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## Fueled by Silk: Victorian Crazy Quilt Mania

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Nominated for Founding Presidents Award

**FUELED BY SILK: THE CRAZY QUILT MANIA**

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Crazy quilts with their haphazardly-shaped pieces of silk and lavish embroidery captured the imagination of thousands of women during the 1880s and 1890s. In fact, the phenomenon was described as a ‘mania’ by writers of the period.<sup>1</sup> And, this distinctive genre of American quilts with their exuberant qualities, opulent colors, and surprising juxtapositions continue to fascinate today. High-style crazy quilts, made of luxurious silk fabrics and heavily embellished with a variety of embroidery stitches, were never intended for daily use as warm bed covers. Instead they were meant to be draped over a sofa, table or piano as a decorative display in Victorian parlors.



*Figure 1. Crazy Quilt. Lizzie M. Bradley. Dated 1883-1884. 67" x 67".  
James Collection. 1997.007.0803.*

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<sup>1</sup>“Crazy Work,” in *Treasures of Use and Beauty* (Springfield, Mass.: W.C. King, 1883), 461 as quoted in Virginia Gunn, “Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/Art Needlework Movement, 1876-1893,” in *Uncoverings 1984*, vol. 5, ed. Sally Garoutte (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), 145.

Why did Crazy quilts seize the imagination of so many women? First of all, quilts in this new format seemed fresh and ‘modern’ -- free of conventional rules governing design and geometry. Traditional patchwork quilts made in repeating block patterns, in contrast, seemed rigid, outmoded, unfashionable. Quite simply, traditional pieced block quilts—the icons of American quilts today-- were regarded as old-fashioned by urban women and taste setters of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, the Crazy quilt format appealed because it offered women so much opportunity for creativity and originality. In 1884, one writer declared, "No species of fancywork yet invented, has ever given more scope for the exercise of artistic ability and real originality; hence, the secret of its wonderful popularity. It is probable that it will exercise its fascinations for years to come."<sup>2</sup> And, that writer was prescient, for Crazy quilts continue to captivate many quilters and scholars today.

While those reasons may explain their popularity during the period, it does not explain what sparked the craze. Why crazy quilts and why the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Most scholars agree that several factors contributed to the national rage for Crazy quilts during the 1880s and 1890s. Most often mentioned is the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, especially the Japanese Pavilion and its decorative arts display.<sup>3</sup> I’ll tell more about this later. Also mentioned is the American Aesthetic Movement and its interest in artistic homes.<sup>4</sup> The movement, which originated in England in the 1860s under the leadership of philosophers and artists such as John Ruskin and William Morris, stressed that a beautiful home would advance the morality and productivity of the family members living within it. In response to this movement, American taste setters promoted new forms of embroidered bed coverings and rejected traditional calico patchwork as artistic. Consequently, quiltmakers concerned with fashion and aesthetics had to find new forms of expression. Thus, Crazy quilts and outline embroidery quilts “emerged as grass-roots responses” to the Aesthetic Movement.<sup>5</sup> The other often cited factor is that silk fabrics became more widely available and affordable in the 1870s.<sup>6</sup> This factor intrigued me because it is often mentioned, but never explained. Why did silk fabrics become more widely available and affordable in the 1870s? That will be the focus of most of the rest of this paper. But, first let me explain how the Centennial Exhibition influenced Crazy quilts.

Millions of Americans flocked to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, an exposition organized to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of U.S. independence. In fact, it is estimated that nearly 10 million Americans attended this fair--almost 20% of the American population. The Japanese pavilion was one of the most popular displays at the Philadelphia exposition. With trade only recently opened with Japan, Americans were fascinated by the

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<sup>2</sup> *Crazy Patchwork: All the New Fancy Stitches Illustrated; and Plain Instructions for Making the Patchwork* (Philadelphia: Strawbridge & Clothier, 1884), as quoted in *Piecework Magazine* (March/April 1998), 98.

<sup>3</sup> Penny McMorris, *Crazy Quilts* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 12, 20, 118; Virginia Gunn, “Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/Art Needlework Movement, 1876-1893,” in *Uncoverings 1984*, vol. 5, ed. Sally Garoutte (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), 131-152; Cindy Brick, *Crazy Quilts: History, Techniques, Embroidery Motifs* (St. Paul: Voyager Press, 2008), 37-41.

<sup>4</sup> Gunn, 131-132.

<sup>5</sup> Gunn, 132.

