



Maverick Quilts

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Maverick Quilts

Some quilts, ambitiously conceived and executed, hold their own with the best examples of decorative art. Such quilts belie the notion of the unsophisticated American quilter throwing scraps together for economy. These breathtaking works of extraordinary complexity and richness will always find appreciation and be valued as manifestations of the artistic spirit.

Less noticed are the unpretentious, eccentric examples of the everyday quilt. Some quilts were made to be used, made of inexpensive materials but created with great originality. Working within the conventions of the common quilt, some women have been inspired to extend the implications of traditional quilt patterns and make them uniquely their own. Like folk sculpture or painting, these quilts appeal to almost every-

one, although they often are original in unfamiliar ways. Their sense of invention and play is infectious. We have chosen to call these works “maverick” quilts.

Although some are very well-made, the maverick quilts in this exhibition were not chosen for the skill with which they were crafted. What they share is an unusual twist on the ordinary, a verve and a gritty individuality rarely found in more studied and self-conscious quilts.

Everyday quilts rarely have a history attached to them. Often, we do not know the names of the women who made them. We do not know if the particularly exciting ones were created out of inspiration, necessity or momentary whim. We do not know if the techniques or patterns they employed were the result of misunderstandings of the “normal” way of quilting or a conscious swerve away from the “normal” way.

Blanche Ransome Parker from Carroll

County, Tennessee, made her unique *Birds* in the early 1940s. Bird quilts of an identifiable style were common in the 1930s and 1940s: a rectangular grid of blocks, usually containing 48 embroidered state birds. Each bird inhabits its own square; the blocks are separated by latticework. Blanche Parker's quilt, however, is her distinctive vision. How she conceived it, or why, we do not know. It appears to have been freely cut and pieced, with no pattern or templates, with only an idea of the finished work in mind. Two birds, one of them red, face to the left. The standard latticework is recognizable, black bars with red squares at the intersections, but everything is askew. The blocks are an impression of “squareness”; extra bits and pieces of fabric are sewn in here and there to make everything fit. The quilt resembles something from a dream, vastly more alive and engaging than most standard-issue bird quilts of the period.

The same could be said for *Brick Wall*. Many brick wall quilts were made in the last part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. Most were composed of rectangular wool suiting samples arranged in neat, offset rows to imitate bricks. Here, the quiltmaker machine-sewed the bricks with a crude topstitch, then elected to cover the seams with red and gold strips.

Compared to the orderly composition of an actual brick wall, this image seems almost cartoon-like, playful and spontaneous. We will never know if its maker made all her quilts this way, or if this was perhaps the only one she ever made. We do not know if she chose to attach the “mortar” strips in a flash of wit, or if she simply wanted to cover up the ragged seams underneath. All we know is that this quilt takes the most stationary of subjects and makes it dance.

Quilts need not be casually executed and askew to have an unusual vitality. *Rail Fence* follows a strict layout, carefully planned and executed. The colors in the piano-key border are perfectly ordered. The shading of the colors in the central field is sophisticated and subtle. With its bright calicoes and meticulous craft, *Rail Fence* is typical of late 19th-century Pennsylvania German quilts, albeit on a delightfully small scale. Its innumerable ties made of embroidery floss, however, are anything but typical. It seems that this quiltmaker



Patchwork, unknown quiltmaker, origin unknown, c. 1880, cotton fabrics, 64" x 73", collection Susie Tompkins, San Francisco



Crazy, unknown quiltmaker, origin unknown, c. 1920, cotton fabrics, 63" x 78", collection Susie Tompkins, San Francisco

so enjoyed the tying that she employed it to an extreme. The knots go all the way to the edge, into the binding. There is no conceivable structural reason for this much tying. The quiltmaker could have placed the knots inconspicuously on the back of the quilt instead of covering the front with these porcupine-like quilts of floss. She wanted to accentuate it, to embellish the surface of her already highly decorative quilt.

