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Two Norwegian Silk Quilts in America

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Two nearly identical wholecloth silk quilts brought to America in the nineteenth century by Norwegian immigrants now reside in Midwestern museums. We examined these quilts as material culture artifacts in an attempt to explain the probable relationship between them. Beginning with information provided by the donors of the quilts, we conducted genealogical research on the two families and their descendants. This investigation led us to connections between the two families and confirmed the upper-class status of these families in Norway. To place these two quilts in a larger context, we researched upper-class Norwegian society and its relationship to the decorative fashion trends of eighteenth-century Europe. Materials, construction, style, design, motifs, and aesthetic properties reveal these two quilts to be both characteristically Norwegian and examples of a larger western European tradition of wholecloth silk quilts.

Two nearly identical, wholecloth silk quilts reside in museums in the upper Midwestern United States: one is at the Minnesota Historical Society, in St. Paul, Minnesota, the other in the collection of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, in Decorah, Iowa.[1] Norwegian immigrants brought the quilts to this country in the nineteenth century, but though they are nearly identical, the individuals who inherited and donated them to the respective museums were neither related nor acquainted. Quilts brought to America by Norwegian immigrants are quite rare, and that there

should be two so similar in material, style, and appearance is remarkable indeed. Our research focuses on the relationship of these two quilts to each other and to the larger European tradition of wholecloth silk quilts.

Between 1825 and 1930, approximately 860,000 Norwegians immigrated to the United States.[2] The majority left the Norwegian countryside as a result of economic pressures; the rural population had grown beyond what the meager farmland of Norway could support.[3] Rural Norwegian women practiced a number of textile traditions, including spinning, weaving, knitting, and embroidery. They were responsible for producing clothing and bedding for their families, from flax they grew and sheep they raised themselves.[4] Traditional Norwegian bed coverings did not include patchwork quilts, but were primarily woven wool coverlets in a variety of decorative weaves with regional variations:

> The åklæ (pl. åklær) is the traditional bed covering of Norway. Women wove them in their farm homes from the wool of the native spelsau sheep. The average size of åklær, 5 by 6 feet, relates to the dimensions of Norway's corner beds and the width of the looms.[5]

Leaving behind these traditions, Norwegian women arriving in America quickly learned to piece quilts in traditional American patterns, such as Log Cabin and Blazing Star, and they enthusiastically joined in the late-nineteenth century fad for crazy quilts.[6] Some families sent quilts to their relatives back in Norway.[7]

Given the presumed absence of patchwork quilts among pre-emigration Norwegian textile traditions, the existence of two quilts brought to America by Norwegian immigrants appears anomalous. Compounding the puzzle, the two quilts are almost identical in design. At the same time, they are distinctly different from the quilts usually seen in the central United States, where quilting and patchwork are practically synonymous. The Norwegian-made quilts are wholecloth, that is, the top of each quilt is constructed of lengths of a single solid-colored fabric; the ornamentation depends entirely on the effect of the quilting designs stitched on the surface.

The family history for one of the quilts indicates that it was made in the late eighteenth century; the family that owned the other claims theirs dates from the 1840s. Consequently, one of our goals was to try to attribute reliable dates for the creation of both artifacts. We wished to establish the Norwegian context for these quilts, explore possible connections between them, and understand their place within the larger European tradition of wholecloth quilts. In addition, we were also interested in the significance of the two quilts' survival in the United States.

Quilting Traditions in Europe before 1700

Quilting—for clothing, bed coverings, and padded armor—came to Europe from Asia. Some researchers assert that quilting arrived in Europe during the time of the Roman Empire, between approximately 100 BC and AD 476.[8] More substantial evidence suggests that quilted textiles were among the Asian luxury goods that returning Crusaders brought with them from the Middle East at the end of the eleventh century.[9]

Costly and rare, quilted bedcovers were available only to royalty and the very wealthy.[10] The oldest surviving European quilts are two "Tristan" quilts, made in Sicily around 1400. Made of linen, these wholecloth textiles illustrate the popular medieval legend of Tristan in pictures and text executed in quilting.[11] These two quilts are thought to have been made as a gift for a wedding in Sicily in 1395.[12] Recent research suggests that the two quilts may actually be fragments of a single large quilt later remade into at least two smaller ones.[13] Physical evidence from the two quilts is supported by references to the fashion among powerful noble families of the late middle ages for beds of enormous size, displayed as status symbols and never intended for sleeping.[14]

A group of about a dozen early-seventeenth-century wholecloth silk quilts is evidence of the international trade in luxury goods. These textile masterpieces have been designated Indo-Portuguese,

although their actual origin is unknown and a topic of current research.[15] They are made of solid-colored silk, with raised areas that accentuate the dense, intricately quilted designs.[16]

The designs on these quilts are reminiscent of embroidered Indian quilts of the seventeenth century, with a round center medallion framed by multiple borders, yet their individual motifs are unique. The example in the collection of Winterthur Museum, like many others in this group, is dominated by a central medallion with a seventeenth-century Portuguese ship under full sail on a sea of undulating, quilted ocean waves. The rest of the surface is filled with human figures, fanciful animals, exotic foliage, and repeated decorative motifs. Some examples from this group portray hunters on horseback with firearms, their dogs, and their prey or European soldiers and exotic, turbaned figures. They strongly suggest the world of the eastern Mediterranean, with its convergence of European and Eastern politics and cultures, and design elements that express Europe's new role in the era of exploration.[17]

The French city of Marseilles was a crucial entry point for Eastern textiles into Western Europe as early as 1218.[18] From its advantageous location on the Mediterranean coast, Marseilles developed into the center of trade between Europe and India and China. By the fifteenth century Marseilles was not only importing textiles, but also had developed a thriving industry of its own, manufacturing quilted goods.[19] Marseilles quilts and quilted fabrics became highly fashionable for clothing and bedding and were exported in great quantities to the rest of Europe and its colonies. In 1680, some five to six thousand women were employed in Marseilles ateliers producing needlework for sale in France and export abroad.[20]

