

Traditions

♥ Quilting





Cover photograph: Shirlene Wedd of Holton learned to quilt as a child from her paternal grandmother.

Back photograph: Mercedes "Sadie" Waller of Seneca is well known for marking quilt tops. She has marked over two thousand quilts.



Quilts are sometimes placed in frames to hold them flat for quilting. Helen Ericson of Emporia is pictured using a hoop to hold her quilt as she stitches.



THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN QUILTMaking

The American quilt has its roots in many cultures. Quilting, the art of stitching together two to three layers of fabric, can be traced to ancient Egypt and through the Middle Ages in Europe and Asia. Patchwork, the art of cutting fabric into little pieces and recombining them, is common to many cultures including those in Africa, Japan, China, India, and Europe.

Quilts in America's colonial period were usually owned by the rich or middle class. During this period quilts were made primarily from cotton, silk, wool, or linen. Cotton and silk fabrics had to be imported and were quite expensive. Therefore, quilts were valuable possessions. Quilts in seventeenth-century America were probably one-piece or whole-cloth quilts.

Evidence suggests that the patchwork quilt is an eighteenth-century development that became common after the American Revolution. Rather than a product of poverty, patchwork demanded a certain level of affluence because it required a diversity of fabrics. Prior to the nineteenth century, fabric was scarce and the average person had few changes of clothing. Poor people made garments from simple square-cut patterns that used an entire width of cloth. This left no scraps to be used in other projects.

The development of factory-produced cotton led to enough inexpensive fabric to allow the poor and growing middle class the luxury of larger wardrobes. Inexpensive fabric also provided the seamstress with the chance to make fitted clothes from rectangles of fabric, which allowed for leftover pieces to be used in other projects. It was not until the Industrial Revolution that fabric became inexpensive enough to make patchwork more commonplace to all classes.

Patterns became more sophisticated and styles more diverse between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early American quiltmakers showed a preference for stars, nine-patch blocks, and floral motifs. As factory-made cotton became more affordable, quilting became more popular. By the nineteenth century new patterns and techniques appeared.



Teamwork is common among quilters. This quilt was pieced by Amelia Wicki. Shirlene Wedd designed the quilting pattern, and it was quilted by Pearl Lear and Mavis Morit.

Diaries and memoirs from the nineteenth century tell us of the importance of quilt-making in women's lives. Girls, as young as six, learned to make patchwork. Their skills were developed both at home and in school. During this period, many women cooperatively quilted patchwork quilts. At quilting parties men were often invited for dancing when the quilt was finished. The quilting party or quilting bee brought women of diverse ages together and served as an opportunity for community socializing.

Some scholars believe that the two decades before the Civil War was the golden age of American quilts. A social fad developed in the creation of album or friendship quilts. Friends would be asked to sign a quilt block made from squares of an identical pattern worked up in different fabrics. Another variation was a quilt made from quilt blocks developed from different patterns. This type of quilt inspired an increase in the variety of patterns.

Between 1840 and the end of the Civil War, quilts took on new importance as women began using them to raise funds and to symbolize political issues and friendship. Changes in technology allowed for improvements in printing fabrics which resulted in an even less expensive product. The sewing machine, which was patented in 1846, was affordable and commonplace by the end of the Civil War. This freed women from the tedious task of constructing clothing by hand and from the handicap of an education based primarily in sewing.

After the Civil War, quilting styles became more homogeneous through the influence of national magazines and national fairs. New styles and patterns appeared in response to changes in economics, technology, and taste. Quilts made of silk became more prevalent as the price of silk dropped. With the increased usage of the sewing machine in the late nineteenth century, quilts of the period generally show lower levels of hand workmanship. In fact some types of quilts, including Crazy Quilts and Log Cabins, were not quilted at all. During this period tying the layers of fabric together to make a comforter became a common option.

Around 1925 quilting became a national fad with rural and urban women, rich and poor, devoting their leisure time to the hobby. Quilt contests became popular. During the Depression and Dust Bowl periods quilts continued to be popular whether made from brand

new yardage or recycled feedbags. The quilt fad died out during World War II when rationing limited the fabric supply. During this period women also entered the workforce in large numbers leaving them little time for sewing. With the nation's bicentennial in 1976, a new national quilting fad developed, along with a national interest in handmade objects. At the end of the twentieth century, quilts are again common bedcovers for Americans.

