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## Quilts and Quilters of Floyd County, Virginia

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Quilts today are recognized as a legitimate part of the select group of objects known as American folk art.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in some cases the art was a mere by-product of the quilt's original functional intent. Many exhibitions, articles, books, films, lectures and seminars have been devoted to displaying and teaching the artistry and techniques of quilting. Such activities have reawakened interest in American quilts and extended the artistic limits of quilting to staggering proportions.

Until recently, somewhat less attention has been given to studying quilts systematically and categorically in order to build a body of knowledge on which the identification of quilts and other folk art pieces might be based. Quilts are the ideal focus for such research, for not only are a fair number signed and dated, but many are handed down from generation to generation within the family of the maker. In the research described here, I examined quilts and the quilting process in order to establish identifying characteristics according to geographic location and cultural background.<sup>2</sup> An attempt was made to define aesthetics in relation to quilts for future comparison with a larger body of folk art pieces.

Research was conducted in the easternmost county of what has been defined as Appalachian Virginia (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Twenty-two resident quiltmakers of Floyd County participated in tape recorded interviews.<sup>4</sup> Available quilts were examined, catalogued, and photographed. All interviewees were at least second generation living in Floyd or surrounding counties; their average age was 68 within a range from 54 to 92. The same questions were asked of each quilter in an oral portion of the interview and each quilter was also asked to respond to a visual instrument developed to quantitatively analyze subjective responses.

The visual instrument contained four sections to aid in identifying design preference, fabric preference, color preference, and pattern and color combinations in relation to specific quilt designs. The first part of the instrument illustrated 12 commonly recognized quilt patterns and the quiltmaker was asked to choose one that she would most like to make. Part two contained eight white fabrics of different fiber and structure and the quilter was asked which of the fabrics she found most suitable for her imagined quilt. Part three consisted of 30 solid fabric swatches representing the color spectrum. Those interviewed were asked to choose a basic color scheme for the selected quilt pattern. Part four of the visual instrument contained the 30 solid color fabric swatches from part three as well as 67 print samples of stripe, dot, check, plaid, floral and geometric patterns. The quiltmaker was asked to select fabric to be used in constructing the specified quilt. Answers were recorded and then grouped by an independent panel of judges. The data was used in an attempt to quantitatively look at an area aesthetic.

### *Geographic Location*

Floyd County encompasses approximately 376 square miles and is bordered on the southeast by the craggy edge of the Blue Ridge, an outcropping which spans nearly a third the width of the nation from northern Virginia to western South Carolina. The ridge is known to most by the National Park Service administered Blue Ridge Parkway which traverses its length. To the south and east the ridge drops sharply to the fertile lowlands known as the Piedmont. The Blue Ridge area was settled primarily by Scotsmen who came to the colonies by way of Ireland. By 1740, the Scotch-Irish immigrants found the best of the Pennsylvania bottomland taken. Joined by second-generation English and German Americans, they turned south following a route through Virginia's Shenandoah Valley toward the fertile Piedmont of North and South Carolina.<sup>5</sup> Most continued on the established and southeastern route, but near the present city of Roanoke some chose the as yet unexplored southwesterly path toward the rugged Appalachian Mountains.<sup>6</sup> For some of these travelers, the trip ended in the isolated central portion of the Blue Ridge.

Figure 1. Map showing geographic location of Floyd County

At the time of its formation in 1831, Floyd County was described as fertile but better adapted to grazing than raising of grain. By 1835, the county seat of Jacksonville boasted five dwellings, two mercantile stores, one house of public entertainment, one tanyard, one blacksmith shop and a post office.<sup>7</sup> The town was located 227 miles from Richmond, 305 miles from Washington and 100 miles from Lynchburg, its chief market and place of trade. Floyd County had an abundance of hay and timber to export and residents hoped the Franklin and Pittsylvania Railroad would provide them means of transport, but it did not.<sup>8</sup> Today, Floyd remains the only county in Virginia without access by rail. It was this isolation factor that most marked Floyd County, and contributed to the individualized nature of her quilts. The findings of this research were originally compared with data collected in Washington County, a more westerly and less isolated county of Appalachian Virginia.<sup>9</sup> Differences were noted in a number of areas, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