<sup>6</sup> McMorris, 11; Beverly Gordon, “Regularly Irregular: Crazy Quilts,” in *American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870-1940*, eds. Marin Hanson and Patricia Cox Crews (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 128.

exotic goods now appearing on the market. The displays in the Japanese pavilion, allowed many Americans to see textiles and decorative arts from Japan for the first time. Scholars believe the Crazy quilt style was inspired, at least in part, by the Japanese decorative art seen there.<sup>7</sup> The asymmetrical format and naturalistic motifs featured in Japanese design were a new artistic approach for most Americans. England's Royal School of Art Needlework display also impressed and inspired American women who came to see the remarkable embroideries on view in the British pavilion at the Centennial Exhibition.<sup>8</sup> A melding of these influences -- exotic Japanese decorative art and British art needlework--shaped a new quilt style that caught on and spread like crazy.

When Crazy patchwork was first introduced, editors of women's magazines encouraged their readers to make one. The new 'crazy' look was regarded as the epitome of sophisticated taste and taste setters praised its bizarre, odd look (desirable attributes of the period).



*Figure 2. Crazy Quilt. Maker Unknown. 1880-1900. 53" x 52".  
James Collection. 1997.007.0284.*

American quiltmakers tried to cover the edge of each irregularly-shaped fabric piece with a different embroidery stitch, creating a riotous sampler of stitches. They also delighted in showcasing the diverse array of fabrics they had managed to collect. Some branched out and collected souvenir ribbons of college teams, sporting events, state fairs, and political activities.

<sup>7</sup> McMorris, 12-13. Brick, 45.

<sup>8</sup> McMorris, 12, 20, 118; Gunn, 131-152.

The resulting visual effects were referred to as “kaleidoscopic” as well as “bewildering” by writers of the day.<sup>9</sup> The Crazy quilts completed at the height of their popularity during the 1880s and 1890s remain some of the most elaborate and most heavily embellished examples ever made.

Oriental figures and fans abound in Crazy quilts, just a few examples of the novel motifs inspired by America’s recent exposure to and fascination with Japanese art. The asymmetrical format became the preferred design format for Crazy quilt blocks, again inspired by exposure to Japanese art. Indeed, the new style was sometimes called “Japanese Patch” in reference to the belief that it arose from Japanese influences.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3.** *Crazy Quilt, detail. Maker Unknown. Possibly made in Michigan. Dated 1884. 76” x 63”.* Ardis and Robert James Collection. 1997.007.0552.

<sup>9</sup> Janette R. Rets, “Finishing Touches,” *Demorest’s Monthly Magazine*, November 1882, 27 as quoted in Virginia Gunn, “Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/Art Needlework Movement, 1876-1893,” in *Uncoverings 1984*, vol. 5, ed. Sally Garoutte (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), 142 called them “quite bewildering in their combination of colors and stuffs.” “Patchwork,” *Harper’s Bazar*, September 16, 1882, p. 583 as quoted in Gunn’s article, p. 142, said they were like “the changing figures of the kaleidoscope, or the beauty and infinite variety of Oriental mosaics.”

<sup>10</sup> *Harper’s Bazar* (September 16, 1882), 583, as quoted in Penny McMorris, *Crazy Quilts* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 12.

Insects of all kinds, but especially flies, butterflies and spiders and spider webs, were used to adorn patches on Crazy quilts. Although novel to the Victorian eye, they were not an entirely new embroidery motif. We know, for example, that Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe inventory taken about 1600, mentions dresses covered with embroidered spiders, flies and webs.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, they were a novelty for the period and to us today.



*Figure 4. My Crazy Dream, detail. Mary M. Hernandred Ricard. Massachusetts. Dated 1877-1912. 74" x 68.5" Ardis and Robert James Collection. 1997.007.0541.*

In these ways the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and exposure to Japanese decorative art and English embroidery influenced the new Crazy quilt style. But, the other factor so often mentioned as contributing to the Crazy quilt mania--the increased availability of affordable silk fabrics--begs the question: Why did silk fabrics suddenly become more widely available and affordable in the 1870s and 1880s following the American Civil War? The answer is an interesting and complicated story. The short answer is that American manufacturers mechanized silk processing far sooner than manufacturers in China, Italy, France, or England. With the growth of the American silk industry following the Civil War, Americans no longer had to rely on expensive imported silk fabrics. This brought a historically scarce luxury within the reach of middle class Americans. Thus silk, previously reserved for wedding dresses and Sunday dresses, became accessible to a much wider group of women for day wear. And, in turn, there were more silk scraps to be used in quilts. In this way, an abundance of

<sup>11</sup> Janet Arnold. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (Leeds: W.S. Maney, 1988), 89 & 190.

affordable silk fabrics fueled the mania for Crazy quilts that spread across the United States during the 1880s and 1890s.

