

“The more things change...the more they stay the same...”

“A stitch in time saves nine...”

“What goes around, comes around...”

Every old-fashioned saying that you can think of certainly applies to the time-honored crafts of quilting and knitting today. The renewed interest in these crafts, perhaps fueled by the desire to get back to basics, is seen in large cities and small towns alike. Shop owners and craft show organizers are saying, “Welcome” to beginners and “Welcome back” to veterans!

Although both crafts undoubtedly date back before written history, the earliest known examples include a quilted garment carved on an ivory figure of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Similarly, fragments of knitting have been found dating back to the time of Egyptian pyramids, evidenced by a knitted doll lain to rest in the tomb of a young child. More recent history suggests that both quilting and knitting were widespread in Europe by the time the colonists came to the New World. Therefore, the American history of the crafts is as unique and varied as the groups of settlers who brought them here. So let's begin with a glimpse back...

Quilting & Knitting

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*Karin Rodeheaver of “Not Just Quilts”
can be seen quilting in her shop in
Oakland, Maryland.*

Quilting

The availability of quilt patterns in books and magazines (as well as on the Internet) is taken for granted today, but it wasn't until the 1850's when textiles were produced in factories that quilting became widespread. In the late 1800's, familiar patterns that American women loved began to appear in print. Publishers of farm magazines discovered that printing quilt patterns attracted women readers. Other types of magazines, and even newspapers, soon began to publish quilt patterns.

One quilting fad that began after the 1876 Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia had all the Victorian-era quilters going "crazy." With the help of popular women's magazines, the making of Crazy Quilts became quite the rage. To the Victorians, the word "crazy" not only meant wild, but also "broken" or "crazed into splinters." This look is evident in the various triangles and other odd shapes in the quilts. Crazy Quilts were more show pieces than functional, using velvets, silks and brocades cut and pieced in random shapes. These quilts were often called "lap robes" that were used to decorate the parlor—fitting showpieces for the lavish interior decoration of the day.

Quilting during the time of the Civil War is a mixture of fact and myth. Some stories suggest that a Log Cabin quilt hanging in a window with a black center for the chimney hole indicated a safe house. Underground Railroad quilts, a variation on Jacob's Ladder, were said to give cues to a safe path to freedom. Although there is no evidence that this really occurred, the stories have been told throughout the generations. We do know, however, that women in the North made quilts with verses indicating the evils of slavery. Some quilts even included pictures of slaves in shackles.

Other quilting trends made their way into American homes over the years. Among them, the popular Charm Quilts, also from the Victorian era, made up of a variety of fabrics. The Charm Quilt can be known by other names that may describe certain attributes of the quilt. "Odd Fellar" could mean that there are no two pieces of fabric exactly alike in a Charm Quilt. "Beggar" refers to the practice of asking for pieces of fabric in order to collect enough of a variety to finish the quilt.

An item called Cheater Cloth became available around the 1850's. This fabric had quilt block patterns printed on it, as opposed to sewing together different pieces of cloth. The first cheater cloth patterns were imitated chintz patches. In the early 1900's, other patterns such as Log Cabin and Charm Quilts became available of cheater cloth. In the 1930's, Sears offered cheater cloth in patterns that included Double Wedding Ring and Grandmother's Flower Garden. Cheater cloth is still being produced today and can be found in just about every quilt store!

Quilting and the Amish

One group of people having a profound effect on the art of quilting is the Amish. The word "Amish" usually brings to mind a host of handmade goods—especially quilts—but actually, the Amish came late into quilting. Very few quilts are known to have been made by the Amish before the 1870's. Then, over a 15-year period, quilting became quite common.

Amish settlers came to the United States from Germany and Switzerland in the early 1700's. A sect of the Mennonite Church, the Amish believe in a simple lifestyle that strictly adheres to the Bible. Amish communities were formed so that members could remain apart from the temptations of the modern world, so not surprisingly, Amish quilts were among the most conservative. Early Amish quilts were made in one solid color of brown, blue, rust or black. Worsted wools and cottons were used, as the popular silks were considered worldly. Although the fabrics were plain, the quilting was intricate and decorative and often included swirling feathers, curves and grids.

