

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Proceedings of the 4th Biennial Symposium of
the International Quilt Museum

International Quilt Museum

4-3-2009

Swedish Quilts in the Context of the *Hemslöjd* Movement

Laurel Horton

Independent Scholar, laurelmhorton@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/iqsc4symp>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Horton, Laurel, "Swedish Quilts in the Context of the *Hemslöjd* Movement" (2009). *Proceedings of the 4th Biennial Symposium of the International Quilt Museum*. 8.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/iqsc4symp/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the International Quilt Museum at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the 4th Biennial Symposium of the International Quilt Museum by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Swedish Quilts in the Context of the *Hemslöjd* Movement

Laurel Horton

Presented at the 4th Biennial Symposium of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum:
The Global Quilt: Cultural Contexts, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 2-4, 2009.

Copyright © 2009 Laurel Horton.

Abstract

During the late nineteenth century, when Swedes determined which textile arts would be promoted through their *hemslöjd*, or handicraft movement, they selected weaving and embroidery as representative of the indigenous textile expressions of their national heritage. In the twenty-first century, Swedes and tourists alike purchase kits to reproduce traditional embroidered items. Many modern Swedes order their own *folkdräkt* (folk dress) outfit representing their ancestral village, which are woven and sewn by artisans and worn for weddings and other ceremonial occasions. In all the ways that indigenous Swedish crafts are presented to the public, quilts are absent.

And yet, during a research trip to Sweden, this American researcher found quilts everywhere. Many museums have quilts in their collections, although these are rarely displayed. Women showed me their quilts, including a wool log cabin made by a grandmother; an elaborate late-nineteenth-century crazy quilt purchased in Östersund, in the remote northern province of Jämtland; and the baby quilt a young clothing designer made for her baby daughter to use.

This paper examines the place of quilts in contemporary Swedish life and compares the historical development of *hemslöjd* with the American experience of the Colonial Revival.



Maria Leimar and Laurel Horton

My interest in Swedish quilts dates from 1997, when I met Maria Leimar at the American Quilt Study Group meeting in Lawrence, Kansas. She had been researching quilts in southeastern Sweden and was looking for colleagues and ideas. I wanted to know more about European quilting as a way of looking at American quilts within a larger context.



Drottninggatan, Stockholm

I made my research trip in 2000. With Stockholm as my base, I spent three weeks visiting museums and meeting with curators, collectors, and quiltmakers, following my own leads as well as Maria's suggestions.



Log barn, Skansen open-air museum

One of my first stops was Skansen, the world's oldest open-air museum, founded in Stockholm in 1891. The park includes some forty-six buildings transported from rural areas all over the country. It's a good place to go if you think that log cabin construction was an American invention.



Cotton whole-cloth quilt, Skansen

In the bedroom of a farmhouse at Skansen, I found a quilt. This turned out to be the only quilt I saw on long-term display in a Swedish museum. Skansen is widely seen by Swedes and visitors alike as the quintessential representation of Swedish folk culture and artifacts.



Border detail, cotton whole-cloth quilt, Skansen

The lack of quilts on display in the cottages at Skansen suggests that they are not considered part of Sweden's traditional textile heritage.



But I already knew that historic Swedish quilts exist. Åsa Wettre traveled around the country photographing and collecting quilts for her book, *Gamla svenska lapptäcken*, (available in English as *Old Swedish Quilts*), published in 1995. Although Åsa has not done further research, she continues to arrange exhibitions of the quilts in her collection. When I contacted her before my trip, she told me her quilts would be in a museum in Hjörning, Denmark.

Åsa Wettre, author *Old Swedish Quilts*. Quilt by Berta Larrson, ca. 1930



Vendsyssel historiske Museum, Hjørring, Denmark

After I visited Åsa at her home in Göteborg, I took the ferry over to Fredrickshaven, where I caught a train to Hjørring and walked to the museum, which consists of a compound of several buildings like this one.



Log Cabin quilt displayed on child's bed

Åsa's exhibition includes a large number of log cabin quilts, which seems to have been the most popular patchwork pattern throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This one is displayed on a child's bed.



Swedish quilts are often narrow, made to fit narrow box beds. Even quilts made in blocks tend to have a central focus. Some of them are quirky, probably because there were no popular-culture influences telling the makers what quilts had to look like.

Wool pieced quilt



Just as in other countries in the late nineteenth century, some Swedish quiltmakers chose to preserve commemorative scarves, handkerchiefs, and tablecloths by surrounding them with patchwork. The gentleman in the center is identified as King Oscar the Second.

