

## Quilting Explained

The Colebrook Quilters have been making quilts for several years, and as a consequence have brought a considerable amount of funds into the Senior & Community Center's coffers. Each year their quilts find homes with someone who was willing to risk one dollar on a chance. The popularity of quilts and quilting is not a new phenomenon, and some background on its history may be of interest.

The exact process of quilt making in the nineteenth century was rarely recorded, women sewed their own and all of their family's clothing, generally from cotton cloth, and as a woman's dress could easily require six yards of material, leftover cuttings were saved for quilts. (Quilt makers quite often had two scrap bags, one for "lights" and the other for "darks".) Worn out clothing was surveyed before discarding, and any usable fabric was trimmed off for future use in a quilt. Most women today do not produce cotton scraps; they tend to have jobs and purchase most of the family's clothing needs, and procure materials to make quilts from fabric stores.

A quilt consists of three layers of different materials. Uppermost is the quilt top, usually pieced, appliquéd, embroidered or any combination of techniques. It is generally made from blocks, which are design units, usually square. Blocks, which became popular in the U. S. in the early 1800s, are generally made first, and sewn together with the other parts of the quilt top. Sashing, described as strips of fabric sewn between blocks, thus separating them, give a visual effect that will vary depending on the sash fabric and width. It is also referred to as lattice. The border is the other area of the quilt top. Much latitude exists here; there may be one, two or more borders, or none at all. Outside the border is the binding, consisting of a strip of fabric used to encase the edges of the quilt. It is the last procedure done in making a quilt.

Once the top has been completed, the backing fabric is chosen for the back of the quilt. If the quilt is to be hand-quilted, (as opposed to machine stitching), fabric is selected that will be easy to quilt: soft, closely woven, and 100% cotton. The last component is the batting, or filler that makes up the middle layer, giving the puffy, or quilted effect after the stitching is completed. Most batting today will consist of cotton, polyester, wool or silk fibers, with a combination of cotton/polyester blends the most popular.

Quilts are made for many reasons, one of the more popular types being a friendship quilt, an example of which can be seen at the Colebrook Historical Society. This so-called "Colebrook Quilt" was made in 1867 as a wedding gift for the bride. Each of its 49 squares is signed by its maker, in this case her sisters, sisters-in-laws, cousins, grandmothers, mother, mother-in-law and friends. The perfect condition of this mid-nineteenth century quilt attests to both the skills of the makers and the value placed upon it by the bride (and her descendents).

Another popular type, although time-consuming and difficult to make, is the "crazy quilt". An example of one such quilt can be seen on permanent display upstairs in the Colebrook Historical Society. The remarkable thing about a crazy quilt is the stitching used to attach the irregular scraps together. This particular type is called embroidery stitching, and as is immediately apparent when looking at a crazy quilt, there seem to be an endless assortment of them, as there are usually few if any repeats, regardless of the size of the quilt. I remember Mary Gray working on a crazy quilt the

Colebrook Quilters made a few years back, and it wasn't the pattern or the colors that intrigued me, it was the fact that no two pieces of fabric were sewn together with the same pattern. She had all of them (and who knows how many more) in her head and although she had an extensive library, I never saw her refer to any printed matter when doing the actual work.

Quilts have a unique ability to bring together communities, whether it is a neighborhood or even an entire nation. Examples of such quilts are the Aids Quilt that is still being added to, as far as we know. Each victim is remembered by his or her own square, and when it is displayed on the Mall in Washington DC, it covered an amazing amount of acreage. The Oklahoma bombing of the federal courthouse in Oklahoma City resulted in many quilts being made to honor the victims. Ruth Pranka of Barkhamsted, known to many in these parts as one of the most accomplished quilters hereabouts, and who taught not only at the Community College, but also in local senior centers, made a commemorative quilt dedicated to the victims of that act of terrorism, and brought it to Oklahoma City, where she presented it to the governor of that state in behalf of citizens of Connecticut. More recently, the destruction of New York's twin towers on September 11, 2001, brought forward many aspects of human emotion and grief, one of which was the creation of quilts. A museum has been established in the vicinity of ground zero that contains a large selection of these.

At first glance, one would think that all aspects of quilting involve only women, but this is not so; many of the hoops, special tables, containers, shelves for storage and other necessities are made by husbands. Occasionally, a friendship quilt, which usually has each square signed by the creator, will turn up the signature of a man. In 2007 the Barkhamsted Historical Society became the owners of an 1848 friendship quilt probably made as a wedding present. Forty-eight of the forty-nine squares contain the names of women, along with their home town and the date the square was made; the remaining square is signed by Reverend Erastus Doty, pastor of the South Colebrook Baptist Church (better known as the Hemlock Meeting House in Robertsville). Gender has nothing to do with ownership of a quilt, as many are made especially for sons, brothers and sweethearts, all of which are equally cherished by the recipients.

Although quilt making has been practiced in this country for many generations, there has been a resurgence in the art over the last half-century. The reason for its popularity is, of course, that quilts are homemade by people for people. Giving and sharing permeate each phase of their production. From the trading of scraps and patterns and the actual production in "bees", to the giving away of the finished work, quilting is an essential human activity. There is something about a quilt that says people, community, compassion, friendship, family, home and love. Whether it is fancy or plain, the fact remains that quilts seem to us symbolic of some of our finer human qualities. Perhaps the revival of interest in quilting is a sign that there may be hope for us yet in these troubled times.