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Discovering Memory and Meaning in Quilts*

Carolyn Ducey and Patricia Crews

After an extensive search Ardis and Robert James, quilt collectors from Chappaqua, New York, chose the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) as the home for their collection of almost a thousand quilts. They also supported the formation of the International Quilt Study Center (IQSC) in 1997 for the interdisciplinary study of quilting traditions through the collection, conservation and exhibition of quilts and related materials. Carolyn Ducey and Patricia Crews, the Center’s curator and director, respectively, write about some of the work they do.

An inscription on an 1852 signature quilt, carefully hand-written in ink on the centre block of the quilt, reads ‘Presented to Mr. & Mrs. Rev. Wm. J. Nice, Dec. 1st, 1852.’ Each block of the quilt contains an appliqued design and a signature. Most blocks are floral bouquets cut from brilliantly coloured chintz, which, in some cases, has faded, leaving only a whisper of its former glory in the protected seams. Appliqued calico patterns mirror each other on either side of the quilt. Three blocks, featuring an exotic plumed bird, may indicate repairs done after the quilt’s construction: each contains pinholes that remain visible after a previous appliqued design was removed.

What can these different elements tell us about this quilt? We can try to learn about the event that sparked the quilt’s construction,

which in turn, helps us to understand the quilt’s function and meaning within American society of the period. We can analyze the colours of dyes available to cotton printers at mid-century and examine the techniques used to transform chintz fabrics into a stunning quilt. We can also observe efforts to maintain the integrity of the quilt’s design through careful repair, and perhaps, through careful analysis, determine approximately when the repair occurred.

How best does a researcher uncover the many layers of meaning held within a quilt? Virginia Gunn, professor of Clothing, Textiles & Interiors at the University of Akron and editor of the American Quilt Study Group’s annual publication *Uncoverings*, writes

... mature scholarship. . . should focus on understanding and telling an interpretation of the past based on careful documentation.¹

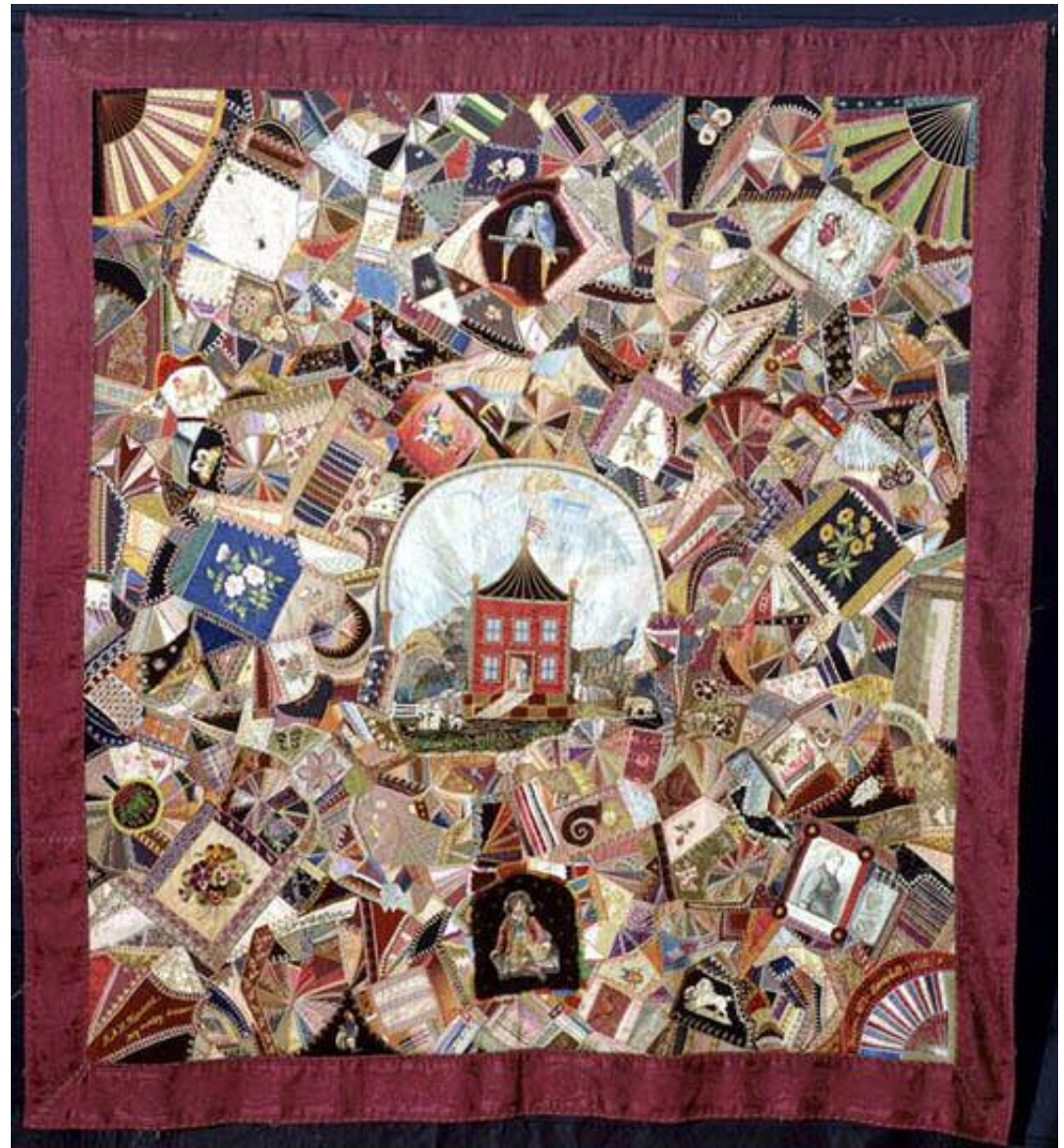
Material culture study—defined as the study of artifacts, rather than documents, to understand cultural history—offers several approaches to artifact analysis.