KANSAS QUILTMaking

Kansas has played a significant role in American quilting. The state has always had more than individual quilters; it has nurtured communities of quilters who have developed traditions and maintained them while quilting became less popular in other regions of the country. The state has many quilting groups, some meeting regularly since the 1910s, who earn money for church and charitable causes with their work, and provide a social and artistic outlet for members while teaching quilting traditions to younger women.

Among the groups of noted quilters in Kansas are the Mennonite and Amish. For over twenty years the Mennonites in Kansas have sponsored the Mennonite Central Committee Relief Sale. At the center of the event is a quilt auction. Quilts are made and donated by members of the church and approximately four hundred quilts are auctioned off each year.

Another significant community of quilters included the informal quilting society of Emporia in the 1930s where competition, fellowship, and sharing patterns, style, and techniques produced several nationally-known quilters. Emporian Charlotte Jane Whitehill's quilts are now the basis of the Denver Art Museum's excellent quilt collection. Her neighbor Rose Kretsinger's quilts are an important part of the equally excellent collection at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas.

Because of Kansas' strong quilt traditions it became a center for the commercial pattern industry that developed between 1920 and 1950. Scioto Danner's "Mrs. Danner's Quilts" was a one-woman national quilt pattern business. *Capper's Weekly* in Topeka was a national pattern source in the 1930s selling patterns found in Kansas quilts. In nearby Kansas City, the *Kansas City Star*, Aunt Martha Studios, and McKim Studios continue to be important sources of traditional patterns, with many of them drawn from Kansas quilts.

Carrie Hall, a dressmaker from Leavenworth, was a dedicated collector of quilt patterns. By the mid-1930s she had stitched 850 blocks which she shared with women's groups around the state. On a visit to Emporia she met Rose Kretsinger. In 1935 the two collaborated on *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt*, which for forty years was the only index to pattern names available to quilters and collectors nationwide.



Quilting adds design and texture to a quilt.



Mercedes "Sadie" Waller uses many traditional motifs, however, she incorporates her own ideas into most quilts she makes.

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In the 1970s Kansas was on the forefront of a national movement to establish quilting guilds. The Quilters Guild of Greater Kansas City, founded in 1975, and Kaw Valley Quilters Guild in Lawrence, begun in 1977, were two of the earliest guilds in the country. In Kansas today there are over thirty-five guilds with memberships ranging from under ten to over four hundred. Another organization that has taken a lead in the state in providing guidance for quiltmakers is the Kansas Quilter's Organization. This group is a model after which other states have built their own statewide organizations. Kansas is among many other states that participated in a statewide quilt project to document the quilts and quiltmakers in the state. In Kansas over 13,000 quilts were documented resulting in a comprehensive look at Kansas quiltmaking traditions.

QUILTING

Quilting can be described as the sewing of small, regular stitches that hold together two or three layers of fabric. Quilting strengthens the quilt by keeping the layers from stretching or shifting out of shape. However, just as important is the purpose of creating texture and design on a finished textile.

It is very difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of quilting. Evidence tells us that forms of quilting existed in the ancient civilizations found in Egypt, Persia, Asia, and North Africa. During these times quilting was used to embellish clothing and on decorated fabric panels. Some scholars speculate that quilting was brought to Europe by the Crusaders during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Eventually Europeans brought the tradition of quilting to the United States.

Some scholars speculate that the earliest quilting found in colonial America was in what are popularly called *linsey-woolsey* quilts or bedspreads. The term *linsey-woolsey* is applied to a type of cloth that is a coarse fabric of cotton or linen woven with wool. *Linsey-woolsey* is a popular term for a type of quilted wool bedspread that has a shiny glaze to its appearance. The *linsey-woolsey* quilt is related to the fashionable wool petticoats worn in the eighteenth century when dresses had open panels that exposed quilted undergarments. Wool whole-cloth quilts, which are characteristic of *linsey-woolsey* bedspreads, were made of bold colors and featured elaborate quilting in the form of feathered plums and fruit or floral designs. This type of quilt was popular in the United States between 1750 and 1840.

