

AMISH QUILTS



Gavin Ashworth

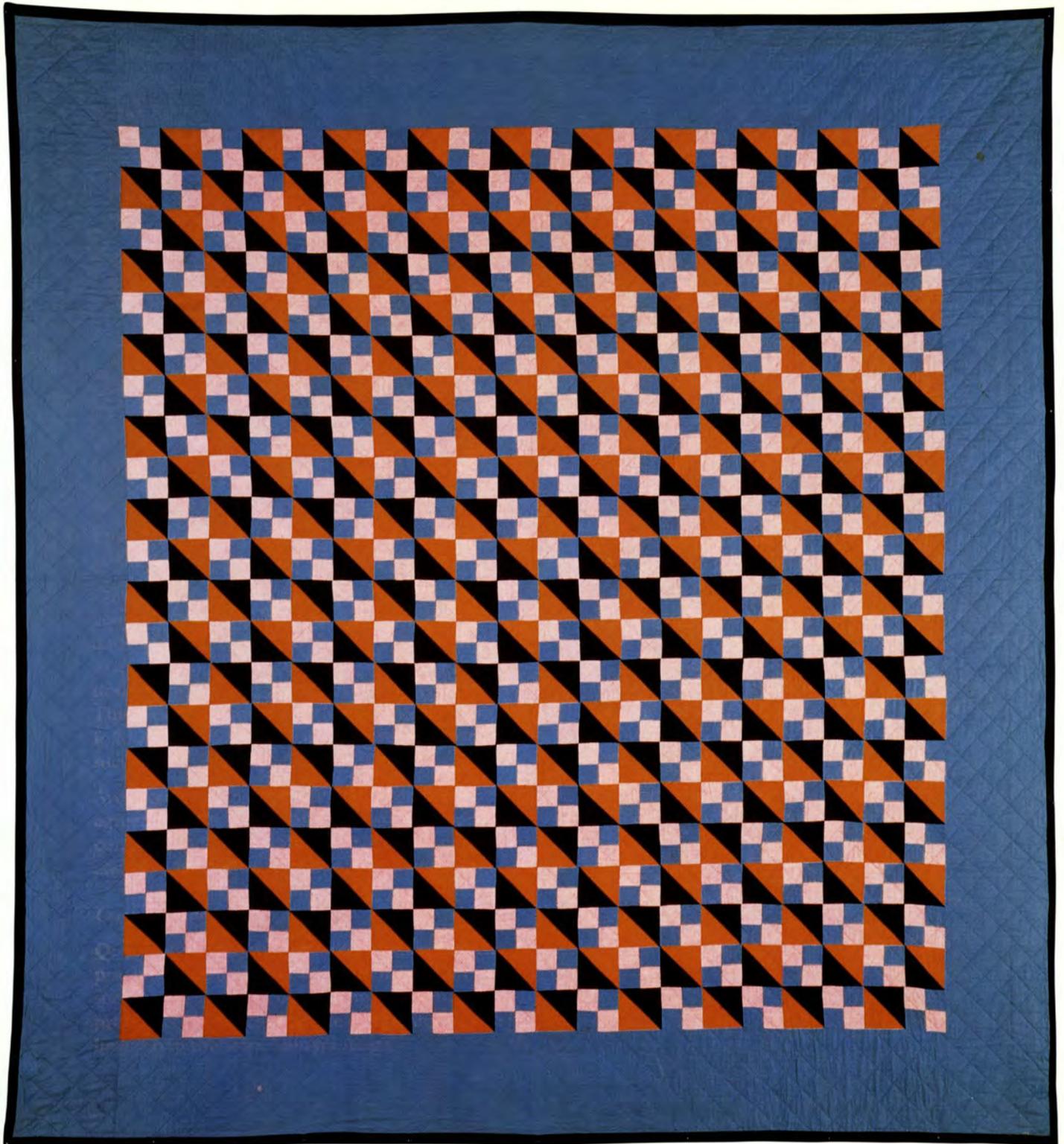
in the Museum of American Folk Art

By Elizabeth V. Warren

The Amish quilt collection of the Museum of American Folk Art is important not only because it comprises a significant percentage of the total collection (approximately one-quarter of more than 400 quilts), but also because it includes examples from most of the major Amish quilting centers: Lancaster and Mifflin Counties in Pennsylvania; Ohio; and Indiana. This varied assemblage provides an opportunity to compare and contrast the quilting traditions of the different areas and, in the process, consider the ways of life in these communities that led to the creation of a distinctive style of American quilt. As guest curator, I have chosen twenty of these for the exhibition "Beyond the Square: Color and Design in Amish Quilts," on view at the Museum through November 7.

