

Quilting

Quilting is a sewing technique in which two layers of fabric, usually with an interior insulating layer, are sewn together with multiple rows of stitching. Quilting has long been used for clothing in China, North Africa, and the Middle East, but currently is most often associated with wall hangings and bed covers. Quilts are often a means of telling a story through fabric images.

There is a strong tradition of quilting in North America, as immigrants from Europe brought the craft with them. The earliest American quilts are known as **whole cloth quilts**. They feature the same fabric for the entire quilt top; it is the intricate stitching on the fabric, most often solid colored, which creates the quilt's design. The painstaking nature of the hand stitching meant that these quilts were most often made by women of leisure.

The photo below is of the Martha Howard quilt. Made by Martha Crafts Howard sometime between 1761 and 1787, the quilt is believed to be one of oldest, if not the oldest, surviving whole cloth quilts in the United States. Measuring seven by eight feet, the salmon colored chintz fabric features feather, scallop and leaf designs, with 10 stitches per inch. The quilt was donated to the Canton (MA) Historical Society in 1910. It sat folded in a box for close to 100 years before a \$10,000 restoration project cleaned the fabric and took care of stains, fraying and insect damage.



Broderie Perse (translation: Persian Embroidery) is a style of quilting that involves cutting motifs from printed fabric (often chintz) and appliquéing them onto a solid background. The broderie perse (or chintz appliqué) technique of quilting was popular in Europe during the 17th century and became popular in the mid-Atlantic and southeastern US in the late 18th and early 19th century. Common motifs included birds, flowers and fruit.

One noted quilt that includes the broderie perse technique is the Rajah Quilt. The quilt, now owned by the National Gallery of Australia, was created in 1841 by a group of women convicts being transported from England to Tasmania. Materials for the quilt were supplied to the convicts by prison reformer Elizabeth Fry and the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners. The quilt, comprised of 2815 pieces, is pictured below. The full history of the quilt can be found at <https://nga.gov.au/rajahquilt/>.



Album quilts (or friendship quilts) reflect the (1) popularity of autograph albums among women in the first half of the 19th century and (2) the invention of indelible ink, which permitted quilters to sign their creations without damaging the fabric. Thus, women created quilts which they signed, often including poems and dedications. The quilts themselves were comprised of appliquéd blocks, each one different. Often, the individual blocks were created by different people. Beginning around 1840, Baltimore, MD, the second largest city in the USA prior to the Civil War, became known for some of the most beautiful album quilts created. According to a 1994 article published in the LA Times, Baltimore Album Quilts “have become what the Rolls-Royce is to cars and Tiffany is to stained glass”. In 1987, a buyer paid \$176,000 for an 1840 Baltimore Album Quilt. The largest collection of Baltimore Album Quilts is held by the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore.

The photo below is of an 1848 Baltimore Album Quilt by Rachel Meyer Walter, a Bavarian immigrant. It is part of the Maryland Historical Society’s vast collection of textiles.



There is currently an exhibition of Baltimore Album Quilts at the New England Quilt Museum in Lowell, MA. This link takes you to the page of the museum website where you can see some of the quilts on display. <https://www.neqm.org/baltimore-album-quilts1>

Amish Quilts

The Amish came relatively late to quilting, in the 1870s. The first Amish quilts were made from scraps, with dark solid colors. Printed fabrics were viewed as too fancy. While the earliest Amish quilts had basic shapes (e.g., rectangles and triangles), over time, more bold and colorful patterns were adopted. While Amish quilts were originally made only to be used within the community, they eventually began to be sold commercially, helped with the post-bicentennial appreciation of the American heritage and the reputation of the Amish for their expert craftsmanship.

Most Amish quilts are done with patchwork, meaning that pieces of fabric are cut into shapes and formed or “patched” into distinct patterns. Amish quilts can also be made in the appliqué style, where small pieces of fabric are sewn together to form a picture. Some of the patterns typical of Amish quilts include: Double Wedding Ring, Star of Bethlehem, Diamond in a Square, Dresden Plate, Star and Shadow and Log Cabin.

The two quilts pictured below are Star of Bethlehem and Diamond in a Square quilts respectively.



Gee's Bend Quilts

Gee's Bend Quilts are quilts created by a group of women and their ancestors who live or have lived in the isolated [African-American](#) hamlet of [Gee's Bend, Alabama](#) along the [Alabama River](#). The quilts of Gee's Bend are considered to be one of the most important [African-American](#) visual and cultural contributions to the history of American art. The women of Gee's Bend have created hundreds of masterpieces from the early 20th century to the present. You can watch their story at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHEqYVzSs7U>

The quilt below, from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, is a "House Top" variation with "Star" Medallion, created by Lutisha Pettway, ca. 1975 and made from corduroy.

