Our Quilt Heritage
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Facilitator’s Guide

_The Patchwork Quilt_

*Of all the things a woman’s hands have made,*

*The quilt so lightly thrown across her bed –*

*The quilt that keeps her loved ones warm –*

*Is woven of her love and dreams and thread.*

-Carrie A. Hall,
The Romance of The Patchwork Quilt

**Introduction:**

**Ask: What is a Quilt?**

Random House Dictionary defines a quilt as "a coverlet for a bed, made of two layers of fabric with some soft substance, as wool or down, between them and stitched in patterns or tufted through all thicknesses in order to prevent the filling from shifting."

The word quilt comes from the Latin culcita meaning a stuffed sack, but it came into the English language from the French word cuilte.

The origins of quilting remain unknown, but historians do know that quilting, piecing, and applique were used for clothing and furnishings in diverse parts of the world in early times.

Ask nearly any Appalachian woman what a quilt is and she would answer with amusement, “Why, everyone knows what a quilt is! It’s a big piece of cloth, made out of lot of little pieces, sewed to another plain piece of cloth, with batting in between.”

True, but the purpose of this study topic is to go beyond this simple definition of a quilt as a “textile sandwich” to a broader understanding of what it may have meant to the maker, as well as the history of quilting itself.
Objectives:

- To explore the history of quilt-making and how it evolved over time
- To examine how quilts were used in early America to meet the needs of the pioneer culture
- To understand how quilting has served as a means of enabling the quilt-maker to express hopes and dreams, to pass on heritage, and to alleviate sorrows
- To provide clues that will help quilt owners determine the possible motivation of the quilt-maker and the approximate age of the quilt

Prior to Lesson:

- Read material to familiarize yourself with the information
- Gather examples of quilts you might have
- Ask club members to bring a quilt to the class

Presenting the Lesson:

Ask: What is one of your quilt memories?

History of Quilting
Quilting did not originate in America, although it certainly took on a new form in this country. The earliest known quilted item is a garment found on a carved, ivory statue of an Egyptian pharaoh who lived about 3400 BC. In 1924 archaeologists discovered a quilted floor covering in Mongolia. They estimated that it dates from somewhere between the first century B.C. to the second century A.D. There are also numerous references to quilts in literature and also inventories of estates. Quilted garments were worn for protection under the armor of the crusading knights in the Middle Ages. They were all made of whole pieces of cloth as were the “bed rugs” made in Europe by men in the tailor guilds.

The earliest known surviving bed quilt is one from Sicily from the end of the fourteenth century. It is made of linen and padded with wool. The blocks across the center are scenes from the legend of Tristan. The quilt is 122” by 106” and is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Although patchwork was developed much later, the appliqué technique was widely used to make the ornamental un-quilted hangings for the churches of the Middle Ages. Appliqué also decorated the robes of the royal elite.

Because quilts provide protection from the elements, quilt-making is an art or skill that has never ceased to exist. As a work of art, they are easy to move around and many people can find satisfaction in the use of different colors and different fabrics. The usefulness of quilts has also contributed to their continued existence. Their advantages include increased warmth, greater strength, and the recycling of existing materials.

Quilting in America
Quilted garments and bedcovers were very important to America’s early settlers, although it is not known exactly when they were introduced. Most quilt scholars agree, however, that the use and development of quilting came from English and Dutch immigrants. There is no evidence that the Spanish or French colonists made use of the technique. The Spanish settlers in the warm climate in the southern areas of the country had little use for the warmth provided by quilted items, and the French in Canada sought protection from the cold with furs, which were easily obtained.

The English and the Dutch who settled along the upper half of the eastern coast are given credit for developing the arts of patchwork and quilting. They applied their skills in spinning and weaving to make quilted garments
to protect them during the colder months and used the leftover scraps, together with the best parts of worn out garments, to fashion quilted patchwork bedcovers. Beth Gutcheon has written that America has only a few indigenous art forms – jazz, the blues, and the patchwork quilt – and the quilt is the blues song of the American woman.

