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Making the Bed: Printed Sheets for Children Since 1960

by
Sarah Hayne Fitzsimmons

Before the 1960s, bed sheets were usually white. Any decoration, whether applied by hand through appliqué, embroidery or crochet, or machine-printed, maintained the monochrome. As screen printing technology and more color-fast dyes were developed, multi-colored printed bed sheets began to enter the American market. In 1960, two of the sheet patterns available in the Sears, Roebuck catalog; “Cowboys” and “Kittens,” were intended specifically for children. Over the next thirty years, printed sheets for children became an increasingly booming American industry. This paper traces the evolution of these “kid sheets” from a social history point of view; focusing on the developing importance of the child’s own room through the twentieth century, the changing technology of printing and dyeing, and the growing power of the licensed trademark in the children’s market over the last forty years. It also touches on the broader issues of the emergence of the mass-market consumer culture in postwar America and the place of the child in that culture.

Sarah Hayne Fitzsimmons is a master’s degree candidate in Museum Studies, Costume and Textiles at the Fashion Institute of Technology, State University of New York. She also holds a master’s degree in Library Science from Queens College of the City University of New York. She was a co-curator of the exhibition “Driving Fashion: Automobile Fabrics of the 1950s” at the Museum at F.I.T. from June to October, 1997. She is Divisional Assistant to the Registrar, Collections Management and Exhibitions Management departments at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.