

The 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition was a big event in Victorian society. One of the most popular exhibits was the Japanese pavilion with its fascinating crazed ceramics and asymmetrical art.

### The Birth of the Crazy Patchwork Quilting Craze

Women were eager to incorporate this new look into their quilts and with the help of popular women's magazines the making of crazy quilts became quite the rage. Creativity was wide open with women sewing asymmetrical pieces of fabric together in abstract arrangements. This enthusiasm for this quilting fad continued until about 1910.



Early quilts made in the crazy style were more show pieces than functional and were often made as smaller unquilted "lap robes" that were used to decorate the parlor. They were fitting showpieces for the lavish interior decoration of the day. These quilts were usually made using velvet, silk and brocade fabric, cut and pieced in random shapes. What a perfect way for women to show off their needlework skills! Using silk thread, women placed lovely decorative stitches on each seam. Intriguing names like feather, herringbone, fly and chain

describe just a few of the intricate stitches. The imagination and skill of the seamstress was the only limit.

### Each Quilting Patch Carefully Planned

To the Victorians the word "crazy" not only meant wild but also broken or crazed into splinters; a good description of the look the various triangles and other odd shapes gave to these quilts. Although crazy style quilts may appear haphazard they were carefully planned. Hours were spent cutting shapes and trying out various arrangements of the pieces before sewing. The following quote from an 1883 article in "The Chester Times", Chester, PA. gives an idea of how they were made.

\* "If your pieces are of good size, and all fresh and handsome, one way is to cut out blocks of cotton cloth, either square or diamond-shape. Cut enough blocks to make the quilt the desired size, then paste on the pieces of silk, satin, or velvet; lap the edges and turn the upper one under; then cover every seam with feather-stitch, cross-stitch, or any fancy stitch you can invent. "



### Crazy Quilt Embroidery

We find a great variety of stitching styles and embroidered motifs on these quilts; sometimes small pictures were even painted on the fabric. Animals and flowers seem to be the favorite embroidery themes. Some quilters believed that embroidering a spider on its web would bring good luck to the quilter. Crazy quilts occasionally included embroidered verses and information recording family events.

### Publications Promoted All This Craziness

Women's magazines of the time published embroidery patterns and offered ideas to be used on the new "crazies". Playing on the word crazy they gave plans for "crazy" tea parties using mismatched invitations and other "crazy" themes. Some articles even suggested that women should be careful as as not to go "crazy" while working on these quilts.

Making a crazy quilt was also popular for fundraising. Sometimes churchwomen would write to famous people asking for a piece of clothing that could be incorporated into the quilt they were making to raise money to help the missionaries, build a new church or other worthy cause. What a great conversation piece such a quilt would be!

### Crazy Quilting Was Not For Just Those Who Could Afford Fine Silks



Originally these quilts were made by those women in the wealthy classes who had the time and the money for the expensive fabric. Before long, other women got in on the fad and found ways to make their own crazies. Some were made from the fancy clothing of the day that had been discarded or passed on to less affluent relatives. Also packets of silk scraps from mills and factories were sold inexpensively through mail order were sold making this style of quilting affordable for more women.

After 1900 women adapted their crazy quilting to using such fabric as flannels, denims and other cottons. They did not always put decorative stitching on these quilts; instead they were often simply pieced. This is why you see a great variety in antique crazy quilts.

Sadly the quilts made with silk in them are rapidly deteriorating, in part because many Victorian silks were embedded with metals to give skirts rustle and weight. Experts in quilt preservation do what they can to save the old silks and when that is no longer possible some take on the painstaking task of renovating the quilt while carefully preserving the original embroidery. Someday many of these historic quilts will only be found in pictures.

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References:

["Clues in the Calico" by Barbara Brackman](#)

["Quilts a Living Tradition" by Robert Shaw](#)

Webpage:

[Victorian Era Quilts From Silk to Cotton](#)