
American Museum in Britain

by Shiela Betterton

Shiela Betterton draws a profile of The American Museum in Britain, where she was for many years, Textile and Needlework Specialist. The Museum is an outpost of American folk and formal culture in the place where much of it originated. She has concentrated for The Quilt Journal on the Museum's textile, and particularly quilt, collections. Included is basic information on the Museum's location, hours, collections, facilities for scholars, etc. This is the second in what will be a continuing series of profiles in The Quilt Journal of museums outside the United States with interesting quilt collections.

—Editors' Note

The city of Bath in the west of England (now designated a World Heritage Site) has long been famous for its Roman Baths complex and its fine 18th century Georgian buildings. Not far behind them in tourist popularity, however, is the American Museum in Britain.

The Museum, which opened in 1961, is located about three miles from the city centre at Claverton Manor. The house, designed by Sir Jeffrey Wyattville, architect to King George IV, was built about 1820 on a site high above the valley of the river Avon, with commanding views to the south and east. It was in the grounds of Claverton Manor that Sir Winston Churchill made his first political speech, to the Primrose League, in July 1897.

The American Museum in Britain, the only museum in Europe of the American decorative and domestic arts, was founded by Dr. Dallas Pratt and Mr. John Judkin, who had a great affection for Great Britain and regretted that no museum in Europe demonstrated the achievements of American craftsmen and artists during the 200 year period from the late 17th century to the Civil War. They envisioned exhibiting furniture and other decorative arts as a means of fostering Anglo-American understanding. The museum is a private foundation run by an educational trust and is not supported by national or local government. In January, 1994 an exhibition with associated events was held in London, primarily to launch a major fundraising campaign.

The Museum was conceived as a series of period rooms illustrating the way Americans lived in the earliest days of Puritan New England through the opulence of anti-bellum New Orleans. In addition to the period rooms, each of which has an actual part of the American home it represented, sections of the museum are devoted to the American Indian, the Maritime Trade, the opening of the American West and textiles. There are also small collections of silver, pewter and glass. The former stable, a semi-circular building, has been converted into a folk art gallery.

Outside attractions, including a recreation of George

Washington's rose and flower garden at Mount Vernon, an arboretum which shows the variety of trees, plants and shrubs which English gardens have adopted from the North American continent, an apple orchard in which some of the older varieties of American apple are grown, an herb garden, a Conestoga wagon and a reproduction Cheyenne teepee, are placed on Claverton Manor's 125 acres.

There are nearly 200 items of furniture to be seen in the museum. This is the largest and most comprehensive group of pre-1855 furniture accessible to the public outside the United States.

Much of the furniture in the early room came from the private collection of the late Joseph Downs, an enthusiastic collector of New England furniture, who had been curator of the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He was also the first curator of the Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum.

The foremost attraction for many, however, is the quilt collection, which is considered the best outside the United States, and ranks high among collections anywhere. The textile room is home to a rotating display of about 50 quilts from a collection of more than 160. So popular are the quilts that a number of schools have made their own Friendship Quilt based on the objects they have seen in the museum's collection. Quilting groups come to study in the textile room and can be given an introductory gallery talk about the collection if required. There are also rugs, woven coverlets and samplers.

The earliest quilt is inscribed "R. . . Porter, her bed quilt made in the year 177(7)." The small eight-point stars are pieced from a square and eight triangles and many of the alternate white blocks are embroidered. The border is applique, swags and bows alternating with vases of flowers.

The most sophisticated quilt is a Baltimore Album quilt, made for a bride in 1847. The traditional hearts are geometric and can be seen at the end of each sashing strip.

Between these two extremes there are some fine examples of 18th century whole-cloth quilts, pieced and applique quilts of every description, also crazy quilts, quilts made in Hawaii and examples by Sioux Indian women, Amish women and slaves.

One of the most interesting quilts was made by slaves on the Mimosa Hall plantation in Marshall, Texas for the Anglican bishop from New Orleans, who toured the cotton plantations annually to baptize, confirm and marry. When the bishop had gone on his way the quilt was usually worn out by the slaves or children. The Mimosa Hall quilt, however, survived and was gifted to the museum by its owner. The blocks, which are set on point, are alternately red whole-cloth and white on which a red chalice, to represent the bishop, has been appliqued. This quilt was loaned to the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, for the exhibition *Before Freedom Came*, which went also to several

other museums in the United States.

The history of many of the museum's quilts are known, including that of a beautifully worked, all-white quilt made and dated 1821 by Mary Waldron Nexen Thompson, the wife of Colonel Alexander Thompson of the United States Army. She accompanied him on all his campaigns and in 1824 they were hosts to the Marquis de Lafayette. After Colonel Thompson's death his widow lobbied a bill through Congress to provide pensions for the widows of Army officers.

A very large silk quilt pieced in a tumbling blocks pattern which forms a twelve-point star on a gray silk background, was made by Sarah Taylor Middleton Rogers, one of the first women physicians in Philadelphia. She was awarded a prize of a silver ladle for the quilt at the state fair in Trenton, New Jersey in 1852.

