



ORIGINAL DESIGN; Carl Klenicke; Corning, Steuben County; c. 1900; Pieced silk, faille, taffeta, and satin; 72½ x 60". Collection of Bessie P. Holmes.

**NEW  
YORK  
BEAUTIES...ALL**

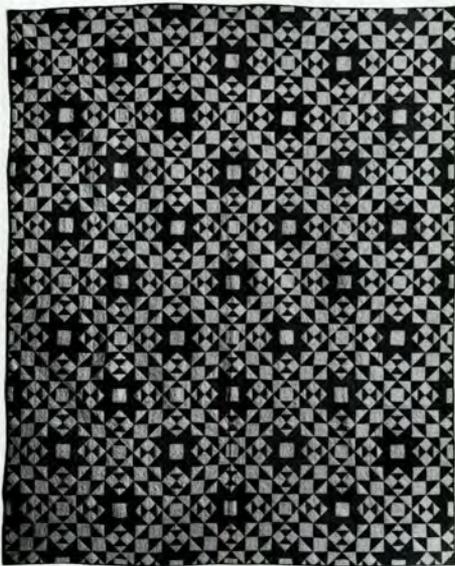
**The  
New York  
Quilt  
Project**



PHYLLIS A. TEPPER

**T**he New York Quilt Project is dedicated to a group of remarkable people who created a significant body of folk art through the use of traditional tools: needle, thread and fabric. They are the known and unknown quiltmakers (mostly women) of New York State who, working within the confines of their homes, have bequeathed to succeeding generations of New Yorkers quilts of rare beauty as well as utility. However, among all the folk artists, quiltmakers have been the most anonymous. Since America's bicentennial, quilts have come out of the closets, trunks, and attics and quilt historians have attempted to redress this situation.

I attended a symposium on southern folk art held in New York during the summer of 1985. The New York Quilt Project is a direct result of a lecture given at that symposium by Shelly Zegart on the Kentucky Quilt Project. After hearing her talk, I determined that New York State had to document, preserve and archive its quilt heritage before the quilts and their histories disappeared. I have always been interested in the history and culture of New York State and wanted to know how and why its women made quilts. I wanted to know how they devel-



**STAR DESIGN;** Emily Webb Fosdick; Monroe, Orange County; c. 1854; Pieced cotton; 92 x 76". Collection of Phyllis Klein.

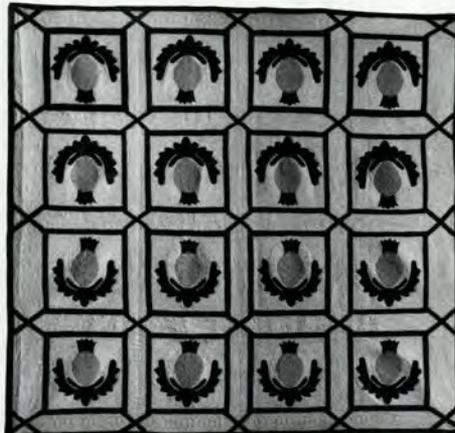
oped their patterns and how they formed their aesthetic judgments . . . who they made quilts with and for, where they learned, who they taught. Documentation of quilts of my native state would enable me to find answers to some of my questions.

Louis C. Jones, of the New York State Historical Association, stated the case for social history when he wrote, "The past should have as many personal ties for each of us as possible, for none should feel that he is floating in time, rootless and unrelated to all that has happened to our fathers and to those who lived in our place before us. . . . In the framework of the home let there be hand-me-downs from yesterday — pictures and furniture or a piece of lace. . . . things that have been in a family a long time have a magic of their own, asserting the values of life and its survival." (Louis C. Jones. *Three Eyes on the Past: Exploring New York Folk Life*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982, pp. 11-12.) Robert Bishop and Gerard C. Wertkin enthusiastically encouraged, guided and supported my efforts to organize this project as a program of the Museum of American Folk Art.