Since living as part of a community is central to Amish life, quilting easily fits into that lifestyle. As quilting became another traditional task, one of many done in groups, the sense of community and the importance of complying with certain standards are very evident in Amish quilting.

With the Bicentennial festivities approaching in 1976, America once again prepared to celebrate its past. The unique art of Amish quilting was discovered during these celebrations, and Amish women began to product quilts to be sold.



Amish quilts continue to inspire other quilters with their simple beauty and basic designs. Quilts are still made by the Amish for family use. Occasions like weddings, fundraisers, or the birth of a new baby bring together Amish women in a sense of community. Since the women are busy in the garden or helping on the farm in the warm months, most of the quilting takes place in winter. Although more quilts are being made for sale, quilting remains a very important part of Amish community life.

Quilting Today

These days, quilters have taken full advantage of the computer technology that enhances all of our lives. "E-quilters" correspond with one another, as well as share patterns and ideas via the internet! A seemingly endless supply of information is there for the taking, a virtual techno-paradise for the quilters of today. However, "the more things change...the more they stay the same." According to Jane Benson, owner of Four Seasons Stitchery in Grantsville, Maryland, despite all the new fabrics and patterns, her customers continue to reach for the traditional, old-fashioned patterns!

While technology is a wonderful way to stay connected, good old-fashioned quilt shows continue to bring people together from all over the region. Here in Western Maryland, an annual quilt show is held on Father's Day weekend at the Allegany County Fairgrounds (Rt. 220 South, just off I-68). Linda Reuschlein, chairperson of the event, and Carolyn Groves, co-chair, are thrilled with the growing number of participants in the show. Quilters as young as age 5, and as experienced as age 93, took part in the 2002 show!

The local Quilter's Guild, with groups of daytime and evening members, takes part in a wonderful program called "Happy Huggies." In this program, quilts are made and donated to local hospitals as well as the Sheriff's Department, so law enforcement officials have warm blankets on hand in case of accidents or other emergencies. Mrs. Reuschlein also teaches the art of quilting to a group of inmates at the federal prison at Mexico Farms. The national program called, "Project Linus" (after the Peanuts comic strip character), is aimed at introducing the inmates to the craft as a creative outlet as well as a productive one. The quilts are then donated to hospitals, and have been given to the Family Crisis Resource Center in Cumberland.

Both Carolyn Groves and Linda Reuschlein say they see more and more people participating in quilting, either as beginners or those returning to the craft. "It is not the old-fashioned quilting of long ago," says Mrs. Reuschlein. "It's an art show fabric!"

History of Quilts Exhibit

The Gordon-Roberts Historic House Museum is displaying quilts made from the 1800's to 1920's with a special exhibit of quilts made from Celanese fabrics. The exhibit also includes antique quilt blocks with modern quilt block interpretations. The exhibit will be open through November 1, 2002.

Located at 218 Washington St., Cumberland. 301-777-8678.

Knitting...

A Look Back

As with quilting, the art of knitting has been around for thousands of years. It was practiced in monasteries in Spain as early as the 9th century and eventually made its way throughout Europe. The terms "garter stitch" and "stockinette stitch" date back to the 1500's when hand-knit stockings were a major industry in England. In 17th century France, carpets were created to include flowers, foliage, birds and animals by the Knitter's Guild of Strasbourg. These knitters were all men, as was the practice of that time.

During the 18th century, knitting became a cottage craft practiced by shepherds, sailors, housewives and orphans. At this time, folk knitting in Ireland as well as the Shetland and Geurnsey Islands developed and flourished. Families were identified by the elaborate patterns in their sweaters, and sometimes it was only the sweater pattern that could identify a drowned sailor! The women of the Shetland Isles knit sweaters between chores, while they walked, turning out several sweaters a year.

By the next century, industrial machine knitting began to produce knitted fabric for garments. Knitting books for genteel ladies, published around the 1860's, helped to popularize the craft for women, and Mrs. Weldon's "The Gentlewoman's Magazine" brought home knitting into middle class homes. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, knitting held universal appeal in all classes.

