

Quilt and Fabric Stylings of the Later Twentieth Century

by Jeffrey Gutcheon

The relationship between the design characteristics — the "look" — of the quilts of a given era and that period's available and popular materials has been much noted but little studied. One reason for this is the range of scholarship required in a number of fields, not all related, to make any sort of reasonable judgments in the matter. More, many seemingly find it easier to apply the skills needed to see and understand those relationships to the work of the past than that of the present, an example of a psychological predilection intruding on a process which logically should have no temporal boundaries. Jeffrey Gutcheon has been involved in the late 20th century's quilt revival since its inception, first as artist and quiltmaker, then as designer and producer of materials specifically conceived for the quiltmaker, and as a perceptive columnist, quilts and materials his subject matter. His training as architect and designer gave him skills additional to his natural ones to bring to his quilts and materials. His early and continuing involvement in the commercial world of quilt kit and cloth production gave him a particular knowledge of that industry's business and aesthetic history.

In the article which follows, he considers the interrelated effects of textile industry trends and practices and the schools, styles and fabric choices of contemporary quilt making. Mr. Gutcheon discusses also the effects of these on modern quilt aesthetics.

—Editors' Note

The great quilting revival of the late 20th century is a rolling historical event of global dimensions. Quilting is being done at a furious pace from Taipei to Norway, from the Klondike to Capetown, and its momentum shows no signs of slackening. We might, therefore, have reasonable expectations of seeing it sail on into the next millennium, urged along by growing consumer demand and brisk trade winds. This huge outpouring of quilted articles will eventually be compared historically to that of the post-Civil War period, commonly thought of as the "Victorian" era, roughly a century ago. Each era's quilts have, of course, visual characteristics which help us date and evaluate them. This is as true for the quilts of the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s as it is for earlier work. The quilts of the 1990s are now developing the characteristic look by which we will know and evaluate them in decades to come. Describing that look, and its evolution in America, is the purpose of this article.

The genesis of our vast legacy of post-Civil War quilts seems relatively uncomplicated. The Reconstruction period, the completion of coast-to-coast rail hookups, the rapid development of advanced textile printing technology in the east, and the

western expansion of the American frontier, were roughly simultaneous occurrences. Freed by resolution of the conflict, Americans turned their creative energies to the pursuit of a better life. In the forty years that followed, they produced what has been called by many our "Golden Age." Quilting, which was already well established in the Eastern states, flourished elsewhere, one of the artifacts of an optimistic outlook based on domestic order, economic growth, and broadening cultural horizons.

It is interesting that another war a century later, the Vietnam civil conflict, brought about, as had the Civil War, an American national crisis. Though remote from us geographically, like the earlier conflict, it highlighted and intensified many divisions in American life. When those hostilities finally ended, a national campaign to heal the divisiveness and restore America's self esteem was undertaken ad hoc by the communications media. A rallying date was already at hand: the American Bicentennial year, 1976.

Five years earlier, the quilting communities' self awareness had been given a positive jolt, as well as tremendous validation, by the exhibition, "Abstract Design in American Quilts," mounted in New York City at the Whitney Museum in July, 1971, by collectors Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof. This now legendary exhibition subsequently traveled the country for several years under the aegis of the Smithsonian Institution. The articles and reviews by such respected art critics as Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times* who attended it, performed a miracle for quilts and quilting by bringing them to the attention of previously unexposed millions. This exhibition and those which derived from it were seen around the world. A love affair between the media and the quilt was firmly established. The strong push given quilting by the Whitney exhibition helped promote the craft among those who had not done it before. This was then furthered by the phenomenal publicity about quilts generated throughout our popular culture before and after the Bicentennial year.¹ I am referring, for example, to the Meredith Corporation's (*Better Homes and Gardens*) Craft Club, which sent out several mailings of a million each offering a small quilt kit project; and the Lane Publications (*Sunset Magazine*, circulation 2 million per month) offering of a slim, non-threatening, how-to-quilt book for \$2.95. These micro-marketing events and others like them, so lowered the threshold of participation in quilting that thousands of new quiltmakers were created.

In the post-Vietnam rush to unearth images in our past that engendered universal good feeling, the quilt's long-established status as national icon was furthered. Quilts were emblematic of those things Americans valued about themselves, their creativity, industriousness, thrift, and, of course, devotion to

family. Virtually every magazine that could stretch its content far enough published at least one issue with a quilt on the cover. Virtually every movie with a bedroom set showed a quilt, folded at the bottom of a bed or spread upon it, even if inappropriate to the rest of the set's decor. Quilting was hot copy.

