

Crazy Quilts

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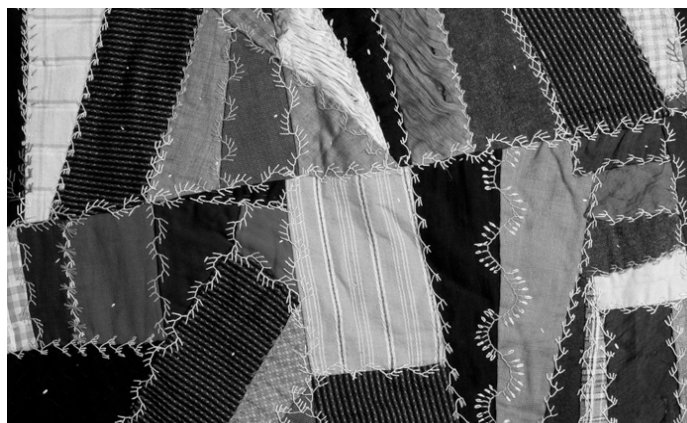
Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn the history of crazy quilts.
- Participants will understand the materials, fabrics and mediums used in crazy quilts.
- Participants will learn the art of embroidery stitches.

Crazy quilts are decorative, fancy, unstructured, frugal, meaningful and unique.

This decorative quilting form uses irregularly shaped scraps of fabric that are pieced together, with the edges covered by distinctive

embroidery stitches. These one-of-a-kind treasures represent a historically significant style of quilt making. Through new textures of fabric, threads, embellishments and sophisticated embroidery machines, quilters have continued to hold this art form in high regard.



History of Crazy Quilts

The term “crazy” was not only referring to the fragmented quilt design but also thought to emulate the cracked surfaces of crazed ceramic pottery, popular during the Victorian era. The oldest usage of crazy patchwork was found in 1885, and the name crazy quilt goes back to 1886. It’s alleged that the term crazy quilt at the time would have primarily meant “haphazardly cracked.”

In truth, this quilt art form is far from crazy or erratic. Many historians believe this method of patchwork was intentional and people purposefully stayed away from the traditional style of patchwork quilts. Crazy quilts made their appearance after the Civil War. The crazy quilt phenomenon was described as “mania” by writers during the height of its popularity between the 1880s and 1890s. The popularity of this elaborate form of patchwork lasted about 50 years until the 1920s.

Historians noted several reasons for increased interest and growth in this type of decorative patchwork, all occurring at the end of the 19th century. Crazy quilts were considered modern because they were free from conventional design and geometry rules associated with traditional

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repeating block quilts. Traditional quilts, usually lined with cotton or wool batting and quilted, were born out of necessity to keep people warm. In contrast, crazy quilts were rarely lined, as they were made for home or parlor decoration and were not intended for daily use. Because of their limited use and laundering, crazy quilts tend to be well preserved.

Irregularly shaped pieces of fabric were sewn onto lightweight foundation cloth. Ladies living in town had access to silk fabrics and threads, and this form of needlework provided opportunities for creativity and originality. Women were able to personalize and add sentimental embellishments.

The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia – specifically the Japanese display and the Royal School of Art Needlework – is often mentioned as a potential influencer of the eclectic and lavish combinations associated with crazy quilts. Visitors were amazed by the heavily embroidered silk kimonos, bright carpets and beautiful screens. This exposition celebrated the 100th anniversary of U.S. independence, with an estimated 20% of the American population attending the event.

The American Aesthetic Movement, which originated in England in 1860, stressed that having a beautiful home would benefit the whole family. Publications and books influenced elaborate home decorating trends, engaging women in what became known as “fancywork,” which included quilting. Women were also inspired by England’s Queen Victoria, whose fashion was ornate with rich, dark colors.

At the end of the 19th century, industrialization contributed significantly to the textile industry, including the mass production of sewing machines and silk manufacturers in the U.S. Silk manufacturers began offering bags of silk scraps and silk kits for purchase. Fabric manufacturers provided pre-printed crazy patchwork foundation material and patterns for crazy blocks and embroidery stitches.

As crazy quilts grew in popularity, quilt shows followed. Entries were judged for the oddest designs, materials, variety of stitches and the greatest number of pieces. Quilters worked hard to cover each irregularly shaped fabric piece with different embroidery stitches to make their crazy quilt as unique as possible.

The crazy quilt design influenced American scrap quilts through the hard economic times of the 1930s and the years of rationing during the 1940s when the world was at war. During the Great Depression, women again saved bits and pieces of material from clothing, feed sacks and other blankets to make quilts to keep their families warm.

West Virginia Quiltmakers

West Virginia quilts were surveyed in 1992 during the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search, culminating in the book “West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers” by Fawn Valentine. The information collected indicated that one in ten quilts made was a crazy quilt. This style of patchwork continued in the mountain state long after the national fad faded in the 19th century. Women with limited quilt-making skills could construct this type of patchwork, and they could be made of any material, such as scraps, recycled garments, feed sacks and eventually polyester double knit. These quilts generally included batting and backing and did not have the elaborate embroidery of earlier examples.