The newly formed New York Quilt Project selected a distinguished panel of consultants to help in the development of its objectives. The panel consisted of experts in quilt history, folklore, folk art history, women's history, textile conservation, publishing, and quilt dealership. With their guidance and a review of other state projects, a plan for active field work was devised. The 1940 cut-off date was selected because it was a historical turning point. America had just come through a bruising depression and was gearing up for the world war to come; women were beginning to venture forth from domesticity into the labor market, and new inventions, many of which were featured at the World's Fair of 1939, promised a brave new world and a new society.

In constructing a documentation form for individual quilts, it was necessary to consider the facts of the quilter's life; her physical surroundings, family situation, cultural heritage, and motivations for making the quilt, as well as information about the technical and physical characteristics of the specific quilt. The documentation form had to serve the dual purpose of eliciting enough information during the oral interview without posing a hardship on the documentors or interviewees, and of creating a data base that would eventually be computerized for archival storage. Compressing all the questions we needed to ask resulted in a four-page questionnaire.

Guidelines were prepared for Quilt Days that were planned throughout the state so that quilt owners could bring in their quilts for photography and documentation. In addition, quilt owners were encouraged to bring in supporting data such as letters, diaries, period publications, photographs of the quilter, and any written material which could shed light on the circumstances of the quilter and the quilt. Forty-five such public quilt days were held throughout the state over a period of twenty-one months. Determination of where to hold Quilt Days depended partially on availability of space and volunteers to do the intake. We never knew how many



**PINEAPPLE;** Nancy Margaret Helmer Folts; Kastbridge, Herkimer County; Before 1900; Appliquéd cotton; 85 x 82". Collection of Madeline Helmer Fagan.



**TURKEY IN THE TREE;** Maker and date unknown; Rockland County; Cotton; 107 x 92". Collection of Judith and Patrick Lawlor.

**TEACHING QUILT;**  
 Elizabeth Hamilton;  
 New York State; 1934;  
 Pieced and appliquéd  
 cotton; 85 x 80".  
 Collection of Ruth G.  
 Strong.



quilts would be brought in and we did not want to disappoint people who might have driven many miles to get to a Quilt Day site. Thus, although times were publicized as being from 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., many days started at 9:00 A.M. and continued until 8:00 P.M. Some days we documented as few as fifty-four quilts and on other days as many as 269. Although it was not possible for every one of the sixty-two counties of New York State to be visited, all the geographical regions of the state were well represented in the course of these Quilt Days. New York State's extensive quilt guild network

proved invaluable in providing enthusiastic volunteers who found space in local churches, private and public university sites, school gyms and libraries, community organization meeting rooms, historical societies, and even a public television station. The guilds arranged for volunteer training days, local publicity and all the other tasks enabling the Project to carry out its mission to locate and document New York State made quilts in the possession of private owners.

The earliest signed and dated quilt in the archives to this time is that of "Mildred Cos Cob Rhy 1753."

Realizing that many quilt owners would not be able to appear personally with their quilts at a public Quilt Day, outreach attempts were made through publications catering to quilt owners, quilt and antique collectors, and persons interested in collateral textile fields. Thus, quilts have been documented and registered by mail, many from other states to which New York State quilts have migrated. Museums and historical societies, both within New York State, and outside, have also sent documentations of quilts in their collections to the archive maintained at the Museum of American Folk Art.

To date, about 6,000 quilts have been documented and archived. The archives have already proven to be useful to students and scholars. Knowledge that an archive exists has brought daily inquiries for information. One paper has already been written by Barbara Phillippi, based on data culled from the New York Quilt Project archives and appears in the American Quilt Study Group's *1990 Uncoverings*.

The logo of the Project is the pattern known as "New York Beauty" for obvious reasons. We thought that we would be able to research the pattern and discover



**ORIGINAL GEOMETRIC;**  
Anthony J. Klem;  
Owego, Tioga County;  
1914-1919; Pieced  
wool; 78 x 70".  
Collection of Jeannette  
C. Lee.

