

THE KANSAS QUILT PROJECT:

Piecing Together Our Past

by Mary W. Madden



WHEN OUR GRANDMOTHERS WERE CAREFULLY PUTTING the final stitches into their quilts, little did they realize that one day their work would receive statewide and even national attention. These quilts, once appreciated only for warmth and beauty, have revealed new worth as historical records in recent years. As products of a distinct time and place, quilts can be viewed as objects that preserve a part of the makers' history and, on a larger scale, reflect the values, interests, and experiences of the society in which they were produced.¹

The interest in studying quilts as historical records and the people, primarily women, who made them may be partially attributed to the current revival in quilt making itself. In the 1970s there reemerged a national appreciation of traditional crafts, including quilting. Coinciding with this revival, two changes were taking place in academia that would directly influence the shape of our current research interests with quilts and their makers. Historians started to focus their attention on the everyday lives of people. Traditionally they had studied and written about the lives of famous individuals, great wars, and political conflicts. Now they were looking at the family and private lives of men, women, and even children to gain insights into the nation's social history.

Researchers were also beginning to accept the material products of our society as legitimate historical evidence. Museums had long been filled with antiquities, but their collections were dismissed by most professional historians. George Kubler, one of the new historians, recognized the importance of our nation's material culture when he commented, "the moment just past is extinguished forever, save for the things made during it."² In the last two decades, historians have joined scholars in such fields as anthropology, art, and folklore in examining our material culture.

In the wake of these new developments, the Kansas Quilt Project: Documenting Quilts and Quiltmakers was founded. In the spring of 1986, the year of the 125th anniversary of Kansas statehood, a group of twenty-five enthusiastic individuals met at Wichita State University. From this initial meeting, an eight-member board of directors was selected to spearhead the project. The Kansas State Historical Society agreed to provide professional and financial assistance as the cosponsor of the quilt project.

The goals of the project were multiple: to heighten public awareness of quilts as examples of Kansas folk art; to document the lives of Kansas quilt makers and their work; to collect data and establish a repository at the Kansas State Historical Society; to promote the art of quilt making through public programs; and to promote the conservation and preservation of quilts. The means for fulfilling these objectives would be as numerous as the goals themselves.

Quilt Discovery Days began in the summer of 1986 as the principal method for documenting quilts and quilt makers. On these days, the public was encouraged to bring quilts and share the stories about the people who made them. The criteria for accepting quilts was very broad. The project was interested in the very old, as well as those quilts fresh from the quilting frame. By specifically including contemporary quilts and quilt makers, it was the project's goal to collect and preserve current quilt making activities before too many of the stories, traditions, and motivations were lost as those of previous generations have been. Similarly, there were no geographical restrictions placed on a quilt's place of origin. The project was to include quilts brought to Kansas, as well as those made here. With this relatively limitless documentation policy, it was intended that a comprehensive understanding of quilt making activities in Kansas, both past and present, would be gained.

To assist with this immense task, ten regional coordinators were enlisted to organize the Quilt Discovery Days in their assigned regions of the state. Legions of volunteers also were recruited to aid in the exciting but often laborious process of registering quilts. To meet research objectives, an interview was conducted with each person who brought quilts to the Quilt Days; biographical and motivational information about the quilt maker was collected, as well as family lore about the making and use of the quilt. Each quilt was then recorded by a trained documentor who examined the quilt and recorded technical information about the size, construction technique, material, batting, and color. Based on this information, the documentor also

determined a range of dates during which the quilt was most likely constructed. This was done independently of the interview to prevent biasing. Likewise, the pattern name assigned at this stage was from standardized reference manuals instead of family tradition. This would allow for computerized retrieval of the quilt later in the research phases of the project. Lastly, a professional photographer took a black and white photograph and color slide of the quilt.

The public's response to this project was tremendous. An average of 183 quilts were brought in at each of the seventy-two Quilt Discovery Days. In sixteen months, the project had documented 13,107 quilts from every corner of the state. The benefits were equally overwhelming. Many of the people who brought in their quilts left with a new appreciation of the quilt maker's handiwork, and the project succeeded in acquiring the most comprehensive collection of information on quilting in Kansas to date.

