

# "Lapptacken en Kulturskatt" ("The Quilt: A Cultural Treasure"): An Exhibition Review

by Julie Silber

*Quilt curator, historian and lecturer Julie Silber was one of three guest curators chosen to select works for the exhibition, "Lapptacken en Kulturskatt," mounted in the Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm this past summer. We asked her to give us her impressions of the exhibition, and these follow this introduction.*

*The exhibition included quilts from four countries, Sweden, England, Wales and the United States. Sweden's representation was the largest single group, 142 quilts, a significant step in investigating that country's quilting tradition. Great Britain alone among European nations had until recently given its quilting tradition serious attention. Sweden with this exhibition joins Holland (See The Quilt Journal, Volume 1, Number 1, 1992, "A New World in the Old: European Quilt Scholarship.") in what will be a growing trend internationally to survey quilting history. There was no attempt made by the organizers of this exhibition to satisfy an overall theme, or to draw specific thematic conclusions from the material shown. However, as more such international exhibitions are mounted, we will have the opportunity to compare different traditions. It is axiomatic that significant insights will result.*

—Editors' Note

In June of 1992, I received an invitation to participate in a quilt exhibition quite unlike any other I had known. As curator of the 350 antique Amish quilts once held by Esprit De Corp. in San Francisco, I was asked to choose twelve pieces to be included in a large exhibition of quilts from several nations, "Lapptacken en Kulturskatt" ("The Quilt: A Cultural Treasure") to be held in Stockholm the following year (June 11 - September 5, 1993).

I was intrigued: quilts from "several nations," including Sweden? I had not known old Swedish quilts existed, and it sounded as if there would be numerous examples. Additionally, my exposure to British quilts, which were to be included, had been limited to examples I had seen pictured in several books and a few I had actually examined. What was this exhibition to be? As it turned out, it was intellectually very exciting, visually beautiful, ultimately both informative and inspiring.

The exhibition was conceived and organized by Asa Wettre, an independent Swedish quilt researcher and curator, and Philippe Legros, First Curator at Liljevalchs Konsthall in Stockholm. Liljevalchs is Stockholm's city art gallery, a handsome structure built in 1919 specifically for temporary exhibitions.

The Swedes, along with other Europeans, have begun to

explore their own quilt traditions. As part of their search, they chose to look at their own older quilts, but also at those of other nations. "Lapptacken en Kulturskatt" featured antique quilts from Sweden, England, Wales and America, including Amish quilts. In addition, there was a large display of contemporary Swedish quilts and several large sections of the AIDS Quilt. To my knowledge, this is the first major exhibition to include older quilts from a number of nations and cultures.

The show was also unusual in that it brought together guest curators with different agendas. The three of us were given a great deal of sovereignty over our particular show areas; we chose the objects from our collections and designed our own spaces. Working separately from floor plans, we were not in touch with one another until we met for the installation. Each was in contact with Philippe Legros at Liljevalchs, whose task it was to oversee the complex project and orchestrate the varieties of quilts and other objects, accommodating to diverse curatorial styles.

I designed my room to be especially spare. The twelve examples of Lancaster County Amish quilts were evenly spaced on matte white walls, accompanied only by unobtrusive identification labels and brief interpretive comments. In displaying Amish quilts alone, I hoped the room would resonate with their essential qualities: elegance, strength, drama and restraint.

Londoner Ron Simpson added dimension to his rooms by adding a few objects (such as sewing tools, traditional Welsh costume, and a Bible printed in the Welsh language) in glass cases. He also installed large photomurals on walls next to some of the quilts. Vivid images of Welsh women, families, sewing machines, farms and factories helped establish a broader social and temporal context for the quilts and their makers.

Ma Wettre went further in establishing a context for her vast collection of antique Swedish quilts. She designed warm, inviting spaces by combining the quilts with familiar items and creating "homey" vignettes. Quilts displayed flat on the walls were accompanied by cases brimming with sewing materials (tools, scraps, unfinished blocks), letters and diaries and family photographs. Asa arranged cozy groupings with quilts displayed on beds, cribs and couches and combined with chairs, dollhouses, rugs and such.