Three Main Characteristics of Crazy Quilts

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln International Quilt Museum provides three main characteristics that make crazy quilts recognizable:



1. The surface is composed of irregularly shaped fabric pieces that appear to follow no pre-set pattern, forming a colorful, asymmetric surface that is usually stitched onto a foundation fabric.
3. The overlapping fabric pieces, sometimes with raw edges or sometimes turned under, are tacked down onto the foundation fabric and the fabric edges are then covered with embroidery stitches.
3. If a palette of luxurious fabric patches was used, further textural and visual interest was often added through a wide range of embroidered motifs and embellishment in many forms, such as appliqués, paintings, beads and spangles.

Fabrics and Threads

Popular fabrics used in crazy quilts were silks, velvets, brocades, satins and taffetas. Most were dyed rich, dark colors. Very seldom was a quilt made of light-colored fabrics.

During this post-Civil War era, American manufacturers were able to mechanize silk production, making the product more affordable to the middle class. Previously, this luxury item was reserved for wedding dresses and other important events.

Souvenir ribbons were made for college teams, sporting events, state fairs and political activities that were then collected and added to this new fad. Cigar manufacturers started bundling their products with silk ribbon, and even cigarette paper manufacturers would tuck silk into their packaging for men to give to their wives so that it may be incorporated into crazy quilts. Churchwomen



would write to famous people asking for a piece of clothing to be added to a quilt to raise money for various charities.

Sometimes a quilter would make a memory quilt telling the story of a family member's life. They would include pieces of clothing, ties and even hat bands. Often the loved one's birth and death date were embroidered into the piece.

Pure silk and cotton twist thread were used in the elaborate stitching of crazy quilts. Sometimes, even embroidery and wool thread were used in folk-art examples. The thread was used to decorate each seam in many intricate stitches such as the feather, herringbone, fly and chain. The feather stitch was used to hide the raw edge.

Quilts were often embellished with detailed embroidery. Popular patterns were of animals and flowers. Many would include a spider in its web as a good luck sign for the quilter. Other insects were included as well, especially flies and butterflies. Sometimes verses and family histories would be stitched into the quilt. Another popular design to include was oriental figures with fans, due to the fascination with Japanese art at that time.

As the crazy quilt fad grew, quilters from less affluent backgrounds started joining in the art form. They gathered material scraps from silk manufacturers and the wealthy's discarded clothing. Around 1900, women began using flannels, denim and other cotton materials in their quilts. While many of these quilts were embroidered, most did not have the decorative detail of the earlier quilts.

Preservation of Crazy Quilts

Crazy quilts are made from expensive decorative material. Most of the fabrics used are not intended for durability, therefore it is very important to care for these antique pieces of art. These quilts were intended to be decoration, not for use. The best place to display them is on the wall. If the piece does not already have a way to hang, applique top and bottom casings and insert a flat dowel rod. This will allow the quilt to hang evenly.

Humidity and light are not good for fabric. It is not a good idea to preserve these delicate quilts behind glass or in uncontrolled temperature storage. Allowing air to circulate around the piece freely and keeping it out of direct sunlight will protect the quilt from moisture damage and from fading. In addition, periodically allow quilts to rest by laying them out over a bed and placing a sheet over top. This will keep fragile crazy quilts from deteriorating over time.

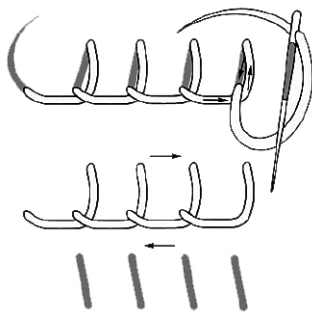
Most importantly, never wash a crazy quilt. These art pieces are made from outdated dyes that will likely bleed. Manufacturing techniques have changed as well, and the quilt would most likely not withstand the attempt of cleaning it, showing signs of wear and possibly complete destruction.

Club Activity

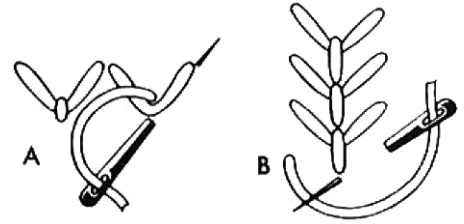
1. Share crazy patchwork and discuss the fabric and stitches used.
2. Learning hand embroidery is both fun and an easy way to create beautiful art with fabric and thread.

Provide each participant with a scrap of fabric and try the three basic embroidery stitches.

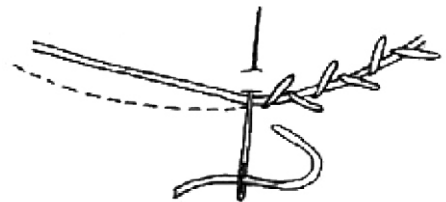
1. Blanket Stitch



2. Thorn Stitch



3. Fly Stitch



Resources

Valentine, F. (2000). *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers Echos from the Hills*. Athen Ohio: Ohio University Press.

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