Another style of needlework that was popular in America in the late eighteenth century is referred to as *whitework*. This type of whole-cloth quilt, mostly made in white cotton, is characterized by elaborate quilting using stuffing and cording methods. This type of quilt is sometimes called *trapunto* today. *Whitework* quilts have their origins in seventeenth-century France and eighteenth-century England. This style continued to be popular in the United

States through the first half of the nineteenth century during the revival of classical Greek design. Other white-on-white needlework traditions were popular during the same period including white-on-white embroidery and candlewicking.

Once patchwork design came into fashion in the nineteenth century, quilting as a decorative technique became less important. By the late 1800s women had replaced certain forms of needlework with other forms of self-expression. Excellent quilting was no longer valued as a reflection of a woman's sewing abilities. After the Civil War quilting saw more of a decline. Close quilting and small regular stitches were characteristics of earlier times. By the early 1900s the trend was toward thick batting and larger quilting stitches. It is also during this period that tying or tacking quilts or comforters became popular.

Machine quilting, despite the development of the sewing machine in the mid-nineteenth century, is primarily a feature of the twentieth century. Machine quilting has gained popularity today when more women have less time for such labor-intensive activities as quilting.

QUILTING TECHNIQUES

The purpose of quilting is to both secure the three layers of the quilt so that it does not shift over time and to provide a decorative element to the finished project. Traditionally, quilting stitches are made with white thread or in colors to match the fabric. The goal in quilting is to take small even stitches. The average is seven to eight stitches per inch. However, stitches have been recorded up to twenty-two stitches per inch. Good quilting takes practice as well as skill.

Various hand-quilting techniques are used by traditional quilters. *Utility* quilting is a repetitive design, such as a grid, that is stitched across the entire quilt without regard to the patchwork design. A type of repetitive design that is common is called *fan* quilting which results in a series of concentric arcs being quilted across the patchwork.

Many quilters *self-quilt* or *outline* their patchwork. In this technique the quilter follows the lines of the patchwork, quilting a quarter of an inch from the seam line. This technique can be used in conjunction with fancier quilting methods. For example, in quilts where patchwork blocks are set next to plain blocks, the quilter might *outline* the patchwork and then quilt a feathered wreath or pineapple in the plain blocks. A more recent form of *outline* quilting is a technique quilters call *in-the-ditch* quilting. This technique requires the quilter to stitch directly in the seam line. Today most quilters stitch around the outline of their design only once. In the nineteenth century quilters often used double or triple lines to emphasize their quilting motifs.

When a quilter chooses to use fancy quilting that results in identifiable design motifs, such as feathers, flowers and cables, the background is sometimes filled in by a *secondary design* or *filling pattern*. This was especially common in the nineteenth century. Grids and parallel lines are common *secondary designs*. *Secondary designs* that are closely quilted are called *filling patterns*. *Stipple* quilting is such a technique. Quilting stitches are placed very close together in a random pattern. The result is that the background appears to pucker. Although this technique is still practiced today by a few dedicated quilters, it was most popular in the 1800s.

From about 1800 to the end of the Civil War, *stuffing* and *cording* techniques were popular. These techniques gave quilting designs more texture by inserting additional padding. For example, quilted grapes might be *stuffed* and quilted vines might be *corded* to provide the quilt with an added dimension. *Stuffed* and *corded* work today is often referred to as *trapunto*, the Italian word for quilt. There are basically two ways to use these techniques.

The first method requires that the quilt be stuffed before the quilting is completed. A coarse background is attached directly to the back of the quilt top using small stitches. Small bits of cotton are then worked through the coarse background fabric. Cotton yarn or cord can be run through a tunnel that is created by the stitching. Once these steps are completed the batting and the back of the quilt are added on and the quilt is quilted in a normal fashion.

The second method of *stuffing* requires that the quilt be quilted first. After the quilt is quilted it can be stuffed working from the back. Stuffing can be inserted through the back



fabric by working the threads apart or a small cut can be made in the backing, allowing the quilter to insert the necessary stuffing.

QUILT MARKING

Before a quilt can be quilted it must be prepared. One of the critical points of preparation is marking the quilt top. The top is marked along quilting lines to provide guidelines for stitching. After a quilt design is chosen, marking the quilt is done before the top is basted to the batting and the backing.