Although our curatorial styles differed, the three of us had some things in common. First, of course, we shared a deep and enthusiastic passion for textiles. It was also clear that we all see quilts not only as beautiful objects, but equally as social documents, "maps" of women's lives. Additionally, each of us has a special fondness for everyday, utilitarian pieces, especially

those with strong graphic impact. Many curators select only "outstanding" examples of workmanship, the most elaborate and the fanciest quilts, for their shows. It was refreshing to discover that each of us found as much significance, beauty, and power in plain quilts as in fancier works.

When I was asked to bring twelve to fourteen examples of Amish quilts, I assumed that each of the five or six cultures would be equally represented by approximately the same number of quilts. It was, however, apparently not the intention of the organizers to do a numerically representative exhibition. (And it seems I was the only one of the guest curators who attempted to do a "survey," a representative sampling of quilts intended to demonstrate those things which best define Lancaster Amish quilts.) Here is a breakdown by categories of the quilts in the exhibition:

Antique Swedish	142
Contemporary Swedish	56
Antique English	12
Antique Welsh	34
Antique American	15
Antique Amish	12
AIDS Quilt Panels	72
Other Swedish (doll quilts, etc.)	40

Quilts were organized in different rooms by national or cultural origin. In some instances, further distinctions were made by era and style of quilt. Rooms led gracefully one into the next, helped by the especially wide openings between them.

I would like to walk you through the exhibition as I experienced it. The large entry room was filled with a colorful group of Swedish quilts of all shapes and sizes. As with the Japanese, French, and Dutch, the Swedes' current interest in quilting has apparently been fueled by considerable recent exposure to American quilts. The influence is evident; in general, the Swedes have only begun to experiment with and expand upon our patchwork traditions and quilting techniques.

The next room was devoted to approximately half of Ron Simpson's antique Welsh quilts. Ron's quilts filled three rooms (two of antique Welsh quilts, one of English), though the spaces were not all contiguous. He chose to organize his two Welsh rooms by types of quilts. This first one held sixteen or seventeen (mostly) wool, "rough and ready," turn-of-the-century pieces which I found exceptionally exciting. Simple geometric piecework in rich, dramatic colors was embellished with unexpectedly intricate quilting. Constructed primarily in the one-patch, central medallion or "strippy" (bars) format, these

quilts glowed with extraordinary intensity and visual power.

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Amish quilts (our twelve examples) filled the adjoining room. These quilts were made by the women of that tightly-knit religious community from about 1870 to 1960 and, intriguingly, they bore some striking similarities to Welsh wool quilts. Typically square, the Amish quilts are pieced of large fields of solid colored wools, often in jewel-like tones. Certain aspects of the quilts provide counterbalancing tensions: elaborate and often curvilinear quilting seen against the simplicity of the large pieced format, and lush, saturated colors against the sharp angles of the starkly geometric patchwork. Amish women chose from only a handful of traditional designs, and I decided to display a few examples of each of them: Center Square, Diamond, Bars, Sunshine and Shadow, and Double Nine-patch.

Ron Simpson's second Welsh room followed. Here we saw examples of more sophisticated urban quilts, made in Wales between 1800 and 1930. Except for a few distinctively Welsh quilting patterns, these quilts were generally indistinguishable from their contemporary urban English cousins. Thus there were early examples of central medallion-style cotton quilts and one-patch types (typically hexagon and Baby's Blocks); also exhibited here were pieced calico quilts and red/green floral appliqués from the turn of this century. In one piece, a whole cloth, solid colored ruffled quilt made in the 1930s, we saw the Welsh tradition of highly elaborate quilting carried into this century.

The adjoining "English" room had quilts which were very similar to the Welsh, but it included also several Victorian-era crazy quilts. The relatively small sampling (also from Ron Simpson's collections) did, however, include a few examples of North Country-style utilitarian pieces which were especially interesting to me. Like the country Welsh pieces, they were not selfconscious, but were straight-forward, and visually powerful. These turn-of-the-century works are typically made of such sensible, hard wearing materials as suiting fabrics and flannels. Central medallion style and bars type ("strippy") formats predominate.