One element common to many of these quilts is this "overtying" technique. Not content with the usual careful grid of small knots about 4 inches apart, which is all that is necessary to hold a quilt together, some quiltmakers decided they so liked the decorative effect of the knots that they emphasized them to great effect. *Brick Wall* has knots that resemble a swarm of multicolored bees. *Crazy*, as another example, has a

blizzard of off-white stitches instead of ties or knots.

Since quilts are defined by the stitching that holds their three layers together, one might argue that these are not quilts in the technical sense, but "tied comforters" or "haps," as some would call them. We chose to include them in the quilting tradition, as they have sufficient elements of the quilt that they do not seem to belong to another category.

Crazy quilts, so named because they employ random-shaped pieces that resemble the "crazed" lines in the glazes of pottery, became fashionable in the second half of the 19th century as a reaction to the quaintness of calico patchwork quilts. Most were made of silks and velvets, densely embellished with various, multicolored embroidery stitches. The purpose was to demonstrate

one's needlework skills with these small, flashy pieces, not to make a functional blanket. The fact that many of these fragile, unwashable quilts have survived is largely a testament to their impracticality rather than to their sturdiness. Since they could not be used, they did not experience the wear of many quilts.

Most crazy quilts were tied with small knots on the back. The crazies in this exhibition, in contrast, were made of sturdy wool or cotton, unembellished with embroidery and, with one exception, quilted. They were probably made to be used as blankets. Their fractured, abstract compositions have an entirely different effect than the embroidered, painted and endlessly decorated crazy quilts to which they are related. These seem more poetic, more evocative and coherent.

The tied crazy quilt from Pennsylvania

is a masterwork. Each block approaches the problem of creating an interesting abstract composition from a different perspective. Its single disk of black velvet appears like a window into infinite space, fittingly crossed with twinkling, snowy stars.

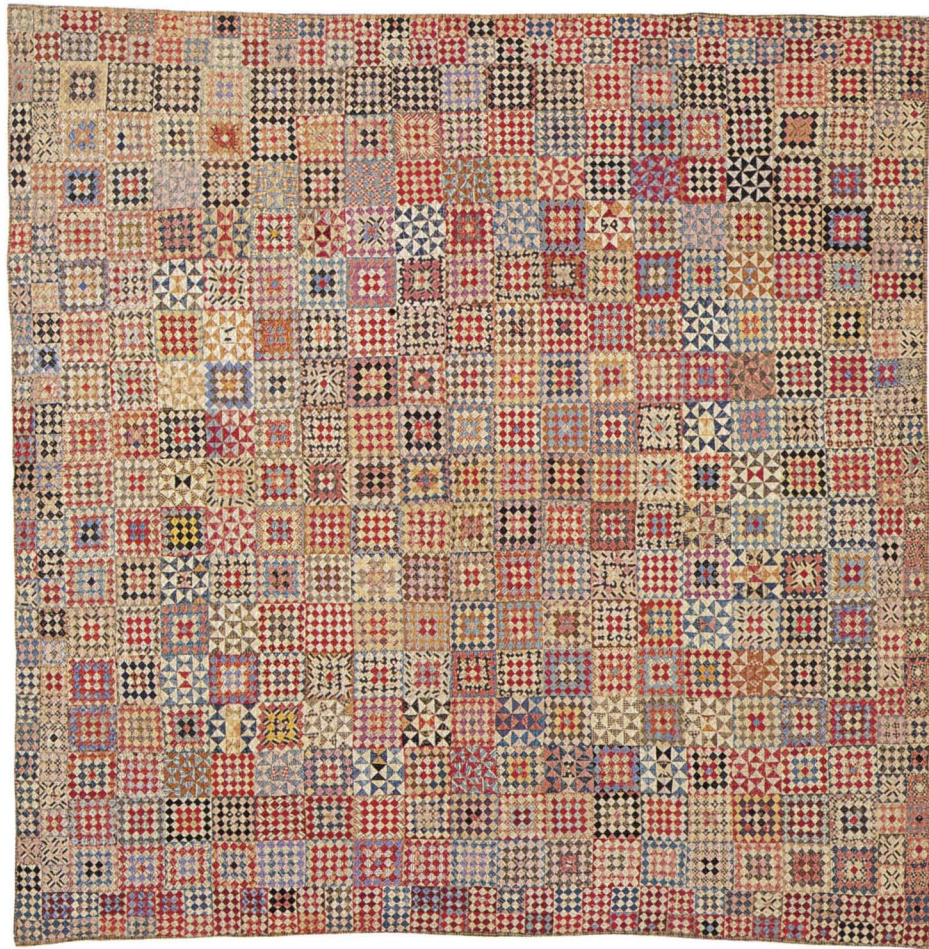
The quilts in this exhibition illustrate the possibilities offered by ignoring how things are supposed to be done. They demonstrate that success is not in how closely one adheres to the patterns of a craft, but in how one can express a more personal vision by deviating from convention.