Although many products are on the market that can be used to mark quilt tops, many traditional quilters continue to use a pencil. The idea is to mark the pattern on the top in a way that the lines are visible and useful for the quilter but will not show after the quilt is completed. Therefore, when a quilt is being marked it is important to avoid scratching the fabric or making a line that is too harsh.

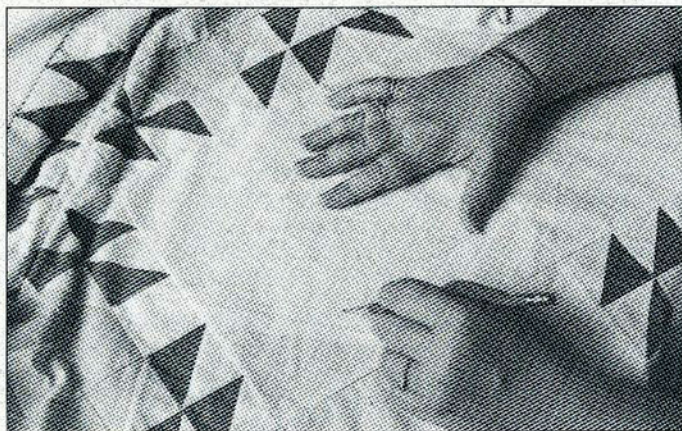
Templates are used to define the quilting pattern. Traditionally, templates are made from cardboard or recycled plastic (such as the top of a coffee can). The quilter uses a template to trace the pattern onto the quilt top. Rulers and yardsticks can be used to mark grids or *outline* patterns.

There are many methods of transferring designs into templates. A simple method is to use a piece of waxed freezer paper that is placed over the desired design. Since the waxed paper is translucent the pattern can be traced onto the paper. Place the paper, waxed side down, on a piece of cardboard and press with a hot iron. This transfers the design to the cardboard which can then be cut out and used as a template. The template is then placed on top of the quilt, and the quilter uses a pencil to trace around the design.

More sophisticated patterns can be drawn on a piece of white paper using a dark ink. The pattern can then be placed under the quilt top. With light fabrics the pattern should show through, and the quilter can trace over the design. The quilt marker uses the phrase "give a little, take a little." Not all patterns fit the space to be quilted in a neat fashion, therefore there are times the quilter must fill in the design by hand. Like quilting, good quilt marking is a product of practice as well as skill.

Marking a border can be difficult. It is not advisable to start marking in the corner since it is highly unlikely that the pattern will fit neatly the entire length of the border. It is best to pick a pattern or customize a pattern to fit from seam to seam of the blocks that make up the top. This should ensure that the corners come out the same.

Although many traditional quilting patterns are available, a quilter can create original quilting designs as well. One simple method is to cut a pattern, much like children are taught to cut a snowflake. Start with a piece of paper the same size as the finished quilt block. Fold



This quilting pattern is held in place with tape while it is traced onto fabric.

the paper in half several times and then begin to cut on the folded edge. When the paper is opened, a distinctive design will appear.

CONCLUSION

Many people believe that a quilt is not a quilt until it is quilted. Quilting serves both functional and aesthetic roles. It is the aesthetic component by which many quilts are judged. Quilting adds texture and design and can stand alone or serve to enhance the beauty of patchwork.

Quilting is a labor-intensive activity. It is a popular belief that women make quilts out of necessity. The reality is that women have always made quilts as a means of self-expression. It is telling that in an era when women have little time to devote to such behavior, quilting remains a popular and important activity in many women's lives.

DIRECTIONS FOR MAKING A QUILTED SQUARE

Materials:

Light fabric for top
Fabric for backing
Batting
Quilting needle

Thimble
Quilting thread
Quilting hoop
Commercial binding

Instructions:

1. Cut the fabric for the top the desired size. Place the quilting pattern under the fabric and trace using a #2 pencil.
2. Baste the top, the batting, and the backing together. Place the quilt into the quilting hoop.
3. Cut the quilting thread approximately 24 inches long. Thread the needle and make a small knot at the end of the thread. Stick the needle into the top about 1/2 inch from where you wish to begin quilting. Gently pull on the thread so that the knot goes through the fabric of the top and rests in the batting layer.
4. You are now ready to begin quilting. Using only the tip of the needle, take the needle through all three layers and back up to the top. As you quilt you should be able to pick up three or four stitches on the needle at a time. Stitching through all three layers, quilt the marked design.
5. When you are about to run out of thread, make a single knot. Pull the knot through to the batting layer. Trim the thread.
6. When the quilting is complete, sew the binding around the edge of the quilted piece.

