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Scrap Quilts of New Mexico

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The 1985 New Mexico Quilt Survey was conducted by Jeannette Lasansky and the author for the Museum of International Folk Art, a unit of the Museum of New Mexico, in Santa Fe. The survey was guided by Charlene Cerny, the director of the Museum of International Folk Art, and was funded entirely by the International Folk Art Foundation. We interviewed, briefly or at length, almost 200 quiltmakers in a six week period, and we photographed as many of them with their work as we could. The field notes, tape-recorded interviews, and photographs from which the material in this paper is drawn are deposited in the archives at the Museum of International Folk Art.

The 1985 New Mexico Quilt Survey was limited to traditional quiltmakers; for this project, we defined traditional quiltmakers as those who learned to make quilts in childhood or youth from family or other community sources. We began with the process by which the art was learned, and the quilts and quilters we saw are probably different from the ones we would have seen had we begun with the products, traditional quilts.

The scrap quilts we saw in the survey can easily be dismissed as imprecise; meticulous workmanship and tiny quilting stitches are not as dominant in these quilts as are sturdiness and visual exuberance. Their design can be dismissed as error-filled; borders and stripping are added to a quilt only if the quiltmaker needs to make it larger, not as planned design elements, and the color theory followed by the scrap quilter is to figure out some way to "blend in" lots of disparate fabrics in a handy and harmonious way. Many quilt enthusiasts, devoted to perfection, will find the more spontaneous and improvisational of New Mexico quilts to be chaotic.[1] We think

that we documented a vital part of quilt history and that the quiltmakers and quilts we saw are an easily-missed part of quiltmaking history that is valuable historically and aesthetically.

Most of the quiltmakers interviewed have lived in New Mexico at least since the 1920s or the 1930s, a period when there was much homesteading activity in the still-new state and when individualists saw this remote, rugged land as a place where they could live independently in the face of hard times. It is notable that almost all of the quiltmakers who closely fit our definition of traditional came of age between the two world wars; by 1940 the ways in which girls were raised and taught had changed, and, indeed, women's lives had changed forever.

The traditional quiltmakers interviewed all learned to make quilts in their childhood or youth, mostly from their mothers and grandmothers. These women have made quilts all their lives and represent a living tradition in women's domestic art. It is a tradition that has been preserved longer in rural, inland areas,[2] and it is a tradition whose time has run out. Quiltmakers who learned the skills of quiltmaking in the traditional way and in whose lives quilting was a necessity, not a hobby, are some of the last of really traditional needleworkers. Modern life with its vigorous and far-reaching commerce and its multiplicity of female lifestyles, has outdated traditional needlework. Making bedding for their households was a necessity for these women at a time when a woman's ability to make serviceable, attractive quilts was still considered, by herself, by her family, and by her community, a measure of her ability as a homemaker. Even if these women's daughters or granddaughters learn quiltmaking from family sources, it is a different kind of "tradition" the younger generations are learning; it is the learning of a traditional craft, not the learning of the traditional way of life that produced the craft.

It is noteworthy that, according to most of the women we interviewed, quilts were not used as decor in the days of their youth. To them a bed with a quilt showing on it would have looked like an unmade bed, just would not have looked proper. A visitor walking through the house, even through the bedrooms, would not have seen any quilts. A bedspread was spread over the quilts during the day both because it protected the quilts, which were a lot of trouble

to wash, and because the bed then looked properly made up. Mildred Whaley McDonnell of Las Cruces remembers her mother putting a sheet over the quilts as a bedspread, a custom remembered by many of the quilters we met; the sheet so used, she says, would have been "ironed 'til you could see yourself in it!" The bedspread-sheets were often embellished with embroidery or applique.

It is largely the scrappiness of New Mexico quilts that distinguishes them from quilts made in some other areas. Quilts were the final resting place for scraps from cuttings of yard goods for clothing and other household necessities, for the leg backs of men's trousers (after the knees and seats were beyond repair), as well as for the good parts from worn-out dresses, blouses, shirts, and aprons. Any textile that came into the New Mexican household was utilized to the greatest degree possible, and New Mexican quilts contain flour sacks, feed sacks, sugar sacks, salt sacks, and tobacco sacks.