An object is thoroughly examined and described in terms of its physical characteristics; and then placed in a broader context through comparison with similar objects. The researcher then garners supplemental information through a study of published sources. Evaluation and interpretation of the significance of the object within cultures, past and present, completes the steps prescribed by models for artifact analysis.

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A physical examination of a quilt can disclose information on the printing and dyeing techniques used in production of fabrics, the style or pattern of a quilt, and its construction methods. Examination of the back of an unfinished crazy quilt top titled *My Crazy Dream*, dated 1877-1912 and made by Mrs. Hernandred Ricard, reveals the foundation-piecing method used to stitch the many assorted pieces together. Comparisons with other crazy quilts reveal examples sewn with the same technique. This supports the scholarship in Penny McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, 1984, which shows that pattern instructions were widely published and that women closely followed current trends and popular quilt styles in the late nineteenth century.

Considering the social context during which a quilt was made can help us understand its significance. A researcher may ask who made the object what economic, cultural, and social role the maker played in society, who used the object and what role the object itself played in society. A Sunrise quilt, dated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, whose maker is unknown, illustrates how a quilt may reveal fascinating information about culture and society at the time of its making.

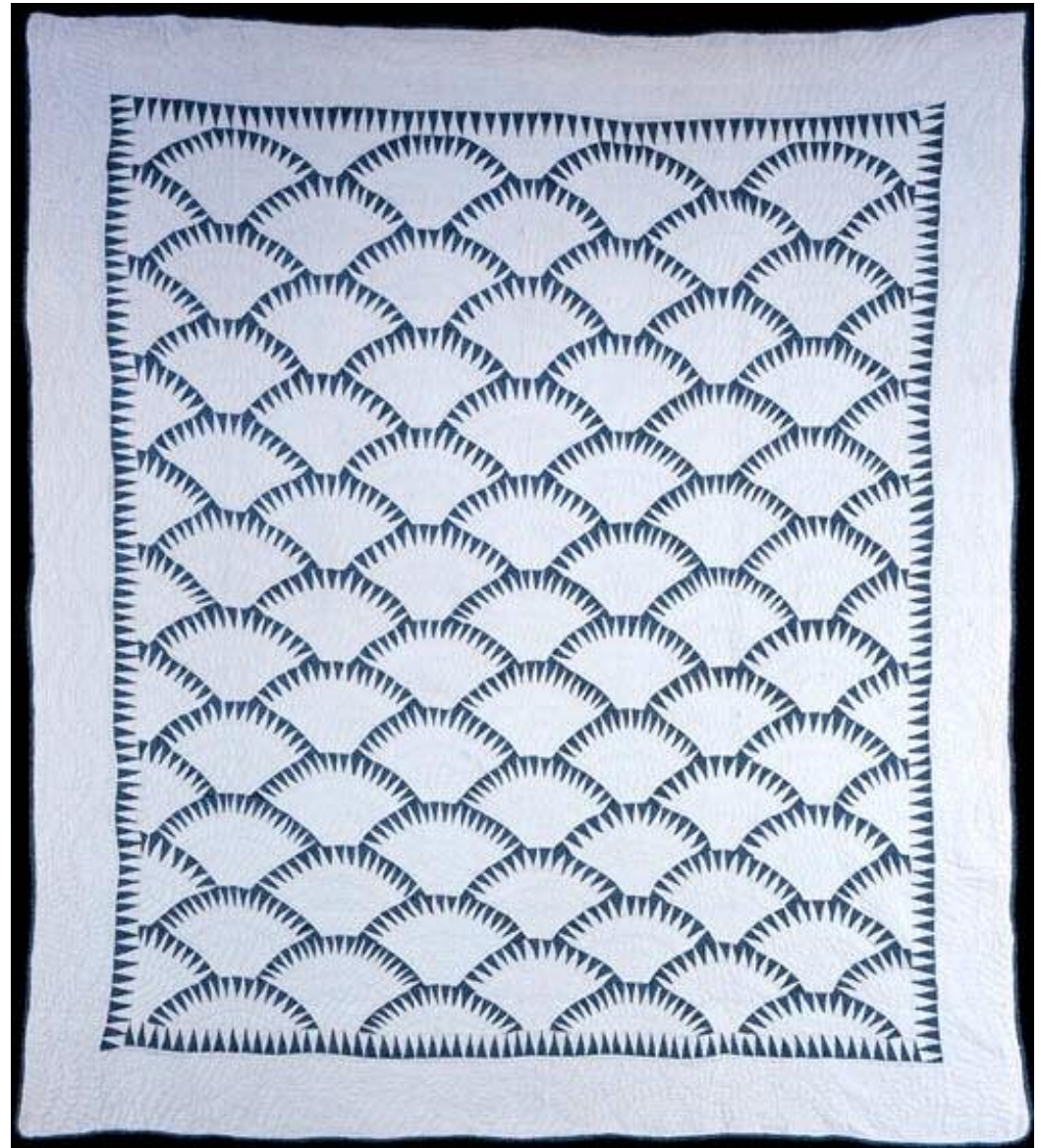


My Crazy Dream (maker's title). 74" x 68.5"

Crazy Quilt. M. Hernandred Ricard, dated 1877-1912, probably Massachusetts.
International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
1997.007.0541

The popularity of Far Eastern-inspired patterns like the Sunrise pattern can be attributed, in part, to the Western popularity of Japanese design during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Japanese design celebrated nature and its beauty in ways that were new to the Western eye. Rapidly this aesthetic was adopted by American women. In fact, decorating one's home with items that reflected Japanese sensibilities and promoted an appreciation of natural beauty was believed to promote high moral standards in one's husband and children. Thus the maker of the Sunrise quilt was nurturing her family within a proper genteel environment that reflected society's expectations.