**ALBUM QUILT; Mrs. Eldad Miller; Cross River; 1861; Appliquéd and embroidered cotton and silk; 90 x 75". Courtesy Museum of American Folk Art; 1980.8.1.**

more of its elusive history. However, as we continued with our Quilt Days, New York Beauty quilts failed to appear with any frequency. In fact, very few were seen! One, that had been a donation to the Oysterponds Historical Society (Orient Point, NY) came only with the name of the donor, pointing out the necessity for documentation by accessioning agencies at the time of donation. Another "New York Beauty" surfaced through the Tennessee Quilt Project. Obviously, the pattern is an old one, although the name may be of more recent vintage. Thus, inadvertently, the choosing of the Project's logo, demonstrates the need for documentation projects.

Many conclusions about quilts made in New York State can be drawn from information gathered by this documentation project. The most obvious are that plain sewing skills were an absolute necessity in years past, cutting across all social and economic class lines, and that deep artistic yearnings existed and were displayed by the makers of many of the quilts. It was not sufficient to create an item of utility in a technically fine manner; the quiltmaker's aesthetic values as an individual were her most important statement.

As director of the New York Quilt Project, it was always one of my objectives to share the art of these quilts and the stories of their makers in a book. Jacqueline M. Atkins, my co-author, and I, believed that by writing a social and cultural history as seen through quilts made by citizens of New York State, we would be providing those personal ties to the past of which Dr. Jones so eloquently wrote. We wanted to pierce the shroud of anonymity surrounding many of the quiltmakers and bring an extra dimension to the understanding of the social history and cultural lore of one of the nation's first colonies to be settled, by placing their art within the context of the reality of New York State history.

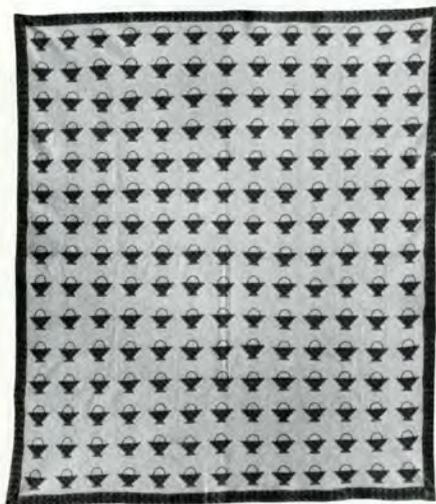
*New York Beauties: Quilts from the Empire State* to be published by Dutton Studio Books is scheduled to appear in May 1992. It will contain approximately 160 pages, 150 quilts in color, and many photos of quiltmakers and pertinent material. On May 14, 1992, an exhibition of about 25 examples of quilts made in New York State will open at the Museum of American Folk Art Eva and Morris Feld Gallery at 2 Lincoln Square in New York City and run until September 6, 1992. The exhibition will then be on view from October 5, 1992 to November 29, 1992 at the Geneva Historical Society, 543 South Main Street, Geneva, NY. It is enthusiastically anticipated that this exhibit will appear in other venues throughout the state. ★

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*Phyllis A. Tepper is a native New Yorker; born in Huntington, Long Island. She was educated in the public schools of New York City and received a B.A. from Queens College and an M.A. from New York University. Tepper is also a Fellow of the Museum of American Folk Art, having completed its Folk Art Institute's certificate program. In addition to directing the New York Quilt Project, she is the Registrar of the Folk Art Institute. Despite her heavy schedule, Tepper has enjoyed making quilts for her family since 1976.*



**CHERRY BASKET; Dora Stevens Rush; Camden, Oneida County; 1868; Pieced cotton; 79 x 69". Collection of Constance M. Kelley.**



**SUNBURST; Sarah Emily Wells Tuthill; Eastern Long Island; c. 1860; Pieced cotton; 82 x 70". Collection of Thomas C. and Mary K. Ryan.**