From 1686 to 1759, the French government established non-importation laws, designed to protect France's traditional textile industries from outside competition. Due to its economic importance, however, Marseilles was exempted from some of these laws, and the port city continued to produce and export textiles, including wholecloth silk bedquilts, to the rest of the world.[21]

Textiles formed the bulk of the goods that circulated in the

growing world trade. Quilted textiles, whether produced in workshops in the south of France or by seamstresses in their own homes, were limited to the upper ranks of society.[22] Evidence from surviving textiles, combined with research in historic documents, particularly property inventories and wills, show that, by the sixteenth century, bedquilts frequently appeared in the inventoried property of the British well-to-do, including wealthy merchants, but were absent among the material possessions of the middling and poorer sorts.[23] A study of sixteenth-century inventories in the Netherlands produced similar findings. Researcher An Moonen found that quilts appeared first among the Dutch royal family: "as the [sixteenth] century progresses, quilts are more often mentioned, although at first only in the residences of the House of Orange. It is not until several decades later that we find quilts among the wealthy middle ranks."[24] The gradual spread of quilts from royalty to the upper ranks coincided with increased trade and the development of the quilting industry in Europe.

Eighteenth-Century Silk Wholecloth Quilts in Europe

European society in the eighteenth century was characterized by expanding economies, an increase in consumer goods, and a rising standard of living. These developments were driven by international trade and technological improvements in manufacturing and transportation. Textiles formed a central component of both these developments, with an influx of exotic silks and cottons from the Orient and the production of woolen, silk, and cotton fabrics by European factories. The availability and variety of woven and printed fabrics brought the prices down, making them affordable to a larger segment of the population. Gradually, these popular textiles became more commonplace in homes throughout Europe and its colonies.[25]

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, quilted bed covers and clothing were highly popular and fashionable. The most elegant of these bedquilts were of wholecloth silk. In some areas,

including the New England colonies, quilts made from glazed wool were popular, particularly in the mid-eighteenth century.[26] Quilts were available through a variety of sources: some were imported from India and China; others were made professionally in workshops in Europe, especially in Marseilles, but also in London and other commercial centers. Still other quilts were made in the homes of the well-to-do, by women with leisure time, sometimes with the help of their servants.

By the sixteenth century, in England, a large number of businesses offered quilts and quilted clothing.[27] Quilted clothing was produced in London by a variety of tradesmen, including "mercers, linen-drapers, haberdashers, or milliners," while quilted bedcovers were produced in furniture workshops by upholsterers.[28] Surviving business correspondence from 1735 provides evidence of a gentleman's order for quilted bed furnishings for his mother from an upholsterer who had a large quantity of ready-made quilted designs from which customers could choose.[29] These businesses not only supplied wealthy British customers but colonists as well. Lynn Bassett has found a range of imported quilts in a study of Massachusetts quilts. While "calico" and "India quilts" appear on lists of sales and were coveted luxury items, the preponderance of quilts imported into the colonies were silk and wool (calamanco) wholecloth quilts made in England by professionals associated with the upholstery trades.[30]

Quiltmaking in Europe prior to the nineteenth century is just beginning to be studied in depth. We know that quilts were produced in factories and workshops, imported from the East, and made in the home; but the lack of reliable data makes it difficult to determine the origin of a particular surviving quilt. The furnishings of a single household might include quilts and other textiles from multiple sources. Evidence of distinctive local and regional patterns of textile acquisition and use complicates attempts to establish maps or timetables for the adoption, spread, and decline of textile styles. Questions concerning who made quilts, why they were made, and how techniques and designs circulated within and between geographic areas offer unlimited opportunities for further research.

Wholecloth Silk Quilts in Scandinavia

Sweden and Norway lie at the northernmost edge of Europe, but their long history of sea-faring exploration, ample coastline, and accessible seaports have connected them to the rest of the world since prehistoric times. As in the rest of Europe, wealthy households in Scandinavia embraced the fashion for silk wholecloth quilts during the eighteenth century. Material artifacts, written documents, and period illustrations provide evidence of both the importation and domestic manufacture of quilted clothing and bed covers in Sweden and Norway. Pioneering research efforts on Scandinavian quilts have tended to focus on patchwork of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and earlier wholecloth quilts are only beginning to receive attention.[31]

A period illustration from Sweden suggests that quilting was an activity in wealthy Scandinavian households in the eighteenth century. Dating from 1797, the watercolor shows two women and a man working at a quilting frame in the drawing room of Bishop Lindbloom.[32] The room is large and finely appointed, with a chandelier, high ceilings, and large windows. In this domestic scene, a child on a nearby settee reads while an older man smokes a pipe. The prominent location of the activity in the drawing room suggests that the quilters were members of the Bishop's family, as servants or hired professionals would have worked in a less formal part of the house. The presence of the man working at the quilting frame raises interesting questions. He may represent a family member or a suitor or he may have been a professional pattern drawer, laying out the design for the quilters to follow. Very little is known about the role of professionals who came to the home to draft the pattern for others to follow or to oversee the quilting. Researcher Aase Sjovold found evidence of a long-standing tradition of hired professionals, including embroiderers, who provided patterns for quilting as well as embroidery and who participated in their execution.[33]

A diary entry from 1798 also documents quiltmaking activity in a well-to-do Swedish home. Hedda Klinckowström, a young

woman, wrote about the sewing preparations for her wedding day, complaining that she was expected to help in the needlework:

