

More on Sicilian Quilts

In the last Journal, I reviewed and commented upon Susan Young's article originally in Quilter's Newsletter Magazine on the famous pair of Sicilian quilts in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Bargello Museum, Florence (see QNM for September, 1993, and TQJ Vol. 3, No. 2, 1994). I said at the end of that review that the quilts deserved further study, and hoped Ms. Young would do it. She has obliged by considering for this Journal one question we raised, where the cotton stuffing had originated. I speculated about the source of the batting: "... No cotton was then grown in Europe. But there was a significant export of finished cotton textiles to Europe from the Orient and the Levant; Sicily had strong ties with the latter. The nature of the filling in the quilts would seem to imply that the cotton trade of the period included unprocessed cotton, perhaps even cotton batting."

Texts I had read over the years, a number of which I reviewed for this note, made reference to the early cultivation of cotton in India and the New World, but were murky about its history as a crop in Europe.

We were thus very pleased to receive the following communique from Ms. Young, which corrects my incorrect assumption about early cotton cultivation in Europe. I am including here most of her general comments on cotton history in the belief that there are among our readers others as interested as I in this matter. Ms. Young writes:

I was fortunate recently to visit the island of Pantelleria, which lies between Sicily and Tunisia. (Ed. note: Pantelleria is 62 miles from Sicily and is tied politically to that island. It occupies a strategic position in the passage which divides the eastern and western Mediterranean.) While there I leafed through a booklet about the history of the island, and noted a mention of the cultivation of cotton there centuries ago. I was intrigued by this because the source of the cotton filling of the Sicilian quilts was unknown. This promoted me to research the history of cotton cultivation.

Greek and Roman writers knew of cotton but spoke of it as an exotic plant, and the fabrics made from it as products of distant lands. Herodotus stated that, in India, they grew trees whose fruit" was a type of wool which was more beautiful and more practical than sheep's wool, and which the Indians used to make clothing. The cotton plant was known anciently as 'the wool tree' and the name survives in the German word for cotton - baumwolle.

The Greeks are thought to have begun to use cotton after Alexander's conquests, and the Romans after the wars with the

Asian kings. But there is no certain record that the cultivation of the plant or the production of cotton fabric was carried out in either Greece or ancient Rome.

Cotton cultivation began in China at a comparatively late date, perhaps not until the thirteenth century. The Arab traveler Suleiman visited China in the second half of the ninth century and made special mention that the Chinese, rich and poor alike, dressed in silk, but he made no mention of cotton. Likewise, Marco Polo spoke of the cultivation of cotton in various other countries but not in China.

Egyptian cotton enjoys an enviable reputation and it is surprising to learn that it has been cultivated there for not much more than a century. The Arab doctor Abd al-Latif visited Egypt in the thirteenth century and listed the plants known there; cotton is not on his list. By the end of the sixteenth century Egyptians were importing cotton from Syria and Cyprus. By that time they were growing the plant in their gardens as a curiosity or ornamental plant.

When European settlers arrived in the Americas, they found that cotton was cultivated, and fabric manufactured from it, in the West Indies, Mexico, Peru and Brazil. The species, however, were different from those known in the Old World.

And now Pantelleria: The island was conquered by the Arabs in the ninth century and they are credited with introducing cotton there. They made its cultivation possible by introducing an efficient irrigation system which used a rudimentary form of water wheel to ring water up from the island's wells. Some ancient Pantelleria place names, such as Cala Cuttuni (Cotton Bay), are a reminder of the success of the new crop and the skilled textile manufacture which was developed by the islanders.

Capitalizing on the strategic position of Pantelleria, the Arabs were able to extend their domination to Sicily, and cotton cultivation there and in southern Italy dates from their conquest. The major obstacle to successful cotton growing was the scarcity of rain and limited quantity of water for irrigation. Despite these difficulties the crop has remained a part of Sicilian agriculture, though its fortunes have undergone many reversals. Even in the medieval period, for instance, imported cotton caused a decline in Sicilian production. However, when world events (the upheavals of Napoleonic period, the American Civil War and the First World War for instance) made cotton prices soar, the industry boomed. Today production is again very limited.

Though it's unlikely we will be able to establish the source of the cotton for the Sicilian quilts with certainty, it now seems reasonable to believe that it may well have been Sicily itself or the neighboring regions of southern Italy or Pantelleria.

This is the 6th issue of *The Quilt Journal - An International Review*, to be published in 4 years. It is also, we are sorry to say, the last for the time being.

The Quilt Journal was one outcome of our 1992 symposium, "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt." Scholarship issues raised there resound currently in the field. Prominent among the more important matters raised in Louisville were these: The need of bringing to all quilt scholarship the same standards of professionalism and judgment which prevail in other fields of inquiry, and the necessity of bringing to quilt study an outlook more interdisciplinary and international. *The Quilt Journal* was our attempt to continue those endeavors.

Publishing even a small journal is enormously time-consuming. We needed to balance the need we saw to continue publishing against other equally important work that demanded our attention. The establishment of an international quilt index, another goal which grew from the Louisville conferences, and a national quilt center, project of The Alliance for American Quilts, in which the Editors are deeply involved, seemed more important just now; our energies, and resources, unfortunately cannot encompass all tasks. We hope that when the center is established, *The Quilt Journal* will be revived as its publication. Until then, we will send you, our members, periodic updates on the progress of

The Center, The Index and *The Journal*.

Publishing *The Quilt Journal* has been an act of love. We are proud of the articles we have been able to put before our readers, and deeply grateful to the scholars who so generously contributed them. Our attempt was to bring to the field for its consideration a great diversity of thinking about quilts and quilting, and in that we feel we succeeded. Articles have ranged the globe, modern and ancient quilts, scholarship here and elsewhere, quilt study methodology, quilts in literature, quilts from the standpoint of women's history, and much else. Response has been supportive and gratifying, and we were especially delighted to know that articles published in the journal were instrumental in helping at least one young scholar fund graduate studies. How sweet such music is.

Thank you, contributors, for giving us the privilege of publishing your work, and for your constructive suggestions and criticisms. Thank you, subscribers and readers, for supporting the Journal's publication and letting us know how you felt about our content. We hope you will rejoin us when *The Quilt Journal* is reborn.

And to those who will in the future read these journals, now, we are proud to think, part of the permanent literature of the field: It was a wonderful time to be doing this, when there was so much to discover.

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