Tablecloth or scarf, portrait of King Oscar II (ruled 1872-1907). Patchwork added by Anna Petterson, Stockholm



Seamstress Emma Friberg, photographed 1914, Frinnaryd, Småland

The exhibition included historic photographs. The quilts and photographs show that, although quiltmaking is not recognized as a national indigenous craft, Swedish women have been making quilts for a long time.



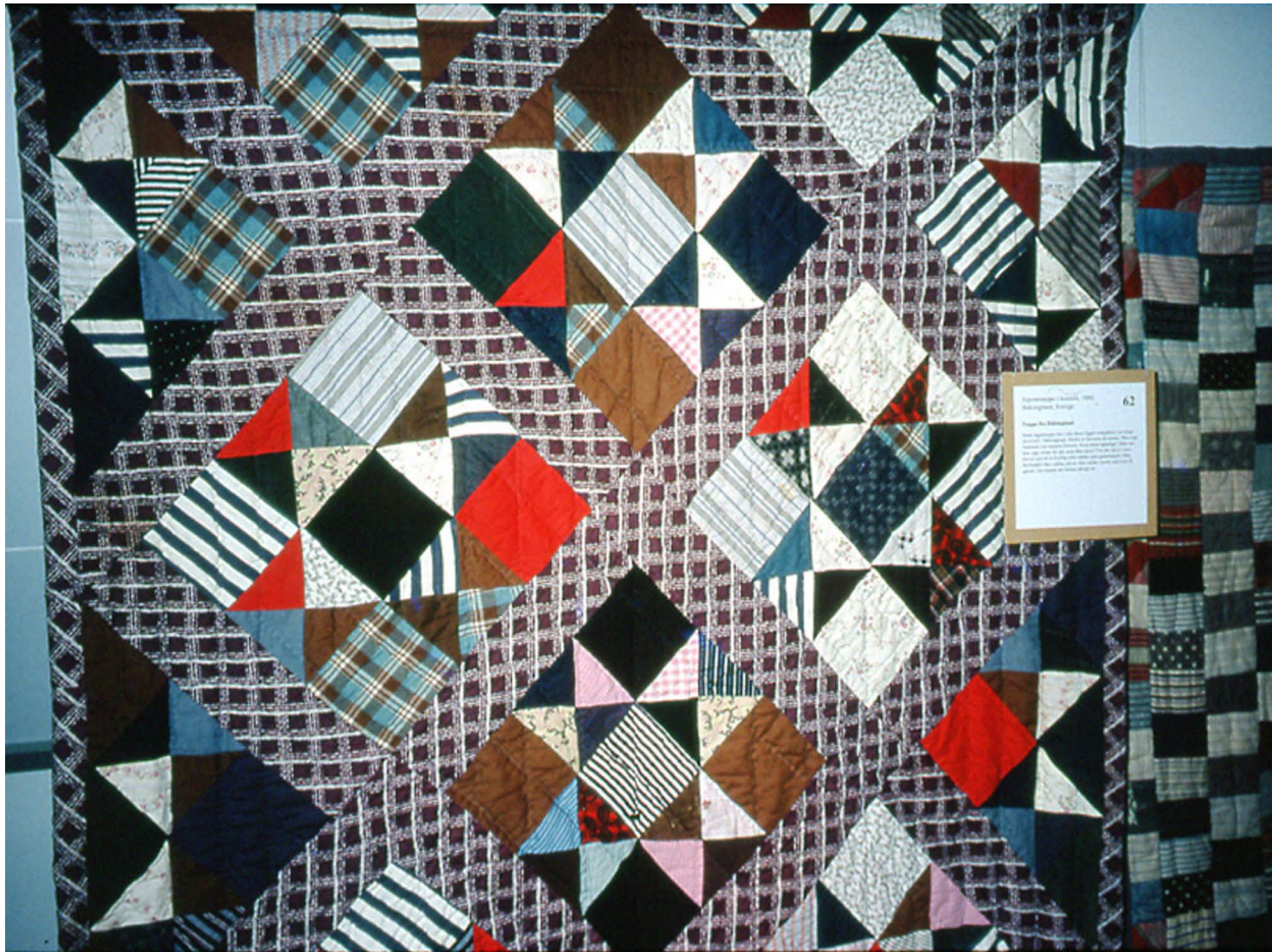
Folkdräkt (regional costume), Leksand visitors center

So, if this is true, why are quilts invisible in museum displays and living-history settings? For this, we need to go back to the 1890s to look at the work of the *Svensk Hemslöjd*, the Swedish Handicraft Association. Entire books—most of them in Swedish—have been written on this movement, but briefly a movement formed in reaction to the perceived negative effects of industrialization and factory goods, and with a desire to rediscover the traditional skills and designs associated with “peasant” arts and crafts.



