

Winterthur Museum's Treasury of Quilts

by Deborah Kraak and Kathleen Carpenter

Winterthur, which houses one of the United States' premier collections of American decorative arts, was in effect the personal creation of Henry Francis du Pont. Mr. du Pont indulged his passion for things American by searching out the finest and rarest objects which appeared on the market, buying in significant quantities, and arranging his treasures in carefully orchestrated period room settings. Winterthur is a center for viewing and studying American decorative art in all its forms, and has one of the country's best training programs in American material culture study and connoisseurship. Here Deborah Kraak, Associate Curator of Textiles at Winterthur, and Kathleen Carpenter, give us a searching profile of Winterthur's quilt collection, and add complete information for potential visitors.

—Editors' Notes

The quilt collection of Winterthur Museum is a kind of hidden treasure with a depth and richness only hinted at by the few quilts displayed in the period rooms or illustrated in quilt publications. Although best known for rare, late 18th-early 19th century medallion format quilts, examples in the collection range from the 17th to the 20th century. The majority of the approximately 224 quilts date from about 1825-1900 (see chart). Most of the quilts in storage have never been seen except by textile specialists. But the Museum has plans to bring its hidden collection to light in 1999 with a major exhibition and catalogue. *The Quilt Journal* has asked for this preview of the collection for its readers.

Unlike most museums or private collections, Winterthur's quilts were not purchased to form a collection *per se*, rather, they were acquired to decorate beds in specific room settings in the 175 Period Rooms created at Winterthur by Henry du Pont. Consequently, the collection is not an encyclopedic record of quilting in America, but a record of one man's taste and its expression in an architectural setting. Henry du Pont had room furnishings changed seasonally on a carefully considered schedule. While records of Mr. du Pont's quilt purchases are worded very generally ("blue wool quilt" for example), he nevertheless gave careful, detailed instructions about which quilts were to be used in each room at what times and in connection with specific changes of bed, window hangings and carpets.¹ Sometimes as many as four quilts would be used in one room on a seasonally rotating basis. Over time, staff reductions have made most such seasonal rotations a thing of the past, and the textile displays in the Period Rooms are now rather static. However, the Museum's goal is to gradually reinstitute selected seasonal changes so the public can once again

enjoy the room variations Mr. du Pont so carefully planned. Mr. du Pont was proud of the extensive textile collection he had created and wrote that, "The curtains, upholstery, bed hangings and bedspreads at Winterthur are in themselves a museum . . .".

Color was an important element in a Period Room's decor, both within the space and without. The textile changes, including quilts, were orchestrated to coordinate with the changing hues visible in the Winterthur landscape beyond the windows of the Period Rooms.³ To judge from the number of blue examples in the collection, Mr. du Pont must have indulged his love of that color when purchasing quilts. Blue quilts in the collection include beautiful examples of two color resist-dyed blue quilts, as well as blue copperplate printed cotton quilts, and a number of blue glazed wool quilts, many with superb quilting.

Pattern was another factor in selecting quilts for Winterthur; Mr. du Pont particularly liked those with patriotic themes. Eagles were a popular motif. They appear in low relief on a chaste white work emblazoned with the word "Liberty," and in designs in medallions on the elaborate columns of so-called "pillar" prints. Skillfully engraved copperplate printed cottons used in quilts in the collection honor American Revolutionary War heroes. One quilt has an *Apotheosis of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington* print made in England about 1785; it illustrates Great Britain's eagerness to retain the United States as a trading partner. Patriotism and propaganda combine in a French copperplate print entitled *Hommage de l'Amerique a la France* made about 1783 and used in a quilt in the collection. The print was an elegant reminder of the great debt the United States owed France for its help in gaining victory over the British.

The scope and focus of the collection was unknown until the Museum decided to assemble an exhibition of its quilts. This led to the first systematic survey of the quilt collection, now nearing completion. Museum staff members were astonished to learn that there are nearly 224 quilts at Winterthur. The collection can be broken down into four major categories: 18th-century whole cloth wool quilts (21), 18th and 19th century whole cloth printed cotton quilts (73), late 18th and early 19th pieced quilts (26), and the previously mentioned medallion quilts. There are a few examples of embroidered Indian bedcovers or palampores (5), as well as a c. 1800 pieced silk quilt, brilliant mid-19th century chintz appliqué quilts, album quilts (4), and one crazy quilt. In Winterthur's quilts as in others, relatively few quilters left their identities: 20 of the quilts of the collection are dated, 20 are signed and 19 are initialed.

