

Uncoverings

1984

Volume 5 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/ Art Needlework Movement, 1876-1893

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In the decade following the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, what came to be known as a "decorative art craze" swept across America.¹ This craze would have a profound effect on decorating and quilting in the Gilded Age between 1876 and 1893. Americans believed that the Centennial had stimulated this development of art and that no areas had "profited by it more than those connected with the furnishing and decoration of the home."²

Women were encouraged to experiment with new aesthetic styles and ideas in decorating. Eastlake or Queen Anne furniture became the fashionable replacement for the Victorian rosewood and walnut rococo styles which had reigned supreme for over thirty years. Art needlework embroidery began to replace the old-fashioned Berlin canvas work. Entrepreneurs and tradesmen encouraged the new aesthetic trends in furnishing and adorning homes, sensing that they would enjoy "commercial advantages."³

This interest in artistic homes was part of the Aesthetic Movement originating in England in the 1860s under the leadership of thinkers and artists such as John Ruskin and William Morris. The household art phase of this movement stressed that the home was "the foundation of all that is good" and that whatever made the home "more attractive, more beautiful, more useful" was worthy of "the attention and thought of the noblest and best of men and women."⁴ A beautiful home would lift the morality and productivity of the people living in it.

While experts noted that "the tendency of art is towards cost and luxury," they also stressed that "in furnishing the home ... every

man or woman, rich or poor, should find a field for the display of individual taste."⁵ To aid this process, many felt that the country needed "an institution that would establish a standard of taste which would preclude the possibility of the acceptance, with any degree of toleration, of such enormities as are now thrust upon the public."⁶

The Philadelphia Centennial would provide the stimulus for the formation of such taste-setting institutions. Within two years of this exhibition, a growing number of art schools, decorative art societies and women's exchanges were established in cities and towns across the country. New journals such as *The Art Journal*, *The Art Amateur* and *The Art Interchange* began serving those interested in household and decorative art. *The Art Amateur* summarized the trend:

Art societies have sprung up all over the country. It is the fashion to talk about art and, in a fashionable way, to practise it. Young ladies, instead of spending their mornings at the piano ... take lessons in painting on china, in oils, or water-colors, or ply their nimble fingers in the production of "art needle work."⁷ (See Figure 1)

This paper will explore the role of the Decorative Art Societies, Societies of Art Needlework, or Women's Exchanges, in shaping the form of quilting from 1876-1893. Proliferating after the Centennial Exhibition, they became taste setters during the household art phase of America's Aesthetic Movement. By promoting new types of embroidered bed coverings and rejecting calico patchwork as artistic needlework, these organizations influenced women's quilting decisions. Women wishing to participate in the art movement and to continue making quilts required new forms of expression. Crazy quilts and outline quilts emerged as grass-roots responses to Aesthetic Movement fashions.

In the 1860s and early 1870s sophisticated people no longer chose traditional calico quilts or woven coverlets for their beds. These were replaced or covered with white Marseille spreads and other commercial spreads. According to one contemporary needlework expert, patchwork now fell "more under the head of plain than fancy needlework." Calico squares were useful for teaching little girls to sew or for old women who no longer being able to "conquer the intricacies of fine work, will still make patchwork quilts for coming generations." While some beautiful specimens were occasionally



Fig. 1. This illustration, part of a series, appeared in Demorest's Monthly Magazine (September 1879), p. 504. A young lady is standing in a room which reflects the decorative art trends in home furnishing.

seen at fancy fairs or county fairs, "the taste is one that has nearly died out."⁸

The reviewer who covered the Centennial Exhibition for *Arthur's Magazine* was not taken with American patchwork. She grouped it in the same category with the "abomination of worsted embroidery . . . horrible to behold" and reported that "we saw some little patchwork, though not an abundance of it, we are happy to state."⁹

In Frank Leslie's *Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition* only one American quilt was described. This so-called quilt, sent by a woman from Alabama, was not the traditional type. It had a white satin background on which were "embroidered 1,500 roses and rosesbuds, in each of which there are from 500 to 900 stitches. Seven thousand skeins of silk were used in this work, and a lady was engaged upon it eighteen months."¹⁰ Obviously there was still an

interest in demanding decorative work.

