

Basket Quilts: A Daily Presence Through History

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"In all cultures, the basket is a daily presence in a women's life. Light willow constructions, white oak egg baskets, schnitz baskets to hold Pennsylvania's store of dried apples or feathers—all were filled and emptied and refilled in the eternal repetition of housewife's duties." ¹

Sandi Fox

It's only natural that baskets have been used in a myriad of quilt patterns from the those reduced to the most fundamental forms to realistic reproductions even including the weaving and detailed floral arrangements.

This Motif Shown in the Quilting

Probably the earliest quilts using baskets were whole cloth quilts. These quilts were not pieced, instead a solid piece of fabric was used and the overall quilting became the focus of interest. Sometimes these containers and other motifs were stuffed to give the object a three dimensional look.

You can imagine how such a quilt would show off the fine sewing skills of a woman. In early America these were made by those of the upper classes. Other women had no time for such endeavors.

Cut From Printed Chintz Then Appliqued

Another form of quilting in early America was that of broderie perse. In this method of decorating bedcoverings printed chintz flowers and other motifs were carefully cut out from a piece of printed fabric then appliquéd to solid fabric. The cost of the lovely prints was high as fabric imported from India was highly taxed by the British. Even the wealthy used these fabrics in a frugal manner. This container was often the central theme in these quilts.



An example of such a quilt made in Maryland about 1800 involves both themes. The basket is the base for a tree of life adorned with leaves and flowers. Two birds typical of the fabric of this time sit below the gazing at it and a garland of flowers and leaves surround it all. That is then surrounded by several wreaths, flowers and birds. ² As you can imagine the container becomes the root of all this, a symbol of home and womanhood.

Medallion Quilts Designed Around a Motif



What I've described above is an example of a medallion style quilt with a large central figure surrounded by pieced or appliquéd decorative items. While broderie perse required printed fabric to be cut out and appliquéd plain fabric could also be used to create baskets and their contents.

This motif was popular for these medallion style quilts. These ranged from the very stylized quilts with appliquéd baskets, vines and flowers during the nineteenth century to the stunning twentieth century quilt by Ruth Lee shown to the right. ³

Adorning Blocks in Baltimore Album Quilts

This appliquéd motif were and still are a popular motif on Baltimore Album style quilts. They can be found in many museum examples including an album quilt from Vermont made about 1870. ⁴ As I examine a photo of this quilt I find three baskets. An empty one tipped at a 45-degree angle with a simple triangle for the container. Another is made up of several triangles, possibly pieced, giving the sense of the basket having been woven. This one contains three rounded objects indicating fruit. The most elaborate one on the quilt has narrow horizontal spaces reverse appliquéd into the basket. A detailed array of fruit overflows the container.

And Even as Embellishments on Crazy Quilts

Even [Crazy Quilts](#) sometimes included embroidered baskets among the lavish embroidery found on many of these quilts. Modern crazy quilt makers have even crafted floral arrangements with silk ribbon to flow from these embroidered containers. ⁵

Pieced Examples Both Primitive & Sophisticated

In the most primitive form triangles, diamonds and other shapes are cut from fabric then pieced. Jonathan Holstein included two basket quilts in his ground breaking 1971 exhibition meant to show the public how closely related pieced quilts can be to modern art.

The most rudimentary one consisted simply of a triangle for the basket with curved appliquéd handles. The are red on a white background with barely visible cream bases. Holstein considered this quilt a prime example of aesthetic resolution. ⁶



The other is crafted with a triangle on a base while four diamonds radiate from the top of the container appearing to indicate flowers. Each basket is on a white background and they are made with of a variety of fabrics so that not one is the same as another. The blocks are on point alternating with brown dotted fabric squares. ⁷ Holstein found this more sophisticated quilt an interesting contrast to the first quilt that corresponded to primitivism in art.

It's not surprising that Holstein included two examples using this motif in his Exhibition. This pieced block patterns has been popular for a very long time. Quilt Historian, Barbara Brackman, found the earliest known dated pieced basket quilt was made in 1855. ⁸ Quilted and appliquéd examples occurred even earlier.

A Symbol of Our Nation's Beginnings

We find this motif in decorative symbols throughout the life of our nation. A 1779 stove plate in Pennsylvania displays a basket cast in iron. They were glazed on fine dishes, carved into mantle pieces, stitched on samplers and painted by fashionable young ladies. ⁹ Although we no longer carry our vegetables, flowers and other goods in them, we are in love with the romantic symbol of baskets. We show it by using them as containers for gifts and for decorative arrangements. No wonder they are one of the most loved objects related to home and hearth.

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References:

¹ p7 and ⁹ p8 "[Small Endearments: 19th Century Quilts for Children](#)" by Sandi Fox (new edition from above page numbers)

² p92 and ⁴ p137 "[The History of the Patchwork Quilt](#)" by Schnuppe von Gwinner

³ webpage, "[Heritage Quilts: Ruth Lee](#)"

⁵ p81 "[Crazy Quilting](#)" by Christine Dabbs

⁶ p182 and ⁷ 199 "[Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition](#)" Jonathan Holstein

⁸ p168 "[Clues in the Calico](#)" by Barbara Brackman

Related Information:

[Patterns From History for Doll & Baby Pieced Quilts](#)



My grandmother was a very special lady. She always found the best in everybody. Quilting was just one thing she was involved in. She was a fantastic gardener, and wrote lots of neat poems about gardening. She made "pin money", by selling plants out of her garden. Grampa always said if he stood in one place long enough, she would have a vine growing up his leg.

One time I was there when he was upstairs looking for his old blue serge suit, hollering "Ruth!, Ruth! Where is my old blue suit!?" (He was gruff and had a temper). Her eyes widened, but with a bit of amusement, as she looked up from her handiwork - a braided rug which, (you guessed it), was comprised in part by the famous blue serge suit.



Back when fur was politically correct, she would restyle fur coats and make matching hats with the scraps. They were mostly the pillbox style. She would also make women's suits out of their husband's out-of-style suits.

She had a good creative eye. We used to tramp around the river banks and gather driftwood that she would use in her dried flower arrangements. She showed me how to make a whistle by placing a blade of grass between the knuckles of both thumbs and blowing between the thumbs.

Here is one of my grandmother's quilts based on the last words of her 5-year old son. He was dying of scarlet fever, and said "Momma, see the pretty white angel?" She had a dream later about it and based this quilt on it. The pink rose bush at the angel's hem (representing the family) is missing one rose bud, which the angel has picked.

This quilt, along with several others of Ruth Lee, is featured in the 6/92 issue of "Quilter's Newsletter Magazine"; "Patchwork Quilt" (Japanese); and a book called "[Kansas Quilts & Quilters](#)", by Barbara Brackman; and her "Grandmother's Flower Garden" quilt was featured in "[The Twentieth Century's 100 Best American Quilts](#)" (Ruth Lee was No. 17 on the list)

Carol Petersen



<p style="text-align: center;"><u>White Angel</u></p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Click above to view the full quilt.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">"Originality"</p> <p>Before my race is run, Before the setting of my sun, I pray that I may leave behind, something that is truly mine A plain whereon no man hath trod, Unmistakeably from the hand of God.</p> <p>And all who may chance to see this something that is of God and me, May see His face in every line, And know His hand is guiding mine. And into every subtle phase, I weave a prayer, a song of praise.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ruth Adams Lee</p> 
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Click the quilt below to view a full version.



[This quilt was selected as one of "The Twentieth Century's 100 Best American Quilts" <](#)

Click the pictures below to view full versions.

		
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Ruth Lee designed and made these original theme quilts.

