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Design Invention in Country Quilts of Tennessee and Georgia

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My involvement with quilts began in 1971 when I did a graduate research paper on American quilts. The topic was selected from a list of suitable subjects because it was the closest to my own area of work —stitchery and fabric collage. I tried to read every book available in Tennessee and in the Library of Congress on the subject of quilts. Incidentally, at the LC I was excited to find a vast number of catalog cards headed "patchwork" which disappointingly turned out to be collections of Victorian verse and short prose.

My project was further implemented by interviews with elderly relatives and persons who were well acquainted with quiltmaking and collecting. Because I grew up in another part of the country I was unaware of my Georgia family heritage of splendid needlework. I took great pleasure in discovering my unknown ancesters through my quilt study. I gathered up family quilts and continued to collect stories and slides while my own efforts at quiltmaking slowly progressed.

From the first, my interest centered on the simple country quilts which possessed some unexpected turn or use of fabric. I was finding the same elements of design, the same sparks of invention in Appalachian quilts that Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof were discovering in quilts of the Northeast. The honest beauty and directness pleased me. I felt obligated to save these everyday quilts from relegation to moving pads and stadium blankets. I felt a duty to future historians. Then, too, my budget could afford the quilts that no one else prized.

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What most exemplifies the southern country quilt? I propose that a limitation of material has direct bearing on the total design of the quilt. Because of restriction more improvisation takes place. The easy out is not available. Substitution must be made. Compromise and adaptations are worked out. An artist sets a problem and, working within certain boundaries, goes about solving it to the best of his or her ability. To my way of thinking, the quiltmaker with a narrow limitation of material is operating within a similar framework.

One of my earliest interviews was with Susie Atkins, a neighbor of Charles Counts, the potter and quiltmaker. She was reputed to have the most beautiful quilt on the back of Lookout Mountain (Georgia) and the reputation was well deserved. Mrs. Atkins showed me a magnificent quilt, with elaborate stitching and stuffing, made by her great-grandmother about 1800. It was of dark blue dotted calico and white in a pattern she called True Lover's Knot, also known as Whig's Defeat. It is an elegant quilt with grace and beauty and superb workmanship.

"I've been offered $500 for this quilt," Mrs. Atkins said (before inflation), "but I wouldn't take anything for it. It's been in our family too long. We don't quilt like that any more!"

Then she showed me the quilt she was completing for her granddaughter's wedding, one called Blue Change. The stitches were even and smooth, but not the equal of her great-grandma's, and the choice of fabric was tasteless.

I asked Charles why, when she had so much appreciation for her family treasure, she turned out one of such mundane quality.

"It is a matter of choice," Charles said. "In the old days you bought a little cloth from the peddlar wagon or the general store and made do with what you had. Now the ladies go into the yard-goods supermarkets and lose their heads with the unlimited choices. Some of the sensitivity has been lost. The products aren't as good any more."

The matter of choice is at the center of my study of the country quilt. Choice may be governed by restriction and limitation.

The eager new quilter is in the dilemma of choice as she selects expensive reproduction calico to color-coordinate in her suburban home. The nice material is cut into little pieces and sewn back together again as directed in the magazine. We can expect to find few surprises in the finished product. Compromise is virtually unknown.

There was devastation in the South after The (Civil) War. There was poverty and a need for frugal living. Fortunately the near self-sufficiency of the southern rural population provided a healing atmosphere for recovery. The quiltmakers, as required, used the resources at hand. Everyday tops were pieced of dress scraps, printed

Susie Atkins shows author her prized quilt. Lookout Mountain, Georgia, 1973

flour sacks, unworn parts of garments, home-dyed domestic, and a minimum of new fabric. Backing material was equally varied. If the cost of cotton-checks or domestic was prohibitive, the quilter improvised with feed sacks, homespun, patchwork of used garments, or even nickel-bag tobacco sacks pieced together. In most instances cotton for filler was readily available, — simply plant it, grow it, pick it, take it to gin, and card it into batts.

Do not imagine that all southern families were poor dirt farmers. By today's standards their cash incomes seem pitifully small, but most rural families had comfortable farms, large families, and plenty to eat. They knew how to make the most of what they had. They were not inhibited by fashion. Their attributes of spirit and adventure are reflected in their quilts.

The following limitations, variations, and inventions have been observed in my study of country quilts of Tennessee and Georgia.

The Sally Hobbs Quilt, made in Brunswick County, Virginia in 1790 and eventually brought to Tennessee, uses cut-outs of rare imported fabrics applied to a background of less costly yardage. By combining

The joy of the misplaced pieces. Ocean Waves quilt top, circa 1900. Chattanooga, TN.

the scarce with the available cloth the maker handled her materials wisely and well. Similar examples from the period are to be found in museums and historic houses.[1]

Settlers who moved into the southern highlands of the Carolinas and Tennessee in the early 1800's replaced the imported calicos in their quilts with floral cut-outs made from home-dyed fabric. The motifs are bolder, more stylized than those from the lowlands, as seen in several examples in the Z.C. and Sara Key Patten Collection.[2]

A few choice pieces of roller-print are combined with common material in a splendidly simple basket of Carolina lilies. The smallest fragments and scraps of rich material are thus used to great advantage.[3]

In the deep south, near Athens, Georgia for example, a regional style developed which is characterized by extensive use of white heightened with lesser amounts of color and print. Formal elegance is noted in these quilts which appear cool rather than warm and comforting.[4]