Linen weaving, Rättvik visitors center

This movement brought together museum curators, collectors, interior designers, and economic development organizers to establish criteria and standards for Swedish folk art. These standards emphasized indigenous craft forms, skillful execution, functionality, and “high-quality natural materials.” (Katarina Ågren, “Handicrafts and Folk Art,” in Klein and Widbom, 1999). Hemslojd gave its stamp of approval to such textile crafts as folk costume, embroidery, and linen weaving.



Patchwork quilt, Hälsingland, late 19th century

Swedish quilts might be skillfully executed and functional, but the Hemslöjd did not consider quiltmaking to be Swedish folk art because it involved the use of imported fabrics and designs and materials.



Embroidered silk whole-cloth quilt, late-18th or early-19th century

They have a point. The earliest Swedish quilts I saw date from the late-eighteenth century. They are silk, whole-cloth, sometimes with a central motif, and usually with an elaborate border. The border of this one was embroidered *after* it was quilted.



Silk whole-cloth quilt, late-18th century

These early whole-cloth quilts are part of a larger European quilting tradition in the eighteenth-century, and very little research has been done. Peggy Derrick and Linda McShannock researched two Norwegian quilts from this period, and their findings appear in *Uncoverings* 2009.



Terthu Gelotte, curator , Torekällbergetsmuseet, Södertälje

These examples are in the collection of the Torekällbergetsmuseet, in Södertälje, a short train ride southwest of Stockholm. Museums have quilts in their collections, but they are rarely displayed. Curator Terthu Gelotte was quite willing to show me quilts in storage, but not all museums were as helpful.



Nordiska Museet (Nordic Museum), Stockholm

Before my trip, I contacted the textile curator of Nordiska Museet, the National Museum of Cultural History, requesting an appointment for Maria and me to look at quilts in storage. The curator replied that, due to limited staff and budget, this would not be possible.



Maria Leimar and Barbro Klein, at Julita

Luckily, Maria and I have a mutual friend and colleague, Barbro Klein, who is a well-respected professor of Ethnology and serves on the board for Nordiska Museet. With Barbro's intervention, we were allowed to see the quilts.



Julita Gård och Museer(Garden and Museums), Katrineholm

This wasn't as easy as it sounds. The quilts are stored, not in the Museum itself in Stockholm, but in a warehouse at Julita, a historic property way out in the countryside, inaccessible by public transportation.