I am not in any way suggesting that until the 1970s American quiltmaking was dormant. Quite the opposite is true. Traditional quiltmaking had never ended. In many communities it was passed from generation to generation as a domestic art. And by the 1970s contemporary quilting was already well established. People like Molly Upton, Nancy Halpern, Michael James and Nancy Crow, who had studio backgrounds and viewed themselves as artists, were working in the quilting medium. In fact, these two quiltmaking communities, the traditional and the "contemporary," were in touch with each other. They exchanged teachings respectfully and had a forum for their interest in *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, which by 1975 had a paid circulation of 35,000.

All of them needed fabric, and there was little available that looked much like that in the now ubiquitous magazine photos of late 19th century quilts. The emphasis in retail fabric shops at this time was on supplying the price-conscious homemaker with fabrics for herself and her family's apparel; and the emphasis in apparel (besides the wools, silks and linings, etc.) was on labor-saving, dirt-resistant, no-iron, easy-care, drip-dry cotton substitutes with varying amounts of polyester in them. Traditional quilters of the early 1970s, by the way, had no objection to these fabrics, since part of the quilt tradition was to use whatever materials came to hand. Similarly, the "contemporary" quiltmakers were more focused on the pattern, color, and texture of fabrics than on the fiber content, relying on patience and craft technique to overcome working difficulties.

The possibility of a sudden and enormous demand for cotton fabrics with a variety of small patterns and colors, to be used in a craft application, was either laughable or unthinkable to the denizens of the textile industry on the east coast. Their cherished belief was that fabric existed for the purpose of making clothing; or perhaps, if you pushed it, for upholstery (clothing for furniture) and draperies (clothing for windows). From this perspective, calicos were seen as a fashion item with a dependable, if limited, range, intended mainly for women's sportswear and children's dresses. Offshoots of these calico lines from a handful of companies were marketed over the counter at department stores like Sears, Penney's, Macy's, Bloomingdales, and Zayre's. Calicos were also available at Hancock, and, as a concession to their customers, at Calico Corners Home Decorating Shops.

Calicos circa 1975 were mostly modest offerings of tiny bud flowers spread on clean fields of colors that changed predictably

with the seasons: navy, red, and white in fall/winter, pastel tints in spring/summer. The largest group emerged yearly from M. Lowenstein Co.; the most elegant and various from Henry Glass & Co. as Peter Pan Fabrics; the only exclusively cotton group (and the one probably remembered with the most fondness by quilters) was Ely Walker's 31 colorways on "Quadriga Cloth." Concord Fabrics had a small "Traditional" cotton group with a suburban design and color range, and Springs Mills, along with V.I.P., filled out the market with emphases on cotton-polyester cloth.

The devotion to polyester by manufacturers at the time requires some explication (popular taste has since turned against it). Like Rayon before it, polyester staple represented an insurance policy for the makers against unpredictable shortages of cotton by cutting roughly in half the amount needed for dressweight cloth. Made in 50%-50% poly-cotton blends, "blended" fabrics had other attractive qualities, too — a slicker hand, a better drape, and the tendency to release dirt easily. Unfortunately, blends also released pigments and rapidogen colors more easily, washing out or fading rapidly in daylight. Too, they pilled in ordinary use, becoming dingy with repeated washing/drying, and were ultimately judged less comfortable to wear; the polyester/cotton blends did not "breathe" as well as 100% cotton cloth.

The true demise of the polyester cloth fetish occurred in 1975, however, when the public declined to endorse polyester double-knit leisurewear as a style, refusing to go "disco." A large number of full-line retail fabric shops which had made a commitment to double-knits went out of business, creating suddenly a sizable breach in the supply system which linked fabric producers to the home-sewing customer. By the end of 1976, as the quilt Americana juggernaut gathered momentum, the "quilt shop" had begun to move into this vacuum, fostering and encouraging a growing interest in fabrics nationwide on the part of both new and old quilters. The retail fabric industry was reverting to pre-synthetic fabrics, those made entirely of cotton. It was a pithy moment, one which gave quiltmaking increased visibility even as it unwittingly imposed creative restrictions.

