

AMERICAN QUILTS

Alabama beauty, *Ashland rose*, *Brunswick star* are not the names of flowers or birds, instead they are just a few of the thousands of different types of blocks used for making American quilts. For a long period of modern American history, quilts were one of the main means of women's personal and artistic expression. They became a unifying force, an interest shared, while quilt gatherings provided a support service and mutual encouragement.



But what exactly is a quilt?

Basically a quilt is a bedcover or bedspread. These were initially made from two layers of cloth. At some point it was discovered that by adding a filling between the two layers it was possible to significantly increase the amount of warmth created. It was also quickly learnt that it was necessary to secure these layers together in some manner and that a series of small running stitches was the solution. This became one of the most popular techniques of quilting.

Quilting dates back for at least three thousand years. Ancient examples have been found at archaeological excavations in various Central Asian countries. Quilting was used for a range of objects, including floor coverings, wall hangings, as well as boots.

Bedspreads decorated with quilting were made in Scandinavia and Europe long before they were being made in America, with some of the most elaborate extant examples dating from the 14th century and originating from Sicily (the famous *Tristan Quilt*, made with *trapunto* or padded quilting), while later ones come from Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and The Netherlands. These quilts were made in a variety of techniques, including what is now called *English paper piecing* (using a card template) and 'wholecloth' quilting (quilts made from one piece of cloth).

Introduction of quilts into the US

When the Mayflower and the Pilgrims arrived in America in 1620 there were no bed quilts on board, but the settlers would have had the basic skills and knowledge of quilt making. The earliest surviving American quilts are made using the so-called wholecloth technique, and in later years quilts were being made that included tops of pieced patchwork. In the early 19th century the top layer often consisted of patchwork, made out of blocks. By the 1850's, a typical American quilt was thus defined as being a covering for a bed that was made from three layers of cloth, with a patchwork top layer. The use of blocks seems to have been developed for convenience, as it was easier to draft a small design in a square rather than on a full quilt.

Amish and Mennonite quilts

Two related religious groups have had a particular influence on American quilts. These are the Amish and the Mennonites.

The Amish are a traditional, Christian group who are known for their simple way of life, plain dress and dislike of modern technology. They originated in the late 17th and early 18th centuries among the Swiss German Anabaptists and a man called Jakob Amman, hence the name of Amish. In the early 18th century, many of the Anabaptists and followers of Amman emigrated to Pennsylvania, US, and to Canada. The patchwork top layers of the Amish quilts are characterised by graphic, often symmetrical designs made with solid-coloured fabrics that are often made from the same material that is used for Amish clothing. Although these quilts have simple designs, the quilting itself can be very complex. A popular quilting pattern among the Amish is the feather motif.

In the late 19th century the Amish split up into the Old Order Amish and the Amish Mennonites. The Mennonites are named after Menno Simons (1496-1561), from Friesland (now a province of The Netherlands). They are a mixed Anabaptist group who believe in a different version of the mission and ministry of Jesus than the official Roman Catholic and later Protestant doctrines. Over the years Mennonites have migrated to many parts of the world, including America, and they were joined by some of the Amish, who subsequently became known as the Amish Mennonites, or simply dropped the name of Amish. Mennonite quilts tend to be much lighter and brighter than Amish quilts, especially as they use figured fabrics.

Social functions (quilting bees)

A *quilting bee* is basically a social gathering based around the activity of quilting. This may be a regular meeting on a weekly or monthly basis, or a special occasion such as quilting a finished top by a group of people for a bride-to-be. In the latter case, there would probably be other activities and food would be brought to share, there may even be music. One of the most important features is the opportunity to talk and chatter with other women, which was said to sound like ‘bees in a hive’, hence the term *quilting bee*.

Over the last two hundred years, many *bees* have come together to create group quilts, which were produced to support charities, events and movements, such as the Red Cross, the American Civil Rights movement and the AIDS epidemic support groups, to name just a few.

