

"In the ready-cut quilts offered for sale are seen the effects of this hurrying age in which we live."

The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt, 1935

The Beginnings of Kit Quilts

Kit quilts began to emerge on the quilt market in the early twentieth century. They have often been derided as "paint by number quilts." They have endured however and today are usually just considered to be a product found in every quilt shop often purchased by new quilters unsure of their skills in cutting or not confident in color choice or by more proficient quilters because it is timesaving and many of the patterns are so beautiful.



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In the 20s and 30s kits came in several different types; pre-cut pieces to stitch into blocks, basted appliqué blocks, printed cross stitched blocks, or as finished quilts. Earlier quilt kits were not pre-stamped but consisted of a piece of cloth, a perforated pattern and a paste or powder to create the design. This technique has come full circle with the templates and pounding powder in use today to mark quilts.



It wasn't long before the more commonly known stamped with blue lines were devised. Die cut patterns were also sold in a variety of shapes including butterflies. They followed the Colonial Revival style of decorating fostered by a plethora of women's magazines. Because kit quilts were marketed in magazines, catalogs and newspapers a certain homogeneity in pattern styles developed that went beyond the regionalism sometimes seen in other quilts from that period.

Colors were usually solid color pastels. Motifs were often floral echoed by the scalloped edges that finished the quilts. The designs were stamped on fabrics or pre-cut in pieces carefully shaded to be appliquéd into realistic flowers. Additionally, embroidery was often used in combination with the appliqué to provide detail to the designs.

The Business of Making Quilt Kits

Many well known designers were responsible for developing mail order cottage businesses that included kit quilts. Small home based pattern companies sprang up as a response to women's need to contribute to the family income especially during the Depression.

The Ladies Art Company offered quilts and blocks as early as 1898 and by 1922 were providing stamped kits for \$5.00. This company started as a family business that even included the children working to fill orders after school. It later employed over 50 people designing, stamping, creating pamphlets and filling orders. Today it is possible to buy a tool that includes all the Ladies Art designs in various sizes. Just go to www.ctpub.com/productdetails.cfm?PC=1090



Marie Webster founded The Practical Patchwork Company 1921 with two friends. They marketed kits and finished quilts using Ms. Webster's well known designs. Her work was sold both nationally and internationally by mail order and through department stores such as Chicago's prestigious Marshall Fields. Her finished quilts became so popular that women were employed throughout the Midwest to piece and quilt them.

The national competition sponsored by Sears at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair resulted in at least four of the top quilts being sold as kits. Anne Orr wrote a column for Good Housekeeping magazine. She won at least two prizes in the competition despite being one of the judges. Several of her designs including "Autumn Leaf" and the "the Lincoln Quilt" were developed as patterns for sale by Orr Studio which she owned. "Autumn Leaf" was offered as a hot iron transfer pattern with directions for cutting out and placing the meandering vines and leaves that were included. A separate quilting pattern was also sold. The two patterns sold for just seventy-five cents. She also offered a kit that included plain and printed fabric stamped to cut for three dollars. She also offered professionally made quilts for those women who could afford them. She became best known for her cross stitched quilts. Her kits were sold through Good Housekeeping and three of her kits were featured in House Beautiful.

Another firm, the Frederick Herrshner Company of Chicago sold a kit for a Double Wedding Ring quilt with die cut pieces ready to stitch for \$3.95 in 1932.

In 1940 Marion Cheever Whiteside Newton designed and sold children's quilt kits, patterns, or completed quilts. Here intricate appliqué quilt designs were geared toward children and the company was named Story Book Quilts.



Quilt Kits Today



Kit quilts continue in popularity today. Most quilt shops have some available. In 1993 a Kit quilt exhibit was sponsored by prominent antique dealers in Kansas City. The exhibit included kits quilts by Bucilla, Lee Wards, Paragon, Herrschner's, Ladies Art Company, Marie Webster, and the Rainbow Company. The show was well attended and the beauty of these creations was admired.

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Much of the information for this handout came from the article Kit Quilts in Perspective by Anne Copeland and Beverly Dunivent in Uncoverings 1994 an annual compilations of papers on quilt history published by the American Quilt Study Group