During the Depression years of the 1930s, the frugality that had been handed down through the generations was again popular. Homemakers saved the buttons from worn-out dresses and used the least-faded pieces from under the collars and inside the pockets for quilt patches, the larger pieces of the skirts for aprons, the smaller pieces for dustrags, and the leftover strips to tie up tomatoes in the garden. Along with their ingenuity in using what they had, they were also satisfying their need for self-expression and beauty in their harsh lives.

The wealthier settlers during the late 1700s and early 1800s were able to import beautiful fabric to have clothing made for the wives and daughters. The leftover scraps were used to appliqué quilts, a technique that is naturally wasteful and time-consuming, but these women, who had servants, had the time and leisure and did not need to worry about costs.

**Quilting as a Means of Self-expression**

Ask: Ask member to share stores about their quilt.

Quilt patterns have been named to express political feelings, such as the “Whig Rose,” “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too,” and “Clay’s Choice.” Others, such as “Burgoyne Surrounded,” commemorate historical events. Everyday living provided many of the names of these old quilts, such as “Log Cabin,” “Flying Geese,” “Maple Leaf,” “Broken Dishes,” and “Indian Hatchet.” Some quilt names came from their makers’ abiding faith: “Jacob’s Ladder,” “Job’s Tears,” and “Star of Bethlehem.” Quilt-making also helped the makers assuage their sorrows, with the ultimate example of this being the “Kentucky Coffin” quilt described in *Quilts in America*. Made in 1839, in shades of brown, it has a fenced-in cemetery in its center that contains coffins with the names of dead family members inscribed on them. Along the border are coffins appliquéd with other family members’ names, waiting until they die to be moved into the center. Modern quilters also use quilting as an outlet for their troubles, as in the wellknown “Divorce Quilt,” with the woman who broke up the maker’s marriage being portrayed as a cat.

Despite these quilts to relieve sorrows, probably more of the quilts made over the years have been intended to celebrate happier times, such as births, weddings, and graduations. As the development of the country spread westward, quilts were often given as a departure gift. One example of this is the quilt made by Ankey Hutchison of Monroe County for her step-grandson who was leaving for Nebraska. A similar quilt, documented by the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search in 1992, was made by Ankey for her niece in 1884. Both were covered with appliquéd verses from a Church of the Brethren hymn. Check *West Virginia Quilts and Quilt Makers* (p. 166) for a photo.

Another quilt that was made as an act of homage can also be seen in *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers* (p. 170). This quilt, with a separate block for each of the 48 states, was made by Ella Martin, a coal miner’s wife from Montcalm. It was a gift for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 expressing her appreciation for the National Recovery Act, which was designed to stimulate the economy and protect the workers. Her quilt was given to the West Virginia Cultural Center in Charleston by the person who purchased it from its last owner, Mrs. Roosevelt’s mail clerk.
Quilting served a communal function as well, with groups of women getting together for quilting parties. The women worked on the quilt, children played, and the men, who may have spent their day in haymaking or other farm work, joined them for supper in the evening. A good example of this activity can be seen in a lithograph “A Quilting Party in Western Virginia” in *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers* (p. 211).

**Decline and Renewal**
Despite its great popularity, quilting declined around the turn of the century, probably due to the availability of mail-order blankets. The few quilters left were quilting without enthusiasm or development of new patterns or styles. It was not revived until the mid-1920s, reaching its peak in the 1930s. Its renewal was probably due to a revival of interest in our country’s history and its crafts. Patterns developed during these years were the “Double Wedding Ring” and “Grandmother’s Flower Garden,” and appliquéd quilts were again popular. The somber blues and grays used during the years of decline were replaced with pink, lavender, yellow, and a very distinctive green. Printed feed sacks were widely used during this time because they could be obtained for nothing when buying animal feed.

Although store-bought fabric was plentiful and cheap, money was scarce. Although some people continued to quilt during each of the periods of decline, there was little quilt-making between 1940 and 1970. Then the second great revival began, and it has not declined to this day. This renewed interest probably stemmed from the nation’s bicentennial coinciding with the “Back to the Earth” movement, with its emphasis on handmade crafts and the values of conservation and frugality. This interest shows no sign of abating, although it probably will in time.