In asking an English and a Swedish collector to lend examples of American quilts, the coordinators of the exhibit made a problematical decision. Although visually interesting and varied, the approximately fifteen examples the two collectors chose for the next room were not typical or generally representative. As a student of American quilts, I knew that it would have been impossible to draw valid general conclusions about American quilts from this group.

The next three rooms were devoted to Swedish quilts made  
*continued on page 12*

before 1950. The first of these had only a few pieces, most of them quite early and borrowed from Swedish museums. Low lighting and protective display apparatus contributed to a formal, old fashioned "museum-like" feeling. Dating from the late 18th century to around 1850, these quilts were wool or felt, primarily lap size quilts, cushion covers and bench covers.

Asa Wettre's collection of old quilts made in Sweden was astonishing to me: Asa has single-handedly gathered nearly two hundred examples from all over Sweden in the past six or seven years. My surprise at seeing so many Swedish examples alerted me to some of my narrow thinking about quilts. I realized that I have had the impression that European quilts exist but are very rare. When I had the opportunity to stand before the abundance of material this exhibition offered, I knew that my assumptions had to be questioned. The picture was larger than I had imagined. In recent years scholars have begun to map connections, especially design heritages and cultural links, among American and English quilts, those from native American and African cultures. Although it is not clear how significant the large number of so many Swedish quilts was to the bigger picture (was it possible that the 150 old Swedish quilts I was seeing were the only ones ever made?), I definitely experienced a shift in my perspective. Suddenly, there were many new questions.

Generally, I was unable to distinguish these later Swedish quilts (most dating from about 1880-1950) from American utility quilts of the period. However, I had a sense of some overall differences: Swedish quilts seemed typically smaller, and the designs were more centrally focused than their American counterparts. Although there were a few examples of fancy, Victorian crazy quilts, simple, cotton patchwork quilts dominated. Numerous examples of a few patchwork designs were represented: the windmill or hourglass types, one-patches, and an extraordinary number of log cabins.

Most of the remaining rooms had more examples of contemporary Swedish quilts, all of which were similar to the quilts in the first room described.

One large room, however, was devoted to the AIDS quilt. Seventy-two individual panels hung proudly on the walls and were laid flat on platforms in a space also occupied by the gallery's bookstore and gift shop. Bodil Sjostrom, the Swedish coordinator for this section, worked closely with The Names Project in San Francisco to borrow sections of the Quilt containing panels memorializing Swedes who have died of AIDS. I was moved to see once again how affecting, poignant and transformative this remarkable piece is to the people who view it, no matter where in the world.

"Lapptacken en Kulturskatt," a grand show in its numbers, had ultimately an intimate, accessible quality. The layout was like a good quilt, successful in its individual units as well as in the multiple ways they related to one another. I particularly appreciated the variety of contextual formats and the relational

interplay of elements throughout the exhibit. The many levels of meaning in quilts — practical, social, ritual, aesthetic, etc. — were suggested or revealed through accompanying wall text, or the manner in which a quilt was displayed (on a bed, on the wall), or through its association with other materials.

The show was a wonderful experience for me personally. I had the opportunity to work collaboratively with European textile experts, and to participate in a project which collectively broadened our knowledge of quiltmaking in a multicultural context.

Although the exhibition was in some ways uneven (and for me frustrating in that all of the text was in Swedish), it was an ambitious and important project, bringing together for the first time a diversity of cultural materials to compare, study, and enjoy. This sort of exhibition is both exciting and provocative. We need more like it, preferably with clearer underlying intentions and, perhaps, more representative cultural balance. Such projects increase our awareness of other world quilting traditions and the work of other scholars; through these we will ultimately understand more of our own tradition and its place within a larger context.

*Julie Silber graduated with a BA in American History from the University of Michigan in 1969. For the last twelve years, she has served as curator of the Esprit Quilt Collection. Julie has written and lectured widely on the subject of Amish quilts. With Pat Ferrero, Julie co-produced the films, "Quilts in Women's Lives," and "Hearts and Hands." She is co-author of the book Hearts and Hands, The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society, and of Amish: The Art of the Quilt. Exhibitions she has curated include "Quilts in Women's Lives," "American Quilts: A Handmade Legacy," and "Amish: The Art of the Quilt." Julie is currently curating traveling exhibitions of Amish and other American quilts.*