

To those of us who experienced the 60s and 70s it hardly seems like those years would qualify as history. Surely we can't be that old!

The Second Half of the Twentieth Century as History

But as we are swept into the 21st century the years from 1960 to 1980 have become a significant period of our history.

World War II was over and the Cold War had set in. The Vietnam War divided Americans and the Civil Rights Movement made great strides in integration of Black Americans.



The world changed yet much remained the same. People still embraced handmade crafts from macramé to quilting. There is always a special feeling of accomplishment in making something instead of buying it.

America's Bicentennial and the Current Quilt Revival?

We tend to think that America's 200th birthday in 1976 as the beginning of the latest quilt revival and it is true that enthusiasm for making quilts for the bicentennial did give it a great boost. But the seeds of this renewed interest in quilting started earlier.

As Early as the Beginning of the 1960s

In the April, 1961 edition of "Women's Day" magazine we find a preview of what was to come. Rose Wilder Lane, daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder of "Little House on the Prairie" fame, wrote an article titled "Patchwork".

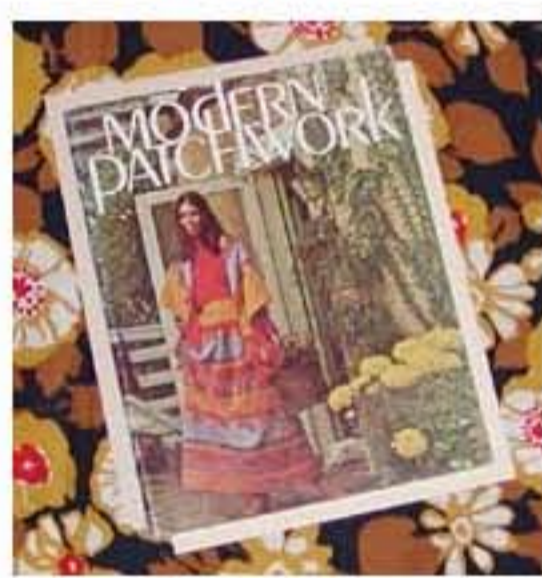
The romantic bit of history in her article included the same misconceptions found in books on quilting written during the Colonial Revival of the 1920s and 30s. The American Quilt Study Group would not begin serious research on quilt history until 1980 so Rose Wilder Lane wrote what was thought to be true at the time.

The article pictured beautiful quilts from museums along with several individual blocks. These pictures surely inspired many women to try their hand at quilting. The patterns and instructions could be ordered through the magazine.

Soon the Back to Nature Movement Encouraged Old Style Craftsmanship

Just a few years later the back-to-nature movement inspired people to explore crafts from earlier times in history including patchwork. Hippies and communes may have led the way in this movement but others were influenced to try their hand at crafts.

A 1970 pattern book titled "Modern Patchwork" included patterns for patchwork clothing as well as quilts. The cover, pictured to the right, displays a young woman in a lovely natural setting wearing patchwork clothing we assume she has made herself.



Then Came the Quilt Exhibit at the Whitney Museum

Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof began collecting quilts at the end of the 1960s. Instead of looking only for fine museum quality quilts they chose quilts they found to be of the "greatest visual interest and impact".¹ In 1971 they were able to display the most fascinating of their quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

This was no easy task; they had proposed a far different exhibit than art museums were accustomed to presenting. Quilting was generally thought of as a craft, not art. But the exhibition turned out to be a huge hit and was promoted enthusiastically both by both publications and word of mouth. As a result the exhibit eventually traveled not only across the United States but to many other countries as well.

America's 200th Birthday Inspired Even More to Become Quilters

When the Bicentennial celebration occurred in 1976 quilts made in honor of the occasion were popular along with parades and ceremonies that included burying time capsules.

Quilt historian, Eleanor Levie, relates, "Almost every quilt historian, and certainly every one who started quilting in the early to mid-1970s, can attest to the influence America's 200th birthday had on quilting. As a celebration of our history, this event grounded everyone in the values of root and traditions".²

Quilting and Fabrics During This Period



The 1960s showed a gradual increase in women wanting to learn to quilt and by the 1970s a few quilt guilds had formed. Popular women's magazines began to include more articles about quilt projects. Interest in quilting was on the rise.

Quilters used the fabric at hand which was often double knit. Double knits went out of vogue for clothing during the 1970s but they were used to make quilts for a while after. This stretchy fabric was difficult to piece so simple patterns were often used like the one to the left made by a church group. But women wanted to try different styles like the doubleknit crazy quilt pillow to the right by Phyllis Breneman.



Below is a close up section of Edith Ferguson's Star of the East quilt. The full quilt is shown near the top of this page. It's a great example of how some women took the challenge and created intricate traditional quilts using



this modern fabric. Edith, who lived her entire life in the North Georgia Appalachian Mountains, did a beautiful job of hand stitching and quilting this difficult quilt.

Of course everyone wasn't content to quilt with double knits. Quilters wanted to make quilts like those made in the past and they knew cotton fabric was ideal for this. The problem was that the only cotton commonly available was in a blend with polyester. Serious quilters searched high and low to find what they called 'real cotton'.³ Some 100% cotton fabric could be found, but not easily. Meanwhile quilters put pressure on the fabric industry to produce more all cotton fabric.

How Different Quilt Making Was From Today

The wonderful quilter's tools we enjoy today like cutting mats and rotary cutters weren't generally available until the 1980s. Quilt pattern templates were made with cardboard or sandpaper instead of plastic and the fabric pieces had to be cut out with scissors. Some quilters pieced by machine but others preferred hand piecing. Applique and quilting were usually done by hand. Quiltmaking methods were still much like those of the past.

But all that would soon change. New tools and methods as well as plentiful quilter's fabric would make a huge difference. Quilter's during the 60s and 70s would have been amazed to see the changes in quilting today.

Thank you for taking the quilt history tour. Enjoy visiting more [quilting pages](#).

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References:

¹ p21, "Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition" by Jonathan Holstein

² p 14 and ³ p31, *American Quiltmaking: 1970-2000*, by Eleanor Levie
If you want to learn more about this time period this is the book to buy.