However – that is the short answer. To fully understand and appreciate the reasons for the remarkable growth in the American silk industry, one must take a closer look beginning with silk, the fiber, and how it is converted into silk fabric.

Silk is produced by the larva of the silk moth. Though we call it a silkworm, it's not a worm. It's a caterpillar. The life span of a silk moth — from an egg the size of a pinhead through adult stage — is a mere 47 days. Most of this time is spent in the silkworm or caterpillar phase, feasting on mulberry leaves. Silkworms are voracious; they can consume 10,000 times their hatch-weight. When fully grown, the caterpillar spins its cocoon of silk, which is a protein<sup>7</sup> based liquid produced in specialized saliva glands and excreted through tiny holes in the silkworm's mouth. The liquid solidifies when it comes into contact with air. The cocooning process for the domesticated silkworm takes five days and results in one continuous thread of silk up to 3,000 feet long, all wound into a cocoon the color and size of a cotton ball. The domesticated silkworm spins the finest quality silk; it no longer occurs in the wild.

The secret of silk production or sericulture was first unraveled by the Chinese who managed to keep it a secret and maintain a monopoly on silk production for almost 3000 years. As Lillian Li argues in her well researched monograph *China's Silk Trade*, “Sericulture was ideally suited to China's peasant economy. It required relatively little capital. Its technology was not complicated, and it did not require complex machinery. It could be profitably undertaken on either a small or large scale. More importantly, sericulture took full advantage of China's most abundant resource, its man and woman power. The highly labor-intensive requirements of sericulture were perfectly suited to the rural household situation, particularly where sericulture was seasonal.”<sup>12</sup>

Sericulture is especially labor intensive during the last ten days of the season. At that time, several workers are needed for 18 hours a day to feed the silkworm a continuous diet of mulberry leaves. Raising silkworms does not require strength, but does require much care and caution in handling the worms, which are extremely delicate and very sensitive to any sudden change of temperature. Consequently, sericulture was traditionally women's work and remains so today. Men typically cultivated the mulberry trees.<sup>13</sup>

Sericulture, not only required an abundant supply of cheap labor, it was more viable where peasants' houses were spread across the fields instead of congregated in villages. When peasant's homes were scattered across the fields (as they were in China), this minimized the costs of transporting the leaves. In addition, it reduced the risk of epidemic diseases to which the domesticated silkworms were extremely susceptible. As the Italian historian Dr. Giovanni Federico explains in his innovative historical analysis of the development of silk as a commodity, “the ideal environment for silkworm raising was a densely populated area, with

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<sup>12</sup> Lillian M. Li, *China's Silk Trade: Traditional Industry in the Modern World, 1842-1937* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1981), 198.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Federico, *An Economic History of the Silk Industry, 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14.

dispersed dwellings and few opportunities for non-agricultural work. It is not surprising that sericulture did not develop at all where the population was scarce and labour expensive (as in the United States) or where people lived in large villages far from the fields (as in the interior of Sicily or Spain).”<sup>14</sup>

Countries where sericulture flourished depended not only on an abundant labor pool, but also on climate. The various species of mulberry trees require a temperate or subtropical environment. The silkworms cannot survive if temperatures drop below 60 to 68 F. This is what prevented the diffusion of silkworm raising in northern Europe. Without heat in the silk rearing rooms, sericulture was too risky, and with heat too expensive to be economically viable. “Climate determined also the intensity of cultivation – and therefore the importance of sericulture as a source of income. In subtropical countries the mulberry tree is in leaf almost continuously and worms can be raised all year. Thus seven (sometimes eight or even nine) crops were produced in southern China each year, and five crops in Bengal.”<sup>15</sup> Climate, however, cannot explain why sericulture did not develop in apparently suitable areas in the US. Rather it was the scarcity of cheap labor.

Once the silkworm’s cocoon is fully formed, it is harvested and boiled or steamed to kill the pupa inside. If the silk moth were allowed to emerge from the cocoon, much of the valuable silk would be damaged or destroyed. It takes about 3,000 cocoons to make one pound of silk.

