

NEWPORT
ART
MUSEUM

**VISUAL STORYTELLING:
Stitched Histories**

Featuring

**The Palmer Family:
Crazy Quilt #3, 1885**



Introduction

Quilts are unique in their ability to be both works of art and practical objects we use everyday. The tremendous time and skill required to make these textiles is impressive, but what is equally amazing is their ability to tell the stories of their makers and the people who used them. Quilts tell uniquely American narratives that showcase the voices of people we don't always hear from like womxn, immigrants, and Black Americans.

Palmer Family
Crazy Quilt #3, c. 1885
Silk, twill, velvet and embroidery
Gift of Cynthia McCaw Palmer in
honor of the Palmer women,
1997.009.003





About the Artist/ Provenance

This Victorian quilt was made in 1885 by Frances Maria Prentice Palmer, most likely with help from her two granddaughters. Maria married into the Palmers, a wealthy Rhode Island family who were direct descendants of pilgrims who traveled from England on the Mayflower. She and her husband, John Simmons Palmer, lived in Providence. There he established “Palmer and Capron” in 1845, in operation for nearly sixty years and one of the oldest jewelry manufacturing firms in Rhode Island.

About the Artwork

Traditionally, quilts and quilt making have been seen as a craft, predominantly done by women at home and not valued as works of fine art. However, in recent years American quilts have gained recognition for their distinct contributions to American Art due to their craftsmanship, creativity, and ingenuity. Typically, quilts get their names from the patterns that the quilter follows to make them. “Crazy” quilts are so-named because they lack a pattern and instead feature combinations of random and irregular shapes. These distinctive quilts offer the maker more artistic freedom because there are no rules or designs to follow. The maker can select and arrange the fabrics and decide which stitches, **appliques** and **embroidery** to incorporate into their creations.

This particular crazy quilt is made of many different fabrics, including **silk** and **cotton**, different weaves like velvet and satin and many colors, illustrations and embroideries. The quilt is **asymmetrical** and made up of scraps of fabric within blocks. Even the way the pieces of fabric and blocks are stitched together is inconsistent, with some joined with a yellow **whipstitch** and others in purple zigzag stitch. Surface decoration such as stitching and embroidery is a major characteristic of a crazy quilt.

Crazy quilts evolved from leftover household scraps of fabric that were then combined to make bed covers. By 1880, crazy quilts were in such high demand that instructions, tips and crazy quilt kits were widely marketed in magazines and newspapers. This broad access to materials and directions enabled many people to make their own crazy quilts. Because of the popularity and mass production of crazy quilt kits, quilts from this time can often look very similar to one another. The kits came with pre-cut pieces of fabric, some with fabric stamped with a pattern, like the outline of a flower which the maker could stitch onto. Because this quilt was made in 1885 and looks similar to others from the same time period, it was likely made from a kit. Quilters could personalize their creations and also add their own embroidery, appliques and in the case of this quilt, ribbons. Popular embellishments also included flowers, birds and Japanese fans.

More Crazy Quilts

You can see the difference between the crazy quilt (likely made from a kit) on the left and the imaginative and improvisational style of the quilt on the right. The one on the right clearly uses scraps of sweaters and other clothing, leaving the shapes of the original garments visible, resulting in a unique and personal quilt.



Palmer Family
Crazy Quilt #5, c. 1880
Silk, twill, velvet and embroidery
Gift of Cynthia McCaw Palmer in honor of the Palmer women,
1997.009.005



Crazy Quilt
Maker unidentified
Possibly made in Pennsylvania, 1930-1945.
International Quilt Museum
2003.003.0140

Quilt Motifs

The **motifs** on quilts often reflect artistic trends at the time they were made. This quilt is no exception and the various motifs, either stitched or appliqued on, were in keeping with the fashions of the time. Flowers, butterflies, birds, and strawberries were popular themes and can be seen on the quilt. The influence of **Chinoiserie** and **Japonisme** appears in the appliqued fan and the Asian-inspired flowers including chrysanthemums and bulrushes. The particular interests and hobbies of the maker are also evident in the quilt - Maria Palmer included commemorative ribbons, souvenirs, and a monogram and date.