Competitions

Quilt competitions have been held since the early 19th century at State and County Fairs, even at rodeos. Mostly, people were competing for ribbons and the kudos of winning, but some competitions did occasionally feature cash prizes. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, the National Quilt shows started to offer cash prizes that were sponsored by quilt related companies. The prizes gradually became larger and larger. The *American Quilt Society* (AQS) show in Paducah, for example, came up with the idea of a ‘purchase prize’, where the ‘Best of Show’ quilt earned a cash prize, and the quilt would then belong to the AQS museum. By the early 21st century there were quilt shows all over the US, from local guilds putting on their own show, to ones held by state-wide organisations.

A Quilt

A typical American quilt is made from three layers, the *top*, the *padding* or *batting* (known as *wadding* in Britain), and the *backing* (lining). It also has a binding, which often has been replaced because it is the first part of the quilt to wear out, being on the edge. It is often possible to see a lot of wear on the top edge, caused by men's whiskers, and some quilters even went so far as to make a *whisker guard* for their quilts, which was simply an extra piece of cloth that was folded to the front when the quilt was in use.

Quilt tops and top materials

A range of materials have been used for the making of quilts. Quilts from the early 19th century were often made from cotton fabrics left over from dress making or even from parts of worn-out clothing.

Polyester double-knit fabrics appeared in the late 1960's. One of its benefits for clothing was the fact that polyester resisted folding and creasing, but on the other hand this characteristic made it difficult to use for quilting. Added to that was the fact that the colours on polyester fabrics would often fade quickly. Some polyester fabrics were also fragile, leaving holes when quilting. In addition, polyester threads that were used for sewing blocks together would sometimes cut the fabric and destroy the design.

In general, cotton thus remains the most popular fabric to use in a quilt, as it is available with many printed designs and colours and it is easy to sew and care for.

Quilt batting and batting material

The batting usually consisted of natural materials such as cotton or wool, but by the end of the 20th century a much wider range of materials was available, including synthetic and blends of natural and synthetic, to take advantage of the best properties of both types. Some of these were especially made for the quilt market.

While the early 1980's witnessed a predominance of polyester batting, more cotton was being used towards the end of the decade, now available with a 'scrim' on the surface, which enables quilting stitches to be used at greater intervals with no detrimental effects. This also led to the quilting designs becoming sparser and simpler.

Today, there is a wide range of batting materials available, from 100% cotton and wool, to bamboo, silk and even recycled plastic bottles.

Quilt backing and backing material

In the 19th century, quilt backs were usually made from joined pieces of plain (and so cheaper) cloth, such as muslin (known as calico in Britain). In the period from the 1960's, wide sheeting made from *polycotton* (polyester cotton) was available. Because of its size it could be used without any seams that might hamper hand quilting stitches. By the 1980's, 100% cotton in large sizes was being printed especially for quilters to back their quilts. This had the advantage that poor stitches, which show on a plain back, can be hidden by a busy print.

Quilt finishing and binding

When a quilt is finished, the edges must be enclosed in some way to avoid fraying of the top or back and to protect the batting. There are several ways in which this can be achieved – the excess backing can be folded over the front and stitched down, or the reverse; if there is excess on the front, it can be turned to the back and secured similarly. Another traditional way, not seen as much in the present day, is a *knife-edge*, or *flat finish*, where the front and back are turned to the inside and the edge is secured with a line, or two, of quilting stitches.

A *binding* is the most commonly seen, however, and this also has variations. It is made with long lengths of fabric a couple of inches wide, depending on preference, and cut on the straight of the grain, or on the bias of the fabric. The latter uses more material, but is stronger. The length of cloth can then be applied as a *single fold binding*, where a single layer is attached to the front of the quilt, folded to the back and turned under to be hemmed. Alternatively, a *double fold binding* (also known as *French binding*) can be used in the same fashion, but with the binding first folded along its length and applied to the front of the quilt before being folded to the back and the folded edge hemmed down. This was the normal method by the end of the 1980's.

Quilting Equipment

Only simple equipment is needed to make a quilt, namely needles, thread, fabric, scissors and measuring devices. Antique quilts are often pieced with ecru or black thread, while more modern quilters may match the colours of the thread to the fabric, particularly in appliqué, or use a neutral tone thread that blends with the majority of the fabrics used.