The need to invent a positive nationalism for the 1976 Bicentennial (following our hang-dog departure from Vietnam and the near-disgrace of the American presidency) helped define a new decorating style. Holdover hippies from the 1960s and new "conservatives" from the rising sunbelt states joined middle Americans everywhere in the embrace of (what else) the "country style." More a marketing event than an actual style, it amalgamated in one time frame antique pine "early American" furniture, traditional crafts, pioneer femininity, Victorian decor, and country music from Appalachia to Los Angeles. Thus the calico granny dresses popularized by hippiedom a decade earlier were now embraced by suburban

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matrons. The eclectic patchwork interiors of Marin County became those of heartland America. And the flamboyant Victorian excesses of Janis Joplin were redeemed by the virtuous frontierswoman aspect of Emmylou Harris singing songs of desperate love, drunkenness, and spirituals in equal measure, while dressed in high-buttoned small print blouses. America was awash with "instant old-timey," as folk purists called it, and quilting had caught the wave.

The gulf between supply and demand in American business is seldom as large, or seldom goes unrecognized so long, as that which existed between fabric producers of New York and the quilting public in the late 1970s. While the Fashion Avenue mavens decried the polyester debacle, a small but growing army of privately financed quiltshop entrepreneurs were combing the world for 100% cotton fabrics that could reproduce the look of those in late 19th century quilts — with an emphasis on the word "look." Though quiltshops embraced the notion that quiltmakers were creative people, a large part of their sales pitch was quite clearly "tradition" and domestic virtue. Tradition, in turn, carried with it a sense of the durable, the lasting, and the time-honored, all of which had a built-in stylistic bias: quilters were looking for prints with finely wrought detail in colorations that appeared, though brand new, to be 100 years old; in other words, in ecru, brown, or "dusty" tints.

Such fabrics, domestically printed with pigment dyes, were available, but not widely so. Most manufacturers had a small, conservative part of their print line designed for the upscale woman. To protect their primary customers, the garment makers, these fabrics were not put into retail circulation. To give the homemaker access to the same fabrics featured in new clothing would have been a breach of business ethics within the textile industry. Even jobbers of factory and designer close-outs were encouraged to sell their goods in South America and the Philippines to keep them out of the American market.

In a cyclical industry, however, no manufacturer wished to forego the opportunity inherent in a growing demand for craft materials, one that might make it possible to sell more fabrics at better prices. As a result a back-door supply network, which funneled appropriate cotton materials to retailers in the form of first-quality "seconds" and prints which were unsuccessful in the clothing market, slowly formed. Quilters gobbled this material up. By 1979 enough quilting demand was visible for several major producers - Concord Fabrics, Peter Pan, and V.I.P. - to commit resources to style entries aimed primarily at quiltmakers. Also in that year, Karey Bresenhan, owner of Great Expectations quilt shop in Houston, Texas, felt the consumer demand potential of the fledgling quilt industry was great enough to risk putting on the first wholesale Quilt Market,² which followed her successful Quilt Festival show. Thereafter, quilting fabric supply and demand marched along in lockstep for at least another ten years.

The huge success of quilting marketed in the "traditional" design forms became, in and of itself, a main deterrent to the

ongoing stylistic development of the late 20th century quilt. It countered the idea central to the Holstein - van der Hoof exhibition of 1971, that artistic concepts and notions of domestic craft had once been, and could be, essentially unified. Evidently, earlier quiltmakers considered themselves "contemporary" no matter what style they used. The numbers of new quiltmakers in the later 20th century devoted to 19th century quilt styles far outweighed, and were even hostile to, those pursuing "contemporary" design ideas. Though contemporary quiltmakers entered the quilting public's consciousness beginning in 1979 through Nancy Crow's Quilt National exhibitions and publications, their most prominent members made a costly tactical error by emphasizing the use of plain colors almost exclusively as the quilt "artist's" substitute for paint. Thus, when "art" quiltmaking went big time in 1979 it contained a faulty aesthetic premise created by its own successful commercialization. Michael James, Nancy Crow, and Yvonne Porcella, the most widely known and established of the contemporary school, taught "thou shalt not use prints." Even greater celebrity attached to Jinny Beyer, whose "Ray of Light" design, winner of the 1979 *Good Housekeeping* national contest, became the most widely publicized quilt in history. Ms. Beyer further rose to prominence through her appearance as featured speaker at the 1979 Continental Quilt Congress. She became the champion of the traditionalists by teaching "Thou shalt use only prints" in her book *Patchwork Patterns*. This prepared the way for her to become the first quiltmaker with a signature line of cotton prints designed specifically for quilting. These were produced first by the V.I.P. company in 1982-83, and thereafter and until the present, by RJR Fashion Fabrics. The list of such signature lines is now quite long and it is growing rapidly.