Realizing, however, that there were inherent limitations in collecting data by this method, the project embarked upon a second research phase in the summer of 1988. This phase was directed at those groups and individuals who would not normally share their quilts at public functions. Professional historians and folklorists conducted interviews with specific cultural groups and quilt clubs to augment the data collected at the Quilt Discovery Days. These interviews, usually conducted in the quilt maker's home or club meeting room, also allowed for a more in-depth and diverse discussion on quilt making than was attainable at the public days.

Although the results of this project will continue to be analyzed, the historical significance of this data is already apparent. The information collaborates much of our current knowledge about women's lives and quilt making activities—but in greater detail—and provides substantial new data that can be used to dispel myths and romantic notions about our past. For example, the information gathered about the quilts has been used to examine migration patterns to Kansas. The 1880 census records identify the states contributing the highest populations to Kansas as Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Iowa. Not surprisingly, our records on the geographic origin of quilts made before 1880 parallel this census data. If researchers had not had the 1880 census, these fragile textile records would have provided equally reliable information.³

Once the research phase of the Kansas Quilt Project was completed, attention was focused on disseminating our findings. A symposium, "Traditions:

Quilts and Quiltmakers of Kansas," was held on July 9, 1988, at the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka. Over two hundred registrants listened to scholarly lectures, viewed quilting demonstrations, and toured quilt exhibits at the museum and the Mulvane Art Museum in Topeka. A series of public programs that included lectures, slide programs, and exhibits were equally well received in each of the ten designated regions of the state. Additionally, a major exhibit based on this project opened in February of 1990 at the Kansas Museum of History. This issue of the Historical Society's journal serves to accompany that exhibit as a catalog. Efforts are also underway for a publication on Kansas quilts and quilt makers.

The following articles, initially presented at the 1988 symposium, illustrate the diversity of research themes made possible through the study of quilts. The work of the Kansas Quilt Project, like that conducted in numerous other quilt documentation projects, provides new understanding of the history of quilting and the lives of quilt makers.

The Kansas Quilt Project would not have been possible without the combined efforts of many individuals and organizations. The project's board of directors would like to thank the Wichita Quilt Guild, which provided the seed money for the project, the quilt

guilds of Kansas, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Kansas Arts Commission, the Kansas State Historical Society, the American International Quilt Association, the Ross Foundation, the Reid Foundation, private businesses, numerous organizations, and many individuals for their generous financial assistance. Our deepest thanks go to the regional coordinators: Delores Dorsch, Betty Lou and Neal Andreson, Mary and Tom Sharp, Shirlene Wedd, Jacqueline Holcomb, Muriel Wolfersperger, Eleanor Burenheide, Ann Harrison, Shelle Morrison, and Elly McCoy and our two consultants, Dorothy Cozart and Dr. Gayle Davis, who shared the vision and worked diligently toward these goals. For untold hours of work at numerous Quilt Discovery Days, the board of directors specifically thanks Shirley Wedd, Bettie Seibel, and Francis Rogers. For advice and support, we are indebted to the staff of the Kansas State Historical Society. We also would like to acknowledge our gratitude to all the volunteers who were the backbone of the project, contributing over twenty thousand hours of work. Finally, our most sincere appreciation goes to the quilt makers and the people who shared their family treasures. Through this collective effort, the record of quilt making in Kansas will never be forgotten.

NOTES

Mary W. Madden is a member of the Kansas Quilt Project's board of directors. She wishes to thank Eleanor Malone and Jennie Chinn for their assistance in developing the material for this introduction.

1. Ricky Clark, "Quilting: A Visual Message in Color and Shape," *Hayes Historical Journal* 6 (Fall 1984): 28.

2. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 79.

3. Barbara Brackman, "Some Results of the Kansas Quilt Project," (lecture prepared for the Kansas Quilt Project, Topeka, Kansas, July 23, 1988).