Modern quilters have sophisticated tools and techniques, compared to their grandmothers’ primitive methods. Often without a ruler or a compass, they drafted complicated patterns and pieced them meticulously using folded paper and trial and error. Today’s quilters wouldn’t think of using pre-used fabrics. In fact, many have become “fabric-holics,” hoarding great quantities of cloth. Some can even be seen wearing T-shirts that read “The one who dies with the most fabric wins.” We can only imagine what our grandmothers would think of this.

**Calico Clues**
Although quilts commonly have been made using cloth left over from a previous generation, the fabric itself is still the primary clue to figuring the approximate date a quilt was made, if the maker did not inscribe the date on the quilt.

Colors are significant clues to a quilt’s history. Floral appliquéd quilts of very bright greens and reds on white backgrounds generally were made in the first three-quarters of the 1800s. About 1875, these imported dyes were replaced with synthetic ones, and the greens from that era faded to a dull tan color over time. Probably for this reason, the quilts made from fabrics around the turn of the century up to the mid-1920s were in subdued blues and grays. In the mid-1920s, reliable dyes became available to give quilts the beautiful pastels typical of this era; they were widely used in the 1930s.

Pattern selection also is a strong clue to a certain era, such as the crazy quilts that began appearing around 1875. Good examples of a later era are the “Sunbonnet Sue” and “Flower Garden” patterns that became very popular in the 1930s, along with the charming pictorial printed fabrics from this period. Batting is another indicator, with the first commercial cotton batting introduced by Stearns and Foster in 1846. It was widely used until polyester batting appeared in the 1960s.
Documenting the Quilt’s History
So that future generations can be aware of your quilt’s maker and any other information about it, follow these directions to make a label and fasten it to the back of the quilt. Cut a piece of laundered white or off-white muslin large enough to handle the information you wish to impart. Tape it to a firm surface. Using a marking pen with a non-water-soluble ink, such as a laundry pen or a fabric marker, write on it the maker’s name, location, and completion date. Other information, such as the name of the pattern, the occasion for which it was made, or to whom it was given, may also be added. Turn the edges under and stitch the label by hand to the quilt’s lining. A decorative embroidery edging can be used for a finishing touch.

Quilt Care
Quilts are sensitive to many things, including light (often cited as the greatest enemy of quilts), heat, dampness, air pollution, dirt, creases (caused by being folded in the same way for a long time), pests, and pets.

The best way to store quilts is to put them on top of one another, covered with a sheet or coverlet, on an unused bed. If they are stored folded, do not store them in more than two or three layers. Refold them several times a year to avoid crease lines, which will weaken the fibers. Direct contact with bare or unpainted wood, such as in a chest or closet, can also damage quilts. One solution is to cover them with large pieces of muslin or old sheets. Never use plastic because it does not allow for air exchange, which may lead to mildew.

Do not wash them in a bathtub because lifting or wringing heavy, water-soaked quilts can break the fibers. If you must wash a quilt, use a top-loading automatic washer filled with lukewarm water, along with a detergent that is safe for quilts. Wash it on the delicate cycle and spin-dry only until the cycle changes to fast spin. Use your hands in an up-and-down motion to remove any remaining water. Lay it flat to dry, if possible, or hang it across two lines in a shaded spot.

So, What Is a Quilt?
It is obvious that a quilt is much more than a “textile sandwich.” It can be read as a diary of the maker – full of her hopes and dreams, as well as her sorrows – made over a particular period, remaining as her legacy for generations that follow. But there is another characteristic that has not been mentioned – it’s warm, tactile qualities that make the person sleeping under one feel sheltered from the cold and life’s harshness. A quilt is many things.

Follow-up Activities
Ask participants if they would like a follow-up to the lesson, such as one of the following:
• Offer a beginners’ class taught by a local quilting teacher or someone else who has quilting experience.
• Organize a group activity, led by those with quilting skills, to make quilts to donate to hospitalized children.
• Sponsor a quilt show at a local library or other public place, exhibiting both old and new quilts.
• Arrange for a club tour to a shop or a museum featuring a quilt display and graduations.
Reference


Resources