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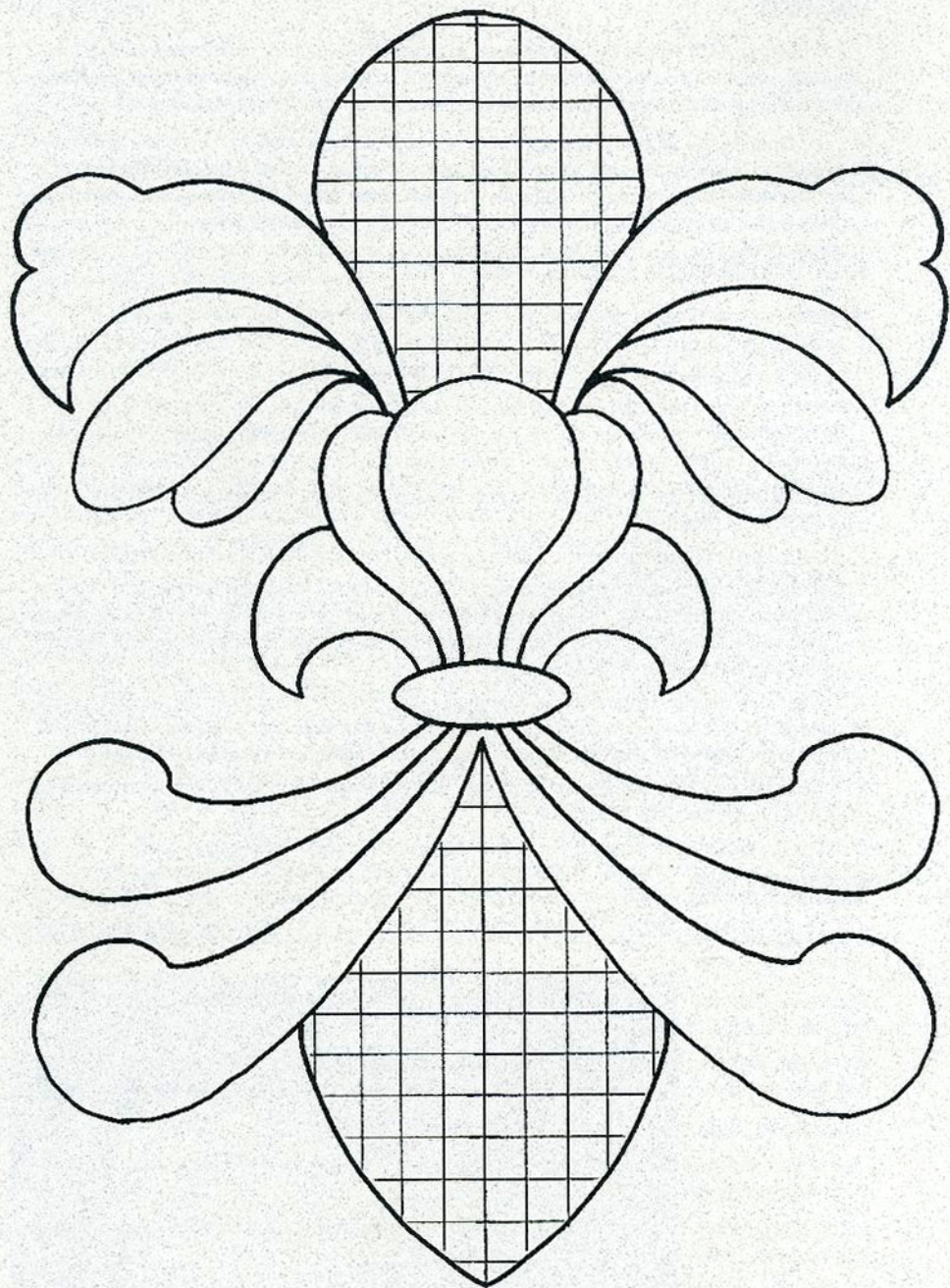
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TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

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NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
THE ARTS

Quilting

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