The simplest of all measuring devices may have been a finger or thumb for gauging the size of the fabric pieces, or the curve produced by rotating your hand whilst keeping your elbow static, a technique known as *elbow quilting* (also known as 'Baptist fan' or 'Amish wave').

Quilting frames

When the quilt top is complete and ready to be quilted, it is prepared for layering with a batting and a backing. These three layers need to be anchored in some way to prevent the batting from shifting during the quilting process, especially if a *quilt hoop* (which looks like a large embroidery hoop) is used, then the quilt 'sandwich' needs to be *basted* (tacked) by hand with large stitches all over the surface of the quilt.

Quilt frames are larger and usually rectangular and enable the edges of the quilt sandwich to be anchored and rolled for access to the middle portions. Whilst the frames can be simple in construction, namely just four slats of wood clamped at the corners, they are generally too large for one person to handle easily until the quilt is attached and rolled onto two of the slats (bars). No basting is needed as the quilt is kept taut as it is rolled on the slats. Several people could work on a quilt at the same time, pausing and moving the accessible area when they are 'ready to roll'.

Quilting templates and stencils

Templates were made from card, tin or wood for the marking and cutting of patchwork pieces. In the 1980's, acrylic templates began to appear. These are easy to use as they are transparent and more durable than cardboard ones. Quilting stencils in plastic were also available by then in a multitude of designs, which could be used with the new, removable marking pens instead of pencil and chalk

The rotary cutter

The rotary cutter arrived on the scene in the early 1980's. It resembles a pizza cutter and contains a razor sharp blade. Originally developed for cutting paper, quilters were quick to see its potential and, used with a self-healing cutting mat and a thick acrylic ruler, the increased accuracy and speed of cutting fabric has now made the cutter one of the standard tools used in modern-day quilting.

Quilting and sewing machines

Domestic sewing machines were first introduced in the 1860's and it was not long before they were more widely available. Machine sewn quilts can sometimes be found dating from this period. Machine quilting was necessarily simple in style, with originally only straight line stitching possible. There was also the problem of moving the bulk of the quilt through the opening provided by the throat space of the machine.



Quilt by Helen Robinson

In 1980, the American company of Gammill created the long arm quilting machine, whereby the machine moves over the surface of a stationary quilt. These early machines were very large and very expensive, but gave rise to a new occupation – a professional machine quilter. You could now choose to make your quilt top by hand, by domestic sewing machine, or by credit card - by paying someone to finish it on a long arm machine!

Stitching a quilt by sewing machine is now common, although some people still prefer the look and tempo of hand stitching.

A recent development is free motion quilting, whereby the 'feed dogs' on a domestic sewing machine are disengaged to allow the quilter to move the quilt in any direction. There are also conventional machines with a larger throat space to make this process easier, but it does take a lot of practice to become adept.

The Main Quilting Techniques

Appliqué

A shape placed on the surface of a larger piece of fabric and attached by stitching is said to be 'appliqued'. There are no constraints on the size or shape of the appliqued piece. With appliqué, designs can be made that are difficult to achieve in seamed patchwork. Pictorial designs such as flowers, houses, ships, people etc are common, as well as abstract, graphic forms. The stitching may be achieved by hand or machine and may strive to be invisible or provide a specific decorative feature.

Art quilts

An *art quilt* is a form that developed as quilts began to be displayed on walls – it is a quilt that is not meant to be used on a bed. They can be large or small, even miniature, and vary widely in their design. A multitude of techniques can be used, since the finished item does not necessarily need to be washed. Today, the boundaries are being blurred, as elements of art quilts find their way into patterns for bed quilts and vice versa.

Embroidered

Embroidery is added to many quilts, either as a main design feature, or for a small scale detail such as the stem of a flower or a signature and date. Entirely cross stitched quilt tops are also encountered, with kits for these being available in the 1950's.