◀ **DIAMOND IN THE SQUARE QUILT**
Quiltmaker unidentified
Lancaster County, Pennsylvania
1910–1925
Wool
78 × 78"
Gift of Freyda Rothstein,
1998.8.2

FOUR PATCH IN TRIANGLES QUILT ▶
Barbara Zook Peachey
(1848–1930)
Yellow Topper Amish, Byler Group
Mifflin County, Pennsylvania
1910–1920
Cotton
85½ × 78¾"
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William B.
Wigton, 1984.25.12



The exhibition "Beyond the Square: Color and Design In Amish Quilts" is sponsored by



The history, sociology, and religion of the Amish have all been fully discussed in many books. It is, however, beneficial to bear some of this background in mind when looking at the quilts in the Museum's collection and considering why they are distinct from other forms of American quilts.

these religions, including elaborate dress and ornate churches, and instead chose the simplicity of the early Christians as their model.

The Amish were followers of Jacob Amman (c. 1644–c. 1730), a Swiss Mennonite bishop who was so conservative that he severed his ties with the Mennonite Church in the

Harshly persecuted in Europe for their beliefs, the Amish began to migrate to America at the invitation of William Penn. The first group probably arrived with other "Pennsylvania Germans" in 1727 or 1737. During the colonial period they settled on the rich farmland of Berks, Chester, and Lancaster Counties in Pennsylvania,



CENTER STAR WITH CORNER STARS QUILT
 Unidentified member of the Glick family
 Probably Arthur, Illinois
 1890–1900
 Wool with cotton backing
 76¾ × 82½"
 Gift of Phyllis Haders, 1985.3.1

The Amish in America today are the descendants of the Swiss Brethren, part of the strong Anabaptist movement that followed the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The Amish rejected what they saw as the decadence of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches of their day. Along with other Anabaptist sects, the Amish repudiated the iconography of

1690s partly because he believed it was not strict enough in its practice of *Meidung*, or shunning those who deviate from the *Ordnung*, or rules of conduct of the Church. Amman's followers formed the group, later called Amish after him, that migrated to the Palatinate region along the Rhine and to the Netherlands.

where they could continue the way of life they had led in Europe, which they essentially lead today. The Amish attempt to keep themselves separate from the outside world, and they generally reject those modern conveniences such as electricity, cars, telephones, and televisions that they feel would bring them into contact with that world. Their style of dress, a

fashion closer to eighteenth-century Europe than twentieth-century America, is also meant to distinguish them as a group apart.

The Amish, like other Germanic groups, did not bring a tradition of quilting to America with them. Blankets, featherbeds, and woven coverlets were the more typical styles of

known examples exist that can be dated before 1870. The quilting tradition seems to have taken hold among the Amish in the 1870s and 1880s, and the majority of Amish quilts extant today were made between the 1880s and the 1960s.¹

As befits the conservative lifestyle of the Amish and their religious prohibition against naturalistic images, the earliest Amish quilts were made of large pieces of a single-colored fabric (either cotton or wool), much like the whole-cloth wool quilts made in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by "English" quiltmakers. By the end of the nineteenth century, these were followed by quilts with more colors and more design elements, although large, geometric pieces of solid-colored fabric were still the norm. The classic Lancaster County designs—Center Square, Diamond in the Square, and Bars—are examples of patterns that originated in the nineteenth century and continued to be made through the twentieth century, partly due to the conservatism of all aspects of Amish life.

LANCASTER COUNTY QUILTS

The Diamond in the Square pattern, unique to Lancaster County,

is probably an Amish adaptation of the center medallion style of quilt that was popular among "English" quiltmakers in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Amish woman's selection of this outmoded style of quilt was not happenstance. According to Amish quilt historian Eve Wheatcroft Granick, the

choice of the old-fashioned medallion style "seems to have been a deliberate attempt to make their quilts in accordance with Amish standards of non-conformity to 'English' fashion."²

The *Diamond in the Square Quilt* in this exhibition is composed of many typical Lancaster County features: The fabrics are fine-quality solid-colored wools, since patterned

material, although sometimes found on the back, was considered too "worldly" for quilt tops; the dimensions are square; and the center motif is surrounded by a narrow inner border and a particularly wide outer border, which is finished with proportionately large corner blocks.

This quilt, like a great many other Amish examples, is also characterized by stitching of exquisite quality. Although most Amish quilts were pieced together with a foot-powered treadle sewing machine (acceptable because it does not use electricity), they were typically quilted by hand. This bedcover includes favorite Lancaster County motifs such as a wreath-star center and a grapevine in the inner border. Quite possibly the realistic quilting motifs, such as the grapevine and the stars, were the maker's way of circumventing her society's prohibition against naturalistic designs. Fruits, flowers, baskets, and other nongeometric forms were often appliquéd onto the quilts of her "gay Dutch" (non-Amish Pennsylvania Germans) and "English" (any other Americans) neighbors. While the Amish generally rejected appliqués because they served no practical purpose, they may have felt it was acceptable to stitch many of the same designs into their quilts, satisfying themselves with the knowledge that their tiny, precise stitches were necessary to hold the backing, filling, and top together.

