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Quilts at Chicago's World's Fairs

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A white quilt in Safford and Bishop's *AMERICA'S QUILTS AND COVERLETS* is described as a trapunto bedcover which won first prize at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. The quilt is now in the collection of the San Antonio Museum Association.¹

In the catalog of the Atlanta Historical Society a stuffed and appliqued quilt by Mrs. Sarah A.S. Low is described as one which won first prize at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.²

In the Denver Art Museum's catalog *Autumn Leaf* is described as a design which won first prize at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.³

The abundance of first prize winners raised some questions I have tried to answer. My major question from the beginning was—Just who won the prizes at that fair? As I looked for the answer to that question I came up with more questions. I found two patterns whose names and dates of publication led me to believe that they might also have been connected with the fair, either as prize-winners or commemorative patterns. The Ladies' Art Company's catalog, *DIAGRAM OF QUILT, SOFA AND PINCUSHION PATTERNS* (1898)⁴ shows two pieced patterns, Columbia Puzzle and Columbia Star. Were these patterns named for the fair, or were they named for Columbia, a term used to mean the United States?

What kinds of quilts were shown at the fair? Were they representative of the quilts being made in the early 1890s or were they heirlooms from another time? I have not found answers to any of my questions. I have not found evidence of the prize-winners; I have not discovered if the Columbia patterns (Puzzle and Star) are, in fact, associated with the fair, and I have not enough evidence to conclude that the quilts shown were representative of contemporary quilting in the 1890s. The search has been frustrating, but it has also been rewarding. I did establish one fact early in my research. *Autumn Leaf* was not a winner at the 1893 fair. It was, in reality, a prize winner at the 1933 Chicago

World's Fair, although not a first prize winner. The confusion between fairs led me to study this later fair also, and I found that a comparison of the two fairs, separated by forty years and vast social changes, illustrates some interesting differences in attitudes towards quilts, American crafts and antiques, and to some degree towards women's work at these two points in time. The fairs coincide with two periods of strong popular interest in quiltmaking and both served to reflect contemporary attitudes towards quiltmaking.

The 1893 Fair

The World's Columbian Exposition was a national celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landing in America. The symbol of the fair was The White City, a lavish group of buildings erected on 680 acres of South Chicago near where the Museum of Science and Industry is located. The buildings were constructed of white plaster mixed with hemp fibers and a little Portland cement, built to last for the life of the fair and designed to be most effective when they glowed at night under artificial light.⁵

The story of the architecture at the fair reflects attitudes and tastes in other arts and crafts including needlework. Chicago originally sought the honor of putting on the fair to show off its recovery from the devastating fire of 1871. Architects of what became known as the Chicago School of Architecture had rebuilt the city in a unique Midwestern style which was functional, practical and beautiful. The fair was to be a showcase for this Chicago style, but the financial backers turned instead to Eastern architects of the Beaux Arts School who took as their inspiration European and classical buildings. The column, the dome and the white facade were the style of the White City while the practical Midwestern architecture which reflected the Prairies was dismissed as provincial. The White City had a strong influence on subsequent architecture, inspiring a classical revival which touched nearly every American town. It was a poor community which could not afford to knock down its Victorian courthouse or bank and replace it with a classically inspired building with a set of substantial Roman columns.

Like American architecture the art of the American patchwork quilt was thriving at a grassroots level at the time of the fair. Cuesta Benberry designates the decade 1910 as the beginning of the true revival of interest in quilts,⁶ but certainly there were many patchwork quilts being made in the last decade of the 19th century. An interest in things American was being born, nurtured by a backlash from the

collection but that museum has no information as to the maker or its provenance.¹³

The handwritten list of prize winners at the Women's Building includes no quilts.¹⁴ Who, then, won first prize in quilts? There were no prizes as I had originally imagined. The image of a World's Fair as a County Fair on a grand scale is wrong. The Columbian Exposition was not a contest, but an exhibit. Diplomas of Honorable Mention were awarded in the Women's Building to selected exhibits. These were conferred by the Board of Lady Managers upon "designers, inventors and expert artisans . . . in recognition of the highest class of work."¹⁵ Apparently several were given out in each category, meaning that both the Low quilt and the San Antonio quilt may have won one. However, in Category 104 (Lace, Embroideries, Trimmings, Artificial Flowers, Fans, etc.) there were no quilts listed as holders of diplomas. There is no documentary evidence that either the Low quilt or the San Antonio quilt won diplomas, and in fact, no evidence that they were even exhibited.

