

# Uncovering Your Quilt's Age

Family lore puts that old quilt among the family heirlooms at well over 100 years old, but how can you be sure?

"Determining the age of a quilt is a real challenge," says Sue Drew, a quilt expert from Montgomery, Ala.

But, she says, an amateur sleuth can come up with an approximate time period for a quilt by learning some of the history of fabrics, prints, patterns, and styles.

## Pre-1800's

The Broderie Perse technique was favored. Broderie Perse actually means "Persian embroidery." With this technique, individual designs (an entire tree, for example) were cut

from block-printed textile or printed chintz from India.

## 1800-1840

A stable "turkey-red" dye was developed about 1829 but didn't become widely used until around 1840. Green dyes in quilt fabrics prior to 1840 were very unstable and tended to fade to a brownish-beige color.

Quilters preferred appliqueing. White-on-white quilts were in vogue.

## 1840-1870

The sewing machine was invented in 1846. England's Prince Albert died in 1861, and Queen Victoria went into mourning. A few years later, American quilters joined her by using somber colors, especially a black-and-white "mourning" print. (The delay occurred because it took some time for a fabric to be designed and made.)

This was also the era of the Temperance Movement, giving birth to The Drunkard's Path pattern. Appli-

qued quilts, especially the elaborate Baltimore Album, dominated. Red-green-and-white quilts were prominent, as were bright-blue-and-white quilts. A distinctive "chrome-orange" fabric was used in abundance.

Log Cabin quilts were popular. After the Whigs lost party dominance in 1856, the Whig's Defeat pattern was in demand from 1857 until 1870, and the Wild Goose Chase pattern was popular after 1861. In 1869, thousands of immigrating Irish railroad workers sparked a renewed interest in the Irish Chain pattern.

## 1870-1890

From 1875 on, the turkey-red print with a black or white design was very popular. Crazy quilts were in style after 1883. Because of the 1876 U.S. centennial, red, white, and blue fabrics were in demand. Fabrics printed with patriotic symbols such as Uncle Sam were also favorites. This was the age of the double pink print—a pink design on a pink background.

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The black "mourning" fabric suggests the quilt was made between 1880 and 1910.

Green-red-and-white quilts were still common, as were blue-and-white and maroon-and-white quilts. Brown calicos were prevalent too. Two popular patterns were the Fan and Bow-tie. Friendship, Autograph, and Album quilts also were favored.

#### 1890-1920

Black-on-white fabric became inexpensive and common. Wine and cadet (gray-blue) or black-on-white prints were used frequently. Shirting fabric was used extensively.

A purplish-brown color was found in quilts until 1900, then that shade was rarely seen until 1970. Quilters used large pieces of fabric in crazy quilts after the turn of the century, and embroidery was simple. Wool was used more frequently.

#### 1920-1940

A distinctive "Nile green" dominated quilts from this period. Pastel prints and solids in peach, lavender, and pale yellow were popular. Maroons rarely were seen in quilts from 1925 until recent times. The Double Wedding Ring pattern was first published in 1928. Other prevalent patterns were Dresden Plate and Grandmother's Flower Garden. Prior to 1935, the swastika frequently had been used by quilters as a symbol

from ancient Greece but was dropped completely after the war because of its Nazi connotation.

#### 1940-1960

Prevailing colors were turquoise, hot pink, and chartreuse. Red-white-and-blue quilts also were popular during World War II. Pastels still were used but in brighter shades.

#### 1960-1975

Only a few small pockets of quilters carried on the art during this period.

#### 1976-1989

*Progressive Farmer* and other magazines sponsored quilt contests as part of the U.S. bicentennial celebration in 1976. Quilts began to be recognized as art around this time.

Quilting and quilt collecting still are popular. Time will tell what themes quilters now are establishing.

By **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON** with photo by **GARY CLARK**

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