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String Quilts

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String quilts are constructed from a large number of scraps using the pressed-work technique.¹ They were made as utility quilts, because this technique is fast, simple and practical. One wonders if another name for this technique could be "the unworthy quilt" as we find many single blocks, unfinished tops and only a few string quilts. These quilts were utility bed covers, "using quilts," and were indeed used up. Possibly this is why there has been little research on this topic.

The term "string" is derived from the small, narrow scraps of fabric generally used to make these quilts. The strings were often strips of fabric left over from cutting out a garment.² The term "string" means a scrap that is longer than it is wide. Occasionally the scraps used were large chunks or irregular shapes. The scarcity of fabric was a constant concern for the early quiltmaker. In making a string quilt she did not trim her scraps to make pieces of consistent size or shape. She used her fabric as it was available. Her need was to complete the quilt and use it.

Although thrift and need were the primary reason for string quilts, they were not lacking in design and beauty.³ In discussing examples of string quilts I will show that in spite of their humble origins many of the creations were carefully planned to produce artistic results, true graphic art.

String work is created on a foundation, either paper or fabric. Two strings are placed right sides together on the foundation and seamed straight across by hand or machine stitching through the foundation. Then the top fabric is folded back, covering the seam. It is finger pressed or ironed open to keep it in the new position. This process is repeated until the foundation is covered with strings. Jean

Fig. 1. String Star blocks on newspaper foundation from Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1903. Author's collection.

Dubois in her book *THE WOOL QUILT* gives clear directions and explanation for this technique.⁴

The art of taking small bits and pieces of used and unused material to create a fabric is well illustrated by a quilt made by Susan McCord from Indiana in 1845. Susan pieced thousands of irregularly shaped red and green scraps to make the leaf and petal shapes. Then she appliqued the string leaves on the solid green twisting vine. This 80" x 76" quilt is a magnificent example of balanced design and well coordinated color using the string technique.⁵

Geometric shapes, particularly diamonds and squares, were a favorite with the quiltmakers.⁶ Diamonds usually used a random selection of colors and prints stitched across the width of the shape to the foundation. Diamonds were then pieced to obtain a star⁷ (Figure 1). Usually the strings are stitched by hand as pick up work then the units are joined by machine. However examples of all hand, all machine or a combination can be seen. The block could then be completed by piecing in the background or by appliqueing the star to a whole cloth.⁸ A seven pointed *String Star* top from mid-Missouri, circa 1930, is an illustration of the applique technique. In this case the foundation cloth is salt and sugar sacks as evidenced by the advertis-

Fig. 2. *String Fan*, circa 1900. Author's collection.

ing markings still visible on the back. The border or joining strips of orange fabric are made of Purina Feed sacks.⁹

When squares were chosen, the strings usually were placed diagonally and a secondary pattern emerged.^{10,11} In some cases these blocks were set on point, alternate block setting. Scrap selection (or lack of) did not mean loss of harmony. Repeated use of a blending fabric indicated the colorist was very aware of her pallet and knew how to use it. An example of this is shown by *String Fan*, circa 1900 (Figure 2). The diamond shape has been covered with red strings alternating with a random selection of scrap fabrics arranged in a fan design. The diamonds were then set in alternate blocks with a pink and white print fabric. The fans seem to dance across the quilt.¹²

Some contained crazy quilts are actually further examples of string quilts.¹³ Perhaps a more accurate term for some contained crazy quilts would be "contained string quilts."¹⁴ A string quilt is constructed by using a foundation, pressed work technique and straight seams. Often a contained crazy quilt or more accurately a

contained string quilt is constructed by the string method, using the pressed technique and straight seams, rather than the usual crazy patchwork method.

Another type of string quilt is the *suttles* variation.¹⁵ *Suttles* is a term used in Nova Scotia to refer to a bag of scraps or "the *suttles* bag."¹⁶ *Suttles* is a pattern using a shape of three or more sides in the center of the block. Strings are sewn on this core to cover the desired shape. It could be compared to a free form log cabin block.¹⁷

When we examine a completed string quilt, the quilting is usually an all over pattern or utility quilting. The most common one is called by various names: shell, plate, fan or waves. A notable exception is a 1930s octagonal star quilt of multi-color string pieces and white, with a pink backing. The marking and quilting were done from the back with no reference to the front patterns. Double feathered circles with diamond grid centers and feathered lyre were quilted, truly a magnificent quilt.¹⁸

When our country was first developing and frontiers opened expanding westward, women met the need of their families by learning to adapt to a harsh and often isolated life. They were quick to utilize their scant, few possessions to the fullest. Recycling garments and all fabrics was a necessary part of their lives. The Scrap and string quilts they pieced brought not only warmth, but a practical and decorative solution to the bleakness of their lives . . . Those early quilts exemplify the intuitive and appreciation of beauty expressed by women untutored in the arts. Their skill at combining 50-200 different scrap-segments into one unifying, artistic design reveals them to be skilled craftswomen.¹⁹

Examples of string quilts have been found in New York, Michigan, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Kansas. I feel there are opportunities for additional research on string quilts. Therefore I hope readers will look for further examples so more study can be done on this fascinating topic.

Notes and References:

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