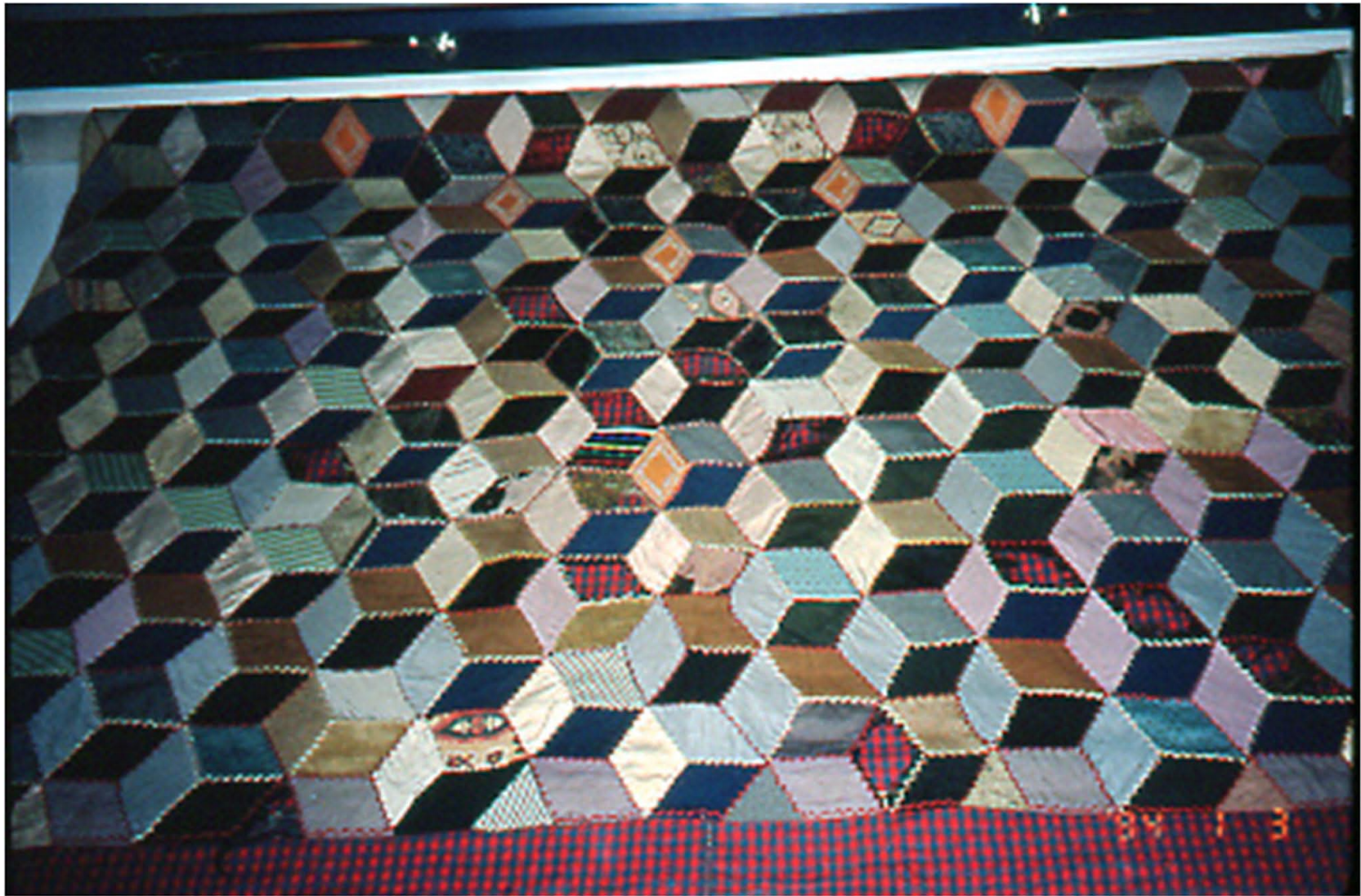
Car by Rent-a-Wreck

Since neither Barbro nor Maria owned a car, it was up to me to get us there. Swedes drive on the right, but I was glad to have help navigating and interpreting the road signs.



Textile storage warehouse, Julita

As we expected, we saw a number of log cabin variations. The Swedish name is *blokhus ruta*. Maria reported seeing an early reference to the pattern as “Canadian block house,” but there are many unanswered questions about when and how the pattern arrived in Sweden.



Mosaic patchwork; cotton, silk, and wool; no batting; 20th century, Småland

Mosaic patchwork with paper templates was popular in Sweden in the late-nineteenth century, as in other parts of Europe and America. This one is embellished with pearl cotton embroidery.



Patchwork cushions in storage

In addition to bedquilts, we were interested in patchwork cushions, which are much earlier. Cushions like these were made in pairs to be used in village marriage celebrations.



Patchwork cushion, late-18th century

The cushions were carried by men on horseback, riding ahead of the procession to place the cushions in a place of honor for the bride and groom to sit on. This one has ribbon inserted as a piping between the fabric pieces. Some surviving ceremonial cushions – not these unfortunately – are embroidered with dates ranging from 1757 to 1804.



Not all historic quilts are in museum collections. In Leksand I arranged to see Kicki Kirvall Hanses, a costume historian. When I visited her home, she brought out a crazy quilt she bought years ago when she lived in Östersund, in the far northern region of Jämtland.

Kicki Kirvall Hanses, Leksand, with quilt purchased in Östersund, Jämtland



Crazy quilt, incorporating embroidered black silk caps (*bindmösser*) from the women's folk costume of Jämtland

Kicki bought it in a shop outside the village of Ås, and she was told it was made by a woman who never married. In the Jämtland folk costume, women's caps were made of black sateen, embroidered in tambour stitch. So this quilt looks like the crazy quilts that were being made elsewhere in the world, yet it has a particular local significance.



I also met Ulrika Sundqvist, a friend of Maria's, who happened to have a quilt made by her *far mor*, that is her father's mother. Ulrika said that when her grandmother died, an aunt and uncle took the best things before the official inventory. Years later, Ulrika and Maria visited them, and the aunt gave Ulrika this quilt.