Many reviews of the Centennial Exhibition paid particular attention to the Japanese display which was the most extensive ever shown in the Western world. Visitors were treated to the "full flower and glory of Japanese Art" and could admire wonderful bronzes, embroideries, costumes, silk textiles and decorative screens. One author felt that the Japanese and Chinese displays were "more artistic, beautiful, and attractive than those of any other nation" and predicted that they would "exert a wide and positive influence upon American art industries." He also forecast that this influence would not take the form of direct copying but would instead be expressed in design attempts to capture the "originality and poetic feeling which give to Japanese art its distinctive character."¹¹

The exhibit of The Royal School of Art Needlework from Kensington, England was also popular. This school was established in 1872 for the two-fold purpose of restoring "ornamental needlework to the high place it once held among decorative arts" while at the same time supplying "suitable employment for poor gentlewomen."¹² Needy gentlewomen completed a three year training program in art needlework. They were then paid to execute designs copied from antique sources or drawn by leading aesthetic designers like William Morris, Walter Crane and Fairfax Wade. The ladies worked in anonymous privacy at the school's workrooms and their embroidered articles were sold in a salesroom maintained by the school.

The Royal School's art needlework display at the Centennial included embroidered bedspreads with patterns based on medieval or Renaissance designs or conventionalized treatment of botanical subjects. While taste setters would later remember that beautifully embroidered quilts "formed the most practical feature of the display of decorative art-needlework," immediate reactions to these new embroideries were mixed.¹³ *Peterson's Magazine* admired the harmonious effect of Fairfax Wade's arabesque design but felt the spread was marred by the insertion of coarse lace. *Arthur's Magazine* described a number of the bedspreads but felt that "beyond richness of material, brilliancy of coloring and elaborateness of design, there is little to recommend those things."¹⁴ It appears that admiration of this new work was something that had to be learned over time.

However, the Royal School's idea of doing needlework for gainful

employment was appealing. The Civil War and the early 1870s depression had thrown an increasing number of middle class wives into the category of "reduced ladies" who needed to earn their own living or supplement their husbands' meager wages. Women were looking for new ways to earn money respectably. Opportunities for women's employment were quite limited, especially for women not educated to teach. Domestic work, sales work or factory work held little appeal to middle-class women.

One of the visitors to the Royal School's display was Mrs. Candace Wheeler, a woman who moved in the art circles of New York City. Aware of friends who needed to discreetly supplement their incomes, she was happy to find that the new art needlework did not look too complicated. Skilled at needlework herself, she felt the designs and techniques involved were simple enough to make a similar project feasible in America.¹⁵

After returning to New York City and testing the idea with friends, Mrs. Wheeler worked to establish a similar institution. The New York Society of Decorative Arts was formed in the spring of 1877. New York socialite Mrs. David Lane was asked to be president. She formed a board of directors composed of the social and intellectual elite of the city. With the backing of the wealthy and influential, the Society was assured of receiving favorable publicity for its activities and displays.

The Society began to offer classes in decorative art techniques. A teacher, Mrs. Pode, was imported from England to direct the classes in art needlework. In October 1877, the Society "opened a sales-room at No. 4 East Twentieth Street, for sculpture, paintings, wood-carvings, lacework, needlework, tapestries, hangings, and other decorative works, selected from contributions sent chiefly by women from all parts of the country."¹⁶ (See Figure 2) While hoping to help needy gentlewomen, the Society made "no distinctions as to the class of contributors" and was thus organized in a more democratic fashion than its English counterpart.¹⁷

So successful was the project that during its first three months the Society sold almost five thousand dollars worth of goods. *The Art Journal* noted that the society had "received the sympathy and support of the intelligent public," who had "made its decisions authoritative in matters of decorative art."¹⁸

Within a year the Society had "flourishing branches in every



Fig. 2. This plate, originally published in *Scribner's Monthly* (September 1881), p. 698, gives a glimpse of the salesroom of *The Society of Decorative Art* in New York City.

