

Britain's quilting heritage

‘Festival of Quilts’ to take place in September

Regular sales are held at Christie’s

By Zita Thornton

The tradition of quilting started at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but was nearly lost as Britain entered the twentieth century. In 1979 the *Quilters' Guild of the British Isles* was established to continue the tradition and to research and preserve Britain's quilt heritage, as well as to encourage and inspire others. In this, its twentieth birthday year, the art of quilting is flourishing in towns and villages up and down the country and this has brought renewed interest in antique quilts. Christie's hold two or three quilt sales each year, the next on November 30th, and quilts are included in the textile sales of other auction houses too. Ironically, it can cost as much to buy a contemporary quilt, as it would an antique example.

At auction, British quilts tend to command prices of around £150-£300. Workmanship, condition, age and dating or provenance increases the value. An early nineteenth century quilt including a date, might cost £500-£1000; an undated one a little less. Later, twentieth century quilts, usually sell for between £150-£250. These pieces generally show wear and tear and restoration, for patchwork quilts were always made to be used. Anyone wanting to buy a contemporary quilt would pay an average price of around £300-£500 although there are many which cost hundreds of pounds more.

Originally, every farmhouse or cottage would have quilts as bedcoverings, made during the winter months when there was less work to do outdoors. They were stitched from the plentiful, unused remnants of other dressmaking. They would be generally lined in a plain fabric and sometimes interlined with sheep's fleece, quilted to keep the spread of wool in place. Girls who worked ‘in service’ as maids or cooks or as dressmaker to the wealthier classes brought home cottons from India or the painted calico or ‘chintz’, which had revolutionised women's dressmaking in the eighteenth century. As chintz became popular for furnishings, those who couldn't afford them used left over pieces to make patchwork seat covers, curtains for four poster beds and so on. Britain's earliest, preserved furnishing patchwork example, can be seen as bed hangings at Levens Hall, near Kendal and dates from 1708. This tradition of patchwork quilting was taken to America by the early colonists and to Australia, on the penal ships.

In the nineteenth century, manufacturers started to produce printed cottons to satisfy the growing fashionable pastime of quilting, by upper class ladies. Centre panels for patchwork quilts were also available, sometimes with matching borders. They would have baskets of flowers or fruit and garlands and were sometimes commemorative. The golden jubilee of George III in 1810 was commemorated with a panel containing ‘G 50 R’ a basket of flowers, the English rose and Scottish thistle. Royal weddings were remembered in this way too. The marriage of Princess Charlotte in 1816 was a popular choice for patchwork. Many can still be found today, dated and with an inscription. Red and white quilts made from white cotton sheeting and fabric dyed with a colour known as Turkey Red after the country from whence the dye came, were popular amongst those unable to afford more decorative dressmaking fabrics. One of these Turkey quilts was sold at Christie's last October for £609.

It was the Victorians who introduced Crazy patchwork quilts. This was a design with no regular overall pattern. Pieces of brightly coloured material were placed in a haphazard arrangement. Feather stitching covered the edges. Sometimes beads, sequins, ribbon work, and metallic braids and threads were added. As Britain entered the twentieth century, the fashion for patchwork quilts went into decline. Needlework books which survive from the first two decades rarely include instructions for patchwork. This was a craft which had grown on the back of necessity and with plenty of cheap materials available there was no longer any need for patchwork.

However the Second World War was a time when the national philosophy was one of make-do-and-mend and fabrics became rationed. Once again there was the necessity for cheap bedcovers so the craft experienced a revival. It was a skill which must have been taught by grandmothers for a whole generation of women had been brought up without the experience of quilting. Patchwork, which had been kept alive mainly in the villages, became a useful medium for garments and would be used to make dressing gowns, jackets or for collars, cuffs and belts to brighten up and revive the look of a wardrobe.