In my opinion, Jinny Beyer's overwhelming success perpetuated, as a marketing tool, the idea of contemporary quilts as re-creations of those of an earlier age. Overshadowed by the sheer volume of "traditionalist" publicity, contemporary quiltmakers pursued the notion of art quilts into the 1980s by forming alliances with the other fiber arts, the studio craft movement, and feminism. These alliances produced work which kept before the quilting public a vision of brighter, more complex color work and up-to-date design concepts not set in the 19th century. When by 1983-4 other fabric manufacturers based on the west coast, and printing mainly in Japan, turned to the burgeoning quilt market for new customers, they had a much wider stylistic target at which to aim. They also brought a new set of production parameters to the game: the use of fiber reactive dyestuffs and advanced screen printing techniques involving nine to 14 separate color positions (compared to the maximum of seven roller positions used by domestic producers on the east coast).

Screen prints and fiber reactive dyes would not by themselves tell the story of many late 20th century quilt fabrics. Reference need also to be made to the attitude toward fabric production

of the companies now producing lines in the Orient, (including Korea, China, and Asia Minor as well as Japan).³ I would characterize that attitude as competitively innovative from both a design and technical point of view and utterly without condescension to the customer. While a certain percentage of today's cotton print design reflects 19th century styling modernized, the best of them embody design concepts developed during the 20th century.

In short, late 20th century quilts will reflect the choices of a competitive fabric industry as did their forebearers of a century ago. Unlike the commercial considerations of the late 19th century, however, those forced by participating quilters and quilt business people themselves will affect style. Future historians will thus need to establish a "works of commerce" category of judgment, along with "works of art" and "works of domestic craft." The retail market for cotton prints is so crowded with producers today that there is a knock-em-down slugfest to create the most fantastic product. The producers, for their part, once again draw no distinction between the retail and the manufacturing customer. Quilmakers, who are the beneficiaries of this process, have responded positively to the outpouring of magnificent prints, though it remains to be seen how this process can continue.

A century hence, the multi-screen oriental-made prints will be easily recognizable because of the general cleanliness and brightness — perhaps "presence" would be a better word — of their color and the number of colors used per print. They will also be easy to identify because of their use of photo processes and other partial-tone techniques which screens permit; and for their feeling of a full spectrum of colors. Finally, the Japanese have a deep reverence for textiles, a superb textile design tradition, and a craft tradition which celebrates significant craftspeople as national treasures. Since Japanese quilmakers were, in the mid-1970s, among the first outside the United States to embrace American style patchwork quiltmaking, it seems only fitting that they should be adding their sensibilities to what Americans, and quilmakers worldwide, are making today.

Jeffrey Gutcheon earned a B.A. from Amherst College and a B. Arch. from MIT where he taught design in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mr. Gutcheon first became interested in quilts as a potential art form, "an opportunity to work with pattern and color," and began designing and making quilts in 1971. One of his early works, "Card Tricks," was published in 1971 in McCall's Needlework and Craft magazine. In 1975 he founded Gutcheon Patchworks, Inc., which marketed quilt kits of his design. In 1982 his book Diamond Patchwork was published, and in the next year he founded The American Classic Line(TM) of all-cotton fabrics. His column "Not for Shopkeepers Only" has appeared since 1982 in Quilter's Newsletter Magazine. He is the former President of the Board of Trustees of the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and continues to serve the school as an advisory trustee. His talents extend also to music; he has played jazz and rock piano professionally, has

had two books on rock piano technique published, and is one of the authors of the Broadway show, "Ain't Misbehavin'!"

Endnotes

Bonnie Leman, publisher of *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, reports that from 1969 to 1975 there were approximately 5,000 new subscribers, net per year. For the six years beginning in 1976 the net increment was 10,000 per year with no extraordinary additional effort made to attract new readers.

According to Ms. Bresenhan, 4 out of 40 exhibitors at the first Quilt Market in 1979 were selling fabric. In 1992, 51 out of 365 exhibitors were fabric sellers.

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