State from Maine to Florida, and valuable auxiliaries in seventeen different cities," including Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, Baltimore, Chicago, St. Louis and Detroit.¹⁹ Called by a variety of names, these schools of art needlework or decorative art societies spread the ideals, values and tastes of the original group from coast to coast. (See Figure 3) The cause was also helped when the New York Society began its own publication, *The Art Interchange*, on September 18, 1878. This publication was to be "devoted to the subject of art as applied to household adornment" and gave "instruction, in silk, crewel, tapestry, and medieval embroideries ... and full descriptions of all novel fancy work."²⁰ Books such as *Women's Handiwork in Modern Homes* by Constance Carey Harrison (New




Fig. 3. This plate which originally appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine (May 1879), p. 839, shows the work room of the School of Needlework at the Boston Art Museum. It later united with The Boston Society of Decorative Art.

York: Scribners, 1881), used the Society as the source for many ideas and helped spread its influence.

The New York Society of Decorative Art remained the pacesetter for taste nationally, although other schools and societies had wide influence as well. *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* did caution that "probably in many cases the stream grows shallow as it gets away from the source, and the quality of work approved by the Society deteriorates, to the disadvantage of the latter's reputation."²¹

As knowledge of the Society spread, more and more women sent contributions of handiwork to be sold. Since most contributors were untrained amateurs, the Society established a screening committee to accept or reject proffered items. Offerings which met the highest standards of excellence in form, color and workmanship

could be granted the Society's seal of merit. If articles were unacceptable, they were returned accompanied by a note from the secretary offering helpful suggestions. *The Art Amateur* stated that "a good standard of excellence in work has been maintained by a committee who set their faces as flint against artistic rubbish."²² Certain categories of mechanical work were not considered artistic, and "leather-work, knitting, Berlin wool-work, skeletonised leaves, and much of the same class, are on this ground invariably excluded."²³ The Society urged people to visit their salesrooms. There was no better way for workers to learn "the right direction for their efforts, than by seeing work which has passed the ordeal of a discriminating judgement, and been found worthy of acceptance."²⁴

Mrs. Candace Wheeler, a member of the screening committee, began to feel rather early that philanthropy and art might not mix well. She knew that many well-made, useful items worthy of being sold had to be rejected by the Society because they did not meet artistic standards. Feeling that a new type of market was needed, she left the Society to help Mrs. William Choate found the Women's Exchange in the summer of 1878. The Women's Exchange had a more liberal acceptance policy and its salesroom featured domestic work such as bread, cakes, jams and pickles, as well as decorative art work and needlework in "every form of plain and fancy sewing."²⁵

The Exchange idea was very successful. In the first year the New York Women's Exchange paid out \$10,252 to consignees. Exchanges were soon started in other cities. By 1892, seventy-five of the more than one hundred exchanges which were established were still flourishing in twenty-three states.²⁶

Demorest's Magazine felt that "to those interested in women's work as a study, learning what she would do if she could, the rooms of the Exchange are more interesting than those of the older society, for this organization having a charitable basis a greater variety of work is accepted."²⁷ With this in mind, it is interesting to reflect on Lucy Salmon's comments when she wrote about the Exchanges for *Forum* magazine in 1892. She stated that the Exchange "has raised the standard of decorative and artistic needle-work by incorporating into its rules a refusal to accept calico patchwork, wax, leather, hair, feather, rice, spatter, splinter, and cardboard work."²⁸ This clearly indicates that calico patchwork was placed in a class with other unfashionable decorative arts, even by the institution that had less stringent artistic standards than the Decorative Art Societies.

Rejection of patchwork is seldom this explicit in articles published during the 1880s. This is understandable, for such a stand would have offended many rural subscribers. But such judgments can often be inferred from other remarks. In addition, traditional patchwork is never mentioned in descriptions of items on display in the salesrooms of either the Society or the Women's Exchange. This reinforces the supposition that there was a ban of sorts on calico patchwork in some of the institutions. Writing in 1921, Candace Wheeler recalled that after the middle of the nineteenth century, most patchwork was "a farmhouse industry" with "narrow limits," although in the "mountains of Kentucky and North Carolina, it still survives in its original painstaking excellence."²⁹

It was clear that traditional patchwork quilts were not valued by taste setting institutions of the new Art Needlework and Decorative Art Movements. Therefore, if quiltmakers wanted to incorporate these fashionable trends into their work, they would have to adapt their familiar forms in some way. The new Art Needlework movement put heavy emphasis on surface embroidery instead of counted work which they considered to be mechanical and repetitious. Ideally, the new artistic needleworker would proceed in this way:

The embroiderer designs her own pattern, and draws it directly on the material, shading and coloring according to her own fancy, so that every effective piece of crewel embroidery may be considered a work of art.³⁰

The needle artist was to paint with threads as an artist painted with a brush. Some women preferred painting on fabric to embroidery, and articles on silk painting appeared in magazines along with embroidery advice.³¹ Americans who embroidered soon developed a preference for working in silk thread on silk or plush fabrics instead of embroidering on crash with crewel yarns as was more common in England. They also preferred natural and realistic designs to the conventionalized English ones and liked exotic designs from foreign cultures like Japan.