Traditional research methodologies of the historian also play an important part in the study of quilts. By examining and interpreting primary and secondary documentary sources related to a particular object, a wealth of information may be uncovered. Letters, for example, or personal diaries, may offer insights into intimate details of an object's creation or its maker's life experiences. Genealogical research makes use of primary materials as well. Examination of census records, church records, and birth and death certificates, for example, may suggest why particular quilts were made.



Sunrise. 83" x 74.5"

Maker unknown, circa 1880, possibly Ohio.

International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
1997.007.0399

The 1852 signature quilt presented to the Reverend Nice and his wife illustrates the value of traditional historical analysis and genealogical research. A marriage certificate tells us that William and Elizabeth were married in 1840 in Greenwich, New Jersey, so we know the quilt was not presented to them on the occasion of their marriage. Census lists and church records indicate that the names inscribed on the quilt were members of the Upper Freehold Baptist Church. The records also state that in 1852; William Nice became the pastor of the church, where he remained until 1855, suggesting that the quilt could have been made as a welcome gift to the new minister and his family.

The various methodologies suggested here are simply a few of the many ways researchers can learn more about quilts. But both the examination of a quilt and the surviving records pertaining to the quiltmaker reveal information that ultimately expands our knowledge of women's history.

References

1. Gunn, Virginia, 'From Myth to Maturity: the Evolution of Quilt Scholarship', *Uncoverings*, 1992, ed. Laurel Horton, San Francisco, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1993, p. 195.

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Department of Textiles, Clothing & Design and the IQSC jointly sponsor a master's degree program in textile history and quilt studies. For more information go to <http://www.quiltstudy.org/index.html> then click on Education and Research.



Floral Album. 107" x 105.5"

Multiple signatures, dated 1852. Upper Freehold Township, New Jersey.
International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln
1997.007.0441