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1842 Primitive Hall Pieced Quilt Top: The Art of Transforming Printed Fabric Designs through Geometry

Tandy Hersh

Primitive Hall, the name of a house in Chester County, Pennsylvania, is the ancestral home of the Pennock family. In 1842, women in this Quaker family made a quilt top now referred to as the Pennock Family Quilt Top and the Primitive Hall Quilt Top. The word "primitive" usually calls to mind artifacts that are archaic, naive or made without the benefit of sophisticated skills. These associations are not appropriate for this pieced album quilt top made for Sarah Pennock, since it shows inventive artistry through three unusual aspects: documentation, geometry and planned use of fabric.

Similarly, the house built by Joseph Pennock in 1738, should not be considered primitive. Joseph Pennock was born in Clonmel, Ireland and lived in Killhouse, his affluent maternal grandfather's home, until he came to Philadelphia in 1700. In contrast to that Irish estate his American house was, perhaps to him, a primitive residence. By American standards, though, the brick house was a fine colonial home for Pennock, the prominent local justice and representative to the Pennsylvania Assembly. Examples of the quality of the house include the Flemish bond brick pattern, the pent roof, panelled wainscot over the mantels and up the stairs, chair rails and ornamented ceilings. A pen and ink drawing of Primitive Hall is the center block (3c) of the quilt top. The house is in rural West Marlboro Township, very near the London Grove Quaker Meeting House where Joseph Pennock attended meeting.

Documentation

The quilt top contains the type of documentation that every quilt researcher would like to find. The names of a married couple, Caspar Wistar Pennock and Caroline Morris Pennock, and those of their grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters are given in one block. Also in this genealogical block (1c) are the date the quilt top was made and the information that Caspar Wistar Pennock gave the quilt top to his two-year-old daughter Sarah Wistar Pennock. All of this family history is in freehand calligraphy in indelible ink and is drawn to appear as pages of an open book and as the spine of a second book. The Pennocks' marriage date is written below the books.

The ink drawing of Primitive Hall includes its location, the date it was built, the builder's name and the signature of the artist. A third block (5c) contains the Pennock coat of arms and the name of Caspar's father George, who died in 1799, the year Caspar was born.¹

Names found in the pieced signature blocks are of the Pennock side of the family, either with that last name or the married names of Caspar's female relatives. One block (2c) contains his mother's name, S. Pennock, for Sarah Wistar Pennock, and also gives her age, 72, and her political preference. A log cabin and hard cider barrel are drawn above her name indicating she was a Whig, a supporter of William Henry Harrison and John Tyler in the 1842 presidential campaign.² None of Caroline Morris Pennock's family provided signature blocks for the quilt. The makers of the quilt had a special interest in Primitive Hall through their family connections, and must have wanted Caspar's baby daughter, who lived then with her parents in Philadelphia, to have the same special interest in her father's family home.

Geometry

When the Pennocks designed this sixty-six inch square, twenty-five block, album quilt top, a wide variety of published quilt block patterns probably was not available, according to Virginia Gunn's study of American periodicals.³ However, if one begins with a twelve-inch square of paper representing the block size in the quilt

others (1b, 2c, 2d, 4d, 5c, 5e) with their points on the diagonals of the block. These stars are combined to form one eight-pointed star (1e) having four short and four long points in one of the design blocks. When combining these stars with squares and circles, added variations are obtained by deciding which figure should be on top, or dominant.

Stars with points of the same length are also constructed, one with six (3a), one with eight (2b) and one with ten points (2c). The ultimate in combining stars with squares appears in a block (2d) which has five "rotating squares" with four, four-pointed "rotating" stars.

Circles provide the central figure in five of the blocks, none alike. One (3b) begins with a central circle and adds three concentric circles, each with a radius of a standard increase over the first. Another (3d) is made in the same fashion, but is segmented eight times and pieced to produce an effect somewhat like Japanese Imari patterns found in porcelain. A sixteen-sided figure (4c), about the same size as the circles, while not a circle, is pieced concentrically and has a circular effect. Intersecting circles (3e) are used in one block to form a well-balanced and intriguing pattern.

