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Special Presentation

Patchwork Objects from Around the World


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During my search to find the roots of Fabric Art or Patchwork, a Singhalese monk in Sri Lanka told me this story: "During Buddhas life (500 B.C.) it was the custom that the people donated robes for Buddha and the monks, even the poor people. And since it was very difficult for the poor to donate, it meant a lot to Buddha. Therefore he ordered that patches from wornout robes had to be used over again to make wallhangings for temples, curtains and rugs."

A resource of early culture and art was discovered in 1977 in the South Chinese city of Chang Sha. The grave of a woman who died 2,100 years ago was found and opened. The treasures and documents found in this grave showed a civilization which was achieved elsewhere in the world much later. Among the things discovered was a "Silk Picture made out of different pieces of material sewn together."¹

Applique on fabric and skin (leather) was known to the ancient Egyptians. They designed attractive and warm robes for the dead on their long journeys. They pieced together different colored fabrics and quilted them.² I found a photo³ of a painting which shows a huntsman in a striped garment, perhaps dyed or painted stripes of skins sewn together. In the same book it says, that weaving was introduced by Asians to Egypt. And, as is well known, the crusaders brought quilted and pieced fashion to Europe, where it was—depending on the climate of the certain country—either used to keep you warm or as decoration—or both.

In the 16th century in Germany, the bed was the most important piece of furniture in the household and bed covers were called "dust covers." I found on the inventory list of the Castle Hohenbarr from 1585, that beside the "dust covers" there was a "White, quilted




AFGHANISTAN, *tent hanging*, 1870. Cotton, silk and Russian chintz patchwork.
Author's collection.

GERMANY, *bed quilt*, 16th c., cotton, Victoria and Albert Museum.

JAPAN, priest's robe, 19th c., silk. Museum of Mankind, London.

SUDAN, Mahdist army uniform, 1850. Museum of Mankind, London.



GERMANY, *wallhanging*, 15th c. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



GERMANY, *wallhanging*, 15th c. (detail). Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

BOHEMIA, *bed cover*, "16 October 1790." *Applique and embroidery*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

bedspread" mentioned.⁴ And in Nuremberg, Germany in 1701 Mrs. Dorothea Sabina Lemp listed in her inventory "one red taffeta bed cover, embroidered and with a blue inner square and framed with a different colour red silk and yellow fringes."⁴

On October 6, 1683 the ship *Concorde* brought the first German immigrants to America. Among them were thirteen Mennonite families from the city of Krefeld, which was then and is still today the capital of textile industry in Germany. They all were weavers and they settled in Pennsylvania. "Pennsylvania Dutch" people were immigrants from Germany. Many designs in the famous Pennsylvania Dutch Quilts are old German folk patterns which the immigrants brought with them.

INDIA, child's cap, 1910, cotton. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The true beginning of patchwork and fabric art as we know it today was in Asia. But as Alfred Allan Lewis mentioned in his book *The Mountain Artisans*: "In a search for the first quilters, it makes no difference which folks one champions. In a fanciful mood, one might say that the cradle of civilization was made up with a quilted cover!"⁵

Most of the following pieces of art were photographed in London at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the British Museum and the Museum of Mankind. It took quite some research and inquiring with the different textile departments at the Victoria & Albert Museum, such as "East Indian," "Far East" or "Embroidery Department." None of the objects I photographed are on exhibition at this huge museum. I found them in the storage rooms of the various departments neatly sorted away in drawers. They are not listed in the inventory under "Patchwork," "Quilts" or "Applique" and they are greatly protected by the keepers of these departments. As an example, to protect the fragile fabrics, once

they are photographed they can never be photographed by someone else. But the photo can be purchased at the photo sales department.

My travels around the world during the last six years has always involved the search for Patchwork. Last year in the Buddhist Temples of Sri Lanka I saw several little circles in the shape of a lotus flower (which is the holy flower) made in a technique I would call a mixture between applique and piecing. Women make them and donate them to the temple.

In Afghanistan, where the Nomads use patchwork objects to decorate their tents, I found an interesting similarity to American patchwork quilts: the maker of the patchwork there will always include a religious error in the design which indicates "only Allah is perfect" as found sometimes in American quilts, where it indicates "that only God is perfect."

Today in Europe we have a renaissance in the popularity of this old technique. In W-Germany, patchwork quilting—introduced this time via the USA—is already the hobby of many thousands of German women. They have founded "Quilting Groups" where they meet regularly once a week or once a month, to talk and exchange designs. Many joint projects are established, such as friendship quilts, and the German quilters are as passionate and addicted to the craft as their American counterparts and they feel as enthusiastic about making quilts as it is felt over here.

References

1. *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Reuter), Munich, 22 November, 1977, p. 47.
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4. L. von Wilckens, *Das Puppenhaus*, Callwey Verlag, Munich, 1978, p. 31.
5. Alfred Allan Lewis, *The Mountain Artisans Quilting Book*, MacMillan, New York, 1973, p. 1.