Ulrika Sundqvist, with quilt made by her father's mother (*far mor*), Maria Ulrika Söderbäck (1895-1976), Östersund, Jämtland



Söderbäck Log Cabin quilt, detail

It was clear that Swedish women of past generations made quilts. But, without support, encouragement, and the official *Hemslöjd* seal of approval, has the tradition of quilting just disappeared among contemporary Swedes? Not exactly.



Garner Tyger Stuvar (Garner Fabrics), Leksand

Quiltmaking in Sweden has always depended on outside influences, as the designs and most of the fabrics are imported. However, while walking down the street in Leksand, I happened to notice this hand-lettered sidewalk poster with the word *tyger*, which I recognized as the Swedish word for fabric. This was a temporary sign for a fabric store that had just moved into a basement shop, and I could easily have walked right past it. The entrance is to the left of the bicycle. I'm not sure about the meaning of the third word. My dictionary says that *stuvar* means "to cook in white sauce."



Interior, *Garner Tyger*

These fabrics looked unfamiliar to me, and I asked the shopkeeper where they were made. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that some of them were manufactured in Borås, which used to be the center of Sweden's wool manufacturing industry.



Dalahäster and wall-painting fabric, printed in Borås

I bought a piece of this red cotton fabric printed with *dalahäster*, the ubiquitous icon of Swedish folk art, as well as a fabric panel printed in the style of the local folk painting which you can see on the left. I had hoped to buy some fabric as a souvenir, but I was surprised that I could buy something that was actually printed in Sweden.



While in Leksand, I arranged to meet a friend of a friend at a fancy-dress shop owned by Jessica Morell. While waiting, I noticed this quilt that Jessica had made for her baby daughter Moa.

Jessica Morell, dressmaker, and baby Moa



Vendor, Rikstäckets (National Quilt Guild) annual meeting, Täby

I had planned my trip to coincide with the annual meeting of Rikstäckets, the national Swedish quilt guild, held at a hotel in Täby, a warehouse district northeast of the Stockholm. The Swedish guild had some 2500 members at that time, and there were about two hundred women at the meeting. This is one of the vendor booths.



Patchwork class, Rikstäckets annual meeting

There were classes, of course, and, except for the default language and preponderance of Husqvarna sewing machines, it looked a lot like American classes. Contemporary quiltmakers in Europe are generally influenced by American books, fabrics, and patterns, rather than by their own textile history, which, as we've seen, is largely invisible.



A typical visitor to Sweden would probably not see quilts. I spent three weeks in various parts of the country, and I saw quilts everywhere. Some of these sightings were pre-arranged, while others occurred spontaneously, as when Sonja Petterson, my B&B hostess, showed me a quilt she had started years ago from silks brought back from Thailand.

Sonja Petterson, Stockholm



Textiles, Näsduk craft cooperative, Näs, Gotland

While it would be tempting to blame the Hemslöjd for suppressing quiltmaking, it's important to recognize that there were similar offshoots of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States during the early twentieth century. These American arbiters of style and taste often denigrated quiltmaking. For example, the influential Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, founded in 1930, did not admit quiltmakers until the 1970s.