The primary effect of isolation on Floyd County was economic. Residents possessed a wealth of survival goods, but very little that could be feasibly traded for coin. One quilter recalled that there was plenty to buy, "but we didn't have anything to buy with was the trouble."<sup>10</sup> The county's poverty manifested itself in quilts from the patterns that were chosen to the fabrics, fillings, and stitching designs that were applied. Even the time of year in which quilts were assembled was ultimately tied to economics.

### *The Quilt Artifact*

A recent observation of quilt historians has been that in most instances, pieced or patchwork quilts were probably not born of economic necessity or constructed primarily as a means of keeping warm,<sup>11</sup> but were aesthetic expressions from the beginning.<sup>12</sup> This may well be true in most areas of the country. However, my research in Floyd County causes me to doubt that this was universally the case. The quiltmakers who were interviewed universally stressed that quilts were constructed for warm bed coverings. In fact one of the primary reasons young girls learned to quilt was so that they could provide warm cover for their future families. "We started a family and everybody had to have quilts... My parents gave us some quilts when we got married and so did my husband's mother... Of course at that time I realized that wasn't going to last forever and I couldn't depend on somebody else to do for me..."<sup>13</sup> Long after woven wool and eventually polyester blankets were used as primary bedcovers in other areas, quilts were still piled five to eight high on beds in homes where wood or oil heat was minimal. I have already touched on the economic difficulties experienced by Floyd County residents and have no doubt that in Floyd, pieced and patchwork quilts were born of economic necessity and were entirely functional in nature.

Patterns. Floyd families were large and at five quilts to a bed, even with more than one child sleeping there, the work to supply the quantity required was no leisure chore. The opportunity to piece curving patterns or to applique delicate sprigs of flowers or to quilt with vines or shells at 12 to 14 stitches per inch, simply did not exist for most Floyd quilters. Instead, geometric patterns with

Figure 2. Quilt patterns (left to right/top to bottom): Eight-Pointed Star, Double X, Rob Peter to Pay Paul, Nine Patch/Nine Diamond, Log Cabin, Monkey Wrench/Churn Dash.

straight lines that could be easily cut and pieced and quilted with stitches that were neither so small as to be overly time consuming, nor so large as to render the quilt unacceptable for the constant use and laundering to which it would be subjected, were the rule. Variations of the Nine Diamond (local name for the Nine Patch pattern) and Star patterns, the Log Cabin, Double X, Monkey Wrench/Churn Dash, and Rob Peter to Pay Paul were likely to be chosen (Figure 2). Other common patterns were early forms of what by the turn of the century was commonly known as the "crazy quilt" without its embellishments. Early Floyd versions were the save-all and string quilts. Save-all simply meant that each piece of fabric was saved and used as it was, no matter the shape with little or no trimming. The fabric scraps were usually small and odd-shaped and had to be pieced together like a jig-saw puzzle. String quilts were similar to the save-all quilts, but made use of scraps that were longer than they were wide.

*Fabrics.* As trade was established and businesses sprang up, fabrics were available to those who could afford to buy them. An

1852 store inventory listed numerous fabrics including calicos for as little as seven and a half cents a yard.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, few could afford the price of new yardage for bedclothes. Thus, left-over fabric from clothing construction was the primary source for Floyd quilt material well into the twentieth century. Still today most Floyd quilters reserve the use of new yardage for joinings and linings.