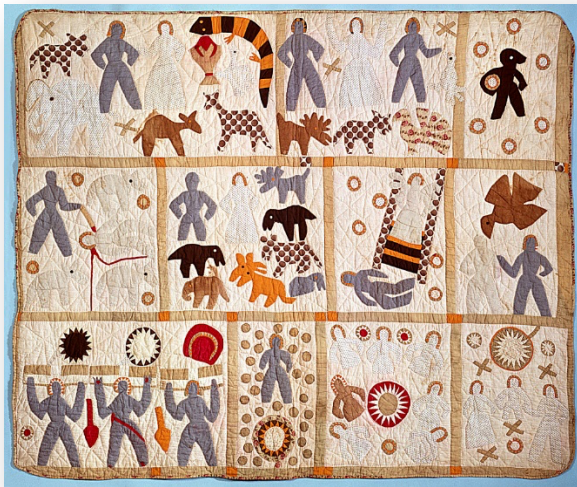


The quilt below, Blocks, Strips, Strings, and Half Squares, was made by Mary Lee Bendolph (2005), and is part of the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Story Quilts

Early story quilts provided a way for those who could not read to tell a story. Some of the best known early story quilts were made by Harriet Powers (1837-1910). Powers was born a slave in rural Georgia. Powers used traditional appliqué techniques to record local history, biblical stories and astronomical events. Although she began exhibiting her quilts in 1886, only two are known to have survived, the *Bible Quilt* (1896, now owned by the National Museum of American History) and the *Pictorial Quilt* (1898, owned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts). After her death in 1910, Powers' work was largely forgotten until it was rediscovered in the 1970s.



Bible Quilt



Pictorial Quilt

Below is a link to a short video which presents Harriet Power's story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uP3RP1W1rPA>

Faith Ringgold (1930-present) is an American painter, writer, performance artist and mixed media sculptor. She is probably best known for her story, or narrative, quilts. She grew up in Depression era Harlem where she was surrounded by an arts scene. When no one would publish her autobiography, she turned to quilts as a way of telling her story. Her first quilt story, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983), depicts the story of Aunt Jemima as a matriarch restaurateur and fictionally revises "the most maligned black female stereotype."



The quilt below is the first in a series of five called *Women on a Bridge*. Called *Tar Beach* (1988), depicts the fantasies of its heroine and narrator, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, who, on a summer night in Harlem, flies over the George Washington Bridge. The quilt is part of the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in NYC.



The following is a link to a fascinating interview with Faith Ringgold.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU9MpcHfwiA>

The Tar Beach quilt was turned into an illustrated book for children in 1991. The following is a link to a video in which Ringgold (at age 86) reads the book aloud.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9RKJleFdBu>

[I am putting Dominique Ehrmann under quilting because her website says “Dominique is a self-taught fiber artist. Quilting is her medium to tell her stories.” In 2016, *Handeye Magazine* said of Ehrmann, “Although she uses traditional techniques and fabrics, she has explored the boundaries of contemporary fiber arts, with novel manufacturing structures, multi-dimensional layers, and kinetic elements. Inspired by children’s pop-up books, cartoons, her family, and her love of and interactions with nature, her quilts employ aspects of modern technology and embody sculptural qualities. At times her work has puzzled quilt festival organizers as they do not always know how to categorize or display it.”](#) You can read the whole article here. <http://handeyemagazine.com/content/magical-quilts>

Here are just a couple of Ehrmann’s creations. The first is entitled *Come and Follow Me*. The second is called Pinwheel Block. Her website is fascinating; check it out. <http://dominiquehrmann.com/en/home/>





For a fascinating piece on quilt artists, watch the PBS episode from *Craft in America* on Quilts.
<https://www.pbs.org/video/quilts-episode-yhkwcj/>

Cross Country Road Trip? Love Quilts? You can see them along the way. Here's a link to quilt and textile museums all across the country.

<https://www.allpeoplequilt.com/how-to-quilt/quilting-basics/quilt-museums-our-must-visit-list>

One of the museums on this list is the Southeastern Quilt and Textile museum in Carrolton, GA (50 miles southeast of Atlanta). From April to July of this year, the museum invited people to submit photos of quilts and other textile arts they had created while sheltering at home during the pandemic. You can see the slide show at <https://www.southeasternquiltandtextilemuseum.org/>