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Special Presentation

Museum Quilt Collecting

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Collecting quilts for museum holding differs drastically from private collecting. The private collector most often has funds for purchasing when the opportunity arises, and is at liberty to trade or sell without any administrative red tape, while most museums are dependent on donors in order to realize growth. Some museums, especially in the eastern portion of the United States, have been fortunate to have been given well-documented pieces or, in some instances, endowments enabling them to be financially capable of building and maintaining a collection.

The Denver Art Museum was established in 1893. In 1933, the first quilt was acquisitioned when Edna D. Grenamyre donated a family quilt made c. 1825. Simplicity and grace characterize this tulip pattern with three blossoms of red and yellow cotton blooming from a yellow-green fabric printed to resemble feathery fern sprays. Quilting is the very finely executed diagonal lines spaced approximately one-half inch apart.

From that first quilt the collection has grown to some 300 examples of which a representative group of pieced, appliqued and crazy quilts hang in the sixth floor textile gallery, with periodic changes to protect the material. With few exceptions, the collection is the result of gifts, a fact which makes us conscious of an obligation to recognize such generosity through this rotating display. Also it is important to continue to impress potential donors with our desire to build the collection to further national and international reputation.

One of the greatest incentives to new donors was the 1955 acquisition of the Charlotte Jane Whitehill Collection. This major gift consisted of 35 quilts, six of which had been made in the 19th century by Whitehill's mother, Elizabeth Ann Cline. Mrs. Whitehill began making quilts as a hobby in 1929, then spending the next 15 years searching for rare patterns and unusual fabrics appropriate to the

period of the original quilt patterns. As her insurance business took her to various parts of the mid-West, she was ever in search of difficult-to-find materials and learned to cut them with infinite care so as to have minimum loss.

Family quilt patterns were guarded with the same, if not stronger, intensity as culinary recipes. Mrs. Whitehill obviously had her own strategy for acquiring permission to copy some of these treasures as evidenced by many of the special examples in her collection. In documenting the quilts for the museum she was most generous in recognizing the family from which the original pattern was obtained. On the back of each of her quilts is an embroidered label with the quilt name and the date it was made. Often pertinent information was added such as for the Martindale Pattern, made in 1933: "An old pattern from Aunt Martha Shaw, Carlyle, Ohio, about 1840. Pattern owned by the Martindale family." "Block from England, 1839, English Rose, Kentucky Rose Wreath; Original border" is found on a 1931 quilt. Spice Pink, made in 1932, documents "1419 yards of thread were used for the quilting" which must have been an unusual amount for only in one other instance is yardage mentioned. Would that more of today's quilters and others involved in various types of needlework give us such facts to assist in the future dating of works!

In spite of her documentation, the Denver Art Museum is still uncertain as to whether or not Mrs. Whitehill did both tops and quilting. When the major exhibition of over 300 quilts and coverlets was assembled in 1974, a visitor to the gallery was offended that we did not credit the person responsible for the quilting. It was suggested that this artist was from the Chicago area. Any information to assist in better documenting this collection would be most appreciated. This is another frustration in being a curator of an important multi-media department—there is seldom time for in-depth research.

Following this significant gift, the museum dedicated the 1963 Winter Quarterly as a record of the collection. The late curator Lydia Roberts Dunham documented 56 quilts from 20 donors for the publication, now coveted by many as the book has been out of print since 1969. As a result of publications, exhibitions, and recent attention afforded quilts, the collection has grown to its present status. Not one year has passed since 1955 that additions have not been made to the growing holdings. Only three purchases have been made.

Why do art museums collect quilts? Quilts are one of our greatest American legacies. Quilts exemplify an artistic achievement. Quilts are a surviving evidence of one of few on-going social events.