> But here the preparations are already well underway, there is sewing and weaving everywhere one goes in the house—the wedding quilt was put up last Monday and there are fittings and deliberations all day long. . . . It is warm and insufferable up in the large weaving room, where the quilting frame has been set up—the flies are buzzing in the windows and Miss Stafva talks a blue streak, nagging and scolding the maids who sit there sewing. She turns to me incessantly—"Does my lady think this looks good?—or perhaps we ought to make the oak leaves around the edge somewhat smaller?" I do not care one bit about how large the oak leaves turn out or how narrow the pleats on the bridegroom's shirt, which Grandmother thinks I should make myself "otherwise there will be no happiness."[34]

The young diarist's attitude towards sewing serves as a reminder that we should not romanticize the production of objects like wedding quilts, but, more importantly, it is also a reminder that textiles produced in the home, including quilts, were not necessarily made entirely by the women of the house. In this narrative, the housemaids are doing the quilting, under the direction of "Miss Stafva," who speaks to the young mistress deferentially, as to someone of higher social standing, and who was probably hired to direct the making of the wedding quilt.

In a study of Norwegian embroidery traditions, Sjovold followed local tradition by including quilting as a category of embroidery. Her description of patterns drawn on the lower, or bottom, piece of material, and the use of a running stitch or backstitch to sew through multiple layers from the back side certainly refers to quilting, rather than embroidery.[35] Sjovold's description of the production and use of embroidered and quilted items in Norway in the eighteenth century fits precisely with the descriptions we have found of quilted items and quilted lengths of fabric available for sale in England, France, and the Netherlands.

> The Norwegian art of embroidery reached its high point in the eighteenth century, influenced by imported textiles. For example, France

> exported lengths of silk upon which the front pieces of men's vests were already embroidered; the fabric needed only to be cut out, fitted, backed, lined, and sewn. The appearance and use of this kind of partially made apparel increased steadily during the course of the period. Silk materials and clothes decorated and embroidered in the East also found their way to Norway. These featured patterns that were suited to the European taste.[36]

At the same time that quilted bedcovers and clothing, worked by professionals and artisans in the trades, were being imported into Norway, embroidery and quilting were being produced in well-to-do homes. According to Sjovold, the education of young women from the upper ranks included decorative needlework as well as drawing.[37]

These descriptions of quiltmaking in Norway and neighboring Sweden mirror what is known about the practice in well-to-do homes elsewhere in Europe. Styles and innovations may have arrived later than in Paris and London, and new influences in coastal towns may not have reached beyond the economic elite, but wholecloth silk quilts were among the textiles acquired and made by households in Norway and Sweden in the eighteenth century. Known surviving examples are rare, but at least two of those quilts were brought to America by Norwegian immigrants, where they serve as clues to the European roots of what we mistakenly call an American tradition.

Two Norwegian Quilts in America

The quilt in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society was donated by Marie Thomsen in 1964, and is known as the Thomsen quilt (plate 1). The donor inherited this quilt from her father, Tolleif Thomsen (1864–1950), who immigrated to America with his parents in 1882. According to Thomsen family history, the quilt had been passed down in the family for five generations.

Anna Smith Holkesvik donated the quilt in the collection of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in 1976 (plate 2).

The donor's father, Dr. Axel Christian Rosenkrands Smith (1844–1917), immigrated in 1873, bringing the Smith family quilt with him. According to the donor, the quilt was the work of her paternal grandmother, Catherine Elizabeth Krog Smith (1819–1846).

The Thomsen quilt measures 83 by 78 inches, and the Smith quilt is 95 by 93 inches. The tops of both quilts are of plain weave silk fabrics, firmly woven, with a very slight rib noticeable under low magnification, which identifies them as warp-reps, or taffetas.[38] The fabrics, which might be further identified as lutestring, an iridescent taffeta with a high sheen, are consistent with the silk fabrics of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced throughout Europe.[39] The fabrics in the quilts are distinguished primarily by color. The Thomsen quilt was originally a vivid green; although the quilt shows little evidence of wear, the color has faded unevenly over time. This is consistent with pre-synthetic greens, which, in the eighteenth century, could be produced only by overdying with blue and yellow vegetable dyes.[40] The Smith quilt is yellow silk. The center of the quilt is faded, while the sides are still bright, suggesting that the quilt was displayed on a bed exposed to sunlight.

Each quilt is backed with a block-printed, plain-woven cotton fabric (plates 3 and 4). The two fabrics are similar in weight, texture, and quality. The block prints, though not identical, are similar in style and manufacture, small in scale and with visible misprints. The Thomsen quilt is backed with undyed cotton, printed in red flowers joined with a small, black meandering vine. The backing on the Smith quilt is printed with flowers in a diamond latticework on a white ground. The edges of the printing block are plainly visible on both fabrics. These printed cotton backings bear a strong resemblance to block printed cottons produced in Persia specifically for linings and backings.[41] They also resemble early European cotton prints found in aprons, short gowns, and other inexpensive goods.[42]

Both quilts are filled with thick cotton batting, and all stitching was done by hand. Each was quilted with a low-twist silk thread

Figure 1. Detail of quilted backstitch on the Smith quilt.
Courtesy of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, LC2405

matching the color of the quilt top. Instead of the running stitch familiar to American quilters, these quilts are quilted with a backstitch. The stitch is distinct and identical on both quilts: on the top the stitches are very small and evenly spaced, while on the back the longer, overlapping stitches are visible (fig. 1). The thick batting in these two quilts required the quilter to sew with an up and down stabbing motion, one stitch at a time: this may be the reason why the stitches on the top, though small and even, have spaces between them instead of being tightly packed, as is normally seen with the backstitch.[43] The backstitch produces a sturdy seam resistant to unraveling. The seams of handsewn clothing were typically backstitched; and, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, quilted garments, such as petticoats and men's waistcoats, were embellished with backstitched motifs.[44]

The two quilts are hemmed with a knife-edge finish; that is, the raw edges of top and backing are carefully folded in and sewn, so that neither fabric is visible on the opposite side. On both quilts, a decorative half-inch-wide, woven silk ribbon is stitched to the outer edges (fig. 2). Similar silk ribbon trim adorned hats, shoes, and

Figure 2. Woven ribbon trim on Thomsen quilt. The woven picotage along the outside edge has worn off.
Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society Collection, 64.73

garters in the eighteenth century.[45] The white ribbon trim on the Smith quilt is applied to all four edges; while the ribbon trim on the Thomsen quilt is ecru, edged with a narrow stripe of dark green, but present on only three sides. The fourth edge may have been trimmed with ribbon that was later removed. In both quilts, two adjacent corners have been cut out to accommodate bedposts.