While ideal art work would be totally original, most publications believed it was acceptable to use designs furnished by trained designers, since becoming proficient at design was held to be a matter of years of study. The Decorative Art Society encouraged originality, but "if a thing be true it need not be original, the intention of the society being to encourage Art-work, and not merely to preside

over the development of genius."³² In fact, it was far better to use a good design by someone else than a poor one of your own.

In January 1881, *Harper's Bazar* announced that they were the first to have the privilege of publishing designs from the Kensington Royal School of Art Needlework, a feat they considered "proof of rare journalistic enterprise." They also published designs from the Decorative Art Society, and stated they were happy to cooperate with both groups in "their praiseworthy endeavors to disseminate and popularize a knowledge of the true principles of household art, and thus to beautify the homes of the people."³³ The Royal School's designs bore a distinctive logo which distinguished their authentic designs from attempted copies.

The designs were given in black and white outline form, with no indication of how they were to be shaded and only meager color suggestions, if any. Making a wise selection and placement of colors was felt to be difficult. Many women preferred to merely outline the design using a well known stem or outline stitch which came to be called the Kensington Stitch for outline embroidery. The J.F. Ingalls Company stated, "If embroidery is new to you, the outline work is best to commence on, as it is much easier to make than the Kensington embroidery, and requires no shading."³⁴ Women realized that "for outline-work many designs will be found simple and easy to work which would be quite impossible in crewels."³⁵ (See Figure 4.)

Even the taste setters found well designed outline work acceptable for bed quilts or coverlets. The New York Society of Decorative Art had a special category for outline work on silk at the 1881 exhibition. The prize-winning design for an outlined baby blanket was published in *Harper's Bazar*. *Arthur's Magazine* suggested copying Kate Greenaway figures from nursery books to make an outline quilt.³⁶

Most art publications and women's magazines used the term quilt very loosely. The directions usually indicate that they are suggesting a lined or hemmed bed covering when they write of quilts. *The Art Amateur* recognized this and explained:

A quilt means, properly speaking, something quilted—i.e. wadded and sewn down . . . In these days, and with a decorative end in view, such very elaborate work hardly repays the time spent on it; but the coverlet is to be recommended as an excellent object for work and for design. Outline work




Fig. 4. These outline designs were given in *The Ladies' Manual of Fancy Work* published by A.L. Burt of New York in 1884. Kate Greenaway type figures and floral patterns were often used on quilt blocks for outline quilts.

in one color is very suitable for this purpose, and a bold formal pattern looks very handsome.³⁷

While the taste setters generally had an embroidered spread in mind, many women familiar with traditional patchwork techniques preferred to combine their outline embroidery with "proper quilting." It was easy for them to embroider outline patterns on familiar blocks, set them together and quilt them in the traditional way. The majority of these "outline quilts" were made for children and were meant to be used and washed. Therefore women usually outlined with Turkey red or blue cotton embroidery floss, the most colorfast yarns.

Publications offered outline designs from the leading schools and societies, as well as from other sources. Needy artists found creating such designs a good way to raise money. Since there were no copyright laws, designs from the most prestigious sources were frequently pirated and copied. Eventually, opportunistic entrepreneurs flooded the market with inexpensive designs. Companies such as J.F. Ingalls and T.E. Parker of Lynn, Massachusetts, advertised pattern catalogues in the backs of women's magazines. The taste setters warned that many of "the patterns commonly sold in the stores are utterly valueless."³⁸ Mrs. Julian Hawthorne informed readers of *Harper's Bazaar* that designs from "nursery tales illustrated by badly drawn, oddly dressed children ... may be fashionable, but they are not

necessarily artistic.”³⁹ In spite of this criticism, outline embroidery became popular because it was “very effective, very rapidly done, and very cheap.”⁴⁰

