



The name Biscuit Quilt brings to mind the old time comfort of waking under a warm quilt to the smell of biscuits baking in the oven. The biscuits in the oven may have been a true delight but there are those who would question the comfort of a biscuit quilt.

Biscuit Quilts: Comfy or Not?

These quilts, called both biscuit and puff quilts are made with individually stuffed squares sewn together to make up the whole quilt. So if you are sleeping under one you are sleeping under dozens of squarish puff-balls.

Today the light weight polyester filling found at craft stores can result in a light comfy quilt but in the 19th century these quilts filled with cotton or wool were not always so comfortable. Worse of all were the 20th century biscuit quilts stuffed with discarded nylon stockings resulting in truly heavy, lumpy quilts.

Victorian Biscuit or Puff Quilts

Biscuit or puff quilts have been around for some time and were popular during the Victorian era. These Victorian puff quilts may have been more decorative than utilitarian as many were made smaller than what would have been needed for a bed covering. Quilt historian, Barbara Brackman, notes a biscuit quilt pattern published in the *Ohio Farmer* in 1896. She also lists the same pattern by the names *Swiss Patchwork* and *Raised Patchwork* with the date 1882.¹ This style quilt may have been made earlier but these are the earliest known published dates.

Brackman also wrote the following in her newsletter, "Puff quilts are generally done in satins and velvets and were popular at the end of the 19th century. The technique was also quite the fashion for sofa pillows." She then added, "Puff or biscuit quilts, especially those made of silk, tend to be from the golden age of silk show quilts, 1880-1900." So though they may seem a bit clumsy to us they were considered quite elegant at one time.



Biscuit Quilts in the 1970s

To the right is an example of the front and back of a two sided 1970s biscuit quilt. It is interesting how the maker put sashing between the squares on the front only.

As mentioned above these quilts made a great comeback in the 1970s when recycling and getting back to the earth was in vogue. It was only natural that women reused nylons to stuff the pillows that made up a biscuit quilt. Perhaps this return of interest in the puff quilt came from quilt collector & historian, Jonathan Holstein.

The Influence of Jonathan Holstein



Possibly for reasons stated above, Puff or Biscuit quilts were never quite the rage that styles like [crazy quilts](#) were. But Jonathan Holstein loved looking for quilts that were striking and sometimes unusual. Holstein was the quilt collector who renewed the interest in quilting during the 1970s through the exhibition, "Abstract Design in American Quilts". It was first shown in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Arts in New York. Before this

exposition most people had not considered ordinary quilting as even possibly being art. But the exhibition changed all that. It was so popular it soon traveled overseas and around the United States.

So you might be amused to read what Jonathan Holstein had to say about the puff quilt included in this exhibition. "This is another manifestation of the late Victorian novelty textile cult.... If it were not so silly looking, it might be taken more seriously as an aesthetic object. These quilts are also surprisingly impractical, far too heavy to sleep under comfortably. What could they have been used for? ... Maybe you lay on them for some therapeutic effect, rather than under them for slumber. I have tried them both ways. and they are equally uncomfortable. But how curious and wonderful is the surface of this peculiar object."²

Puff or Biscuit Quilt Variations

Puff style quilts don't have to be made of stuffed squares. Brackman lists a diamond shape puff quilt from 1882, apparently a variation of the *Raised Patchwork* and *Swiss Patchwork* I mentioned above.¹



Sometimes biscuit or puff quilts were made up of a variety of fabrics sewn together at random. Other times they were put in a pattern like the *Around the World* or *Log Cabin* arrangement. The fabrics varied too. They might have been made of fine velvets or of wool suiting and gabardine. Later some were made of synthetic fabrics popular in the mid 20th century. They could even have been made with double-knits. Today they are usually made of cotton.

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References:

¹ p34, "[Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns](#)", by Barbara Brackman and Barbara Brackman, *The Quilt Detective: Clues in the Needlework*, 2005, digital newsletter.

² p146 "[Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition](#)", by Jonathan Holstein



Websites:

Thanks to Marilyn Withrow we have the lovely photo of the puff quilt near the top of this page.

Thanks to Kimberly Wulfert for the example of a 1970s biscuit quilt seen in the middle of this article. Her site, [New Pathways Into Quilt History](#) is a great place to learn about quilt and textile history.