The Quilt Designs

The quilts were designed in a center-medallion format, typical of eighteenth-century wholecloth quilts. Half- and quarter-medallions fill the corners and edges of the background, and this central field is framed by multiple borders, alternating narrow and wide. The overall format is reminiscent of Persian carpets and Indian painted cottons and reflects the influence of Indian and Persian textiles on Europe.[46]

The center medallion consists of a large circle containing a symmetrical design of a center rosette with four large tulips alternating with narrow leaf-like motifs (figs. 3a and 3b). The half- and quarter-

Figures 3a and b. Center medallions from the Smith quilt (above) and the Thomsen quilt (below).
Tracings by Peggy Derrick and Judy Calcote

Figures 4a and b. Palmette motifs from the Smith quilt (above) and the Thomsen quilt (below).
Tracings by Peggy Derrick and Judy Calcote

medallions feature foliated palmette patterns. The background quilting is a grid of diamonds.

The patterns in the inner borders constitute the main variation between the two quilts: the inner border of the Thomsen quilt features an arabesque flowering vine, while the Smith quilt's inner border is filled by a cable, a familiar quilting design which is more formally recognized as a form of architectural ornamentation known as a guilloche. The wide borders on both quilts are subdivided into large triangles, in which curving palmettes alternate with double spirals topped with a tulip motif, echoing the tulips in the medallion (figs. 4a and 4b). The egg-and-dart, another motif derived from architecture, runs in a narrow strip along the outer side edges of both quilts. An interlocking knot work design appears

Figure 5. "Acroterion," or scrolls-and-palm, from Ernst Rettelbusch, *Handbook of Historic Ornmament*, page 12.

in the two corners that were not cut away to accommodate a four-poster bed.

These quilting designs form a compendium of European decorative motifs, some traditional and some more fashionable at the time they were made. Some are commonly seen on wholecloth quilts throughout Europe, such as the cable/guilloche and the flowering vine. Others, such as the tulip motifs, appear thus far to be unique to Norwegian quilts, as similar designs have not yet been identified among other European quilts. Tulip bulbs were introduced into the Netherlands from the Middle East in the mid-sixteenth century, and the immensely popular flower would have quickly made its way to Norway's cosmopolitan coast.[47]

The full, downward-curving palmette form has not been identified as a quilting motif elsewhere. Although its robust, symmetrical form has a Baroque quality, the palmette, like the guilloche, derives from classic Greek architecture.[48] The double spiral topped by a tulip is based on the Greek acroterion, a scrolls-and-palm design

Figures 6a and b. Scrolls-and-tulip detail from Smith quilt (above) and Thomsen quilt (below).
Tracings by Peggy Derrick and Judy Calcote

often used as a finial on pedestals (fig. 5).[49] On these two quilts the palm in the Greek motif has been replaced with a tulip taken from the medallion design (figs. 6a and 6b). Just as the palmette has been exaggerated, with more fronds than normal, the scrolls are formed from large, tightly wound spirals with more turnings than in the original motifs.

The rediscovery of Greek art and architecture led to the widespread popularity of neoclassical influences in the mid-eighteenth century.[50] The presence of neoclassic motifs in the two Norwegian quilts suggests an eighteenth-century date. The quilting designs

may have been influenced by those in other media, such as woodcarving. An early Norwegian bed includes carved fan-like shapes similar to the quilted palmettes.[51] Indeed, it is most likely that the neoclassical influences on quilting designs came not directly from an architectural source, but from some intermediary design transmission.

On close inspection, the two Norwegian immigrant quilts are not identical. As mentioned, the Smith quilt has a cable, or guilloche, in its inner border, while the inner border on the Thomsen quilt has a flowering vine. Otherwise, the overall format and the primary designs of the two quilts are so similar that it seems inconceivable that they were not designed by the same person. To try and find that connection we needed to examine the family histories relating to the two quilts.

The Thomsen Family Quilt

Marie Thomsen donated the green silk quilt to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1964. She inherited the quilt from her father, Tolleif Thomsen (1864–1950); it was said to have been handed down in their family for five generations. Tolleif's father, Taulerius Cornelius Thomsen (1832–1909), had first been a seaman, but in 1862, he married Marie Magdelene Olsen (1825–1907) and settled down on the Einstavøll farm owned by her father. They were both from well-to-do, educated families, but being a younger son, with no land of his own, Taulerius eventually decided that America would offer more opportunity for his three sons. In a memoir, Taulerius Tolleif wrote, "both my father and mother had good educations for their time, so they kept me at my books, and I could read quite fluently at the age of seven. Some of my uncles were scholarly men, and they sent me fine reading material which I read with great interest as they came."[52]

In 1882, the Thomsen family immigrated to America. Taulerius was fifty, and his wife Marie, fifty-seven (fig. 7). They were accompanied by Tolleif, age eighteen and his two younger brothers.[53]

Figure 7. Marie and Taulerius Thomsen. Marie's grandmother, Mette Munthe Juel, is believed to have helped make the Thomsen quilt. *Photograph courtesy of Keith Thomsen*

Arriving in northern Minnesota, the Thomsen family homesteaded first in Kandiyohi County and then at Bear Lake in Aiken County. In Tolleif's memoir of the family's pioneer days, he describes the hard work and adventures of the settlers' lives, in a land where they had to make their own roads, cut timber to make log homes, and grub out tree roots before they could plant any crops.