The quiltmakers we interviewed use the old-fashioned term, "domestic," for unbleached muslin and the similar sturdy white or unbleached fabric of which the sacks were made. Although domestic for stripping and for linings was sometimes dyed, unbleached domestic was frequently left white for use as stripping or fill-ins. Elsie Dallas Bloomfield of Farmington and Wyoma Simmons of Carlsbad have each developed a distinctive style derived from the custom of using white sackings for stripping and fill-ins. Elsie feels that the many exuberant colors she uses in her quilt blocks are "toned down" somewhat by the use of white stripping. Wyoma Simmons makes quilts in which dramatic details, stripping, and breaks are displayed sharply against white. She uses the same style in her applique quilts; Wyoma does the kind of applique most often done by New Mexico's traditional quiltmakers, in which the applique is held in place with buttonhole stitch embroidery. This style of applique was very popular in the 1920s and 1930s; it features small, varied motifs that can be done, in fact are even best done, with scraps.

The little bitty domestic sacks that loose tobacco was sold in were a challenge to use. Young girls hounded fathers, brothers, uncles, and neighbors to give them empty tobacco sacks. Ella Green Buckner owned a store in Hope, and in the 1950s she asked customers who purchased tobacco if they would bring her back the

sacks when they had finished the contents. She made a Brickwork quilt from the sacks she accumulated in this way. The names, initials, and cattle brands on the white bricks of her quilt are those of people who lived around Hope.

New Mexico quiltmakers or their mothers brought a tradition of using scraps in quilts from other states, but in the eastern and southern United States there was a strong parallel tradition of making "nice," or fancy, quilts that is almost never encountered here.[3] Scrap quilts are considered thrifty work, but it was not really poverty which prompted the use of scraps. There was also little availability of manufactured goods in New Mexico. Working with scraps became an important part of quiltmaking. Scraps were hoarded and studied and discussed and swapped, and they became the quiltmaker's vocabulary. More than a frugal necessity, using scraps in her quilts became an essential part of the quilter's expression. Even today, although most of these quiltmakers can easily afford and can easily find purchased fabrics, using scraps is an ongoing custom and an ongoing challenge.

Loyce Wood Sage of Gallup cuts out pieces for several quilts at once in order to make the best use of the fabric scraps. Boston Commons and a few others, she says, can be cut out of the scraps from cutting a pattern of larger pieces, then the tiniest scraps left can be used for an Ocean Waves quilt. Addie Jouett of Clovis says she never throws a piece of fabric away "as long as it's two inches." She has five sisters and five cousins who send her scraps from all over the country. Clara Hogsett of Quemado, who still lives in the log cabin her husband built when he and his mother homesteaded in the mountains in 1930, says "I never buy fabric for quilts." Elsie Bloomfield still has a few of her mother's scraps, but her scraps come mostly from friends. Ethel Holloway Brown of Deming trades a scrap bag back and forth with her daughter that has scraps in it that date back to World War II.

Because many of their friends who sew now make clothing from double knits, New Mexico quiltmakers have found themselves in possession of an abundance of double knit polyester scraps. They have felt obliged to use up these scraps and they have found themselves equal to the challenge. They have made rather startlingly textured and colored, but sometimes quite attractive double knit

quilts. Addie Jouett says, "The double knit is kinda' hard; if you want to sew with your fingers, you can't hardly sew it. But it sews nice on the machine. That's why I had to get a new machine—to sew double knit."

Even the backs, the linings of the quilts, especially the older ones, are often pieced. We saw quilt linings pieced of irregularly sized scraps as well as of feed sacks—of dyed white sacks, of matched print sacks, and of sacks of various prints.

Mary Wassom of Hatch says that the biggest change she sees in modern quiltmaking is the purchasing of fabric, which, she notes, makes quilts pretty expensive. However, she still loves working with her scraps. "My eyes are so bad," says Mary, "I need to cut what's easy, mostly just squares on squares now." She wants to keep on working; "I've got so many scraps," she says, "and I'm anxious to make them up."

There are two special kinds of quilts made by the traditional quiltmakers of New Mexico that are of particular interest, both because they are absolutely scrappy and because they are interestingly handsome quilts.