English paper piecing

Paper shapes, commonly hexagons, are cut from stiff paper and slightly larger fabric pieces are wrapped around them and secured by basting stitches. These 'units' are then joined together by whip stitching them together until larger units are formed and joined in the same way, to make a whole quilt top. A multitude of designs are possible and even very complex shapes are seen in antique quilts that were made with this method.

Patchwork and piecing (blocks)

The top of the quilt is often constructed by sewing pieces of fabric together, commonly, but not exclusively, in a particular pattern. American quilts often use blocks with a decorative design.

Strippy/ String

This technique is commonly used for utility quilts, but they have a beauty of their own. *Strippy* quilts are, as the name suggests, made from strips of fabric, which may be regular or varied in length and width – they are quick to make and easy to piece. 'String' is the term used for long, skinny, leftover pieces of fabric, perhaps from garment sewing and, in an effort to use every last scrap, they are joined together, often using muslin or newspaper as a foundation to facilitate regular blocks to be cut from the piece when it is large enough. These would then be sewn together to make a patchwork quilt top.

Tied quilts

This term simply refers to any quilt that is not quilted, but the layers of quilt top, batting and backing are secured together by 'ties'. It tends to be seen more on utility quilts, particularly when a thick batting is used, making fine quilting difficult. It may be achieved by simply sewing a few stitches in place at regular intervals over the surface of the quilt or make a feature of the ties by

using thick thread and knotting it so it is visible on the surface. Sometimes buttons are used and sewn through all three layers to create a more decorative effect.

Wholecloth

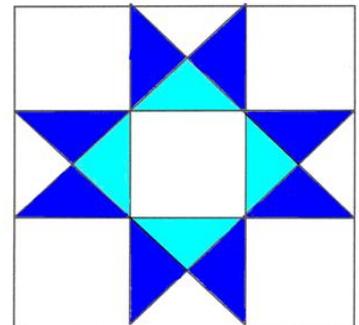
A wholecloth quilt is comprised of a single fabric. It may be simply pieced to make it big enough for a bed cover, but the piecing does not typically form a specific pattern. The decoration is achieved entirely by stitching, whether by hand or machine, which completely covers the surface of the quilt.

Quilt block patterns and sources

A feature of American quilts is the use of *blocks* that are made up of smaller geometric shapes to create a range of different patterns and overall designs. A block is basically a unit of patchwork that is often (but not inevitably) square and intended to be joined together with other blocks in order to create a quilt top. Blocks are commonly about 12 inches (30 cm) square and have many advantages in terms of drafting designs, construction and portability. It is possible to make a collection of blocks and then at a later date to decide how to join them together and to adjust the final size of the design using plain (filler) blocks if necessary.

As more and more block designs came into existence, they were given special names. However, these names are not necessarily consistent and changed with both time and location. An example is the *Ohio Star* block. The following are alternative names, and their dates of first use, by which it has been known:

- Mosaic Patchwork 1882
- Eight Point Design 1897
- Happy Home 1906
- Ohio Star 1927
- Aunt Eliza's Star 1932
- Flying Crows 1936
- Tippy canoe & Tyler Too 1973



There are at least another fourteen alternative names for this block, and it is easy to see how some of the names came about. Some are purely descriptive, others derive from nature.

Block patterns may be based on traditional forms, such as *Log Cabin*, *Nine Patch* and *Flying Geese*. In the 1920's and 1930's, many newspapers and periodicals would publish patterns for quilt blocks, possibly with suggested fabrics and layouts.

Kits have also been available since about the 1930's and usually include a pattern with enough fabric to make the quilt top. The batting and backing are sold separately. This production of kits led to manufacturers, such as *Mountain Mist*, producing patterns on the packaging of their batting for customers' use.

Nowadays, there are computer programs specifically aimed at quilters to make designing quilts and blocks easier. Some programs even allow people to scan copies of their own ground fabric, so that the quilter can see exactly what the finished design will look like.

