



Media only: Amy Hutchins (202) 633-8497
Media Web site: americanart.si.edu/press

Sept. 25, 2007

Rare Pieced Quilts from the Frontier on Display at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The exhibition “Going West! Quilts and Community” is on view at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum from Oct. 5 through Jan. 21, 2008. It reveals the essential role that quilts and the making of quilts played in the lives of women on the frontier.

“Going West! Quilts and Community” features 50 quilts from the first quarter of the 19th century to the 1930s. They were either brought on the journey out west as cherished keepsakes or created once women established homes on the prairie. Quilts were carried by settlers across the Great Platte River Road, which was a principal route for America’s western expansion as early as the 1840s.

“Gazing at these traditional quilt patterns, one can quickly grasp how intimately the quilting art form is connected to the American frontier experience,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “We are delighted to offer this exhibition as a glimpse into the abundant ingenuity and creativity of America’s pioneer women.”

Sandi Fox is the guest curator of the exhibition. Fox, and independent curator, is the former collection curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and is the author of numerous articles, books and exhibition catalogs. Robyn Kennedy, chief of the Renwick Gallery, is the exhibition coordinator.

“The Renwick has a rich tradition of showcasing American textile art,” said Kennedy. “This exhibition allows us to explore the fascinating legacy of quilting along westward migration routes and examine how these works fit in to the larger framework of American craft.”

The quilts in the exhibition are on loan from historical societies and museums throughout Nebraska. They offer a visual story of the lives of frontier women and illustrate a range of patterns, styles and techniques. The exhibition includes crazy quilts, doll and children’s quilts, and community signature works. Familiar patterns include the log cabin and lone star, and variations of the fan and

wagon wheel. Each piece demonstrates the extraordinary creativity of the artist and acts as a record of personal, family or community history.

The earliest works in the exhibition were carried by settlers across the Great Platte River Road, a corridor of western expansion that transported the wagon trains of settlers to the Nebraska territory and to points further west. A convergence of the Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail and the California Trail, the Platt River Valley formed the backbone of the American frontier. Quilts were a key part of the bedding most families carried with them and were an essential element of starting a new life on the frontier. They served both a decorative and utilitarian function.

Quilts that were carried from Europe to the Nebraska frontier include “The Swedish Red Silk Quilt,” a luxurious work by an unidentified maker in the first half of the 19th century, and “The Silk Mosaic Child’s Quilt,” by Ann Sarah Harvey Bentley made in London about 1843. Several other works originated in the eastern states, such as “Rebecca Ellen Slyh’s Quilt” (1852) from Franklin County, Ohio; Anna L. Smith’s “Nine-Patch Blocks with Sawtooth Border” (about 1869) from northwestern New York; and “Mary Norris’s ‘Blazing Star’ Quilt” (about 1895) from Sandusky, Ohio.

Quilts helped women form social connections in the communities that developed in the new territory. Pieces such as “The Omaha Commerce Quilt” (1895) by the Ladies Aid Society of the Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church display a strong community spirit. The quilt is a group fundraising effort created by multiple members of the society. Local businesses purchased advertising space on the quilt with each section designed and finished by a different quilter; the whole work creates a civic billboard. Quilts such as “The Red Cross Quilt” (about 1917) were part of a larger patriotic call during World War I. This piece was auctioned as part of the community war efforts to raise funds for the Red Cross. Similar techniques were employed with signature quilts. Donors signed their name on a quilt block; the signatures were then stitched over by the members of the group. Examples are seen in the Swedish Methodist Church member’s “Blue Embroidered Spokes of Signatures” (1926) and “Stars and Signatures” (1927) by unidentified makers.

In contrast to these group collaborations are works of intense personal expression and creativity, including “You are the Darling of the Earth Crazy Quilt” (about 1898), a crazy quilt by Edith Withers Meyers and “Mary Prokopec’s Star Medallion Crazy Quilt” (about 1900) by Marie Tejkl Prokopec. Meyers’ quilt incorporates phrases, such as “Toots” and “Buzz,” and depicts events from her life, such as “skating party on the North River,” into the stitching. Prokopec’s work reflects her Czechoslovakian heritage, incorporating the same embroidered motifs of flowers and birds as seen

in traditional Czech decorated textiles. These works are a visual diary for the personal histories of the women and embody the creativity and ingenuity of all the artists in the exhibition.

Credit

The museum gratefully acknowledges the support of Helen and Peter Bing for this exhibition.

Publication

The accompanying catalog, co-published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and D Giles Ltd. in London, includes contributions by Fox and an introduction by author and independent curator Roderick Kiracofe. It will be available for \$49.95 in the museum's store and online at americanart.si.edu.

Programs

A variety of free public programs will be offered in conjunction with the exhibition. Jane Burch Cochran will present an illustrated lecture titled "Art Quilts: A New Vision" Sunday Oct. 21, at 3 p.m. Patricia Crew, director of the University of Nebraska's International Quilt Study Center, will discuss Nebraska quilts and quilting traditions, as well as the center's commitment to the preservation, study and exhibition of quilts Sunday, Nov. 11, at 3 p.m. The Renwick will host a quilt trunk show and sale with a talk by quilter Sandra Smith Saturday, Dec. 1. During the exhibition, members of the Annapolis Quilting Guild will demonstrate a variety of quilting techniques in the galleries every Tuesday and Friday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. (except Friday, Nov. 23).

For a complete schedule of free public programs, visit the museum's online program calendar at americanart.si.edu.

About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum is dedicated to exhibiting American crafts and decorative arts from the 19th to the 21st centuries. It is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W., near the Farragut North (Red line) and Farragut West (Blue and Orange lines) Metrorail stations. Museum hours are from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Web site: americanart.si.edu.

###

Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password.