However, the fact that the quilts were not mentioned in the documents or the histories of the fair does not necessarily mean that they were not exhibited. Although only ten quilts are mentioned in the sources, I believe there were more quilts at the fair. The records in both the documents and the histories are incomplete. Any quilt mentioned in one source (for example, the handwritten list of exhibits) was not listed in any other source (for example, the guide book to the fair). Therefore, any one source must be seen as incomplete and one can conclude that the total of these sources is also incomplete. It appears that quilts were not well documented. Like the Midwestern architecture, the American quilt was passed over in favor of European and classically inspired art and craft items. The guide books of the time are full of descriptions of tapestries, enameled glass and bronze plates, but sadly lacking in mention of American folk arts or crafts.

That attitude towards American arts and crafts was common at the time. In *THE ANTIQUERS*, a history of collecting American antiques, Elizabeth Stillinger describes the 19th century taste in which American antiques were only valued if there was a curio factor or if the item was associated with a famous person or historical event or site. The intrinsic values in the design and construction of the articles were not appreciated at the time, except by a few collectors.¹⁶ Stillinger's thesis may explain why a limited number of quilts were mentioned. Of the five quilts described in the published guidebooks, histories and catalogs, four fit her categories of worthwhile antiques. Three were curios—one of Army badges, one Patchwork Scripture quilt and one

of 15,682 pieces. And one was probably mentioned because of its association with a historical figure. In *THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION*, written in 1898, there is a description of a North Dakota state exhibit containing a "curio collection, for which a quilt worked by Mary Queen of Scots while in captivity was loaned by a descendent of a maid of honor to the unhappy queen."¹⁷ If there were quilts from more common seamstresses they were perhaps deemed not worthy of mentioning at the time.

I mention the Mary Queen of Scots quilt since it is one of nine entries described with that word, but there is strong evidence that the Mary Queen of Scots needlework was not a quilt. Helen Kelley, in a 1978 *QUILTER'S JOURNAL* article, writes that she has been unable to find evidence of any quilts made by Mary. There are in England examples of needlepoint and embroidery attributed to the queen but no quilts with her cypher have been documented.¹⁸ The quilt in the North Dakota exhibit may have been another type of needlework, or it may actually have been a quilt falsely attributed to the Queen. Perhaps the passage in *THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION* is the source for the myth about Mary's quilting.

I had hoped to find a first prize winner at the 1893 fair, but I found poor records and the fact that there really was no first prize. I did find how both The Atlanta Historical Society and The San Antonio Museum Association can both claim to have First Prize Winning Quilts. It seems to be a matter of exaggeration of a Diploma of Honorable Mention, although I found no documentation of any quilt winning such a diploma.

I had hoped to find the influence of the fair on later quilting, but the only quilt I found which I could say was directly attributable to that fair is a quilt made from a commemorative handkerchief from the Exposition. The quilt is now in the collection of the Chicago Historical Society.¹⁹

The 1933 Fair

The major question regarding the earlier fair was "Who won the quilt competition?" I found an abundance of "first-prize winning quilts," but no documentation of any kind of contest. The question regarding the quilts at the 1933 fair was just the opposite. I have found an abundance of documentation as to the winner, but "Where is the prize-winning quilt?" I have not yet found an answer to this question, but again the search has been fascinating.

In contrast to the 1893 fair in which discrete diplomas were awarded for excellence, the 1933 fair featured a thousand dollar grand prize in

quiltmaking. The award-winning quilt was given to Eleanor Roosevelt, with photographers present to record the event. The contest was accompanied by an impressive amount of publicity and was followed by sales of patterns and kits to enable everyone to make a copy of the Grand Prize Winner and "have a blue ribbon quilt of your own."²⁰

In the forty year span between fairs attitudes about nearly everything in American life had changed. After World War I Americans felt themselves to be the saviors of Europe. They began to feel a pride in their country and its heritage. American crafts and antiques became more popular as people looked for their roots, and a large number of people began to value Americana for its aesthetic appeal as well as the historical or curio factors so necessary to the Victorian appreciation of folk arts and crafts. During the 1920s the concept of the period room came into vogue after the opening of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York²¹ and the beginning of the restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia. Copies of antique furniture were available to nearly everyone and a "Colonial" quilt was a popular item. The 1933 fair took place at the peak of the quilt revival, and unlike the 1893 fair it seems to reflect what was actually happening in quilting at the grassroots level.

The 1933 fair was called A Century of Progress. It was a celebration of Chicago's hundredth birthday, and although the country was in the depths of the Depression, the year-long party was a financial and cultural success. Like the 1893 Exposition, the whole fair had an impact on American taste and style in subsequent years. The architecture and theme of the fair was of a dramatic "modernistic" nature, and certainly the futuristic Art Deco buildings designed for the fair affected architecture for several years after. During the Depression there was less nostalgia for the good old days than there had been in the twenties and the fact that a quilt show was so popular in the middle of this modernistic fair is an indication of how entrenched the craft was in the early 30s; the interest in quilting did not die out until World War II.