A certain richness such as one finds in an Oriental rug is achieved in the use of unmatched colors and textures. The Log Cabin pattern made of numerous scraps has a syncopated, unexpected rhythm caused by the shifting of color and intensity. It is a sensation which cannot be accomplished in a carefully planned quilt.[5]

Small quilt-tops or fragments extended with borders acquire a totally different setting from the top that has little or no border. The sensitive quiltmaker finishes her quilt with a frame, a proper border. The lack of such treatment can be disturbing.[6]

Natural dyeing was a practical as well as an esthetic consideration. In addition to the turkey red and copperas dyeing for brilliant color, there was natural dyeing with walnut, maple, oak, sumac, broomsedge, dock, scotchbroom, bloodroot, ladies' bedstraw, and, of course, indigo. Domestic (unbleached muslin) for background and lining when boiled with red clay dirt and water took on a rosy glow which did not show the soil (no pun intended) as soon as a light quilt. Walnut hulls were used to color a white quilt-back that would otherwise have appeared dingy in limestone-water washings.[7]

The country quilt ladies who made quilts from their scrap bags frequently joined one piece to another without consideration for organization. It is in this unexpected juxtaposition of colors and values that one finds entertainment for the eye. The movement jumps from one dominant spot to another and back and around, then rests for a moment in a quiet area before finding new paths to follow. The unplanned course is fresh and appealing.[8]

The same sort of eye movement occurs in looking at quilts of regular,

symmetrical pattern when there is a change of intensity and hue. The flatness and dull repetition are enlivened when the fabrics mix and flow in pleasing variation.[9]

Perhaps the string quilt is the epitome of quiltmaking economy when the ragtag ends and bits of material are used to make units for a block. The process involves a great deal of time, no economy there, and without careful planning the overall design may fall far short of success. Those country quilters with a sense of design have made some noteworthy quilts in string quilt technique.[10]

A certain surprise element is present in a misplaced piece, whether deliberate or accidental. A small allover pattern such as Ocean Waves arrests attention when occasional triangles are upside down or sideways. We may take the quilter to task for failing to correct her mistakes but, for me, I find joy and relief in the misplaced piece.[11]

Lola Fitzgerald and Freddie Mae Woods prepare to air their scrap-bag quilts. Hixson, TN. 1975

If the same care is given to designing borders and joinings that is given to making blocks, the products of quiltmaking would be tremendously improved. As it is, most quilts have been put together with dull strips and little or no border. When an interesting setting is discovered, it is time to sit up and take notice. An original treatment at the intersection of stripping adds spice to the block. Sometimes two colors have been joined in bands for stripping. Invention is welcome in borders, sashing, and joining units to enhance the design and alleviate boredom.[12]

There may be accidental beauty in unmatched backgrounds and mismatched pieces, as in the quilts of Lillian Beattie who sometimes runs out of background fabric for her appliqued figures. She uses the nearest match which may be a few shades off, but adds rather than detracts from the composition.[13]

Perhaps the average eye has rejected the plain, country quilt because of a lack of understanding of its purpose and making. The personal statement is there, if one looks for it and does not feel compelled to make comparisons with grander works. With study and comprehension come empathy.

We weep at the humblest quilts made from bits and scraps, bottoms of men's pants legs, nickel-bag tobacco sacks, sock tops.

We cherish the feel of the handspun, handwoven quilt-back.

We admire the patience of the quilt stuffer.

We smile at the invention in filling a large space.

We acknowledge the finality made at the corner of a quilt.

These southern quiltmakers had originality, persistence, skill, pride, the desire for something beautiful. They possessed the willingness to make quilts for necessity. They made quilts for pleasure and for love.

Notes

1. Mrs. W.J. Hagan, Jr. of Lookout Mt., TN recently donated this quilt to the Birmingham (Alabama) Museum.
2. Z. C. and Sarah Key Patten Collection, Ashland Farm near Chattanooga, TN.
3. Ibid. Thought to have been made near Lenoir City, TN c. 1850.
4. Various quilts shown in the collection and gatherings of Dr. Roy Ward, Watkinsville, GA.
5. Examples are numerous and include those from the author's collection; the exhibition Log Cabin and String Quilts, the Hunter Museum, Chattanooga, TN, 1979; and quilts by members of Senior Neighbors of Chattanooga, Inc.
6. Melissa Thompson, Nolensville, TN, extended a small Log Cabin quilt with a series of three borders for a "short cut to the Log Cabin." An excellent treatise on borders is found in Dr. William R. Dunton's book, OLD QUILTS.
7. Dot Davis, Hixson, TN, showed a string quilt dyed with red clay. According to Lola Fitzgerald, also of Hixson, her mother colored her quilt-backs with walnut dye because of the heavy limestone content of the water supply at Cloud Spring, GA, which precluded a "white" wash.
8. A nine patch quilt made by the artist Alma Lesch at the age of five has unexpected relationships and the same whimsy as in her later works. The author has a number of scrap quilts in her collection.
9. Dutch Rose quilt by Hattie Bryant, Chattanooga, is an excellent example, made c. 1955.
10. Lillie Johnson of Chattanooga owns a Bay Leaf quilt made by her grandmother c. 1890. The leaves made in string-strips are so regular they appear to be made of striped material.
11. Ocean Waves quilt c. 1900 belonging to author.
12. In particular, Dutch Flower Pot quilt, Dr. Roy Ward.
13. Lillian Beattie, a 100 year-old lady who appliques lively cloth figures derived from magazine and newspaper illustrations.