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Most Winterthur quilts are not the famous early pieced and appliqueed quilts that dazzle from the pages of books on quilts and historic textiles, but are simple, wholecloth quilts. One hundred and thirty-eight examples, in silk, wool, and cotton, demonstrate Mr. du Pont's interest in fabric itself, and include silk taffetas, velvets, brocades, and damasks, as well as cottons that are patterned by block, copperplate, and roller printing.

One of the most interesting results of the quilt survey, done in conjunction with the rehousing of the entire textile collection, was the discovery of many wholecloth quilts made of printed cotton. Although most of the printed fabrics used in the quilts were made in Great Britain, two very interesting quilts were block printed about 1800-1810; the Museum has the woodblocks with which they were made. The majority of the printed whole cloth quilts were stored on shelves along with lengths and rolls of historic printed fabric. It was exciting to discover in the Museum's unparalleled collection of early printed textiles unquilted fabrics similar or identical to those used in these whole cloth quilts. There were even examples of quilts or textiles with the same pattern printed in different colorways. This sheds new light on the range of choices available to the quiltmaker and the popular color schemes of their eras.

The wool whole cloth quilts are the type commonly, and erroneously, known as "linsey woolsey." In reality, these were not made of a fabric with a linen warp and wool weft, but of worsted wool. The shiny texture of the worsted yarns and the brilliance of the saturated colors were enhanced by a surface glaze. Several of Winterthur's wholecloth wool quilts retain their glazes and the crisp, new look that the glazing gives them. Research on the composition of historic glazes and their methods of application is being done by staff members in the Museum's Textile Conservation Department and will appear in the quilt catalogue.

Mr. du Pont's color and pattern preferences were particularly evident in the late 18th-early 19th pieced quilts. The nearly kaleidoscopic assortment of blockprinted, copperplate and roller printed textiles in the quilts are like a merchant's swatch book. Popular 18th century styles of madder dyed/printed floral prints mix with ca. 1800 prints in the fashionable drab shades of yellows, greens, and browns. Small-scale geometric prints and animal motifs — giraffe and leopard — are combined with squares of monochromatic copperplate prints. The incomplete motifs recall tantalizingly the 36" square patterns on lengths of English-export cotton cloths which are part of the Winterthur collection.

The late 18th-early 19th century medallion quilts are probably the most impressive quilts in the collection, both for their beauty and rarity. They contain the greatest diversity of types and styles of fabric of all the Museum's quilts. The quiltmakers cut fabric to form swags, ribbons, and geometric borders. With the medallions, there are appliqué "pictures," usually of birds and flowering trees, that were the principle motifs of printed fabrics. But they are com-

bined with a variety of colors and forms that would have been impossible, from a technical point of view, in any single textile manufactured by the block, copperplate and roller printing methods. The number of different textiles used in these quilts and the intricacy of the designs communicate the quiltmaker's delight in working with her medium. The expense of these textiles, particularly the furnishing fabrics, supports the theory that early pieced or appliqué quilts were not the product of scarcity but of abundance.⁴

Some of the most unusual quilts in the collection are those made from Indian mordant painted and resist dyed bedcovers. Decorated with a Tree of Life that flowered with real and imaginary flowers, these bedcovers were wildly popular in the late 17th and 18th centuries. Palampores could be purchased plain or quilted. Such quilts were among the earliest recorded quilts that were exported, via England, to the British colonies in North America.⁵ Judge Samuel Sewall, in a 1720 entry in the diaries he kept from 1674-1729, wrote that he ordered from England "a good fine large Chintz Quilt well made" for his daughter's wedding.⁶ This example demonstrates the fashion advantage of living in the colonies then. At the time of the Sewall wedding, it was illegal to own and use Indian printed textiles in England. The prohibition on these cloths occurred because their popularity threatened English textile industries. Textile manufacturers successfully sought government support in limiting British use of imported, printed textiles. It was, however, permissible to import them to England if their ultimate destination was the colonies.⁷ The Tree of Life, seen on the Indian palampores, was prototype for both English printed furnishing fabric designs and for the trees found on so many medallion format quilts. Through the quilted and unquilted palampores in the Winterthur collection, the printed textiles, and the early quilts, it has been possible to trace that evolution in one collection.

The quilt and textile collections at Winterthur offer many possibilities for the serious researcher. Appointments can be scheduled for people doing graduate level research or for work for publication. Call the Winterthur Library, (302) 888-4681, for an appointment.