Figure 8. Thomsen family genealogy

Family lore states that the quilt was made by Mette Andrea Christine Munthe (1762–1805) and two of her sisters about 1765. In 1791 Mette married Christopher Andressen Munthe Juel (1767–1804), a pastor at Hjelmeland and later Time, both villages in the Stavanger area (fig. 8).[54] Their daughter, Ingeborg Marie Juel (1793–1841), inherited the quilt and, in turn, passed it down to her daughter Marie, Tolleif's mother, who brought it with her on the journey from Norway.

Figure 9. Krog/Smith family chart

The Smith Family Quilt

In 1976, at the age of eighty-seven, Anna Smith Holkesvik (1889–1977) donated to Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum several items she had inherited from her father, Dr. Axel Christian Rosenkrands Smith (1844–1917).[55] Among the donated items was the wholecloth yellow silk quilt, which Holkesvik identified as having been made in Norway by her paternal grandmother, Catherine Elisabeth Krog Smith (1819–1846).[56] Catherine Elisabeth Krog was born in Arendal, Norway, to a well-to-do clergyman and his wife. Her family history shows that her relatives included wealthy sea captains, businessmen, and pastors, with familial connections to Denmark (fig. 9).[57] From 1536 to 1814, Norway was ruled by Denmark, and Danish culture strongly influenced Norwegian society.[58] Norway's upper class therefore had strong cultural ties with Denmark, particularly in the areas of religion and education; the

upper-class men who became priests and civil servants trained and studied in Denmark.

In 1842 Catherine Krog married Carsten Smith (1817–1884), the son of a sea captain. Smith's grandfather was the pastor in Øyestad, not far from Arendal; and Carsten Smith grew up on the *prestegard*, or pastor's farm. At the time of the 1801 census, the family was living on the *prestegard* in a large, comfortable house, and they employed nine servants.[59] Carsten Smith was a military officer and government official: he was a member of the Royal Taxing Commission in Oslo. In the course of his lifetime he served in several civil-servant roles, including district governor (*amtmand*) in Nordland.

Carsten and Catherine Smith lived in Stavanger, where Carsten held a government post. Their two children were born there: Anna, in 1843, and Axel, in 1844. Catherine died in 1846, at the age of twenty-seven, when Axel was two years old. Axel Smith grew up and became a medical doctor. He immigrated to Decorah, Iowa, in 1873 to serve as the first physician at Luther College.[60] As a member of the educated upper class in Norway, he came to America to take a prestigious post at a Lutheran college created to train ministers for the growing Norwegian immigrant community. In 1873, Dr. Smith married Gertrude Christopher, the daughter of Norwegian immigrants. The couple had four children, only two of whom survived to adulthood. His son also became a doctor, and his daughter, Anna, married Julian Holkesvik.[61]

The history of the quilt is undocumented, but it seems likely that Dr. Axel Smith brought it with him when he emigrated in 1873. Leaving Norway as an adult, unaccompanied by other family members, Axel Smith may have brought the quilt with him as a family heirloom, a valued memento of his family and his Norwegian heritage. Alternatively, he may have received it later, perhaps as a result of the distribution of a family estate. Bolstering this argument is the fact that Anna Holkesvik also donated a sewing table said to have belonged to her grandmother, Catherine Krog Smith, and brought to Iowa by her father, Dr. Axel Smith.

Familial and Ethnic Identity

Although extensive genealogies are available for both the Smith and Thomsen families, the only indication for a shared family connection for the two quilts is the frequency of two family names, Juel and Krog. Individuals in both the Thomsen and Smith families moved in the same upper-class circles in Stavanger, as well as in Bergen and Trondheim, which were the largest Norwegian coastal cities and where trade and wealth were concentrated. Both families included parish priests, who at that time represented Norwegian aristocracy and wealth, as well as businessmen and sea captains. And both families had connections with Denmark, including church and school affiliations, reinforcing their positions as part of Norway's ruling class.

For the descendents who emigrated, the silk quilts represented their past in Norway. Marie Thomsen had inherited the green silk quilt from her mother and, while Marie's married life was not one of wealth and comfort, the quilt was both a memento of her own family and a symbol of her connection to past status. According to Thomsen family lore, the green silk quilt never left the trunk in which it came to America, only being taken out briefly to be admired on special occasions. Homesteading in the north woods was a rough life, and winters were very cold. In 1855, another immigrant to Minnesota, Theodore Bost, wrote back to his parents in Switzerland, "It's so cold that the logs . . . make continual crackling noises, and I have great difficulty keeping warm even in my little cabin."[62] But rather than being put to use, the green quilt stayed safely in its trunk, a treasured memory and a souvenir of a life that was past.

Axel Smith, who immigrated as a young man, brought to America mementos of a mother who had died when he was two years old. For him the quilt would have represented another kind of loss, as well as a connection with memories of childhood and family. After the passing of the first generation of immigrants, their descendents in both families had a different relationship with the quilts, just as they had a different relationship with Norway. The

quilts came to represent Norwegian cultural heritage as well as family ties. This is part of the reason that family heirlooms are donated to museums, where these ties are preserved and publicly recognized. An object's preservation in a museum makes available and accessible to future generations their connection to past family members, and to their history and traditions. Tolleif Thomsen's descendents are very proud of their family history and still come to the Minnesota History Center to visit "their" quilt.

While Axel either brought his mother's quilt with him or received it later in life, Tolleif Thomsen arrived in America with his mother and her quilt, which he then inherited after her death. Both men passed their quilts to their daughters, and it was their daughters who gave them to museums.