Quilts and the 1830-1850's

Until the 1830's, American quilts were generally made of glazed chintz and reflected English, French and German quilt-making traditions. In 1794, Eli Whitney (1765-1825) perfected the cotton gin, a semi-industrial machine that was used to remove seeds from the raw cotton fibres. Ginned batting for a quilt, however, was expensive so many women used cotton fibres that were not completely cleaned. As a result, fragments of cotton husks can still be seen in early 19th century quilts.

By the 1830's-1860's, when settlers spread west across the continent, the unique American 'block patchwork' was created. Patchwork blocks were easily portable and beautiful patterns could be made by simply turning the blocks.

Album quilts began to appear between 1840 and 1860. These were based on the then fashionable bound paper albums that were inscribed by friends with verses and signatures. In the same tradition, quilt blocks were being embroidered with names, verses, drawings, etc.

Preparations for the western journey could often take months and quilts that had been made by family and friends were taken on the wagons for warmth. But mortality was high and when no wood was available, quilts were used to bury the dead.

By the 1840's, women were making quilts for sale. This was the first sign of professionalisation of the American quilters. The sewing machine was widely produced by the late 1850's. By 1860, women with access to a 'Singer' could sew more in one day than in a week by hand. Too expensive for most, women would club to buy a machine and then have it one day per month.

The dark side of technological progress was slavery. The cotton fields of the south fed the machines of the north. Many slave owners adopted a single-crop economy to meet the demand for cotton. While slaves were prohibited from acquiring literacy skills, that did not stop them from making quilts from scraps and rags. On rare holidays, slave women had 'sprees' (the name for early quilting bees) with others and there is evidence they worked on plantation quilts that adorned the beds of their owners.

Quilts and the 1860's-1870's

The 1860's was a period of the Civil War in America and central to the conflict was the economics of slavery and the political control of that system.

From 1825's onwards, some women started to make anti-slavery statements, for example the re-naming of block patterns *Job's Tears* became *Slave Chain*. By 1835 some women were openly holding fairs and bazaars to sell their needlework to raise money for abolitionist causes.

The Civil War broke out in 1861 and almost immediately bedding, including handmade quilts and woven coverlets, were sent to the two opposing armies to keep the soldiers warm and remind them of home. Some soldiers plundered households, particularly in the south. Many women hid or buried quilts, only bringing them out with the declaration of peace in 1865.

As the war ended, many women began to make quilts to replace those used and destroyed, and to reflect the new political and economic forces in America. The post-war era brought prosperity to the north and widely circulating national publications and exhibitions helped ensure that patchwork patterns were easily available and could be exchanged. States in the west of the country encouraged migration with the offer of free land, and so quilts and quilting started to become more widespread.

Quilting styles became more homogeneous and husk-less quilt batting became widely available, especially by mail order. The expanding textile industry offered more choices to consumers as the new aniline dyes, which were developed in Europe from the mid-1850's onwards, made colours brighter and sharper.

It is estimated that by 1870 there were over twelve hundred different printed fabrics and colourways available in the US, offering seamstress and quilters a wide choice of designs and colours. In addition, between 1870-1880, about 7.5 million sewing machines were manufactured and sold in the US and as a result most quilting groups had access to at least one machine.

The most popular pattern of the late 19th century emerged after the Civil War, namely the *Log Cabin*, as well as a range of related designs. The Log Cabin is said to represent the hearth and the home, order and the union.

Quilts and the 1880's-1900

The period from 1880-1900 is generally considered to be the Golden Age of American quilts and quilt making. It was not unusual for a woman to make at least a dozen for her own family and then make others with her church group. Missionaries taught quilt making to the American Indians, to the recently liberated African Americans and the Hawaiians. Each group adapted the designs to their own needs and aesthetics.

Crazy quilts

The parlours of the late 19th century included brightly coloured oriental carpets, taxidermy, richly patterned wallpaper and masses of bric-a-brac. The traditional and orderly quilt (especially the *Log Cabin* forms) had a new rival, the *Crazy quilt*, which for some represented to opposite to the *Log Cabin* quilt, namely disorder, complexity and dissolution. While many Crazy quilts were made using a block format, they also featured embroidered details such as flowers (especially daisies), painted motifs and ribbons, which were arranged as random compositions. These quilts were not made for the practical use on beds, instead they belonged to Victorian parlour tables or the backs of sofas. Fancy silk and satin dress fabric off-cuts, along with velvet, wool, and linen, were sewn into *crazy quilts*, which are technically crazy patchworks rather than quilts, with their seams embroidered in a variety of stitches.