The Quilters' Guild was founded at a time when interest was again high. The style fitted in well with the rural fashions produced by designers such as Laura Ashley, who themselves provided patches of their fabrics suitable for making into quilts. Patchwork books published decades earlier were reprinted as paperbacks many times over. One patchwork exhibition in London attracted 800 items from all over Britain and reflected this revival in the craft. Many of the patchworks were stitched from remnants found in ‘ragbags’ whose inclusion would always provide memories of long forgotten garments or special occasions. These exhibits provided a historic record of the life and times of their creators, and for many enthusiasts today, it is this aspect which provides the interest. Patchwork quilts give us the opportunity to catch glimpses of the textile fashions of the past. The Guild went on to encourage young stitchers to fashion the collectables of the future and its heritage committee encourages study of our quilt history.

It seems fitting that a Festival of Quilts, which will include both the old and the new, has been chosen to celebrate its twentieth birthday. This takes place between 21-26 September at The Indoor Cricket School, Lord's Ground, St John's Wood, London. A special focus will be the challenge to produce red and white quilts in the Turkey tradition.

Prebooking is advisable. Credit card bookings can be made by telephoning 01775 722371.

Details of all the exhibitions in the festival and of local events taking place throughout the year, can be obtained from the Guild on 01422 347669.

The next Christie's quilt sale is on 30th November.



Contemporary design inspired by curving snails' trails.



The centre of a Turkey red and white cotton fund-raising quilt associated with Easton Wesleyan Church, 1897. 199cm x 260cm. Quilters' Guild of the British Isles.



Herbert Hughes drew the pattern for his wife, Matilda, when she made this applique quilt in 1880. Turkey red motifs on white cotton, embroidered with initials and the name of the maker. Quilters' Guild of the British Isles.



Contemporary quilt 'Sea Fever'. Sally Holman. Inspired by the poem. Centre ship from a print of HMS Martin.



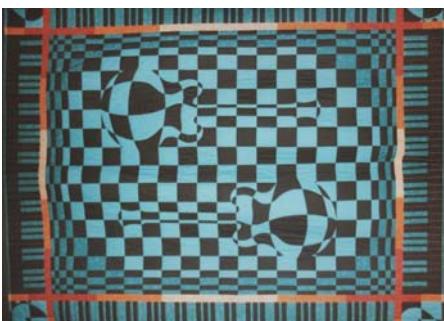
Christie's, South Kensington. A patchwork quilt c1821. £517. April 99.



A variation of a Log Cabin pattern called 'Pineapple', where white strips are positioned round a small red central square and red strips are placed diagonally on the corners. 163cm x 194cm. Quilters' Guild of the British Isles.



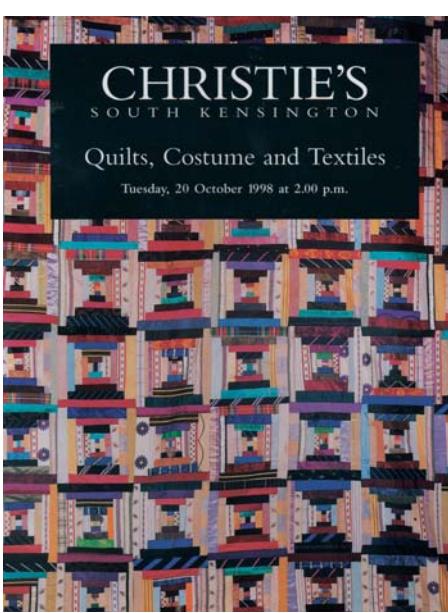
Contemporary quilt based on a traditional seven point star design within a border.



Contemporary quilt 'Imagine'. Nikki Tinkler. A reversible quilt with 'hidden' guitars, keyboards, clefs and a bar of music.



Christie's, South Kensington. A 19thC patchwork coverlet of various pretty printed cottons, with a central hexagon pattern and bordered with stylised flower heads. £575. April 99.



Christie's, South Kensington. 'Log Cabin Courthouse Steps'. Pieces include tie and ribbon fragments, c1890-1900 with fabrics from mid 19thC. £322. October 98.