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Review of *A Flowering of Quilts* Edited by Patricia Cox Crews

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A Flowering of Quilts. Edited by Patricia Cox Crews. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Acknowledgments, introduction, illustrations, photographs, selected bibliography, contributors, index. ix + 147 pp. \$50.00.

A Flowering of Quilts comes to us from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's International Quilt Study Center, created by Robert and Ardis James, who donated their magnificent collection of quilts to the university. The book is the catalogue of a two-year exhibition

at the Center called "Fanciful Flowers: Botany and the American Quilt" focusing on the connection between American women's love of floral designs in quilts and their affinity for botany in the nineteenth century.

The book itself is like a great walled garden of flowers. Before you can get to the gorgeous photographs of the fifty-three quilts, you must scale the walls of the two explanatory essays. The first, by Dr. Margaret Bolick, curator of botany for the University of Nebraska State Museum, tells us that while women were attracted to botany in the nineteenth century, they were largely excluded from the profession. Back then, we learn, most women stayed home and took care of the family. The essay offers a detailed demographic review of the women who studied botany at the University of Nebraska under Charles E. Bessey between 1884 and 1915. Of these, few went on to become professional botanists. Almost every sentence is fortified with a footnote, fifty-four footnotes over six pages. When this footnote blizzard has passed, the connection between botany and quilts is nowhere to be seen.

At least we can discern the connection in the second essay, by Susan Curtis, co-curator of the exhibition. Curtis shows how the fashions in both quilting and garden design moved from neoclassical formality in 1800 to a more naturalistic and asymmetrical approach by the end of the century. The parallels are intriguing. Curator Carolyn Ducey's captions for the quilts provide useful information about the quilts and about botany but fall short of pulling the two together. It seems to me that the curators set themselves a nearly impossible task. Since the great majority of nineteenth-century quilts have botanical themes, the basis upon which the exhibition's quilts were selected is so broad as to be of little value in demonstrating the thesis of the show.

The photographs of the quilts themselves, however, are worth the price of the book. Few have been previously published. While all are first-rate examples of their genre, most also show surprising and original minds at work. Whether or not you subscribe to the

organizing principle behind this project, these quilts shine.

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