By 1933 marketing and big business had developed to the point that pavilions at the fair were not only sponsored by countries and states, but by corporations such as General Motors and Sears, Roebuck and Co. Sears had been serving the quilting market for decades and they took advantage of the boom in quiltmaking to sponsor a national quilt contest in conjunction with the fair. Each Sears store sponsored a local contest with three winners. Mail order houses had similar contests. The winners at the local level were sent to ten district contests and the three best from each district were sent to Chicago. The

Judges in The Century of Progress contest. Sue Roberts of Sears (center), Mary McElwain (right) and an unidentified woman examine the first-prize winner Unknown Star. Behind them are second-place Colonial Rose and third-place Delectable Mountains. Photo: courtesy Sears, Roebuck & Company.

national judges were Anne Orr, Needlework Editor of GOOD HOUSE-KEEPING MAGAZINE and quilt designer; Sue Roberts, Sear's Home Advisor; Mary McElwain, quilt collector; and Robert B. Harshe, Director of the Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. Harshe was apparently replaced by Miss B. Burnett, his assistant, in the actual judging.²²

The prizes were awarded as follows: First place prize of \$1000 to Margaret Rodgers Caden of Lexington, Kentucky for a quilt called Unknown Star,²³ Star of the Century²⁴ or Eight Point Combination Feathered Star²⁵ depending on the source; Second place prize of \$500 to Mabel Langley of Dallas for an applique Colonial Rose; and Third place prize of \$300 to Freida Plume of Evanston, Illinois for a Delectable Mountains quilt.²⁶ These quilts were all traditional patterns which had been documented by earlier historians. Patterns and kits for the three prize winners were sold by Sears and by other pattern companies such as Aunt Martha and Needlecraft Supply. A legacy from this fair is the many copies of the prize winners. The quilt most often copied seems to have been Autumn Leaf, a regional winner in the Kansas City contest, but not a national winner. It was made by Mary A. Hillaker of Carl Junction, Missouri. Whether Mrs. Hillaker used a kit is unknown, but prior to the fair, Anne Orr and GOOD HOUSEKEEPING MAGAZINE sold a similar Autumn Leaf quilt kit with "leaves of gingham and prints stamped to cut."²⁷ The center motif was slightly different from Mrs. Hillaker's and she added two colored bands and a second applique border, but the outer applique border was nearly identical. The Sears commemorative pamphlet said it was once called Thousand Leaves²⁸ but no records of it being published under this name have been found.

It is interesting to note that Anne Orr was a judge in the National contest. Whether she disqualified herself from judging a quilt made from one of her own designs is unknown, but the quilt did not win at the national level. After the fair many copies of Autumn Leaf were made, including Charlotte Jane Whitehill's which is now at the Denver Art Museum. I recently saw one finished in 1981 at the Kansas City Quilter's Guild show.

Colonial Rose was another popular mid-thirties quilt, with many copies made from a Needlecraft Supply kit. The prize-winning Colonial Rose made by Ms. Langley is in the possession of her relatives, reports Joyce Gross. This second prize winner is the only winner I have been able to track down.

The Century of Progress contest seems to have encouraged two types of quilts. In addition to the traditional patterns adapted to 30s fabrics and colors such as the winners, there were also "original

designs commemorating The Century of Progress Exposition." The flyer that outlined contest rules announced a \$200 bonus to be awarded if the Grand National Prize Winner had a Century of Progress theme.²⁹ Many such quilts were entered. Joyce Gross has sent me some correspondence from Ida M. Stow who did not win, but apparently entered a Century of Progress quilt. She was disgruntled, and felt that the judges were prejudiced in favor of the traditional patterns.³⁰ The validity of her complaint is impossible to discern from this perspective; however, many of the Century of Progress quilts *were* displayed at the Sears Building at the fair. Two are now in the collection of the Chicago Historical Society. One is by Mary Teska of Grand Haven, Michigan,³¹ and one is by Bertha Stenge of Chicago.³² Two others are pictured in Alice Beyer's book, *QUILTING*, which has been reprinted by the East Bay Heritage Quilters,³³ but these two are unattributed, and I am still looking for the artists. Sears has in their files several other photographs of commemorative quilts from the fair; again unfortunately, these are unattributed.

The winning quilt was presented to Eleanor Roosevelt by E.J. Condon of Sears. The event was recorded in a photograph which is also included in the Beyer book.³⁴ The quilt is not now in the collection of the White House. Clement E. Conger, Curator of the White House, stated that there were five quilts/coverlets in the permanent collection there, but none was The Star of the Century.³⁵ He suggested that the quilt might be in the Roosevelt Library but Marguerite Hubbard, acting curator of the FDR Library in Hyde Park, New York, stated in a letter that neither the Roosevelt home nor library has such a quilt. They do have one pink, white and green silk applique quilt which was entered in the Sears contest.³⁶ Joseph P. Lash, Mrs. Roosevelt's biographer, also knew nothing about such a quilt.³⁷

Mr. Conger suggested that the quilt might have been given to another institution or another individual by Mrs. Roosevelt. At the time of the gift there were no strict conditions on presidential gifts. He says that quilts made for or donated to individual presidents or their wives are not kept at the White House. And, of course, there is the possibility that it was used and used up. It has been nearly fifty years.