The Lancaster County *Double Nine Patch Quilt* in the exhibition is an example of a pattern that was probably developed after the classic Center Square, Diamond in the Square, and Bars designs, most likely in the later nineteenth or early twentieth century. Double Nine Patch is a block-work pattern, popular in the outside world by the middle of the nineteenth century but not seen among the Amish until much later.

It is in the beautiful, bold wool examples of Lancaster County that one is made particularly aware of the striking colors chosen by the Amish women for their quilts. While much of the color choice for a quilt was determined by the fabrics and dyes available at any particular time, community values and informal rules regarding the appropriateness of a specific color choice also



DOUBLE NINE PATCH QUILT
Mrs. Dan Troyer
Holmes County, Ohio
1915–1925
Cotton
75¼ × 43¼"
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Wigton, 1984.25.19

bedding. At some point in the nineteenth century, the Amish learned to make quilts from their "English" neighbors, which is what they call all people outside their sect. There are very few documents (mostly estate inventories) that mention quilts among the Amish between the 1830s and the 1870s, but such quilts had to have been exceedingly rare, and only two

influenced the maker's selections. It is sometimes confusing, therefore, to compare the bright colors of the quilts against the "plain" face that the Amish present to the outside world. However, since the Amish *Ordnung* does not specifically refer to quilts, the women were not prevented from combining the deep jewel tones and vivid pastels they favored with more expected—and somber—earth shades and other dark colors. And while the brightly colored fabrics were often purchased specially for quilting, some Amish still use pinks, blues, greens, and other bright colors for their clothing, particularly for children, although the vivid hues are frequently hidden beneath a black cape or jacket.

MIFFLIN COUNTY QUILTS

Mifflin County, Pennsylvania—specifically the Kishacoquillas Valley ("Kish Valley" or "Big Valley," as it is commonly called)—has been home to the Amish since the 1790s, when several families moved there from Lancaster and Chester Counties. Currently, five separate and distinct Amish groups, all stemming from an original church that existed until the 1850s, occupy the Big Valley, and each maintains its own distinguishing rules, including those that encompass clothing colors and styles, buggy styles, housing styles and decoration, and quilting.³

The Museum's collection includes quilts made by members of three of these Amish groups. In general, the simplest examples tend to be those made by the Nebraska Amish, the most conservative group, not only in the Big Valley but in all of North America. Four- and nine-patch variations were the only kinds of patterns permitted among the Nebraska Amish, and the

color choices allowed the quiltmakers were also extremely limited.

Two of the bedcovers included in the exhibition, *Four in Block-Work Quilt* and *Four Patch in Triangles Quilt*, were made by members of the Byler Group, also called the "Yellow Topper" Amish because of the color of their buggy tops. The Byler church is slightly less conservative than the Nebraska Amish, as is evidenced by

the use of some bright colors in their quilts. However, as is clear from the patterns chosen by the makers of these and other quilts from Mifflin County in the Museum's collection, four- and nine-patch patterns would appear to be the most popular designs among all the groups in the Big Valley.

Unlike Lancaster County, where wool was the fabric of choice for quilts, Mifflin County Amish quilts

HUMMINGBIRDS QUILT
 Quiltmaker unidentified
 Shipshewana, Indiana
 1920–1930
 Cotton
 87¾ × 68¼"
 Gift of David Pottinger,
 1980.37.69





DOUBLE NINE PATCH QUILT
 Quiltmaker unidentified
 Lancaster County, Pennsylvania
 1930–1940
 Wool and wool-rayon blend
 79½ × 75¼"
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William B.
 Wigton, 1984.25.5

are commonly found in a variety of fabrics, and often the fabrics were mixed in a single quilt. The *Four in Block-Work Quilt* (illustrated on page 6) was probably made between 1925 and 1935 by Annie M. Peachey Swarey, who used a number of different fabrics in her quilt, including pieces of the newly available cotton/rayon. The American Viscose Corporation opened a factory in Lewistown, Pennsylvania, in 1921, making rayon readily available to the Amish through a local outlet shop. Amish quilts from Mifflin County, therefore, will often show a characteristic use of this fabric much earlier than those made in other communities.⁴

The oldest Mifflin County quilts in the Museum's collection were made by members of a third Amish

church in the Big Valley, the Peachey or "Black Topper" Amish. This group has been described as slightly more liberal than the other two groups discussed here,⁵ and both of these quilts are examples of patterns that were common in the outside world, although their peak popularity among the "English" probably occurred at least a generation before they were adopted by the Amish. Wool and cotton Log Cabin quilts such as the Barn Raising example in this exhibition became popular among most quiltmakers in the outside world in the 1860s. By the end of the nineteenth century, when this quilt was made by Lydia A. Kanagy Peachey, Log Cabins were more likely to be show quilts made of luxurious and impractical fabrics such as silk.