But even clothing scraps were by no means plentiful. "We didn't have a lot of material back in those days [1920s] and we didn't have a lot of clothes. You had a new dress in the fall for winter and one or two for the summer and that was it."<sup>15</sup> Another quilter remembered times when her mother could not make quilts because she would have to wait until enough scrap fabric accumulated.<sup>16</sup> "Back then [1920s] if anyone got a new dress, they saved every scrap no matter how small and they would divide it out and give all the family some."<sup>17</sup>

The scarcity of clothing scraps meant that they were not the only fabrics used in quilts. The cloth bags in which animal feeds and staples such as sugar, flour, and salt, and even tobacco were sold, provided valuable fabric for Floyd quilters. The stitches holding the bags together were carefully undone and then the bags were bleached to remove identifying marks. The five pound sugar sack was about the size of a quilt block and four of the 100 pound Daisy hog or chicken feed bags joined together would make a quilt lining. Sometimes the feed bags were dyed if the maker wanted other than white. "Years ago they had a tobacco named White Horse [that] came in little cloth bags . . . I can remember [mother] saving those . . . She dyed them in two different colors and pieced a quilt . . . I remember it was yellow and green."<sup>18</sup>

The 1930s witnessed perhaps the biggest boon to Floyd quilting—the advent of printed cotton feed sacks. The bags were available in a variety of different prints, mostly in low intensity primary colors. These were most often used for linings and joinings but sometimes for quilt pieces themselves. Often quilters would trade feed sacks to get enough of one print. One woman remembered how the feed store was like a bargain basement with all the quilters grabbing to get enough bags to match.<sup>19</sup>

Worn clothes, too, served as sources of quilt fabric. Some adult clothing was used to make children's clothes, but when the children

grew too large, “[mother] would cut the best part out of the backs of coats or backs of even the pant legs . . . and piece [the quilt block] . . . Some of them they called Tangled Britches . . . If they weren’t used there, they were used for making the scatter rugs for the floor.”<sup>20</sup> No fabric went to waste. For that reason the save-all or string quilts were the most common patterns for quilts made from used clothing. Most used-cloth quilts were wool because cotton garments were worn harder and laundered more often, causing them to be of little use in quilts. The practice of using worn clothing as a source of quilt fabric ended in Floyd prior to the twentieth century. An exception is the occasional use of fabric from garments with sentimental value as in crazy quilts made during the Victorian era, but even these quilts show a particular influence of Floyd County. Instead of the silk velvets, satins, and brocades that adorn most crazy quilts, Floyd County crazy quilts were collections of wool plaids, broadcloths and linens, reflections of the clothing the residents were wearing.

*Filling.* Quilt filling, like the fabrics in the quilt top was often a make-do, use-what-you-can affair. Cotton batts were not common in early Floyd quilts. The mountainous climate really did not provide a long enough growing season for cotton, although one quilter remembered her mother growing cotton for quilts up through the 1940s. “They’d have two or three rows across the garden, enough to do a couple of quilts during the winter. After you picked it, you had to lay it down in front of the fireplace and let that stuff sort of get warm and then at night we picked the seed out of it.”<sup>21</sup> For those who were able to purchase cotton batting, it was less than luxury. The cotton was quite poor quality with many seeds and debris left unremoved; “It had lumps in it that you couldn’t stick a needle through.”<sup>22</sup> Until the 1930s when Mountain Mist offered a better quality top-of-the-line batting, the batts were purchased in foot-wide rolls of varying weights from one to three pounds. A two-pound batt would make a good warm quilt, but “they didn’t do fancy quilting on that.”<sup>23</sup>

Many of the earliest quilts were filled with wool fleece, a light-weight, warm batt that did not form hard, tight lumps when washed and was much easier to quilt. The wool was available to many who raised their own sheep and several quilters remembered its durability well. “When the [quilt] tops and bottoms gave out, we’d wash



them . . . take the wool and fluff it up with some cards and put that back in the [new] quilts . . . they were the nicest quilts you've ever seen."<sup>24</sup> Prior to 1920 when a county woolen mill was established, most of the wool was hand washed and carded at home. The woolen mill would prepare batting "half the size of a quilt and then you used two strips."<sup>25</sup> Sometimes the wool was put between cheese cloth so it would "hold its place."<sup>26</sup>

Other materials also served as fillings. Often times, worn ragged blankets or quilts were used and simply recovered. Due to excessive thickness such quilts were usually tacked rather than quilted. One quilt (c. 1900) was filled with threads tediously unravelled from old clothes and fabrics.