Octagonal figures are used as background in five blocks (1d, 2c, 4b, 4d, 5b). Another block (5a) almost defies attempts to describe it. The designer must have established a grid system with one-inch blocks and drawn in most of the diagonals of these blocks. Then by deciding which squares or triangles to combine in a piece, a pattern of intersecting ribbons and contrasting squares was produced. A similar method was probably used to design other, simpler blocks (4a, 5d). The design in another block (4b) is an arrangement of irregular shapes laid out in a circular form. All pieces radiate from the central point of the square and three different four- and five-sided shapes ring the central ink design.

Planned Use of Fabric

The precise placement of fabric designs on each part of the geometric design is the third outstanding feature of this quilt top. This systematic use of fabric repeats of flowers, stripes and other figures from calico or chintz, creates new designs which enhance the geo-

Figure 2. Diagram of the quilt top. Horizontal rows are numbered from top to bottom; vertical rows are lettered across. The empty block 2d is a single piece of chintz in the quilt.

metric shapes. Throughout the twenty-two geometric blocks, nineteen are ornamented by skillful cutting to use pattern repeats. For example, the regular, eight-pointed star (2b) has been ornamented by cutting the fabric to center an identical floral pattern in each point of the star. This, with the ribbon-like outline or border for each point, completes the design and adds interest to the shape and color. A more complicated problem was to take a printed ornamental chain (3b), perhaps arranged in a large circle or ellipse in the original print, and cut thirteen pieces to produce a circular band of a

different, smaller circumference. The artist succeeded in creating the appearance of a continuous, unbroken chain. Patches of varying sizes were cut to obtain this effect. At their intersections very slight discrepancies in the form of the links show how intricate a solution was required.

Perhaps the finest example is the block signed "S. Pennock aged 72" (2c). Seven different printed fabrics are used in this block. The inner decagon border is an overall small dark print. Each point of the star has an identical single paisley centered in it. The triangles that surround the star are ornamented by a centered floral pattern. The twenty-sided figure took the most skill because the fabric used is a stripe. The stripe is turned to create a feeling of motion, and to accomplish this with the particular width stripe, two irregular-sided pieces were cut for every facet of the outer decagon. The two four-pointed stars are ornamented with an identical larger scale paisley and an identical tiny floral motif. The octagon is made from a small floral print in a receding color to provide a background for the dominant stars. This use of receding and dominant colors to accent particular geometric forms is a characteristic of this quilt top.

Assembly and Ink Work

The precision involved in the geometry and fabric design placement was achieved through the use of paper templates.⁴ This "English" method of piecing was not widely used in America. However, it provides the quilter a means of creating and controlling designs for each block limited only by the ability to draw the design on paper. As we see in this quilt top it also provides opportunity to arrange the printed cloth on the paper template in such a way that these designs may be employed in the total composition. As with all methods there are some "costs." The English method of piecing uses more cloth; the cutting and basting are more time consuming; and the whipping requires more closely placed stitches.

In an album quilt each signer can make a block, or a block can be made by several people; for instance, a designer, a piecer and a person who does the calligraphy. By being able to study the back of this quilt top with the paper templates still in place, several observations that shed light on the number of makers can be made about the construction of the Primitive Hall quilt top.

First, the paper is not all the same quality or color. Most is heavy, supple and cream colored. Two blocks are made on different textured, caramel colored paper and one block has two pieces of thin, lined paper in it.

Second, there is no uniformity in the information written on the paper. Some blocks have no marking of any kind. Some have penciled numbers and some inked numbers to assist in assembly. Others have the word "white" or "buff" on certain pieces. One has the penciled words "white," "dark" and "light" in appropriate places. One has "R W" (right white) and "L Wh" (left white). Several have the word "white" and the words "Mark the donor's name in durable ink" centered on the back of the signature area. For these blocks it is possible that the donor did not participate in the construction. Blocks with this marking are among the most difficult to execute, yet other difficult blocks, for example the one by Sarah Wistar Pennock (aged 72) and the interlocking circles, have no writing on the back.

