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Review of *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*  
by B. Brackman, J. A. Chinn, G. R.  
Davis, T. Thompson, S. R. Farley, N.  
Hornback

Laurel Horton  
Seneca, South Carolina

**Kansas Quilts and Quilters.** B. Brackman, J. A. Chinn, G. R. Davis, T. Thompson, S. R. Farley, N. Hornback. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993. Photographs, maps, preface, appendix, and index. 206 pp. \$40.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

*Kansas Quilts and Quilters* represents one state's contribution to one of the most remarkable grassroots movements in the late twentieth century—the formation of groups to photograph and document quilts made or found within a particular geographic area. Quilt projects in all fifty states, as well as in Canada and the British Isles, have since 1980, recorded tens of thousands of quilts. The purpose of these projects is not merely to chalk up numbers but to provide data for a better understanding of quilting as an important expression of identity and accomplishments of women.

To those accustomed to think of quilts as bedcovers, pleasant but old-fashioned, this book will be a revelation. No one could read this book and come away without a better understanding of the important role of quilts in the lives of American women. Readers who expect anything involving quilts to be meaningless “fluff” will be impressed with the depth of scholarly research and writing in this volume.

Barbara Brackman provides a valuable and well-written historical overview in a chapter called “Rocky Road to Kansas.” With the clever use of surprisingly appropriate quilt pattern names to delineate subjects, Brackman provides data drawn from first person accounts of early travellers and settlers in Kansas.

Brackman, one of the foremost scholars on quilt patterns and American quilting in general, demonstrates clearly the fallacy of the myth that early

frontier dwellers made quilts out of necessity. Instead, families brought with them the bedding they would need for the first years, and it was only after establishing settled homes that women returned to quilting to provide color in their homes and in their lives.

While the authors specifically address quilting within the context of the state of Kansas, all of the articles offer insights for American quilts generally. Nancy Hornback provides a thoughtful examination of a well-known but under-investigated subject, a tradition of elaborate red and green floral applique quilts. Hornback's valuable essay is not the final word on this important phenomenon, but it provides a much-needed starting point for future work.

Brackman and Terry Thompson likewise provide the first published study of "conversation prints," fabrics printed with small finely drawn pictorial subjects. Through a remarkable collection of photographs and quilts, the authors show how the late-nineteenth-century popularity of such fabrics coincided with contemporary leisure activities.

Brackman's in-depth look at the quilts made by individual designers and quilters in the town of Emporia explores the influence of Rose Kretsinger and Charlotte Jane Whitehill, renowned for their original and influential designs. Brackman's expressed disappointment in discovering Emporia to be unusual in its large numbers of original designs serves only to highlight the uniqueness of the town and its community of quilt artists.

Sara Farley's highly detailed account of groups of Mennonites and their circuitous paths to Kansas and quilting provides important insights into the way immigrant groups in America have transferred their indigenous needle skills to the making of quilts.

In an essay which is useful not just to a study of Kansas quilts but to American quilting traditions generally, Jennie Chinn carefully reviews the major writings on African American quilting of the past fifteen years and demonstrates the inapplicability of most of it for the probable majority of African American quilts. She rightly suggests that many of the broad generalizations applied to this group can be traced to a self-limited sample and to studying only the quilts themselves, not the quilters.

Another essay with far-reaching implications is Gayle Davis's study of contemporary quilting groups. Davis analyzes the motivations and the rewards of today's traditional quilts groups, drawing upon both other scholars and upon the words of the quilters themselves.

*Kansas Quilts and Quilters* provides an important overview of the state's quilting traditions, detailed studies of important individuals and

movements, and implications for an enlarged understanding of American quilts and quilters. The extensive research, the variety of the quilts, and the inclusion of historic photographs all contribute to a very readable and important book. Among the growing group of "quilt project" books, this is one of the best. **Laurel Horton**, *Seneca, South Carolina*.