These “outline quilts” allowed quiltmakers to continue their traditional skills while incorporating new fashions in outline and art needlework. However, these practical, washable quilts did not satisfy all needs to create something ornamental, decorative and individual. Quilters were familiar with the fancy silk fabrics and embroidery used on portieres and screens in the homes of the fashionable elite. Women’s periodicals and art journals often described magnificent home furnishings made for the wealthy. They believed, as did *Harper’s Bazar*, that the “rare and beautiful things . . . furnishing the grand drawing-rooms of millionaires . . . are of interest . . . mainly because they set the fashions for the simpler things used by people of small means.”⁴¹ Quiltmakers must have found the crazy quilt a perfect solution for imitating the fashionable trends and incorporating them into the quilting process.

The exact origin of the crazy quilt was discussed in the periodicals of the early 1880s. Many were willing to hazard a guess, but no one was certain—though most would probably have agreed with *Demorest’s*, that the crazy quilt “came in with what is rudely denominated the “decorative craze.”⁴² It is likely that crazy quilts were a grass roots response to the decorative art movement.

The first descriptions of this new type of needlework appearing in popular women’s magazines were rather vague, and the technique remained unnamed. For example, in November 1879, *Peterson’s Magazine*, describing table covers, reported a “new work, which consists of scraps of all kinds being appliqued on to serge, and ornamented with colored silks, in imitation of Eastern work.”⁴³ Janett Rets, writing for *Demorest’s*, states that “the old patchwork quilts, which usurped so large a portion of our grandmother’s time, are replaced by others made in more elaborate style, which, if well done, are quite Eastern in effect . . . These quilts are quite bewildering in their combination of colors and stuffs.”⁴⁴ *Harper’s Bazar* said that “we have quite discarded in our modern quilts the regular geometric design once so popular, and substituted what are more like the changing figures of the kaleidoscope, or the beauty and infinite variety of Oriental mosaics.”⁴⁵

The fact that these descriptions appeared first in the editorial columns rather than in the work table sections of the magazines

suggests that crazy quilts were observed rather than introduced by these periodicals. Editors recognized oriental influence. Several of them felt this new work was related to mid-Victorian silk template quilts often called mosaic patchwork. However, crazy quilts were not made by cutting irregular templates. Instead, the technique used on the well-known log cabin quilts was adapted. Traditional quilt-makers were very familiar with the pressed patchwork method of fashioning log cabin quilts by adding strips of wool, cotton or silk to a foundation or background fabric. It would be easy to understand how an asymmetrical arrangement of silk strips around an irregular center might be considered a Japanese effect. If combined with embroidery and art needlework designs, all the fashionable decorating trends could be incorporated in one unique grass roots interpretation. Hetta Ward supported this theory of development when she wrote:

Careful housewives have always hoarded their bright bits of silk and old ribbons, and years ago, these were fashioned with painful regularity and great labor into what were called log-cabin bed-spreads . . . Of late years these same bits of bright silk have been again used for bed-spreads, but put together in a happy hit-or-miss fashion, joined with a slight line of embroidery and called Japanese bed-spreads.⁴⁶

The Decorative Art Societies probably did not introduce crazy work in their workrooms since these were under the direction of an English needleworker and favored the type of conventional embroidery produced in England. It is likely that crazy quilts were first introduced to the Societies by some contributor to the salesrooms rather than by an instructor. At any rate, the taste setters recognized the work and felt that if it was properly done it offered "an opportunity for really artistic work." In October 1882, *The Art Amateur* presented its first article on "crazy" quilts. The editor noted that:

When the present favorite style of quilt was introduced it was called the Japanese, but the national sense of humor has been too keen, and the Japanese is now generally known as the "crazy" quilt. There is method in its madness, however, and put together with a good understanding of color effects, the crazy quilt may prove an artistic piece of work.⁴⁷