In patchwork, "strings" means the very small, often long, skinny pieces of fabric left over when a textile has been used up. Long, narrow pieces are left when a garment is cut out of yard goods, and there are also scraps left over after quilt pieces have been cut out of large scraps. These are the pieces of fabric that any sensible person would throw out, but the scrap quilter hoards them and uses them in string quilts. String quilts, in which patchwork elements are pieced together out of numerous, often tiny, pieces, have a random, spontaneous element in the piecing, and they often achieve a striking and dynamic beauty. String quilts sometimes appear illusionary; they present an undulating pattern that resembles a dream landscape or a pattern made by shifting lights.

The scrap quilter finds a use for even those fabrics that are too heavy, too textured, or too rough for use in nice quilts. These are called camp quilts, hunting quilts, farm quilts; cowboys called them soogans and used them in their bedrolls—but the name we heard most often is Britches quilts. They are roughly made out of rough fabrics and are generally intended for outdoor use. They have a fascination all their own and often have a rugged beauty.

Britches quilts use mainly the good fabric that can be salvaged from the leg backs of men's denim or wool trousers, but any tough, heavy fabric can be used. Mary Garrison of Mosquero points out that it is very useful to know how to make this kind of quilt when you need a lot of bedding, as "You can make and tack a camp quilt in one day."

New Mexico quilters now produce Britches quilts out of double knits; they find them to be durable, warm, and easy to launder. Britches quilts are still made for two reasons: the quiltmakers keep their families' campers outfitted, and they like the idea of still making the old style of quilt.

In the 1985 New Mexico Quilt Survey we discovered a palpable chunk of quiltmaking history, still with us and fascinating. The quilts are, first of all, good, sturdy, warm covers. That is really what it is required of a quilt to be, and that alone justifies to the quiltmakers the work and appreciation of the work. Beyond that, these women feel that they are using their time in an appropriate and satisfying way—in the continuance of a pastime they learned from their mothers and grandmothers. It is the process of the work that they love; the using of their time and energy—and scraps—to produce aesthetically pleasing quilts. The quilts they produce are usually just patchwork quilts. They are bright, traditional patterns stitched together with skill and sometimes with a well-developed design sense. They are generally not attempts at technical perfection nor at design innovation, but they are expressive of their makers' characters and lifestyles and of the experience from which they come.

It is fascinating to think of these quilts as the direct descendants of the western American frontier. The simplicity of these quilts speaks of a rugged, difficult, isolated life and of an exuberance of spirit and a will to persevere and succeed that is legendary. There is a pleasing, sturdy simplicity in their lack of fancy stripping, fancy borders, and fancy quilting, and in their concentration on bright colors, exuberant interplay of geometric forms, and the sometimes giddy mix of color, tone, and shape.

The influence of materials on design is always apparent in these quilts. The scrap quilter, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century, worked with sometimes severe limitations—working

only with materials she came by. Jeannette Lasansky says the worker is seeing "the possibilities in the rearrangement of everyday things..."[4] "Blending in the scraps," as Mable Otis Head of Farmington calls it, is highly creative work.

Another fascinating aspect of these quilts is the spontaneous element present in many of them. The exotic kind of balance achieved in many scrap quilts produces a dynamic design that has a feeling of improvisation and that evokes comparison with the work of abstract expressionist painters. Britches quilts and string quilts have a dramatic, spontaneous quality that is charming and handsome.

There was a considerable amount of quiltmaking in New Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century. The quilts typically produced here had vitality and charm and had meaning in terms of pioneer life. They were generally simpler, perhaps homelier, quilts than those made in longer-settled parts of the country, but they succeed on their own aesthetic terms and are telling cultural artifacts.

Notes and References:

1. John Michael Vlach, "Arrival and Survival: The Maintenance of an Afro-American Tradition in Folk Art and Craft," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980), p. 205. The three kinds of interpretational mistakes here are taken from Vlach's cautions about Afro-American folk art, including quilts.
2. Among studies of similiar quiltmakers in rural, isolated areas are:
   Ruth McKendry, *Traditional Quilts and Bedcovers* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold co., 1979)
   Susan L. Davis, *Appalachian Quilts of Floyd County, Virginia* (Masters thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1980).
3. Davis, p. 103. *North Carolina Quilts*, brochure that accompanied an exhibit, not marked with date, publisher, or author.
4. Jeannette Lasansky, "New Mexico Patchwork Quilts," p. 2 statement in brochure accompanying exhibit at Governor's Gallery, Santa Fe, January, 1986.