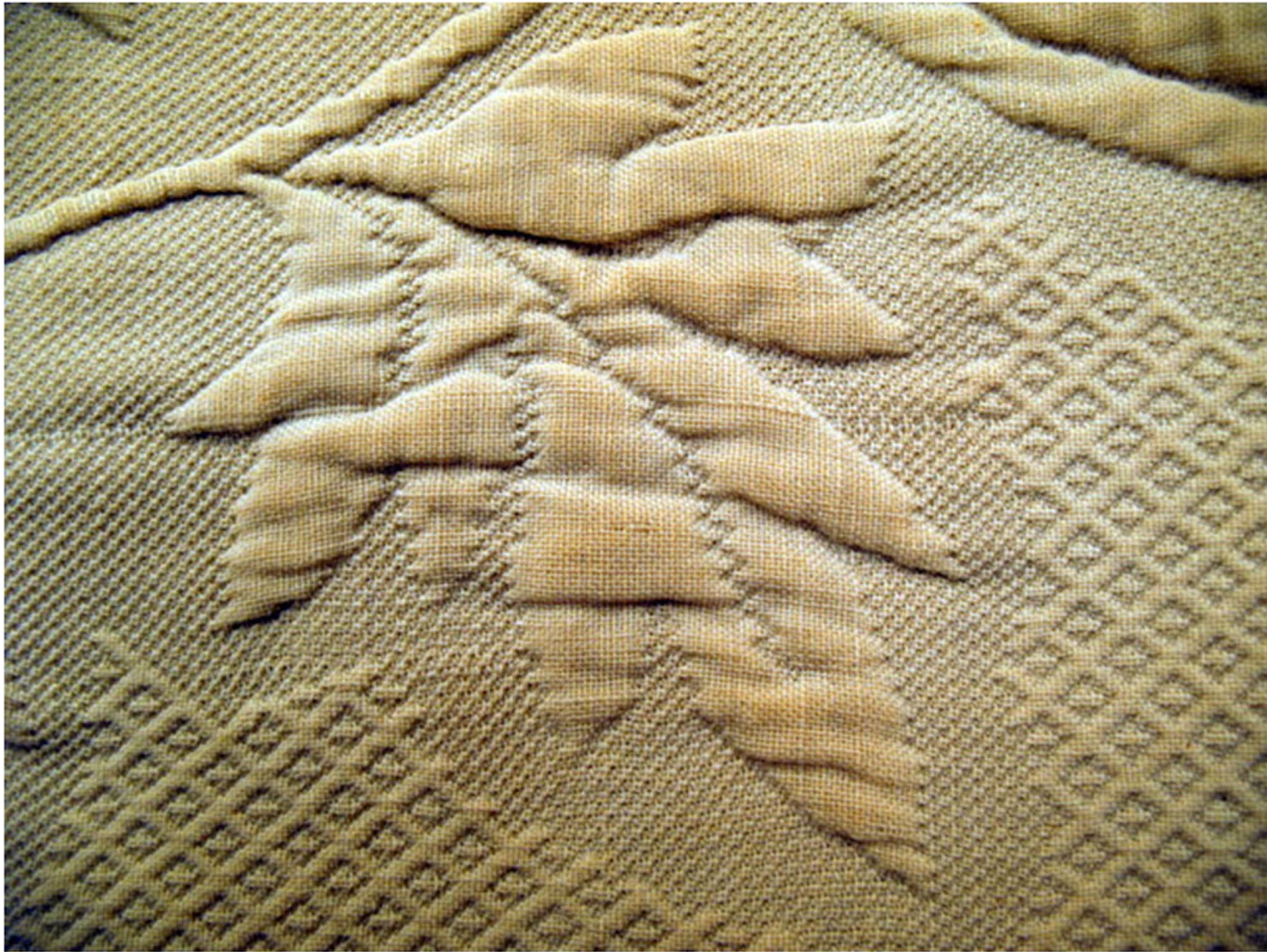


PARLOR BED ROOM STYLE OF 1804

28216

What's wrong with this picture? Let me count the ways.

The most important factor influencing American quilting traditions is undoubtedly the Colonial Revival movement. Although the Colonial Revival coincided and intertwined with the Arts and Crafts movement, popular writers embraced quilts as representative of America's mythical colonial heritage.



Factory-woven spread, (France or England), late-18th century

Ignoring evidence that the earliest American quilts were, as in Sweden, influenced by bedcovers produced in European factories and cottage industries, the Colonial Revival reinvented quilts as the results of pioneer survival skills and romanticized the quilting bee as emblematic of the democratic ideal.



Kerstin Widell and Birgetta Nygren, Visby, Gotland

What a study of Swedish quilts shows us is a sort of parallel universe in which quiltmaking emerged as a popular form of needlework in response to imported textile traditions, but without the sanctification of a romanticized association with national origins. As an American, I will never fully understand the complexities of Sweden's quilt and textile heritage. We must leave the real research to the Swedes. My research goal is to more fully understand the complexities of American quiltmaking within the larger context of international textile traditions.

Tack så mycket!

Har ni frågor?

Laurel Horton is an internationally acclaimed folklorist, quilt researcher, and author whose publications include:

Social Fabric : South Carolina's Traditional Quilts (Columbia, SC: McKissick Museum, 1985)

The Oral Interview in Quilt Research (San Francisco, CA : American Quilt Study Group, 1988)

Glorified Patchwork : South Carolina Crazy Quilts (Columbia, SC: McKissick Museum, 1989)

Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1994)

The Quilts: Threads of Our Heritage: A Collection of Quilts Hand-Crafted by the Women of the Mary Snoddy Black Family (Spartanburg, SC: Mary Black Foundation, 2000)

Mary Black's Family Quilts: Meaning and Memory in Everyday Life (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005)

"An Upcountry Legacy: Mary Black's Family Quilts," *Southern Spaces* 2006; online at <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2006/horton/print/2c.htm>

Her website can be seen at <http://www.kalmiaresearch.net/index.htm>