The description of the technique given in this article reveals that

y quilts were fully developed by 1882. The article states: The foundation of the crazy quilt consists of patches of calico, or any other humble material ten inches square. On each of these squares is laid a large irregular piece of silk, the largest used in the square, which is called the "starter." It is usually placed at some angle covering the centre, and it is advisable that this piece be of some light, plain color. The rest of the square is then filled up with odd pieces of silk which are simply overlapped and basted down, with the raw edges turned in. . . The overlapping seams are covered with fancy stitches in silk and filoselle, arrasene or gold thread. The herring-bone is the simplest form of stitch used, but it is generally employed in combinations of color and with the addition of point Russe, cross-stitch, feather stitch, and every sort in fact which the ingenious fingers of women can devise. It is impossible to give directions in this respect; the individual fancy should have free play and nothing will come amiss. These stitches are not confined to the seams, but are used at discretion in the body of the pieces, or wherever the needle-woman's fancy may direct. Applique work is also sometimes employed on the pieces. Sunflowers and daisies in other stuffs, such as velvet and plush, may be introduced, together with Greek vases, Japanese teapots, and Etruscan jars. This is done, however, with doubtful taste.⁴⁸

The author of this article suggests that on "this last and supremest development of the crazy quilt . . . the results are often handsome enough to warrant the enthusiasm and industry expended in producing them." There is a warning, however, against cluttering the surface with odd things that would look good on close inspection but would add nothing to the general effect.⁴⁹ This comment indicates an awareness that crazy quilts were made to be admired and inspected, often at close range. Women made these quilts to be shown off as works of art. It was felt that the piece-de-resistance of crazy work was the bedspread, and *Harper's Bazar* wrote that such a work "deserves to be handed down to posterity as an heirloom."⁵⁰ The size of the crazy quilt is usually smaller than traditional bed coverings, for "these quilts, even when used on a bed are not tucked in like ordinary ones."⁵¹ *Godey's Lady's Book* stated that "ornamental coverlets are rarely made full size . . . [they] lay on top of the bed

after it is made, over the ordinary white quilt."⁵² This manner of use allowed them to be seen and admired.

While crazy quilts were usually artistic masterpieces for the makers' own homes, some were also made for sale. *Demorest's* reported that "these quilts are seen occasionally in shop windows marked with fabulous prices."⁵³ They reportedly sold at seventy-five to a hundred dollars. One, with Oscar Wilde and sunflowers, sold at a fair for \$150.00.⁵⁴ However, since crazy quilts took much time and material to make, the technique was often used on smaller items such as sofa-pillows, chair-tidies, table-covers and decorative scarfs. These sold well at the Women's Exchanges.⁵⁵

With crazy work recognized at the highest levels in needlework circles, crazy work became a "mania for home decoration" by 1883.⁵⁶ *Dorcas Magazine* wrote that:

Of all the "crazes" which have swept over and fairly engulfed some of us, there is none which has taken a deeper hold upon the fair women of our land than this one of crazy patchwork ... Many a women with strong artistic taste finds no other outlet for it than in such work as this.⁵⁷

The Art Amateur reported that:

One of the ambitions of a young man of fashion nowadays is the possession of a crazy quilt, made up of patches contributed by the ladies of his acquaintance; and his social progress may be reckoned by these patches as an Indian warrior's prowess is reckoned by his scalps.⁵⁸ (See Figure 5)

The crazy quilt enthusiasm was fanned by entrepreneurs providing materials, designs and directions in a seemingly mad rush to capitalize and extract a profit from this "decorative craze." In the April 1884 issue of *The Ladies Home Journal*, seven different companies ran ads for patchwork silks on one page.⁵⁹ Penny McMorris's beautiful book *Crazy Quilts* clearly documents the crazy quilt at the peak of its popularity in the mid 1880s. One can see the amazing and rich variety of individual interpretations in this technique.⁶⁰

As crazy work became popular and widespread, it lost much of its appeal among the taste setters. Editors of *Dorcas* discussing crazy quilts in 1884 noted that "many a country girl finds her only relief from an uncongenial life and unpleasant duties in the fancy work which the 'high art' people delight to condemn."⁶¹ The same year an editor of *Harper's Bazar* began to write that "the craze for decorative