Stitches for Crazy Quilting. Patchwork, Embroidery, Etc.
C.L. Browne (author) 1885 A. I. Huyler (publisher)

This is an example of stitches and embroidery motifs quilters could trace or copy and add to their own crazy quilts. The crazy quilt craze was so popular that these advertisements were common in women's magazines and newspapers.

Crazy Quilts and Japonisme



(left) Howard Gardiner Cushing
Child with a Toy, 1909
Oil on canvas
Gift of the Howard G. Cushing Memorial
Committee
1920.001.009



(right) "Articles from Japanese collection"
*Photograph of the Japanese Pavilion at the
Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in
1876*
C020590 Centennial Photographic Co.

History of Crazy Quilts and Japonisme

Japonisme, the name given to the Western interpretation of Japanese and sometimes Asian design, affected everything from textiles, fashion,

decorative arts and popular culture in the late nineteenth century. Public fascination with Japanese culture emerged after Japan opened its ports in 1853, after 200 years of isolation, and exported their goods to the Western world. Furthermore, Japanese art and culture were on full display in the Japanese Pavilion at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 and inspired countless artists and makers.

Howard Gardiner Cushing, an American artist and early member of the Newport Art Association, incorporated Asian motifs in his work and adopted the use of asymmetry, a hallmark of Japanese art. Cushing included fashionable Asian objects such as fans, folding screens, urns and Japanese prints in many of his paintings.

Art in Context



(left) *Cloisonné enamel dish*, Ca. 1880, Yokohama, Japan. Seizaburo Goto (maker), 237-1881 Victoria and Albert Museum
(right) *Japan-a-mania at the Centennial*, the PhillyHistory Blog

The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 was the first World's Fair to be held in the United States and coincided with the 100th anniversary of American independence. World Fairs were the social media of their day and were often the only way most people could see new advancements, by various countries, in engineering, decorative arts, food, agriculture and art. People from all over the country and world would travel to the expositions to do business, be inspired and learn about other nations. Thirty seven countries participated in the Philadelphia Exposition which attracted nearly 10 million visitors and lasted from May 10, 1876 until November 10, 1876. The photograph on the left, of the Japanese Pavilion, could have displayed this Cloisonné dish, made in Japan specifically to capitalize on the demand for Japanese goods in the Western market.

Gee's Bend Quiltmakers

Even though Crazy Quilt #3 was made over 150 years ago, the tradition of storytelling through quilting is still alive and well. The women of Gee's Bend, Alabama have a rich tradition, going back 150 years, of producing some of the most beautiful and unique quilts in the nation. The residents are direct descendants of the enslaved people who worked the **cotton** fields where they live today. Their quilts tell the powerful stories of their enslaved and persecuted ancestors as well as their personal struggles, triumphs and unique perspectives.

Originally, Gee's Bend women made quilts to keep themselves and their children warm in unheated shacks that had no running water or electricity. These stunning works of art are important because they stand alone in their distinctive improvisational, bold and geometric designs. They don't follow the tradition of classical quilting and were spurred from necessity; the quilters used whatever materials were on hand, often recycling from old clothing and textiles. The combination of storytelling, beauty and creativity defines these quilts as some of the most important African-American visual and cultural contributions to the history of art and of the United States.

(top right) <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/>
(bottom right) Leola Pettway and Qunnie Pettway working at the Freedom Quilting Bee. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.





“The quilts gave the women of Gee’s Bend a voice. They give them a place in the world. They took them places that we had never been to. I think places we had never even dreamed about going.” – Louisiana Pettway Bendolph, 4th generation quilter

The Center Medallion Checkerboard Variation Quilt made by quilter Annette Pettway showcases striking colors, pattern mixing, bold graphics and asymmetry to create a unique improvisational style of quilting developed by the women of Gee's Bend over generations.

