

Uncoverings 2009

Volume 30 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Laurel Horton



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Preface

The American Quilt Study Group returns to its California birthplace for the thirtieth annual seminar. Although the official anniversary celebration will come next year, the 2009 seminar in San Jose offers an opportunity to look back at the individuals, events, and ideas that led to the founding of the American Quilt Study Group and the first volume of *Uncoverings*.

In the 1970s, Sally Garoutte was one of a small number of individuals who were interested in the history of quilts and quilting. As she traveled around the country, visiting museums and archives, Sally became aware that there were few published—or unpublished—sources of reliable information available among the popular books on quilting. She also noticed that the majority of the curators, librarians, and archivists whose assistance she sought did not take her research interests seriously. She realized that even if she conducted research and wrote up the results, finding a journal that would publish her work would be difficult. Sally's experiences led her to envision an organization that would encourage people to conduct research on quilt-related subjects, to provide an opportunity for this research to be shared orally at an annual seminar, and to publish these research findings in an annual journal.

The first Seminar of the American Quilt Study Group was held in 1980, near Sally's home in Mill Valley, California. As Sally recalled in her preface to *Uncoverings* 1980,



We did not then know whether there was enough serious interest among American women in their own indigenous art to call forth the effort of research necessary to make up a program of papers. This book is the best sort of evidence that such interest indeed exists. It introduces the public as well as quilt lovers to the idea that the history of quilts and quilting is an important part of our heritage subject to serious study. The American Quilt Study Group hopes that this volume is the first of many.

Sally's vision was both ambitious and audacious, and transforming it into reality required new skills. She learned how to establish and operate a national nonprofit organization, and she taught herself to edit and publish a journal. Later, when computers replaced typewriters, Sally took classes to learn the new technology. But Sally's contribution to the field of quilt research went far beyond the nuts and bolts of the organization. Through personal example and her interactions with others, she embodied the two aims that come together in AQSG's mission statement.

The first aim was a commitment to high standards for scholarship. Sally knew that proper documentation and accurate interpretation were essential, both in developing a body of reliable data and in demonstrating its value to the public. The second aim, essential at a time when quilt study was virtually absent in academic settings, was to empower people—particularly women—to conduct original research. These two aims do not co-exist comfortably; in fact, some critics have argued that it is impossible for untrained researchers to produce respectable scholarly results.

Sally's gift was to see both aims as possible. She recognized that it would take time to establish both the scholars and the scholarship, and she started with the resources available to her. For the first seminar, Sally cajoled her friends and colleagues to express their quilt-related knowledge as oral presentations; and, afterward, she worked with them to convert these papers into published articles. Since that first year, AQSG has continued to maintain a delicate balance between the two aims, and this volume is no exception.

Each of the articles herein began with a question in the mind



of a “quilt lover.” Looking at a quilt, two quilts, a number of quilts, an intriguing pattern, or a company, each author followed the threads to see where they led. And the results of their research and their interpretations become worthy additions to the growing body of respectable scholarship on the many aspects of quilting.

Peggy Derrick and Linda McShannock started with the realization that two quilts in different museums were remarkably similar. Starting with only the information provided by donors, Derrick and McShannock used multiple sources to trace the quilts and their makers back to Norway. Their article not only documents the two quilts, but it also places them within the context of quilting in eighteenth-century Europe.

For many years, collectors and researchers of twentieth-century quilts and quilt patterns have puzzled over the elusive Rainbow designs. Sharon Pinka has compiled data on Rainbow designs, the company’s operations, and William Pinch, the “Maker of Pretty Quilt Blocks.” Pinka offers a checklist of characteristics useful in identifying quilts made from Rainbow designs.

Jane Amelon began with the remarkable story of a quilt made by a group of battered women imprisoned for killing or injuring their abusers. When displayed publicly, the quilt succeeded in bringing justice for these women after all official attempts had failed. Amelon looks at various ways to examine the rhetorical properties of quilts and shows how the imprisoned women conveyed a powerfully persuasive message through their quilt.

One of the biggest gaps in our understanding of nineteenth-century quilts concerns the history of cotton batting. Linda Pumphrey, associated with Mountain Mist[®] batting for twenty years, consulted a wide range of primary and secondary sources to compile a narrative of the early history of the Stearns & Foster Company. Her article provides the first documentation of the production and marketing of batting in the nineteenth century.

Mary Fitzgerald became intrigued with a group of twentieth-century patchwork designs which use small squares of different colors to create a pictorial image. Her interest led to a survey of examples of geometric pictorial patchwork, stretching from the

early-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. As part of her research, she examined the published instructions accompanying commercial patterns and studied the process of constructing quilts using twenty-first-century tools.

This thirtieth volume of *Uncoverings* also includes a special presentation. We are pleased to include the text of Virginia Gunn's keynote address from the 2008 seminar, which includes reflections on her participation in AQSG, and, in particular, the centrality of the study of history to what we do.

Sally Garoutte, who died in 1989, edited the first seven volumes of *Uncoverings*, which included four of her own research papers. Her work as researcher, editor, and mentor set an example for those of us who follow. I think Sally would be pleased, though probably not surprised, to see that a "serious interest" in quilt research has spread among women and men, in America and beyond. As it turned out, *Uncoverings 1980* was indeed "the first of many" volumes, evidence that many people have come to recognize that "the history of quilts and quilting is an important part of our heritage," worthy of serious study.