Quilts and the 1900's-1920's

In the new century, interest in traditional handwork in the urban areas was waning. Quilts were considered 'old fashioned'. At the same time, increased industrialisation resulted in mass production and manufacturing, and provided bed covers of many shades, shapes and sizes, which could be

bought by mail order more cheaply than the cost of materials and weeks of work required to make a quilt. Also, many women had lost their enthusiasm for hand quilting, as the low cost of the sewing machine meant that even rural women in remote communities had access to one. In rural communities, especially in the new western states, there was, however a continued interest in making new and 'modern' forms of quilts.

The US joined the war in Europe in April 1917. Quilts started to play an active role raising funds for church-related charities and war relief. The bedspreads were sold or raffled and often people were charged ten cents to embroider or write their name on a block. Many of these quilts have become a textile version of the autograph book and comparable quilts are still being made to the present day. This intersection of social concern and fundraising reflects the values and views of the women who made them.

A major turning point was the ratification, on 18 August 1920, of the 19th amendment, which guaranteed all Americans the right to vote. Women had finally won a victory which took decades of agitation and protest and they again took up the needle, not only to express their delight, but to celebrate their art.

Quilts and the 1930's-1940's

By 1930, the art of patchwork and quilting was re-vitalised and once again became a national passion. For those more practically minded, it was a way of saving money in the Depression years of the 1930's. Although quilts from this era were often re-interpreted patterns from the previous decades, the new quilts were made in modern, lighter pastel colours. This was the era of do-it-yourself kits that came complete with patterns and fabric marked in exact shapes ready to cut and sew.

The feed, flour and sugar sacks of the Depression years became a valuable source for the making of quilts, clothing, household items such as table clothes and curtains, as well as toys. Plain feed sacks had been around since 1860's and used by poorer women to back quilts and to make underwear, but they had problems in removing the ink 'barrel stamps' without damaging the fabric. This problem was later resolved by having soluble ink and then paper labels that could easily be removed.

By 1930 printed cloth bags or 'pretties', with a wide array of flowers and patterns appeared, taking the purchasing powers out of men's hands as women would choose bags that they could re-cycle. By 1935 the market was saturated with feed sack prints featuring everything, from cowboys to teddy bears. Newspapers and journals produced patterns and articles on the best use of the bags and the three most famous patterns of *Dresden Plate*, *Grandmother's Flower Garden* and *Double Wedding Ring*, were featured over and over again.

In 1933 the World's Fair was held in Chicago and Sears Roebuck sponsored a quilt exhibition that became the largest quilt show ever organised. The organisers offered \$7,500 in prize money with \$1,200 to be awarded for the finest quilt entered. Over 25,000 women submitted their work in the hope of winning a fortune.

The Second World War (1939-1945) saw women again making quilts to raise funds to support the war effort. Many of the quilters used cotton feed sacks that were printed with images of airplanes and warships, while other sacks had patriotic colours (red, white and blue), as well as the lighter

caricatures of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. At the end of the war a cotton printing company called Kent produced bags and lengths of cloth printed with the heads of Hirohito, Hitler and Mussolini being cooked in a pan above the phrase “Bad eggs, Keep ’em Frying”.

Quilts and the 1950’s

In comparison to the number of quilts made in the Depression era, only a few people were making quilts after World War II. This was partially because many women stayed in the workforce after the end of the war and had no time to make quilts. In addition, cheaper and lower maintenance options for bed covers were widely available. and ‘all things modern’ soon became the rage. There developed a stigma attached to quilt making: “poor folks had to make quilts” and quilt making dropped in popularity, with a relatively small number of women keeping the craft alive.