### *The Quilt Process*

The entire quiltmaking process was influenced by economics and ultimately the seasons of the year. Floyd was a primarily agrarian culture; in addition to feed crops for animals, every home had a garden. The same women who provided quilts for the beds also planted and harvested the gardens and provided food for the table. The schedule was well-defined: summers were reserved for the out-of-doors. In late May or early June, planting took place. By the end of June or early July, the strawberries, blackberries, and huckleberries were ripe for picking and preserving followed by peas, beans, corn, cabbage, tomatoes, potatoes and so on. It was not until the first frost in late September that the harvest actually came to an end. The only quilting that might be accomplished during the summer was by elderly women who were no longer able to plant or harvest; nevertheless, they seldom forfeited their expertise in the kitchen.

*"Putting in" the Quilt.* After the harvest while the weather was still warm or in the late spring before planting, quilts were "put in" for quilting. The term refers to the attachment of the pieced quilt top, the filling, and the lining, to the quilt frame for quilting. Traditionally, the quilt frame was made of four straight pieces of a lightweight wood such as cucumber (tulip poplar), as long as the length and width of the quilt and about one and a half inches thick. These pieces were placed at right angles forming the outline of a square

Figure 3. Floyd County quilting patterns

which was fastened at the corners with either wooden pegs or large nails placed through a series of drilled holes. The frame then rested on the backs of four chairs or was suspended from ceiling staples with "twine string" where it could be raised or lowered according to need. Many times once winter set in, the major part of the home was closed off and the families lived in one or two rooms that were heated by wood stoves or fireplaces. In such instances it was not practical to have a quilting frame set up, particularly if there were small children or bad weather which kept the older children home from school.

*Piecing.* The piecing of quilt tops was most often accomplished in the coldest part of the winter because it is the one part of the quilting process that does not take a lot of space. Several quilters

remembered their mothers sitting by lamplight piecing quilt tops by hand from neat piles of pre-cut squares. Although most owned treadle sewing machines by the 1920s, the quilters said their mothers often did hand work for the sake of convenience. "[Mother] did most of her work at night in making the blocks. Of course we all had to sit around the fireplace to keep warm and she said there was just not space for that sewing machine."<sup>27</sup>

*Stitching Patterns.* Floyd quilts prior to 1930 were quilted primarily using a straight-stitch pattern parallel to the quilt sides, a similar parallel diagonal pattern, a fan configuration of parallel curved lines formed with a makeshift string compass, or a pattern that was referred to as the elbow (Figure 3). McKendry in her book, *Traditional Quilts and Bed Coverings*,<sup>28</sup> notes that most homespun quilts in Canada were quilted in fan patterns or diagonal lines with no time spent on quilting other than to adequately hold the layers together. Although the fabrics became finer and the fillings lighter, the stitching designs remained as the last vestiges of the era of homespun quilts. Floyd quilters knew these designs could be figured quickly using minimal tools: a chalk or pencil, straightedge, or piece of string. For those lacking the chalk, a buckwheat flour batter could substitute: by dipping string in the batter, it could be laid across the quilt and snapped like a chalkline; when dry, the batter could be brushed off.<sup>29</sup> About 1930, some Floyd quilters began to follow the pieced quilt designs with their stitches so that the stitching patterns wouldn't "take away from the design on top."<sup>30</sup> This continues to be the most popular stitching pattern today.