Purchased or Made in the Home?

Although oral family narratives attribute the quilts to family members, we considered the possibility that they may have been ready-made, imported luxury goods, or that they were made in a commercial workshop in one of Norway's cities, like Bergen or Oslo. According to Linda Eaton, "Quilts, as well as the textiles from which they were made, have always been associated with world trade," and we have established Norway's role as a country of sailors and traders.[63] Eaton refers to advertisements for fabric and quilting in eighteenth-century American newspapers for textiles imported from "Persia, India, Flanders, Turkey, Hamburg, Holland, Russia, Scotland, England, France, and . . . Marseilles."[64] The same goods that were traded in the colonies were certainly available in Norway, and fashions did not take long to arrive by sea from the Continent or Great Britain.

We know that quiltmaking was an activity practiced by upper-class women in Norway during the eighteenth century, and it is certainly possible that members of the Thomsen and Smith families participated in the making of these quilts. What is harder to determine is the role professional quilters or quilt markers may

have played in the process of domestic quilt production. As an examination of the genealogies of the two families does not point to a common ancestor who might have served as the maker of both family quilts, we looked for evidence that an outside professional might have designed both quilts. We took a closer look at what is known about Norwegian quiltmaking.

Material Connections in Norway

While the center-medallion format, and quilting motifs such as the cable, egg-and-dart, and flowering vine are typical of eighteenth-century wholecloth quilts, other quilting motifs—the scrolls, palmettes, and center tulip medallions—are uncommon. Joan Foster, following the publication of her book on Norwegian quilts, has located three silk quilts in Norwegian museums that share some similarities with the two immigrant quilts in our study.[65]

Two of the quilts Foster discusses are in the collection of the Bergen Museum in Norway. The first of these has a center panel of red silk damask, set within a wide yellow silk border, and an undyed linen backing.[66] The red center features an unusual Jacobean star motif, and the borders are quilted with alternating scrolls-and-palm and palmettes, similar to the designs on the two immigrant quilts. Of the five quilts identified with similar motifs, this is the only one that is dated and initialed: the date "1742" and the initials "M F" are embroidered at the base of one of the palmettes within the border.

The second of the Bergen Museum quilts has a large central panel of painted silk surrounded by narrow red borders.[67] The central section is painted in the manner of an Indian palampore although its Chinoiserie motifs are unusual; if it was made in India, it was done specifically for the European market. The borders are quilted with scrolls-and-palm and palmettes in the same manner as the other quilts in Norway and the immigrant quilts. Like the two immigrant quilts, this one has cutout corners. The backing of this quilt is pieced from multiple block-printed cottons.

Figures 10a and b. Scrolls-and-palm motifs from quilt in the National Museum of Decorative Arts, Trondheim, Norway, NK395-1899 (above) and the quilt in the Bergen Museum, B 8504 (below).
Tracings by Peggy Derrick, from photographs provided by Joan Foster

The third Norwegian quilt is owned by the National Museum of Decorative Arts, in Trondheim.[68] A wholecloth quilt of yellow silk featuring a center-medallion design, this quilt bears the closest resemblance to the two Norwegian immigrant quilts in American museums. It also has two cutout corners and a two-color, block-printed cotton backing.[69] The quilting motifs on this quilt appear to be similar though not identical to the ones on the immigrant quilts: a center medallion of tulips and leaves, as well as similar outer border motifs.

The three quilts Foster has located in Norway all contain the scrolls-and-palm motif, in the form of two scrolls topped by a symmetrical palm, closely adhering to the classic shape and proportions (figs. 10a and 10b). On the immigrant quilts, the palm above

the scrolls has been replaced with a tulip. None of the quilts Foster discusses is embellished with the woven ribbon trim that is found on the immigrant quilts.

The one factor shared by the two Norwegian immigrant quilts—and the three quilts in Norwegian museums—is the wide outer border with quilting motifs of alternating scrolls-and-palm and palmettes. The center medallion incorporating tulips is found in nearly identical form on the two Norwegian immigrant quilts, and in a variant form on the quilt in the Trondheim museum. Additional research into other Norwegian decorative arts, specifically rosemaling and woodcarving, might reveal evidence of similar designs or regional interpretations of neoclassic motifs.

Exploring the Design Process

To better understand the process by which the designs were created and marked on these two quilts, and to compare their motifs in detail, we decided to trace the designs from each quilt. This allowed us to compare the designs closely without having to remove the quilts from their respective museums. In each case the quilt was covered with a clear protective sheet of Mylar, a strong polyester film, which was then overlaid with another sheet of Mylar onto which we traced the patterns (fig. 11).

We found that the process of slowly tracing the designs by hand led to a deeper understanding of the original construction of the designs, as we began to be more aware of the individual units and their symmetry.[70] We gained a new appreciation for the artist's logic and skill and the economy with which the designs were created.

Tracing the motifs confirmed that these designs were drawn freehand, not transferred using stencils. As our hands followed the contours of the motifs, we realized how cleverly they were based on easily repeated elements. It became obvious that these forms represented the design vocabulary of an individual quilt marker who was repeating something she or he had done many times. The center medallion, for example, could be easily repeated freehand by first

Figure 11. Judy Calcote tracing the Thomsen quilt designs onto Mylar. *Photograph courtesy of Linda McShannock*

laying out the circle and dividing it in quarters and eighths. This then guided the quilt marker in placing first the center rosette, and then the four tulips and alternating four leaves. The result is a design that is surprisingly consistent, even when repeated over and over, with small variations.

When we overlaid the Mylar sheets from the two quilts, our initial impressions were confirmed: even though the designs were basically the same, nothing lined up with the precision one would expect from a stencil. The large triangles in the wide borders, which frame individual motifs, turned out to be completely irregular, with wide variations in size and degree of angle. And small elements within the designs showed more variation than was apparent just by looking at the patterns. Swirls and ornaments were often added to fill in open spaces. The center medallion and the border designs revealed the same freehand drawing process.

