

The word "Amish" brings a picture to mind, one of horses and buggies, barn raising, living off the land without modern conveniences, and of quilts. But in truth the Amish came late to quilting.

The Amish Came Late to Quilting

Long after their neighbors were piecing quilts the Amish still used the old German featherbeds and coverlets. There was a good reason for this. Amish communities were formed so that the members could remain apart from the temptations of the modern world. But what is considered 'modern' changes over the years.

The Amish gradually made changes as well, but often a few decades later. Amish quilt making is a good example of this. Very few quilts are known to have been made by the Amish before the 1870s. Then over 15 years quilting became quite common.

Amish Quilting Evolves, But Always Behind Current Quilt Styles



As we follow the evolution of their quilt making we find that the Amish always used conservative styles compared to what was popular in quilting at any given time. The first Amish quilts were made in one solid color, of brown, blue, rust or black. Often worsted wools were used, and though the fabric was plain, the quilting done to hold the layers together was intricate and decorative. Swirling feathers, curves and grids were typical quilting patterns.

Gradually some basic piecing and additional colors were added. For example a quilt may have had a large diamond in the middle of a dark fabric with only wide border around it. Fabric colors evolved to include pumpkin, olive green and an occasional dark red. These new colors were still deep and solid.

As the general population moved on to elaborate crazy quilts the Amish adopted some of the more basic of the block patterns. Nine patch, Around the World, and Sunshine and Shadow were popular. Only solid colored fabric was used but with more varied colors. Amish quilts were made of wool or cotton, as popular silks were considered too worldly.

The Making of an Amish Quilt

Many Amish quilters used black as an integral part of the quilt. In the hands of these creative women this recipe of simplicity brought about amazing results. The play of the black against the saturated hues created a vibrant and distinctive quilt. Solid fabrics showcased the women's hand quilting skills. These stunning quilts were not made for everyday use but instead were brought out for special occasions.

Most people assume that Amish quilts were done completely by hand but this was not the case. Many Amish quilts were pieced using a treadle sewing machine but the beautiful quilting was always done by hand.

Although most piecing was done at home when the top was ready to be quilted it was often an occasion for women to gather around the quilting frame. Living as part of the community is central to Amish life and quilting fits into this pattern. It was natural for quilting to become another traditional task, one of many done in groups. This sense of community and the importance of complying with community standards had a great influence on Amish quilting.



Differences in Quiltmaking Between Amish Communities

Changes in how quilts were made occurred slowly and only with community approval. Interestingly, this also brought about a good deal of variety from community to community as each community had its own, often unwritten guidelines as to how things should be done. Pink or white fabric may have been considered unacceptable in a more conservative area, while drab browns may have been thought dull and old-fashioned in a more liberal one. A quilt made in one community might be put away or sold when the family moved to another one.

Changes in Fabric and Patterns Over Time

In the early twentieth century new brighter colors became available and women began to adapt traditional patterns to create more complex designs. During the World War II natural fiber was hard to come by and even the Amish had to turn to the synthetics available at the that time. As most of the nation turned away from quilting, considering it old-fashioned and a waste of time, the Amish continued the tradition.

By the 1940s the Amish began to add more pastels and in rare cases printed fabric. Many communities allowed more freedom in design and even appliqué began to appear. Hand quilting was no longer as detailed as it had been in earlier times.

The unique art of Amish quilting might have declined to utilitarian craft if it were not for the discovery of Amish quilts by the general population.

Modern Day Amish Quilts



With the approach of the bicentennial in 1976 Americans became very interested in their past and in the process discovered the unique art of Amish quilting. Amish quilts became a popular item and Amish women began to produce quilts to be sold.

In spite of so many buyers eager to purchase them, quilts are still made by the Amish for their own use. Women make quilts for weddings, babies, friendship and as fund-raisers.

Because the women are often busy in the garden and helping with the farming in the milder months, most Amish quilt making is done in the winter. Young mothers may find little time for quilting but many grandmothers produce a number of quilts.

Although many quilts are being made for sale, quilting is still an important part of Amish family and community life.

Amish Quilts an Inspiration

Amish quilts continue to be a source of inspiration to quilters. Modern quilt artists are using black with solid colors and discovering the beauty in such basic designs. Amish quilt designs are a result of a belief that art is not a separate thing but that beauty is a part of function, a concept that can be an inspiration to all quilters.

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References:

"Clues in the Calico", by Barbara Brackman

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"Quilts a Living Tradition" by Robert Shaw