Center Medallion Checkerboard Variation Quilt
Annette Pettway, 1998
Souls Grown Deep Foundation

Questions for Viewing

What do you find most interesting or inspiring about the quilts in this document? Do you have a favorite and why?

The quilters of Gee's bend originally made their quilts from scraps of fabrics they had around their houses. Look around you. What kinds of materials, textiles or otherwise could you use to make a quilt? Be sure to include the materials found on the floors, walls, people and furniture. What would this quilt look like and what story would it be telling?

Quilts have not been viewed as "traditional works of fine art" and therefore are not often displayed in art museums. Can you think of other types of art that you don't see in museums? Sometimes they can be labeled as decorative, craft or folk art.

How do quilts and other types of "non-traditional works of art" help us to understand a more accurate view of American history? What types of people use and make these types of art?

Activities

Textiles, in the United States alone, contribute to 21 billion pounds of waste every year with most textiles ending up in landfills. Do you have old or discarded clothes, blankets and fabrics in your home? Imagine some innovative ways to recycle these materials and save them from the landfills.

Our homes are often filled with objects handed down from generations. Do you have a quilt or family heirloom in your home? Do you know its origin and who made it? Spend time with the object, what does it look like? Ask your family members about it and you may find out something surprising.

Vocabulary

APPLIQUÉ - needlework in which pieces or patches of fabric in different shapes and patterns are sewn or stuck onto a larger piece to form a picture or pattern. Usually for decorative purposes only.

ASYMMETRICAL - The absence of symmetry. Symmetry refers to a sense of harmonious and beautiful proportion and balance.

COTTON - A plant which originated in America, India and Africa; the fibers produced by the plant; and the fabric produced using the fibers.

EMBROIDERY - decorating fabric or other materials using a needle to apply thread or yarn.

MOTIF - A decorative design, pattern or a distinctive feature or dominant idea in an artistic composition.

SILK - A type of fiber made from secretions of the silkworm. Silk is lightweight but very strong.

PATCHWORK - A construction made by stitching by hand or machine various pieces together. Sometimes used as a method to mend or decorate textiles. Sometimes the various pieces are arranged methodically and other times they are improvisational.

QUILT - Originally used as a bed cover or blanket, quilts consist of a face or top, a backing, edging and often a layer of batting in between the layers.

QUILTING - The stitches used to bring together the layers of fabric with batting in between. It can be functional or decorative, can be a straight line or in a design.

WHIPSTITCH - A simple sewing stitch that is used in crocheting, knitting and sewing, and in which the needle is passed in and out of the fabric in a series of stitches that circle an edge of the fabric

WOOL - A type of fabric made from animal fibers. Usually, wool is made out of sheep hair but it can also be made out of the hair of goats, rabbits and alpaca. Wool is a heavy and warm fiber making it ideal for colder months.

Additional Resources

<https://barbarabrackman.blogspot.com/>

<https://mfa.org/video/bisa-butler-quilting-for-culturea>

<https://soulsgrowndeeep.org/>

<http://statemuseumpa.org/crazy-quilts/>

Credits

Centennial Photographic Co. *Articles from Japanese collection*. Albumen Prints. *Free Library of Philadelphia*: Philadelphia, PA. <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/item/998>. (accessed Feb 22, 2022)

Cindy Brick, *Crazy Quilts: History, Techniques, Embroidery Motifs*, St. Paul: Voyageur Press (2011).

Hanson, Marin F., and Patricia Cox Crews. *American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870-1940: The International Quilt Study Center Collections*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Karen Zukowski, *Creating the Artful Home: The Aesthetic Movement*, Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith (2006).

New England Historic Genealogical Society. *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1874.

Phipps, Elena. *Looking at Textiles: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011.

Peck, Amelia and Amy Elizabeth Bogansky. *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800*. 2013.

Peck, Amelia, and Cynthia V. A. Schaffner, *American Quilts & Coverlets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.

Penny McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, New York: E.P. Dutton (1984).

Souls Grown Deep. "Gee's Bend Quiltmakers" Accessed December 15, 2021. <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/gees-bend-quiltmakers>.