The remarkable similarity of quilted designs in these two immigrant quilts in American museums strongly suggests that the same person had a hand in their construction. This theory is supported by other similarities in the fabrics, the quilting stitch, the cutout corners, and the nearly identical ribbon trim. All of these clues further indicate that the two quilts were made during the same time period, and, almost certainly, in the same place. Although the quilted motifs in the three quilts found in Norwegian museums are similar in imagery and layout, the two immigrant quilts clearly form a stylistic subset within a larger tradition.

Rethinking the Dates

According to the oral narratives handed down by the donors' families, these two quilts were made seventy-seven years apart. While theoretically possible, it seems highly unlikely that two such similar quilts were not made in the same period. Changes in fashion strongly influence quilt design, and the upper-class families associated with these quilts would have had an interest in following fashion trends.

When Tolleif Thomsen's daughter donated the green quilt to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1964, she indicated that it was her father, Tolleif, who told her it had been made by his great-grandmother and two of her sisters. Marie quoted him as saying, "This bedspread has been in my mother's family since about 1765. Mother, born 1825, got it from her mother, born about 1790. Her mother and two sisters embroidered it, and one became Ole Bull's grandmother and another Mother's."[71]

Genealogical research indicates that Tolleif was correct about his mother's birth date and that her mother, Ingeborg, was born in 1792; he was also correct that she was "born about 1790." However, Ingeborg's mother, Mette Andrea Munthe, was born in 1762, and she would have been three years old in 1765, far too young to assist in making a quilt. Even her older sister, Anna Margrete Munthe, who "became Ole Bull's grandmother," would have been only

seven.[72] It is possible that the date "about 1765" Tolleif remembered had originally referred to the birth date of his great-grandmother, not the year the quilt was made. This was also the year that the mother of these three sisters died, giving this date added significance to the family.[73]

Since Mette was the sister who got the quilt, it is reasonable to assume that it was made before her wedding in 1791, as quilts were often made in anticipation of marriage.[74] If she did indeed help make the quilt, we have a date range of approximately 1775 (when she would have been thirteen years old) to 1791. The physical evidence of the quilt is consistent with this date range.

When Anna Holkesvik donated the yellow Smith quilt to Vesterheim Museum, she said it had been made in 1842 by her father's mother, Catherine Elizabeth Krog Smith. But Catherine had died in 1846, when Anna's father was only two years old, making it highly improbable that she conveyed the quilt's history directly to her son. It is not clear when he was given the quilt or what he was told about it. Nor do we know exactly what he told his daughter, decades later. We theorize that the Smith's family quilt was made two generations earlier, placing it in the same time period as the Thomsen quilt: the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The family histories that accompany historic objects often ascribe earlier dates than the evidence can support. In this case, however, the quilt appears to be much older than the family history would indicate.

Conclusion

Through our genealogical research we were able to confirm that the ancestors of the individuals who brought these quilts to America lived in the area around Stavanger, Norway, that their families belonged to the same small social class, and that they may have shared a family or parish relationship. The material evidence of the quilts, combined with an analysis of the family stories, leads us to conclude that the two quilts were made in the last quarter of the

eighteenth century and that they were almost certainly drawn by the same experienced designer. Further, these two quilts, together with the three found in Norway, indicate the presence of a distinctive Norwegian expression of the larger eighteenth-century style of wholecloth silk quilts. This small sample offers a beginning point for further research. As additional examples are identified, in Norway and among emigrant communities elsewhere, researchers will develop a clearer understanding of Norwegian quiltmaking overall, as well as distinctive local and regional traditions. These fragments of material culture give us a glimpse of the decorative arts and women's handwork at a time when upper-class women produced or acquired decorative textiles for their homes. These quilts survive as an expression of that time and place. Future discoveries in Norway, and elsewhere in Europe, will help us understand more about these curiously related survivors of Europe's long, but little studied, quilting traditions.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

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4. Laurann Gilbertson, "Patterns of the New World," *Uncoverings 2006*, ed. Joanna E. Evans (Lincoln, NE: American Quilt Study Group, 2006), 159.

5. Gilbertson, "The Great Norwegian Cover-up," *Scandinavian Review*, vol. 82, no. 3 (Winter 1994): 68–75.

6. Gilbertson, "Patterns of the New World," 157–86, esp. 168.

7. Joan Foster, *Gamle Tekstiler: Lappeteknikk, Applikasjon, Quilting*, (Oslo: N.W. Damm & Son, 2002), 6. Joan Foster provided a typescript translation to the authors.

8. An Moonen, *Quilts: The Dutch Tradition* (Arnhem: Nederlands Openluchtmuseum, 1992), 10.

9. Dorothy Osler, *Traditional British Quilts* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1987), 82. According to Osler, "the first direct evidence for quilting in Britain relates to its use not for bedquilts but for padded armour."

10. Moonen, *Quilts*, 10. Moonen describes a quilted jacket worn by King João I of Portugal in 1385.

11. Averil Colby, *Quilting* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 13–17; Sarah Randles, "The Guicciardini Quilts," *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 5, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2009): 99. According to Randles, "Numerous writers have described the quilts as trapunto work, a technique in which small holes are made in the back layer of the quilt and padding is inserted from the rear. However, there is no evidence of cuts on the back of the V&A quilt, and it would have been difficult to insert large pieces of padding between the threads of the ground fabric with a needle. This suggests that the padding might have been placed between the layers of the quilt before they were stitched."

12. The "Tristan" quilts are in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Bargello Museum, Florence, Italy. For an image of the quilt in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/objectid/O98183.