I am continuing my search for the Star of the Century and I hope to track down other entrants and winners in the Sears Century of Progress contest. Further documentation of the many quilts entered and the special few that won will give us a better sense of our recent past in quilt history. The fascination of the quilt contest is that it is like a snapshot at a particular point in time, capturing the best of a particular era.

Appendix: Quilts Found

A. Quilts currently in existence which reputedly were entered in 1893 World's Columbian Exposition

Maker	Description	Location
Unknown	White quilt	San Antonio Museum Association, San Antonio, TX
Bull, Emma Salt Lake City	Crazy quilt	Utah Historical Society, Salt Lake City, UT
Caldwell, Rosa T.	Calico Log Cabin (Barn raising)	Greensboro, NC Historical Society
Low, Sarah A.S. Troup Co., GA	Rose of Sharon	Atlanta Historical Society, Atlanta, GA
Sickafoose, Mrs. A. Lyons, IA	Crazy Patch pillow	Private Collection
Slade, Dorinda	Sunrise in the Pines	Unknown. Reported in PIONEER QUILTS, Kate D. Carter, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1979
Wells, Olive Batchelor	The Creation; pictorial Garden of Eden	Helen F. Spencer Museum of Art, Univ. of Kansas

B. Quilts entered in the 1933 Sears, Roebuck & Company Century of Progress Contest. These quilts have been located.

Maker	Description	Location
Unknown	Pink, green & white three-dimensional floral applique	Roosevelt Library Hyde Park, NY
Unknown	Grandmother's Pieced Tulips	Owned by Granddaughter
Unknown	Possible Chicago Commemorative	Private Collection

Unknown	Sears Building, Progress in Transportation depicted in clouds in sky	Private Collection, NY
*Andres, Emma Prescott, AZ	Silhouette (woman spinning) (Merit Award)	Private Collection
*Tripp, Beulah Mary Blee	Grandmother's Fan	Beulah Tripp, MO
*Carpenter, Mrs. Virgil Hyndman, PA	Sunburst; 1st prize in PA	Family Collection
Christoffel	Commemorative	Private Collection, IN
Clemens, Beulah W. Seattle, WA	Pieced Sunflower (Green ribbon in Seattle)	Owned by daughter
*Freeman, Mrs. I.J. Chicago	Floral applique, pink, green & white, three-dimensional	Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY
Greenbaum, Catherine Rochester, NY	Centennial Quilt	Rochester Museum & Science Center
*Hyde, Celia P. Crowley, LA	Louisiana Rose, 2nd prize in Dallas	Family Collection, LA
*Langley, Mabel Dallas, TX	Colonial Rose (Second Prize)	Owned by niece
Lathouse, Mrs. W.B. Warren, OH	Commemorative, central portrait of F.D. Roosevelt	Private Collection
Leaton, Effie Lucy Ponting, Chicago	From Teepees to Temples, blue, yellow & white geometric	Family Collection, IL
Montgomery, Lora Waverly, OH	Commemorative, Sears Building in center, Century of Progress in quilting	Family Collection, IL
Mueller, Marie Gainesville, IA	Horn of Plenty (Award of Merit)	Private Collection
*Poetz, Marie	Chicago Commemorative	Private Collection

Pedersen, Florence Durand	Commemorative; tied	Family Collection, IL
Price, Georgianna Chicago	Commemorative; Sears Building and small houses	Private Collection, Chicago
Raddatz, Ruby Sedro Valley, WA	Work and Play	Owned by Grand- daughter
Stahlschmidt, Dorothy New Douglas, IL	Star of Texas	Maker's Collection
*Stenge, Bertha Chicago, IL	Chicago Commemorative	Chicago Historical Society
*Tekippe, Rose Ft. Atkinson, IA	New York Beauty; 3rd prize in Minneapolis	Family Collection, MN
*Teska, Mary Grand Haven, MI	Chicago Commemorative	Chicago Historical Society
*Ward, Mrs. Louis Horse Cave, KY	Lincoln's Favorite; 1st prize in Memphis	Maker's Collection
Wetzel, Olive Thomas	Commemorative; central map of Illinois	Private Collection, IL
*White, Rose Clarkston, WA	8-pointed Star; silk; U.S. Capitol and Sears Building quilted in center; 1st prize in Seattle	Latah County His- torical Society, Moscow, ID
*Wise, Mrs. J.R. Knoxville, TN	Commemorative; Chicago history set in blocks	Family Collection, MD

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