In 1971, Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof revolutionized the way we view quilts by organizing a major quilt exhibition for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Subsequently, similar quilt exhibitions have become more common. Contemporary quiltmakers now take considerable pride in creating works that are valued for their aesthetic merit in addition to their technical skill.

These maverick quilts make it clear that the “revolution” was primarily in the way we see quilts rather than in the way they were seen by their makers. The quilt tradition has always contained examples that appear to have been made at least as much for the personal expression of the maker as for reasons of economy or fashion. And it is uncanny how many of these quilts from a century ago prefigure by decades trends in abstract painting.

Among the quilts that have survived, these examples are unusual, out of the ordinary. But we have no way of knowing how they “fit in” with their contemporaries (similarly dated quilts). We can only reference these existing quilts. Most likely, the quilts we have for study represent the “best” quilts, the ones that were deemed “heirlooms” or worthy of saving. Utility quilts, those made for everyday use, were for the most part destroyed, thus limiting our opportunities for study and comparison.

There may have been many more quilts similar to the ones exhibited that did not survive years of service. It is likely that utility quilts were the first ones to be commandeered for a variety of potentially destructive uses (packing, etc.). Given that likelihood, it is almost miraculous that some of these examples survived, particularly those in pristine



Broken Dishes, Myrtle Avis Jackson Moon, Robinson County, Tennessee, 1910, cotton fabrics, 64" x 72", collection Susie Tompkins, San Francisco

condition. It is therefore quite possible that these examples would not seem like such “mavericks” if a larger number of contemporaneous quilts had been preserved.

Regardless of where they fit historically, regardless of their status as art, regardless of a collector’s sensibility or the quilts’ relationships with one another, these distinctive quilts give us insights into the minds of some highly creative and witty women. The spirit of play and good humor in the pastel-colored *Crazy*, like the subtle inner workings of *Broken Dishes* and the inexplicable sunrise in a teacup of *Patchwork*, speak to us with eloquent, amusing messages from the past, messages from women who might have been our ancestors. These quilts remind us that original, unique works of art may be as close as the coverings under which we sleep.

Joe Cunningham and Julie Silber
Co-curators of the exhibition

Notes on the collection

This exhibition is assembled from the collection of Susie Tompkins, co-founder and owner of Esprit de Corp., the clothing company. Until 1990, the Esprit collection was made up almost entirely of Amish quilts. That year, Tompkins assumed control of the company and began to expand the collection. The quilts she found most appealing were the unsung, humble utility quilts and comforters. A serious collector of photography, she soon saw echoes of these quilts in her black-and-white photographs of depression-era farm families. Quilts such as these were similar to the ones the women in the photographs produced.

These quilts embody a gritty creativity that challenges tradition. They are glorious examples of everyday items. They represent the many traditional quilts that were made by women who could not resist giving an identifiable, community pattern a personal twist and identity.

Cover: *Birds*, Blanche Ransome Parker, Carroll County, Tennessee, 1940, cotton fabrics, 64" x 80", collection Susie Tompkins, San Francisco