Quilts from the 1950’s tend to be made from material in bright, often patriotic colours, in addition to the new, light teal colour. Printed materials from this era are abstract, painted forms, or images influenced by the atomic age. Quilts for children tend to include clowns, circuses, cowboys inspired by TV shows, as well as films of the time, such as *Dumbo*.

Piecing and appliqué patterns from the 1920’s and 1930’s newspapers were still in use as a design source. Quilt kits remained popular as this was an easy way to produce a quilt with a co-ordinated theme. Pansies and butterflies being common subject matter, along with the *Double Wedding Ring* pattern, which was popular for brides, and *Sunbonnet Sue* and *Overall Sam* for children.

Quilts and the 1960’s

The 1960’s was a period of many changes and the politics of the time inspired peace signs and daisies that were used as decorative motifs together with bright, intense colours, tie dyeing and ‘mod flowers’, sometimes looking like splats of paint.

Polyester knitted materials became available in the 1960’s. These were not really suitable for making quilts, but this did not stop them being used, and many of these quilts, which could be very graphic, bright and difficult to place in the home as tastes changed, were put away and are today being discovered again. Many quilts found from this era are quite simple in design. Part of this is due to the difficulty of piecing polyester and also the lack of skills that had not been passed on from the previous generation.

However, the individualism of the 1960’s encouraged experimentation and stimulated the art quilt style. These products are now beginning to be appreciated by today’s collectors. Quilts from the 1960’s and 1970’s era are starting to be displayed in major quilt shows, such as the *QuiltCon* show held in Austin, Texas in 2015.

Quilts and the 1970's

The early 1970's saw an economic recession that encouraged an interest in the restoration of old buildings rather than building new houses and this helped to revive interest in vintage quilts, including quilt making in the 'Spirit of 76' (American Independence). This became known as the *Bicentennial Revival* in the quilt world and led to more books and information being available on quilt making. It also encouraged the establishment of large, national quilt shows, such as the *Houston International Quilt Festival*, which started in 1975, and quilt organisations on a national level.

In 1971 the exhibition 'Abstract Design in American Quilts' opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, with quilts displayed on the walls. They could be appreciated as 'Art' for the first time.

Magazines appeared that were devoted entirely to quilt making. Among the first was *Quilters Newsletter*, which was started on a family kitchen table in 1969 and only ceased publication in 2016. As interest increased, quilt books and magazines proliferated and there was more emphasis on accuracy. Eventually, a quarter inch (0.6 cm) seam allowance became the norm, whereas this had varied with the maker in previous times.

Fabric shops and others offered classes, often making sampler quilts to teach a variety of simple blocks. Patchwork clothing was popular in the 1970's and some antique quilts were cut up to make coats, jackets and bags. It became so popular that 'cheater cloth' or imitation patchwork saw a resurgence and came to be a standard print style available for clothing as well as quilts.

Quilt series in magazines followed certain themes, encouraging the purchase of the publication over several months. The themes included designs such as state flowers or birds, even embroidery outline portraits of past and present presidents.

Quilts and the 1980's

The early 1980's was a time of improving economy and more disposable income and quilters, amongst others, began to spend more on their hobby. Today, quilting is a multi-billion dollar industry. The *American Quilt Study Group* (AQSG) started in 1980 and textile historians undertook major quilt documentation projects, examining and photographing thousands of quilts across the USA, some of which had never left their original homes. People were now being encouraged to label their quilts and not to be 'anonymous'. Quilt related occupations appeared such as teaching, running quilt shops, designing both patterns and fabrics specifically for quilters and professional quilting services such as long arm quilting, and some TV shows started to include quilters giving rise to quilting 'sew'lebrities!

Competitions

Nationwide challenges, for example the Hoffman fabrics challenge, now inspire friendly competition with a given theme or set of guidelines. In 1985, the *American Quilters Society* (AQS)

held its first annual quilt show in Paducah, Kentucky, with an attendance of around 5,000. Quilters could now win prize money for their quilts. Previously they had been mostly competing for ‘ribbons’ and prestige.