A rare Hawaiian flag quilt contrasts with two examples of Hawaiian appliqué quilts. Three "Star" quilts are representative of those made by Sioux Indian women, while the small collection of Amish quilts shows the contrast between those made in Lancaster County and those made in the mid-west.

One of the latest acquisitions is a quilt which was given to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1930s. She gave it to her grandson, Curtis who has now donated it to the museum. It is a "Trip Around the World" pattern made of one inch squares in a myriad of colors.

The woven coverlets range from simple blankets hand embroidered, through overshot and double cloth to elaborate Jacquard weavings. The earliest Jacquard, white and indigo, has a pattern of eagles, Independence Hall and Masonic emblems. Woven into one corner is the phrase "Agriculture and Manufacture are the foundations of our Independence, July 4, 1829."

The rugs have been made in a variety of techniques; embroidered, hooked, woven, and braided. There are floral and geometric patterns, horses, dogs and cats, even one with a flag and the word "Union" at the top; rugs hooked to the patterns of Edward Sands Frost, and an example of the high sculptured pile "Waldoboro" type rug showing a one-eyed lion with beavers at its feet.

The collection of textiles woven by Navajo Indian women includes everything from a classic second phase chief's blanket to a modern rug. Two women's wearing blankets complement those woven for men. The exuberant "eye-dazzler" blankets and rugs made with commercial Germantown yarn contrast with rugs woven from wool which had been vegetable dyed. One rug, made by Eleanor Roanhorse of Pine Springs, Arizona, in 1966 was awarded a blue ribbon by the Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff. There is also a small number of Spanish-American blankets woven on a horizontal loom.

To the east of the main building is the new gallery, the foundation stone of which was laid by His Royal Highness,

the Prince of Wales. Here there is a large exhibition hall used for temporary exhibitions, the museum's extensive library and a special gallery for the museum's collection of more than 200 antique maps and related prints which had been collected over a period of 50 years by Dr. Pratt and which he has now donated to the museum. Dr. Pratt also provided funds to build the gallery in which the maps are displayed.

The founders saw folk art as an important part of the museum and had the semi-circular stable block converted to a folk art gallery. Exhibits include two full-sized cigar store Indians, weathervanes, tin wedding anniversary gifts, duck decoys and paintings by Ammi Phillips, Joshua Johnson and unknown folk artists.

The museum's education program was designed to create a link between America and Great Britain, and has two main aims; the first is to train the eye and develop aesthetic competence, and the second is to encourage greater understanding of the United States.

All students have access to the museum's extensive library if a prior appointment is made with the librarian.

The museum is closed during January for cleaning and refurbishment, and this year will open to the public on March 26 through November 6, from 2:00 pm until 5:00 pm every-day except Mondays. Parties of adults can be accommodated by prior arrangement with the secretary, Mrs. Ford (telephone 0225-460503). During mornings, Mondays and all day when the museum is not open to the public, schools and students are welcomed if prior arrangement is made with the education secretary, Mrs. Amanda Davies (telephone 0225-463538). It is sometimes possible to visit the textile room only when the museum is not open to the public, but a prior appointment must be made. A nominal fee is charged.*

Shiela Betterton, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, has been associated for 30 years with the American Museum in Britain, the last 19 as its Textile and Needlework Specialist, with a particular interest in quilts. She was born in Northumberland, England, and, she notes, "always slept under quilts." She was intrigued, on a trip to America in 1963, to discover its quilting tradition. She began patchwork and quilting research then, and has continued it around the world ever since. Ms. Betterton lectures in England and abroad on the subject, and has written six books on textiles in the Museum's collection. She has also collaborated on many other publications in the field.

*See Page 16 for an information chart on the American Museum in Britain.

American Museum in Britain

- Founded by Dallas Pratt and John Judkyn and opened in 1961.
- Housed at Claverton Manor, just outside Bath, England, which was designed in 1820 by Jeffrey Wyattville, architect to King George IV.
- Established as "a museum of the decorative arts and of American history illustrating life in America from Colonial days to the end of the nineteenth century," with the aim of fostering Anglo-American understanding.
- The collection includes galleries devoted to the American Indian, the Pennsylvania Germans, the religious community of the Shakers, and the isolated Spanish colonists of New Mexico. Exhibits depict the opening of the West, whaling, textiles including quilts, pewter, glass and silver. The gardens include an American arboretum, and a semi-circular gallery presenting the vigorous forms and primitive designs of American folk art.
- A new gallery contains a reference library covering American history and the decorative arts, a map room relating to the discovery of the New World, and a hall showing special exhibitions.
- Approximately 60,000 visitors a year, of which some 16,000 are pupils from educational institutions.
- Open daily from 2-5 p.m. (except Mondays) from March 26 until November 6. Educational tours and special adult tours are arranged year round upon advance application only.
- Address: American Museum in Britain, Claverton Manor, Bath BA2 7BD. Phone: (0225) 460503. Fax: (0225) 480726.

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