Fig. 5. This cabinet photograph taken in 1880s is a good example of the aesthetic influence on interior back-grounds in the studio. The crazy-work scarf is prominently displayed and helps suggest that this is a “young man of fashion.” (author’s collection)

art has wrought certain definite mischiefs with much good ... the makers of Kensington-stitch table-cloth borders, Holbein towel ends, ‘decorative waste-baskets’ ... and ‘crazy patchwork’ seem to have eaten of the insane root that takes reason prisoner. Their countless stitches and ugly ingenuity appear to them the fit expression of aesthetic instincts.”⁶² In spite of these opinions, crazy quilts flourished. By 1887, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* found that “the time, patience, stitches and mistakes the crazy quilt represents, are too awful for words.” Reporting on the Second Competitive Exhibition of Needlework sponsored by the Canfield Company and held in New York City in December 1887, *Godey’s* stated that “we regretted much the time and energy spent on the most childish, and unsatisfactory of all work done with the needle, ‘crazy’ patch-work, and we

strongly recommend that prizes for such work be omitted from all future announcements.”⁶³

Interviewed in 1887, Mrs. Candace Wheeler, now running “The Associated Artists,” her own design firm, opined that “there is far too much embroidery, too much so-called ‘ornamentation’ in our houses . . .” She wished she “could turn all the miserable waste of embroidery into legitimate channels” and decried “the wretched fashion journals that have flooded the country with discordant designs, made by cheap designers, regardless of or in ignorance of the laws of color and composition.”⁶⁴

Crazy quilts continued to be made in abundance well into the twentieth century, although they eventually ceased to be featured in leading periodicals. Later versions were often less ornate and detailed in design. It was noted that modern women were in a hurry, and had “neither the time, skill, nor patience for the finer and more elaborate kinds of art embroidery.”⁶⁵ Outline quilts remained popular for children. The design motifs changed to reflect trends in story books. Peter Rabbit and the Sunbonnet babies replaced the Kate Greenaways and Brownies of the 19th century. In the 1890s, interest in traditional calico patchwork, long out of favor, began to re-emerge.⁶⁶

The era of the crazy quilt and Kensington outline work gradually became part of history, and interest in the decorative art, art needlework and household arts movements subsided. Many of the decorative art journals ceased publication. Most decorative art societies gradually faded from the scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as people became convinced once again that art should be in the hands of trained experts instead of amateurs. The Women’s Exchanges lasted through the depression, and some still exist today. For the most part, however, the art world turned its back on needlework, which was once again seen mainly as a pastime for women in the home.

Modern scientific efficiency became the trend of the early 20th century. This movement favored a clean, uncluttered home where the decorative crazy quilt would look out of place. Many of them were packed away and saved, for they were scrapbooks of memories—reminders of an age when women followed the household art aesthetic trends by making “artistic quilts” to decorate their homes. Margaret E. Sangster captures the mood and meaning of this

unique time in her poem, "The Crazy Quilt," published in 1884:

THE CRAZY QUILT

By Margaret E. Sangster.

Patchwork only, did you say,
This mosaic quaint and gay,
Starred with dainty applique,
 In confusion mazy?
Sooth it hath a high-born air,
With an easeful charm and rare,
Lightening the weight of care.
 Wherefore call it crazy?

Every woman in the land
This bewitching quilt has planned;
Slender fingers, toil-worn hand,
 Pulse alike with pleasure
As the curious pieces blend
This an heirloom's grace to lend,
That the souvenir of a friend,
 Each a cherished treasure.

Patiently dear grandma sets
Bit to bit, and swift forgets
All the little daily frets
 Age and loss are bringing,
And we hear her softly croon
To herself a tender tune;
'Tis of youth and love a rune
 She is gently singing.

Shaking heads and looking wise,
Merchants smile with doubtful eyes
When, expectant of a prize,
 Maidens beg a sample.

Stock of velvet, silk, or frieze,
 Like the famous nibbled cheese,
 Disappears if, dames to please,
 Clipped are fragments ample.

Patchwork 'tis, but glorified,
 Aureoled with stately pride,
 Fit to offer to a bride
 As a wedding present.
 Stitched with more than common pains,
 Offspring of artistic brains,
 Wrought in flowers, and loops, and chains,
 Is this patchwork pleasant.⁶⁷

Notes and References:

1. "Is Our Art Only a Fashion?" *The Art Amateur*, (June 1881), p. 2.
2. "Hints for Home Furnishing," *The Art Amateur*, (July 1879), p. 34.
3. "Is Our Art Only a Fashion?" p. 2.
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