Silk reeling is the next step in the process and involves soaking the cocoon in warm water, then unwinding the long single strand which composes each one, and combining sets of strands on reels, from which they are removed and packaged as hanks of raw silk. This labor intensive, low-value-added process was concentrated in the nations where silk was ‘grown’ and harvested—mainly China, India and Japan. About 95 per cent of the cocoons were reeled in the countries where they were produced because, cocoons are much heavier and bulkier than reeled silk.<sup>16</sup>

After reeling, the silk filaments are removed and packaged as hanks of raw silk. “Not only was raw silk the leading Chinese export commodity until the 1930s, silk-reeling was also the most important Chinese industry before the rise of cotton spinning in the 20th century.”<sup>17</sup> After reeling, the hanks of raw silk were spun into yarns, then woven into fabrics.

At the beginning of the 19th century a momentous change occurred—the development of a world market for raw silk. Some silk had always been traded as the fame of the Silk Road across northern China, Iran and Turkey attests. That silk trade was usually in the form of cloth,. Eventually, however, the Asian countries became self-sufficient in terms of silk and no longer relied on Chinese silk. The Northern European countries, however, never became self-sufficient in terms of raw silk. Consequently, long-distance silk trade with Asia became a permanent feature of the silk industry in Northern Europe once silk weaving in Lyons, France, was well

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<sup>14</sup> Federico, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Federico, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Federico, 11

<sup>17</sup> Robert Y. Eng, *Economic Imperialism in China: Silk Production and Exports, 1861-1932* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), 12.



established during the late 15th century. The French silk weaving industry flourished so well that its national production of raw silk was never sufficient to meet its needs. Consequently, the French always had to import raw silk. World trade in raw silk was further boosted by the development of silk fabric manufacturing in several northern European countries including England and Germany. And around the turn of the 19th century, silk manufacturing grew in the United States. For climatic, labor and economic reasons none of the northern European countries, nor the United States, succeeded in producing commercially significant quantities of raw silk. Consequently, they had to resort to Mediterranean silk (mainly Italian) and later to Chinese and Indian silk and, after 1859, to Japanese silk. The quantity of raw silk traded worldwide grew twenty-fold from the 1820s to the 1920s. In fact, between the 1870s and 1930, the value of raw silk trade increased nine times.<sup>18</sup>

“The Japanese silk industry was China’s biggest competitor on the world market from the late nineteenth century on. Although starting from a lower level, Japanese raw silk exports surpassed Chinese exports by the 1900s; by 1929 Japan had more than 60% of total world trade in raw silk.”<sup>19</sup> If China had succeeded in taking over the American market and dominating it instead of the Japanese, Chinese merchants would have earned a much larger income, and China would not have had a balance of trade problem (which it had every year between 1865 and 1937). For all of this to have happened, however, the Chinese silk industry would have had to modernize more smoothly and that did not happen for a variety of reasons, which I will briefly examine later.<sup>20</sup> But first, let’s turn to Japan, which became China’s chief rival in the world silk market from the late 19th century onward. A brief look at the development of the Japanese silk industry is useful in understanding why Japanese silk came to dominate the American market.

Japan’s spectacular growth in trade during the late 19th century has usually been attributed to an aggressive government policy aimed at developing Japan’s export capability. To help promote the growth of silk exports, the Japanese government not only set up model filatures (mechanized silk reeling factories), it also set up inspection stations to monitor quality as well as the devastating silkworm diseases. It also regulated the breeding and distribution of silkworm eggs. In addition, the Japanese government encouraged commerce by the extension of credit through a modern banking system.<sup>21</sup> Although government leadership and policies described above were the key factors in the successful development of the Japanese silk industry, the general historical context and economic environment were equally important. For example, historian Robert Eng argues that, “Whereas certain elements in traditional Japanese social structure and cultural values made Japan receptive to the importation of Western ideas and technology and the need for far-reaching changes in political and social institutions, elements of Chinese society and culture retarded the possibility of constructive responses to Western penetration. While the Chinese complacently saw themselves as the center of civilization, the Japanese had a tradition of cultural borrowing from the Chinese that made it easier for them to learn from the West.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Federico, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Eng, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Li, 198.

<sup>21</sup> Li, 200.