The third observation concerns the stitching. The method of making basting stitches varies widely among blocks from one stitch per inch up to six. The basting threads most often are cotton but occasionally are silk. The whipping or overcasting is done with closely spaced stitches and is carefully sewn throughout, but there are differences in execution. Some stitches are evenly spaced, while others are so closely spaced that the threads pile up on each other.

Fourth, the seam allowance varies from block to block.

Fifth, one block has a white signature area where double the amount of fabric needed was cut but never trimmed.

Although this quilt top does not contain any block made by a beginning piecer, the expertly constructed blocks reflect differing abilities. These differences from block to block support a conclusion that several different expert needleworkers sewed the blocks.

The freehand ink work also shows different levels of skill, though all of the ink work is done on tightly woven, unwashed linen. The genealogical listings are contoured artistically to fit the curved pages of an open book. The penmanship in this block has the characteristics of engraving, that is, every letter is given measured spacing. Some block signatures are made with the same measured spacing and are by the same hand. The rendering of the house, the legend

below the house and the artist's signature, Isabella P. Lukens, are less precise than the engraving style. Her drawing is made of many light ink strokes that make a sepia colored picture. That sepia quality is in other drawings, for example a dog retrieving a stick. There is a bolder, more assertive, hand that achieves a stronger line and develops a deeper density of ink with fewer strokes illustrated in a cornucopia, a log cabin with a cider barrel, and Christ calming the sea. An amateurish hand drew small ornamentations: oak leaves, acorns, birds and pennants.

Quaker Schools

Quaker schools for girls and boys were organized in Pennsylvania in the late 18th century. Early 19th century records of the Westtown School established in 1799 in Chester County, contain information on the subjects studied and scheduling of classes. The materials in the Chester County Historical Society Library include: names of students; their work books (penmanship, essay or "piece" books, mathematics or "cipher" books, mensuration books); and other materials such as autograph or album books, teachers' diaries and students' letters to parents and friends.⁵

Girls attended the same classes as boys but their schedules were arranged to provide two weeks of sewing classes in every six-week period. Sewing classes included instruction in plain sewing, care and mending of clothes, darning and making samplers.⁶ In addition to these sewing skills, the girls learned to make silk terrestrial globes. Carefully cut segments of silk were fashioned into solid spheres, a task in itself, but to make the effort more valuable, latitude and longitude lines were embroidered on the spheres and the geographic features were inked in by hand to become the earth. In these globes there was much practical work in drawing geometric forms.

In calligraphy and penmanship classes girls worked with ink on cloth. Ink block lettering and elaborate writing taught in class was used to copy quotations from classical scholars in the album books exchanged at year's end. In every course an attempt was made to apply principles to everyday problems and to integrate learning across the courses.

With this education many Quaker girls would have developed the

Figure 3. Detail of block 2c, showing the planned use of fabric. Photograph by the author.

skills necessary to design and sew intricate blocks in a quilt and do the ink art work and penmanship found on the quilt under study. At school boys had training in surveying, trigonometry and astronomy.⁷ Within the Quaker families there was technical help available to free quilt designers from dependence on copying.

Design History

Quilters have a series of artistic decisions to make when designing a quilt. These decisions are similar to those a painter must make when designing a painting. For example, the painter must decide what size and shape the canvas must be. The size and shape of the quilter's "canvas" is determined by the dimensions of the bed plus the necessary side and end allowances. Considerations of traditional versus innovative design, choice of medium, geometric proportions, dominant and recessive areas through strong contrasts or subtle color harmony, and framing control the finished painting or quilt. Of course the painter and the quilt designer are influenced by time

and place and the product becomes a part of the material culture for scholars.

In historical sequence, whole cloth, chintz applique, and early block quilts preceded the 1842 Primitive Hall quilt top. In a whole cloth quilt the canvas is two or three lengths of the same solid or printed fabric sewn together to make one overall background. The ornamentation is the large-scale quilted design which results in contrasts in the quilted texture. Geometric considerations are limited to the shape of the bed itself and to the type and placement of quilting designs.