During the Depression, everyone made an effort to reuse in order to save money. ("A willful waste makes a woeful want"). At this time, many home knitters unraveled old sweaters in order to knit the newest fashions. Knitting for the troops during World War II brought interest to the craft again, and was seen in a positive force in the war effort. Then, after the war, knitting declined in popularity since people wanted to put the Depression and war years aside. By then, the new easy-care fabrics were gaining attention, and except for a brief period in the sixties when mohair sweaters were the rage, knitting remained in the hands of mothers and grandmothers who made presents for family members.

Knitting Today

A new and exciting interest in knitting has occurred in the last five years. Younger people are interested in wearing unique clothing that makes an individual statement. More and more people who lead busy, stressful lives look to crafts like knitting to

wind down and relax. And the baby boomer generation is nearing retirement age and is looking for productive yet slower-paced activities for leisure. Even Hollywood is boasting of its many knitters who have made the craft chic once again. Even men (yes, men) are returning to the craft, including prominent designers and artists as stated in a feature article in "Vogue-Knitting International" magazine. ("What goes around comes around" certainly applies here!) Finally, the availability of exceptional yarns today has allowed even new knitters to create beautiful, simple items with exquisite yarns of mohair, cotton, wool, rayon, silk and synthetics. Sheep's wool is treated to be washable and soft—no longer the scratchy wool we remember from childhood.

In addition to the personal pleasure that knitting brings, there are many ways to utilize time and talent to help others. One example is the Tri-State Operation LovePak program, a Red Cross-sponsored

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project in which boxes of goods are sent to our US Troops in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. As part of Operation LovePak II, planned for Fall 2002, warm hats for children also will be included in the shipment. Called the "Lids for Kids" project countless talented knitters and crocheters are hard at work aiming to knit 1000 hats (scarves, mittens, and gloves too) to be given to children in need. Amy Shuman, writer of the wellness column for the *Cumberland Times-News* (an avid knitter herself), and her husband John, have been instrumental in organizing this program. Many of the knitters are patrons of a new business in downtown Cumberland called Millicent's Knits & Yarns. Owners Mel Martin and Dick Soderman opened their store less than a year ago after relocating from Vermont. They have nothing but praise for Western Maryland and the people they have met. "In fact," says Mel, "we have more friends here than we had in 32 years living in Vermont!" Along with providing discounted yarns for the "Lids for Kids" project, Millicent's, along with the Shumans, helped organize several "Hat-A-Thons" in an effort to reach their goal. The store also serves as a drop-off site for the growing bounty of warm hats!

As Mel and Dick have seen their business grow, so too has their circle of friends—their knitting circle—who come to the shop twice a week, not just to knit, but to socialize. And you may be surprised
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and encouraged to know how many beginners are among them! Mel states that she has seen a definite increase in first-time knitters, as well as those resuming the craft after many years. Feel free to join any of the knit-ins: Wednesdays, noon to 1:30 pm; Fridays 1-3 pm and the "first" Tuesday of each month, 7-9 pm.

It is clear that both quilting and knitting are seeing resurgence in popularity these days, as people continue to look for ways to be creative. As life's fast pace encroaches upon us, these crafts are providing a relaxing, fulfilling and productive outlet—one that cannot be measured in the number of quilt blocks pieced, or rows completed, but instead is measured by an extraordinary level of pride, satisfaction and above all, creativity. Incorporating a few simple pleasures in our otherwise hectic lives is a good thing, so learn something new! Or, refresh your memory on a long-forgotten hobby and, by all means, "don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today!"

*Specialty shops for supplies,
quilts and knitted goods.*

Traditions At The White Swan
(Quilting Supplies)

16525 National Pike, Hagerstown, MD
(301) 733-9130

Millicent's Knits and Yarns

49 N. Centre Street, Cumberland, MD
(301) 722-8100

Four Seasons Stitchery

116 Main Street, Grantsville, MD
(301) 895-5958

**Spruce Forest Artisan Village
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