Lillian Li, a Harvard educated scholar of Chinese history and author of *China's Silk Trade: Traditional Industry in the Modern world, 1842-1937* notes that, "Foreign trade in general played a larger role in Japan's economy than in China's and, in contrast to its Chinese counterpart, the Japanese silk industry was far more directed toward the foreign market than the domestic."<sup>23</sup> She also observed that during the period prior to the opening of trade with the West, Japan had experienced a period of growth and innovation in sericulture supported by its government. In contrast, Chinese sericulture during that same period experienced a decline in government demand and support and stagnation technologically. Consequently, by the mid-nineteenth century, "the Japanese had not only caught up with the Chinese in silk technology, but had begun to experiment with some techniques yet unknown in China."<sup>24</sup>

Hence Japan was better positioned to capitalize on the increased demand for silk by the United States. Japanese raw silk began to supplement America's predominantly Chinese silk imports. Initially Japanese silk exports depended more on the expansion of the American market than on any intrinsic superiority of Japanese silk. In fact, Japan's first small shipments were poor quality. However, Japan gradually tailored reeled raw silk to suit American manufacturing's specific needs.<sup>25</sup> By the early 20th century, Japan dominated US silk imports, selling most of its output to America. In fact, between 1867-1873 and 1888-1893, Japanese exports to the U.S. increased 70-fold, whereas exports to Europe increased only 1.4 times.<sup>26</sup> "Without this enormous, dependable source of raw silk, American industrial-scale silk textile manufacturing would never have been possible."<sup>27</sup> By the mid-1880s, American silk weaving had overtaken the European silk weaving industry.

How had this happened? It was due in large part to the more rapid mechanization of the U.S. industry. Whereas the United States quickly mechanized the manufacture of silk, other countries were slow to change. In Europe each stage of silk manufacturing continued to require intensive handwork; the European silk industry relied on low wages and abundant labor to sustain it. In America scarce and expensive labor costs drove silk manufacture toward mechanized production.<sup>28</sup>

These factors, coupled with the opening of trade with Japan at a critical juncture, contributed to the spectacular growth of the US silk industry following the Civil War. However, another factor also encouraged American silk industry expansion: this one was a domestic factor --a tariff imposed on raw silk. During the American Civil War import duties or tariffs were substantially increased on manufactured silk fabrics and other goods. They averaged 60 percent and remained virtually unchanged until 1883. "Imported raw silk, reeled from cocoons into hanks, but processed no further, remained tax-free. With raw silk so favorably priced and the tax

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<sup>22</sup> Eng, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Li, 200-201

<sup>24</sup> Li, 201.

<sup>25</sup> Jacqueline Field, Marjorie Senechal and Madelyn Shaw, *American Silk, 1830-1930: Entrepreneurs and Artifacts* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), xxi.

<sup>26</sup> Eng, 165.

<sup>27</sup> Field, Senechal and Shaw, xxi.

<sup>28</sup> Field, Senechal and Shaw, xxii.

rendering already expensive imported finished goods even more costly, U.S. entrepreneurs recognized, and took advantage of, this window of opportunity to make something more affordable. In this way, the silk import duties, originally intended to raise much-needed revenues during and after the Civil War came to have the unintended consequence of acting as a protective tariff.”<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, for all of these reasons American silk manufacturing mechanized and expanded rapidly and brought voluminous quantities of silk goods within the reach of ordinary Americans. Indeed, as Jacqueline Field, asserted and argued so persuasively in her book *American Silk, 1830-1930*, “America democratized silk.”<sup>30</sup> Middle-class and even working class women could now afford a silk dress and could make show quilts of silk. Without the remarkable expansion of silk fabric manufacturing in the United States, I contend there would have been no Crazy quilt mania in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Crazy quilt style might have emerged, but without an abundance of inexpensive silk fabrics, it would not have become a craze that swept the nation. Elaborately embroidered silk Crazy quilts would simply have been too expensive for most women to make. That is the story of how silk fueled the Crazy quilt mania of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a story of American entrepreneurs who capitalized on a special opportunity, transformed the manufacture of silk fabrics and world silk trade, and made silk affordable for ordinary Americans.

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<sup>29</sup> Field, Senechal and Shaw, xxii.

<sup>30</sup> Jacqueline Field as quoted in an interview with Sally Logue Post, “Searching for American Silk: What’s in Your Attic? Follow the century-long American silk industry from its beginning to decline.” *Texas Tech Today*, January 8, 2008. (Accessed 10 September 2009); available from <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/communications/news/stories/07-12-field-book.php>.