In a chintz applique quilt the canvas is a neutral background cloth ornamented with applique. Decorative motifs are cut from a variety of printed fabrics and sewn onto the background in a new creative placement. Borders, central medallions, color contrasts and design contrasts are added to the quilted ornamentation found in whole cloth quilts. Geometry is variously involved in this process to center some designs, outline or separate others, to form borders or to balance the composition.

Subdividing the quilter's "canvas" into a network of squares, diamonds, hexagons or other grid systems, introduces additional possibilities for natural and geometric ornamentation in pieced and appliqued quilts. If the units of the grid are quite small, the overall effect is directed to how they ornament the whole bed. However, as in the Primitive Hall quilt top, if a small number of larger grid blocks is used, especially with sashing, the eye is directed to the contents of each block and then to the way they fit into the general composition. The Primitive Hall quilt top "canvas" contains twenty-five different blocks, each twelve inches square and framed by rather narrow sashing. The blocks with genealogy, house drawing and coat of arms are centrally placed and separated by large circular blocks, with others, plain and complex, placed in a fairly well-balanced fashion. The viewer's interest centers on the "message" conveyed by the geometric figure, the chintz motifs, the ink design and the "donor's" name.

Examples of Technique

The innovative and patient twentieth century quilt artist, the late Averil Colby, has taken a step beyond the Primitive Hall quilt top

techniques. She has blended chintz applique's free form design tradition with placing motifs within the limits of a specific geometric form. An interesting illustration is the way Miss Colby created a large floral wreath for the center of a quilt.⁸ If she had found a large wreath printed on fabric she could have cut it out as one large motif for appliqueing, but instead she drew her free form wreath on paper, then laid a grid of three-quarter inch hexagons over the drawing for piecing. To compose the wreath she chose many floral printed fabrics, covering each small hexagon template with its carefully selected fragment of the whole design. One rose might be made of several hexagons with parts of the petals on each. She built her flowers as though working in chintz applique technique but was constantly restricted by the geometric template format of piecing. Miss Colby's way of working with chintz motifs to enhance her quilts is extraordinary. She bought bolts of material and cut out tiny hexagon shaped designs throughout the entire bolt.⁹ The ideas expressed and the methods used in the Primitive Hall quilt top need not be taken to that exquisite extreme to be useful to today's quilters.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century chintz applique, the nineteenth century Primitive Hall quilt top and Miss Colby's twentieth century hexagon designs are all related. Chintz applique is completely free form. Any printed fabric motif or any part of a motif can be cut out and applied to a background cloth to create any scale original design. The Primitive Hall quilt top's pieced geometric templates control the shape of a motif, but there is freedom in choosing what printed fabric motif to place within each template. Averil Colby's work sets up two constraints: 1) the choice of a geometric template again controls the shape of the motif but now, 2) the artist's free form drawing determines what motifs will be cut. All three methods deal with selecting a printed fabric motif as a way to ornament a quilt.

An eighteenth century English quilt illustrates that the technique was used very early and that some of the earliest work was the most exquisite.¹⁰ It has the appearance of the very complex marquetry from which it was copied, since the maker's husband was a cabinet maker dealing in ornate inlaid wood work. Each piece is formed from patterned fabric just right for the effect needed. In the nineteenth century a Netherlands quilt employed hexagons with cen-

tered floral designs using pieces cut from floral chintz patterns.¹¹ In each of these quilts, far separated in time and place from Primitive Hall, the design impact was heightened by the planned use of fabric motifs.

Caspar Wistar Pennock's Quaker family members had the opportunity to study under English sewing teachers and respected mathematics and calligraphy instructors in the Society of Friends' Pennsylvania schools. Their social status gave them access to fine chintz household furnishing fabric and dress material. Their interest in commemorating their family heritage, which centered around the Pennock house, led them to a group project. Combining their skills, they created an imaginative album quilt top. As they planned how to enhance the geometric shapes, careful selection and placement of motifs transformed the printed fabric into new relationships.

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