Amish quilts

In the 1980’s, there was a fascination with Amish quilts, inspiring quilts made in the same style and colours, by non-Amish quilters. Interestingly, the Amish themselves began to make quilts for tourists containing printed fabric and appliqué, which was formerly discouraged.

AIDS and quilts

In 1987, family members of AIDS victims created quilts to commemorate their loss. Combined, these feature the names of the deceased and has become known as the ‘Names Project’. There are now more than fifty thousand names and it is the largest community project in the world. Many people have visited the quilt, which has been displayed in various locations and over three million US dollars have been raised because of it.

Art quilts

Art quilts, which are less utilitarian and meant to be viewed on the wall, became very popular in the 1980’s and many people from an art background became involved with quilting. The range of printed cottons available to quilters exploded, with fabric companies producing specific themed collections on a short run to entice quilters to buy for what became known as their ‘stash’. Up to seventeen colours could now be used in any single print and a wide range of co-ordinating shades are available. Even so, home dyeing also became popular, for rare shades. Some people were also dyeing with tea to replicate an antique look for their modern fabrics.

Wearable art

The Fairfield Fashion Show at the Houston Fall Quilt Market was now showcasing clothing with incorporated quilting elements – this became known as ‘Wearable Art’.

Quilts and the 1990’s

In the 1990’s, quilt shows were becoming larger and more widespread, giving more people access to the latest trends. There could be as many as 50,000 visitors to the Houston Quilt Festival, which is the biggest in the USA.

Many sewing machines are now computerised and capable of many previously undreamed of functions, such as computer connectivity with built-in tutorials, thousands of decorative stitches and stitch regulators to give a consistent stitch length during free motion quilting.

Throughout quilting history, people had shared patterns and techniques, but now there was much discussion over what constituted copyright infringements, public domain and use of patterns when entering quilt shows.

New fabric designs are constantly introduced and quilters can become collectors of a specific style or designer. They are also more willing to experiment with non-cotton fabrics and materials, particularly for art quilts, utilising the properties of each in different ways. There is a multitude of new products to help stabilise slippery or fragile fabric, such as glue that can be used to fuse fabrics and yet still allow them to be sewn on the machine.

Increasing numbers of quilts are now quilted by machine in complex patterns (such as the Mariner's Compass). The backs of some quilts may also be artfully pieced as well as the front and the distinction between a traditional quilt and an art quilt is less clear as many quilts, whether bed-sized or miniature, can display elements from both types.

American quilts and the 21st century

Computer technology in the early 21st century has meant that quilters from all over the world can communicate with each other, share ideas, techniques and generally support each other. There are also many online quilting 'bees' working on projects, either separately or together with a common cause with members worldwide.

The Modern Quilt Guild is an organisation that has sprung up from the internet in this way and was formed online in 2009. It held its first (actual) quilt show, known as 'QuiltCon', in 2013 for quilts with a modern aesthetic. Younger quilters are approaching designs in a new way, sometimes using a twist on a traditional design by, for example, supersizing a traditional block. Some designs can be shocking, graphic, or quiet and understated. Improvisation has found its place too with some people rejecting rulers, by stitching in a free-form improvisational way, inspired by the Gee's Bend quilts of Alabama, USA. This is a group of African American women who live in the isolated hamlet of Gee's Bend in Alabama. The quilts made in Gee's Bend are regarded as being simply made and with a distinctive free form, using whatever materials are available to them.

Nowadays quilters have a wide array of materials to choose from, while digital printing means that photographic style images containing unlimited numbers of colours can be used. It is even possible to create a design and then send it online to a company who will print it on fabric especially for the client.

Fussy cutting, stack'n'whack, colourwash, rag quilts, T-shirt quilts, fusible applique, these are just a few of the quilting terms that are now used that would have puzzled quilters fifty years ago, let alone those making quilts 150 years ago.

The quilters 'sewing box' has now become a 'sewing studio', which may simply have a sewing machine, notions and fabric. It may also contain a 12 foot (360 cm) long-arm machine, a computerised embroidery machine, computer, light box, specialised die cutting machines and much more.