Each museum projects an individual image. Visitors interpret the

1933.19. *Single Tulip*, ca. 1825, 74" × 89". Maker unknown. Gift of Edna D. Grenamyre.

image in various ways depending on how it fits into their likes or learning process. In an educational institution the thrust is to exhibit quilts to fulfill visitor interest in the most stimulating manner possible. Above all, the presentation must place these objects as art objects. We use illustrative and didactic panels to romanticize each quilt while still placing emphasis on the creative merits.

Donors are the resources on which museums depend for collection expansion, due to limited acquisition funds. In the instance of our museum, our departmental funds average approximately \$10,000 annually. The department houses all textiles other than Native Arts—American Indian, Oceanic, and African—which leaves textiles and costumes from Europe, Asia, and the Americas under our jurisdiction. An 18th century tapestry on today's market starts at \$60,000. Peruvian textiles can range from \$2,500 to \$80,000. One American sampler fetched \$34,000 at a 1980 auction. This gives some idea of how few pieces can be added over a period of years, even with private and corporate funds. The appraised value of a quilt on today's market is, in most instances, higher than will actually be fetched. Thus it is more advantageous to give this object as a tax deduction rather than selling it.

Many donors are very sensitive toward family heirlooms. With recent awareness as to the advantages of temperature and humidity control to extend the longevity of any textile, there is a psychological contentment knowing that a very special quilt will be better preserved in a museum rather than folded away in the trunk.

Long-term loans are acceptable to some institutions and very beneficial to prospective donors. Such an arrangement allows the object to be in a protected environment, covered under museum insurance, and avoids risk of loss that could occur in a normal residence. This is an alternative often considered by that person whose sentimental attachment cannot accept an out-and-out gift at the time. However, not all museums consider such an arrangement due to storage, paperwork, and insurance cost unless they feel strongly that the piece will ultimately become a gift.

After years of experience in collecting, we are now analyzing all segments of our holdings. Such an exercise is time-consuming but, curiously enough, this has been a real eye-opener. I suddenly became aware that we do not have some of the most conventional early patterns: School House, Tea Cup, Mariner's Compass, and Bow Tie—to name but a few.

Is a culture pertinent? Then as a museum you must get down to the realities: what is the financial support available? Nonprofit groups

31.1971. *Flowers and Birds*, 19th c., English, 104" × 93". (Detail)
Maker unknown. On loan from Mrs. Amy S. Goodell.

such as quilt councils do have money. They have contacts. Collections are known to them more than to most museums. Museums need the support of those involved in quilts to further contacts for donors and financial support.

Cataloging is a process common in the museum world, but I urge collectors and dealers also to acquire as much provenance on a piece as possible. A collector once asked for more specifics and my recommendations were as follows:

1. Who made the quilt?
2. Did the same person do the quilting? If not, who?
3. When and where was the object made?
4. Is there an original significance: birth, wedding, farewell gift, etc.?
5. When purchasing from a dealer—how was the quilt acquired: estate, auction, privately, etc. This information can be a beginning of tracking down pertinent information that dealer might have.

Such information should be kept on separate cards with some corresponding identification—such as a number on the object. Those who have family quilts are the greatest offenders. They know it's Grandmother's quilt—but which Grandmother? Did she make it, was it given to her, had it belonged to her mother? Sounds silly, but this is the type of information I urge everyone to take the time to document.

Storage is a problem for those who have what I call non-active quilts. These are the ones in the closet, attic, basement or trunk. If space does not allow for rolling, then special attention must be given to refolding at frequent intervals. It's rather like spraying and pruning the roses! Carpet rolls can usually be acquired from local stores, but the challenge of finding acid free tissue with which to cover the rolls is a whole new problem.

Check with local museums for the closest source. Plastic is a real no no! It is filled with acid, so please use cotton muslin to keep the dust and light from the quilt!

To conclude, a very selfish request: please be in touch with museums about your collection or ones with which you are familiar. I'm not certain how to qualify "collection." Sometimes, there might be just one shining jewel which is certainly not Webster's definition of collection, but if you knew the inner thoughts of a curator striving to boast the most outstanding quilt collection, it is a collection!