

A piece of quilt history.

The word *quilt* is derived from the Latin, *culcita*, which means a stuffed sack, mattress or cushion. The Oxford dictionary refines this to 'an article of bed-furniture, consisting essentially of two large pieces of woven material having a layer of some soft substance (such as wool, flock or down) placed between them. In later use a coverlet, especially one in which the lining is kept in place by stitches or lines of stitching passing through the whole (the medieval *quiltpoint* or *counterpoint*).'

Quilting is not restricted to bedding; quilted clothing is warm and protective. Quilted garments were often worn under armour or, in the case of 'light' protection, as armour itself. Quilts, and quilted clothing, have been made all over the world from a very early period.

Historically, quilting should not be seen exclusively as a 'peasant-art'; it has always had its top-end exponents. In England, the popularity of quilting reached its zenith in the 17th and 18th centuries. A wealthy man might wear a suit of quilted satin doublet and breeches while quilted satin petticoats were part of a fashionable lady's dress. This image (1) shows a suit from the late 1630s made from a bed quilt. Beautifully made, this is perhaps an early example of recycling or even up-cycling.



Image 1

In 1584 a bed quilt belonging to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester was described like this; '*A faire quilte of crymson sattin, all lozenged over with silver twiste, in the midst a cinquefoile within a garland of ragged staves, fringed rounde aboute with a small fringe of crimson silke, lined through with white fustian*'. Clearly a valuable and luxurious possession!



Image 2

At the time the pictured quilt (image 2) was made (1830 – 1840, probably Welsh) the British textile industry was producing a great variety of printed cottons in different qualities, available in a range of different prices. Textile designs were developed with an emphasis on novelty, such as the four leopard skin print squares in the corners. In 'piecing' or 'patchwork', small pieces of fabric are sewn together to produce a decorative design. This is known as 'piecing over paper'. The pattern is first drawn onto paper and then accurately cut. Small pieces of fabric are tacked round each of the shapes, and then joined together from the back using overstitch.



This English quilt (image 3) from the mid 18th century uses appliqué (cut out and stitched fabric shapes) to make the design. The two figures at the centre of the design are based on a Hiram Powers sculpture, *The Greek Slave* (1846), shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The sculpture became a famous artwork of the second half of the 19th century and was often interpreted as a criticism of slavery in America. The unknown quilter may have been making the same criticism. Quilts can, and often do, tell complex stories.

Image 3

Early American settlers brought quilting with them from their old homes in Europe, Holland and Britain in particular. As settlement expanded westwards, Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee and Carolina all developed a strong tradition of quilting.

"Much of the social history of early America has been lost to us precisely because women were expected to use needles rather than pens. Yet if textiles are in one sense an emblem of women's oppression, they have also been an almost universal medium of female expression."

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich¹



Image 4

Image 3 © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Image 4 © International Quilt Study Centre & Museum, 2001.011.0001. www.QuiltStudy.org

¹ Ulrich, Harvard Professor of early American history, received the Pulitzer Prize in 1991.

This quilt (image 4) is known as the Reconciliation Quilt. Made in 1867, it is an example of a *story* quilt but perhaps *social history* or *documentary* would be more accurate as the story, told in forty stitched blocks, depicts scenes of domestic, cultural and political life from the civil war and reconstruction era. The second block of the second row shows a newly free African American engaged in his own business venture – something which would have been a great rarity before the abolition of slavery. This particular quilt, attributed to Linda Ward Honstain, achieved a record price for a quilt at auction when it sold at Sotheby's in 1991, for \$264,000.

Alongside their European American counterparts, African American quilts are now equally admired; influenced by African textile traditions as well as 'traditional' European quilt patterns, the overall appearance is freer, more individual and more contemporary.



Image 5

Gee's Bend is an area of Alabama where African American women developed a bold, distinctive style, based on traditional quilting but with a geometric simplicity akin to American modern art of the twentieth century (image 5). A collection of Gee's Bend quilts have been exhibited all over America including a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.



Image 6

The largest piece of community folk art in the world is a quilt² (image 6) made of over 46,000 panels each measuring 3' x 6', the average size of a grave. The panels have all been made as memorials of the lives of people who have died of AIDS related causes. The idea for the quilt was conceived in 1985 by AIDS activist Cleve Jones and the quilt had its first showing on the National Mall in Washington D.C. in 1987.

² Officially known as 'The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt' often abbreviated to the AIDS Quilt.

Quilts were originally made for warmth. A quilt on your bed might mean the difference between life and death or, if not quite as essential as that, the difference between comfort and austerity. It is interesting that this thrifty, practical, traditionally female craft began to attract critical acclaim at the point where quilting was no longer a necessity for economy and warmth. For centuries quilting was a domestic activity practiced as a 'folk-art' but quilt making, particularly since the late 1960s and 1970s, has moved as far from folk art as computers have from the slide-rule. A quilt is now a broad canvas used to express many ideas just as paintings do. Many fine artists now use textiles and quilting as a medium of expression. Feminism and the re-interpretation of traditionally female activities have provided a new audience, and new practitioners, for contemporary quilt design. Pauline Burbridge, Tracey Emin, Nancy Clearwater Herman, Radka Donnell and Jean Ray Laury are well known artists who have made quilts as part of their practice.

'In early America, the sources for quilt design came from nature and from all the articles of everyday life--the patterns on dishes, the designs from cast-iron stoves, political symbols such as the eagle and the star, wild flowers and other plant forms. In the twentieth century, however, none of the new influences of the time seem to have permeated quilt design. Even the strong influence of Art Nouveau, which was apparent in other crafts, had almost no effect on quilt making. Perhaps women lost confidence in their ability to design. We saw watered-down versions of old designs, used over and over, with few of the revitalizing changes essential in any 'lively' art. Modern designers of quilts are not concerned with reiterating statements made years ago. They have their own comments to make, comments which are relevant to our own times. At last we can look forward to exciting designs. Traditional designs no longer meet our needs. Creativity and inventiveness make it possible to modify and rejuvenate the old approaches and techniques. Systems of construction in quilt making are strong, durable, and beautiful. If we can retain the structural integrity of the traditional quilt and add to it a contemporary approach to color and design, we will achieve a quilt which merges past and present.'

Jean Ray Laury³

The exhibitors taking part in this exhibition use diverse imagery and techniques to make their quilts. From France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Germany and the USA their work is individual, fresh and, as Jean Ray Laury puts it 'they have their own comments to make'. We hope you enjoy the skill and inventiveness of these quilters as much as we do.

Compiled by P. de Burlet for the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, January 2012

³ From *The Art Quilt*, Robert Shaw, Hugh Lauter Levin Associates; 1997