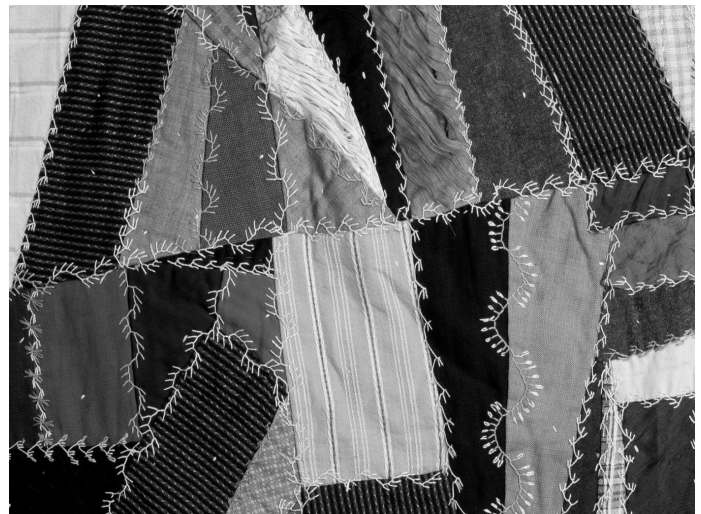


Crazy Quilts

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Crazy quilts are one-of-a-kind treasures representing a historically significant quilt-making style.

Crazy quilts are one-of-a-kind treasures representing a historically significant quilt-making style. With rich textures of silks and velvet fabrics, threads, embellishments and sophisticated embroidery, this form of needlework is an art form to be highly valued.



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 fabrics that follow no pre-set pattern, forming a colorful, asymmetric surface and typically stitched onto a foundation fabric.
2. The overlapping fabric pieces, sometimes with raw edges or sometimes turned under, are tacked onto the foundation fabric and the fabric edges are covered with embroidery stitches.
3. Textural and visual interest is often added through various embroidered motifs and embellishments in many forms, such as appliqués, paintings, beads and spangles.

Historians believe this fragmented patchwork method was intentional and people purposefully stayed away from the traditional style of patchwork quilts. Crazy quilts made their appearance during the Victorian era. 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. Crazy quilts were made for home decoration or to be displayed in parlors and were not intended for daily use. Because of this, they were rarely lined

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for warmth like traditional quilts. Ladies living in town or more urban areas had access to silk fabric and threads, and this form of needlework provided opportunities for creativity and originality. Women were able to personalize and add sentimental embellishments to this type of quilt.

Other influencers of the crazy quilt mania included:

- The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia – specifically the Japanese display and the Royal School of Art Needlework – inspired people with its display of eclectic and lavish heavily embroidered silk kimonos, bright carpets and beautiful screens.
- The American Aesthetic Movement and publications showcasing home decorating trends encouraged women to take up what became known as “fancywork,” which included quilting. Queen Victoria’s fashion also inspired women to use rich and extravagant designs in their quilt making.
- Industrialization contributed significantly to the textile industry, including the mass production of sewing machines and silk manufacturers in the U.S. Silk became readily available, and manufacturers offered silk scraps and silk kit bags. Fabric manufacturers provided pre-printed crazy patchwork and patterns for crazy blocks and embroidery stitches.
- West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers’ heritage quilt registration process found that one in ten quilts were crazy patchwork quilts.

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. Pure silk and cotton twist thread were used in the elaborate stitching of crazy quilts. The thread was used to decorate each seam in many intricate stitches such as the feather, herringbone, fly and chain.

Try out this fly stitch.