Quilts are on display in over a dozen of the Period Rooms. They range from whole cloth wool examples to densely quilted covers made from 18th century English copperplate prints or two-color blue resist fabrics, to 19th century stuffed white work quilts. These can be seen on either the two-hour tour of the Period Rooms, or in a Special Subject Tour that focuses on textiles. Call or write the Reservations Office at 800-448-3883. The charge for the two hour tour is \$21. The Special Subject Tour is limited to a maximum of four people, at a charge of \$80. The tour includes a visit to two study/storage areas: the Needlework Study Room and the Textile Study Room. Previously, the visitors on the SST tours could see scores of the Museum's quilts on sliding hanging racks in the Bedspread Storage room. This system was recently replaced by boxed storage, part of the general rehousing of

the entire textile collection when the new fire suppression system was installed. While this limits immediate visibility of the quilts, it will enhance their life expectancy by minimizing the damage caused by gravity, dust, and abrasion. The more fearsome destruction that would occur if one or more sprinkler heads discharged will also be reduced. Boxed storage is not ideal, and the Museum hopes to substitute a more "user friendly" system when all of the Museum's collections in storage are rehoused.

A selection of quilts is currently on view in the installation, *Perspectives on the Decorative Arts in the Galleries*. This includes a Baltimore album quilt, an early 18th century palampore, and a bedcover blockprinted by John Hewson of Philadelphia, one of the few late 18th century printers working in the United States. Hours of operation are 10:00-4:00 Tuesday-Saturday and 1:00-4:00 on Sunday. The last tour leaves at 3:00 and costs \$7 for all three properties. There are also quilts displayed at the Historic Houses of Odessa; please call (302) 387-4069 for more information.

Winterthur Museum Library has an excellent collection of books about quilts and historic textiles. The quilt selection alone numbers over 150 titles. There are also rare books and periodicals that contain fabric swatches. The Library is open to the public Monday-Friday from 8:30-4:30. No appointments are necessary, and there is no charge. Researchers do, however, need to obtain a Library pass at the guards' station in the part of the Museum known as the Glass Corridor. This modern structure that links the Period Rooms with the Research wing is difficult to drive to if you do not know your way around the Winterthur estate. It might be easier to park in the Visitor Parking Lot, clearly marked on your way into the property, and walk down to the Pavilion. A shuttle van runs every five minutes between the Pavilion and the Museum from 9:00 to 5:30. Once the visitor is at the Museum, a staff member will give directions to the Glass Corridor. In addition to picking up a Library pass there, the visitor will be given a key for a locker in which all bags, purses, etc., must be stored. Only books, paper, and pencils may be brought into the Library.

Swatch books and other fabric-related one-of-a-kind manuscripts are in the Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, located in the lower level of the Library. Hours are 8:30-4:30 Monday-Friday. For access please call Gail Stanislaw at (302) 888-4853.

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Deborah Kraak, A Associate Curator of Textiles at the Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum, Delaware, is also an Adjunct Professor in the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Early American Cultures. In 1992 and 1994 she was an Adjunct Instructor teaching a Survey of Textile History at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and the Parsons School of Designs Masters Program in the History of Decorative Arts. Ms. Kraak has worked also as Assistant Curator, Department of Textiles and Costume of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She has professional experience in the textile and decorative arts field at a number of other institutions, has curated a large number of exhibitions in the field, and has published numerous articles.

Ms. Kraak received her BA with High Honors in Art History at Michigan State University, a Museum Training Certificate from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and an MA in Art History from the latter institution.

Endnotes

¹White work quilts were ordered for messy guests, presumably because the quilts could be more easily laundered than could pieced or printed quilts.

²Notes to Mr. du Pont's executors, written during the period from 1945-1964.

³Denise Magnani. *The Winterthur Garden: Henry du Pont's Romance with the Land*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers in association with The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1995, p. 120, "Textiles also brought nature's colors indoors," and p. 123, "Perhaps the ultimate interplay of interior and exterior resides in two avocative parallels we can intuit, but not prove, to have been du Pont's intentions. One is the identification of similar color contrasts and triads in period rooms and the garden."

⁴Rachel Maines, *Paradigms of Scarcity and Abundance*.

⁵A palampore with an 18th-century Boston provenance is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

⁶Quoted by Patsy and Myron Orlofsky in *Quilts in America*, New York, London, Paris: Abbeville Press, 1992 edition, pp. 34-35.

⁷After 1721, it even became illegal to own and use cotton fabrics printed in England; this helps explain why American textile collections often have more examples of 18th century English printed textiles than English collections.

WINTERTHUR QUILT COLLECTION					
	Late 17th Century Early 18th Century	18th Century	Late 18th Century Early 19th Century	19th Century	Late 19th Century Early 20th Century
Wholecloth	1	38	39	56	3
Pieced		2	7	28	5
Applique		1	2	16	2
Pieced & Applique		1	1	10	2