### *Aesthetics*

A person's aesthetic is a difficult thing to define. Through the years, many have been accused of having none, yet by Webster's definition,<sup>31</sup> to be without an aesthetic is to lack appreciation for or judgments concerning the nature of beauty, a near impossibility. Leyburn, for instance, accuses the Scotch-Irish, as representatives of Americans in general during the nineteenth century, of being so interested in economics that they were essentially oblivious to the realm of aesthetics.<sup>32</sup> He asserts that their architecture was purely functional and their art could not even qualify as folk art. Econom-

ics and function were definitely important factors to the Scotch-Irish, but to say their products do not qualify as art is to make a value judgment and overlook the individualized nature of aesthetics, for indeed appreciation is a highly individual reaction and must clearly be influenced by a variety of factors. Webster also tells us that aesthetics can refer to an explanation of art through other sciences such as psychology, sociology, ethnology or history.<sup>33</sup> We can, therefore, talk about a cumulative aesthetic based on one or more common denominators. In the case of Floyd County quilters, the denominators are geographic, economic, ethnic, and socio-cultural.

Nature is clearly the basis for the Floyd aesthetic. The residents have a great respect for nature as is the case in most societies where people are so dependent on it for survival. To say that nature is the basis for the aesthetic does not mean simply that it serves as inspiration for colors or flower motifs, although this is certainly true. Nature is the basis for the aesthetic in that it is not merely ornamental, but functional, and in the natural process of nature, artistic works are created. Early quilts were of course influenced greatly by available fabrics but the colors used in present-day Floyd quilts do reflect natural surroundings. Emphasis is on the primary and secondary red, yellow, orange, and green, the colors of flowers dotting mountain meadows. The county's isolation leads one to expect a high degree of originality in pieced patterns. This was not the case, but there did seem to be a lot of design variation—variety in scale, edge treatment and the way the pattern blocks were set together.

In the course of their interviews, Floyd County quilters were asked if they had or would consider uses for quilts other than as bedcovers; they had not. Even though the women now make quilts to pass on to the children and grandchildren, they are still designed to lie on beds and be used.

Some Floyd quilts which were examined were constructed of polyester doubleknit fabric, a characteristic which causes outsiders to sniff and declare a lack of aesthetic appreciation. Yet this must also be assessed in the proper perspective. When asked their preference of materials to use for quilting, the quilters almost universally chose 100% cotton. When asked about the use of polyester, the quilters

responded that it was a good fabric to use for serviceable everyday quilts. In perspective, the polyester quilts have actually replaced the wool quilts of yesteryear. Like the wool quilts, the polyester quilts are made of scraps from clothing construction. Where wool was once what was worn daily, polyester now takes its place. Wool quilts were often tied rather than quilted due to bulk. Polyester quilts are treated similarly and sometimes batting is eliminated due to actual fabric weight. Like the wool quilts, those of polyester are very warm; a single polyester quilt is lighter in weight than the number of cotton quilts required to achieve the same degree of warmth. Polyester quilts are machine washable and extremely durable.

The acceptance and use of polyester doubleknit fabric for quilts points out the basis for the Floyd County aesthetic: function is the root of beauty. A functional object has a natural beauty that can be appreciated within the realm of that function. Floyd quilters today are not trying to replicate the quilts of the past, rather they are extending the medium to meet their own present functional needs. In a sense they are repeating the actions of their ancestors, who in their original quilts, adapted materials to meet the needs of their changing environment.

### *Conclusion*

The introduction to "High Styles," an exhibit of 20th Century American Design at the Whitney Museum in New York City, professed well designed objects to be both art and artifact. "They constitute a microcosm of American cultural attitudes, a symbolic language through which we define ourselves and are, in turn, defined."<sup>34</sup> Quilts are indeed representative of a symbolic language. This study was able to relate quilts to the economic and cultural background of a people within a defined geographic region. The fabrics selected as well as processes of assembly have shown the values, ingenuity, and persistence of a people. If we continue to systematically and categorically examine and record quilts throughout the country, then the quilt's symbolic language will be made clear.

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