A Selection of Minnesota Quilts

"The art of patchwork has, in our times, been carried to a pitch never before approached. In a word, it has ceased to be commonplace, and has become really artistic"

Although this quote is from a popular ladies’ magazine in 1885, arbiters of fashion might have said something similar about American quilts at various times over the last three centuries. All of the following examples from the Society’s collection have, at one time or another, been considered artistic quilts.

I’m Linda McShannock, collections curator at the Minnesota Historical Society responsible for the quilt collection. Worldwide, quilting interest continues to expand. Today quilting is reported to be a 4 billion dollar industry in the U. S. alone. Today's quilters put to cloth their own artistic expression whether they are creating a favorite historic quilt pattern or, an art quilt that may have little resemblance to the bed coverings of earlier centuries. It wasn't until the 1970s that quilts were identified as art. Until then, they might have been a showcase for (usually) a woman's skill with the needle, or as a utilitarian household necessity, but they were always made to be put on a bed, not hung on a wall.

Credit for the current quilt revival is often given to Jonathan Holstein’s and Gail van der Hoof’s exhibit of quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. Visitors to this and similar exhibitions admired the quilts for their graphic qualities and their emerging place in art history. These quilts may have been exhibited as art for the first time, but quilts have always been made with artistry in mind. The most fashionable quilts of any time period were created to express a maker's place as a trend -setter in her community.

Quilts recognized as artistic included whole cloth quilts of the late 18th to early 19th century which showcased the fine needlework that middle and upper class women were trained in as part of their primary education. These New England examples and one of Norwegian origin in the Society’s collection illustrate this artistry.

In the mid 19th century red and green quilts were the preferred expression of artistic endeavors. Red and green on a white ground were the most popular color combinations for "best" appliqué quilts in the mid 19th century. We see these examples of striking symmetry and balance. A variety of examples from our collection were brought to Minnesota with settlers from New England, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Crazy quilts appeared at the end of the 19th century, promoted by the fashionable community as the new "artistic" quilt. Victorian ladies of leisure pieced their quilts from silk velvet and brocades. Intricate embroidery and beadwork displayed the quilter's conspicuous consumption and abundant leisure time. Women took up the needle and
created endless examples in their “crazy” phase. Over 1/4 of the Society's quilt collection are pieced crazy quilts.

Ideas about what was artistic continued to change. The Arts and Crafts movement of the early 20th century recognized simplicity of design, expressions of the natural world, pastel colors and fluid designs.

Contemporary quilters continue this tradition of the art of patchwork making quilts that honor traditions or respond to this century's call for artistic expression.

The Minnesota Historical Society holds nearly 400 quilts in its permanent collection dating from the late 18th century to the present including examples both functional and artistic. Visit the MHS website to view these quilts on-line. Besides contemporary work, this collection includes historic examples of quilting traditions of Native Americans, territorial pioneers, immigrant, and refugee communities. When quilters create their art, the quilts become windows to the creative process and the intersection of local traditions and national and international trends.