13. Randles, "Guicciardini Quilts," 93–128.

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15. Linda Baumgarten, "The Mystery of Silk Cord Quilts in the Seventeenth Century," paper presented at the Global Quilts symposium, International Quilt Study Center, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 2–4, 2009.

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29. Pamela Clabburn, *The National Trust Book of Furnishing Textiles* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 108–9.

30. Bassett, *Massachusetts Quilts*, 4.

31. Examples of this research include Foster, *Gamle Tekstiler;* Åsa Wettre, *Old Swedish Quilts* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1996; originally published as *Gamla svenska lapptäcken* [Sweden: Tiden förlag, 1993]); Birgit Glüsing, *Gammelt dansk Patchwork* (Copenhagen: privately printed, 2003).

32. Wettre, *Swedish Quilts*, 28. The image is also available at: http://www.durantextiles.com/newsletter/documents/news_6de_07.asp.

33. Aase Bay Sjøvold, *Broderikunst Og Prydsøm* (Oslo: Kunstindustrimuseet I Oslo, 1976), 24. English translation provided by Helen Kelley.

34. Wettre, *Swedish Quilts*, 36–37.

35. Sjøvold, *Broderikunst*, 3.

36. Ibid., 7–8.

37. Ibid., 8–9.

38. Elisabet Stavenow-Hidemark, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Textiles: The Anders Berch Collection at the Nordiska Museet* (Stockholm: Nordiska Museet, 1990), 121–22.

39. Textile conservator Newbie Richardson examined the quilt in the MHS collection on June 2, 2008. She confirmed our identification of the silk fabric as taffeta, suggesting that it might be lutestring. See Florence M. Montgomery,

Textiles in America 1650–1870 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 283–85.

40. For information on pre-synthetic natural dyes see: J. N. Liles, *The Art and Craft of Natural Dyeing* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 145–46; Agustí Nieto-Galan, *Colouring Textiles: A History of Natural Dyestuffs in Industrial Europe* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 1–30.

41. Jennifer Mary Wearden, *Persian Printed Cottons* (New York: Harry. N. Abrams, 1989).

42. Richardson, personal communication, June 2, 2008.

43. These findings resulted from Peggy Derrick's empirical research into quilting using the backstitch.

44. Colby, 84, 105, 177; Lynne Z.Bassett, *Telltale Quilts from the Deerfield Collection* (Deerfield, MA: Historic Deerfield, 2003), 12–13.

45. Richardson, personal communication, June 2, 2008.

46. Bassett, *Massachusetts Quilts*, 4–6.

47. Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2001), 80.

48. Ernst Rettelbusch, *Handbook of Historic Ornament* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996; first published in Stuttgart, Germany, 1937), 12–17.

49. Ibid., 12–14.

50. Helen Gardner, Horst de la Croix, and Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through The Ages* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 786–90.

51. Roar Hauglid, *The Native Arts of Norway* (Oslo: Mittet and Company, 1955), 27.

52. Tolleif George Thomsen, *Memories from Bear Lake* (Seattle: Thor B. Thomsen and Carolyn M. Thomsen, 1968), 9.

53. Genealogical information for the Thomsen family was compiled from the following sources: a family genealogical website, www.bearlakethomsens.com; a Munthe family genealogical website, www.munthe.net; Thomsen, *Memories from Bear Lake*; church and census records (microfiche), Lassen Collection, Norwegian American Genealogical Center; and Naeseth Library, Madison, WI.

54. To confuse matters, Mette's mother was Ingeborg Marie Juel. These two families intermarried repeatedly, often using the same first names as well.

55. The Smith family name came from a Scottish ancestor who immigrated to Norway in the 1600s.

56. Genealogical information for the Smith and Krog families was compiled from the following sources: church and census records (microfiche), Lassen Collection; *Winneshiek County Biographies* (Decorah, IA: Decorah Genealogy Association, 1996); Johan Carl Louis Lengnick, *Familien Krog* (Copenhagen, 1856).

57. Catherine Krog Smith's father, J. E. G. Krog, received his theology degree in Denmark; his first wife was Danish, and his second, Catherine's mother, also bore a Danish name.

58. Ann Urness Gesme, *Between Rocks and Hard Places* (Hastings, MN: Caragana Press, 1993), 10.

59. This house is still standing. For a photograph, see Kjell J. Bråstad, *Øyestad Bygdebok,* vol. 1 (Utgitt Av: Øyestad Kommune, 1981), 299.

60. *Winneshiek County Biographies*, 59–60.

61. Ibid.

62. Ralph H. Bowen, *A Frontier Family in Minnesota: Letters of Theodore and Sophie Bost, 1851–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 79.

63. Eaton, *Quilts in a Material World,* 112.

64. Ibid.

65. Joan Foster, "One Common Border, Two Continents, Three Countries: A Study of a Set of Silk Wholecloth Quilts," *Quilt Studies: The Journal of the British Quilt Study Group*, vol. 10, ed. Hazel Mills, (Peasholme Green: British Quilt Study Group, 2009), 59–88. Detailed information on two additional quilts in private collections in Britain was not available to be included in our study.

66. Bergen Museum collection, University of Bergen, Norway, accession B 8504.

67. Bergen Museum collection, accession B 4518.

68. National Museum of Decorative Arts, Trondheim, Norway: accession NK395-1899.

69. Joan Foster, email messages to authors, 2005–2007.

70. Judy Calcote, an MHS volunteer and quilter, traced the Thomsen quilt; Peggy Derrick traced the Smith quilt.

71. Correspondence attributed to Tolleif Thomsen, museum accession collection file 64.73, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

72. Ole Bull was a world-famous nineteenth-century Norwegian violinist and folk hero.

73. In McShannock's experience as a curator, the dates ascribed to donated objects are often those associated with significant family events, such as births, deaths, or marriages.

74. Wettre, *Swedish Quilts,* 36–37; Sjøvold,0 *Broderikunst,* 24.