The *Log Cabin Quilt* in this exhibition was made of both wool and cotton in rich, saturated colors that were particularly popular among the Peachey quiltmakers. Of special interest is the fact that there has been some minor use of patterned fabrics—checks and inconspicuous prints—on this quilt. As mentioned above, patterned fabrics are generally considered too worldly for use by the Amish. Occasionally, however, rather than wasting material, the maker will use a small check or print that has been acquired in a bundle of fabrics in a subdued way, such as for the tiny chimney of a Log Cabin block.

The second Peachey Amish quilt in the exhibition, the *Crazy Patch Quilt*, is also an Amish adaptation of a pattern common in the outside world at an earlier time. According to family history, the quilt was made by Leah Zook Hartzler for her sister, Lydia, on the occasion of Lydia's marriage to Daniel J. Yoder in 1903. In the outside world, Crazy Quilts reached their peak of popularity in the 1880s. This remarkable example can be considered both an Amish woman's interpretation of a design that was already waning among quiltmakers outside her community and a quilt that is totally in keeping with the relatively narrow aesthetic parameters set by that community.

While obviously influenced by the fanciful silk and velvet Crazy Quilts popular in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Amish maker of this quilt has imposed order and regularity on what is by definition a disordered and asymmetrical design. The "crazy" patches are neatly set off by pumpkin-colored squares at the corners, and on close examination it can be seen that even the irregular patches themselves are ordered by a traditional Mifflin County four-patch pattern.

MIDWESTERN QUILTS

By far the largest number of Amish quilts in the Museum's collection were made in the Midwest, particularly Indiana and

Ohio. This reflects both the large settlements of Amish in these two states and the popularity of quilting in these communities, as well as the fact that the Museum was the beneficiary of a generous gift of Indiana quilts in 1980.⁶

What may be the oldest midwestern quilt in the Museum's collection, however, was probably made in one of the comparatively smaller communities. Although there is no genealogical information to prove exactly where the *Center Star with Corner Stars Quilt* was made, it resembles a group of quilts made in the Arthur, Illinois, community in the late nineteenth century.⁷ This stable and prosperous community is known for the use of fine materials, a strong color sense, and unusual borders and piecing arrangements,⁸ all of which can be seen on this uncommon quilt.

Another unusual quilt in the exhibition is the *Double Nine Patch Quilt* from Holmes County, Ohio, which is neither a crib nor a full-size quilt but rather a long and narrow shape (75¾ × 43¼"). This elongated textile was probably used as a lounge quilt and was made for the small, usually narrow daybeds that were once used in Amish parlors in place of upholstered sofas.⁹

Perhaps the greatest difference between Amish quilts made in the Midwest and those made in Pennsylvania is the increased number of patterns found in the Midwest, both those borrowed from the outside world and those that originated in the Amish communities. The greater variety of patterns may be a by-product of the fact that the Amish in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and elsewhere in the Midwest generally do not live in such concentrated communities as their counterparts in Pennsylvania and consequently have more opportunities to be exposed to the outside world and its influences. Because of the slightly less restrictive nature of life in some midwestern Amish communities,¹⁰ there may have been greater freedom to experiment with quilt patterns.

This great range of patterns can be seen in the large grouping of midwestern Amish quilts that are part of the Museum's collection. Typically, the quilts are block designs surrounded, like most Amish quilts, by a

narrow inner border and a wide outer border. Cotton is the preferred fabric, although a variety of different cotton weaves are used (sometimes in a single quilt), and pieces of other fabrics such as wool may be found along with the cotton on some quilts.

The Indiana quilts in the exhibition demonstrate color combinations that were particularly preferred by the Amish in the Midwest from the 1920s through the 1940s, when most of the quilts in the Museum's collection were made. In the early twentieth century, black became a favorite color for quilts, especially as a background. Sometimes, a dark blue was chosen instead. Both colors provided a strong contrast to the bold reds, yellows, blues, greens, and other hues that the quiltmakers frequently selected for their patterns. Such a dark and bright color combination often made even the simplest pattern appear especially exciting. The *Hummingbirds Quilt*, for example, an exceptionally graphic quilt, derives its visual appeal from rows of inexpertly stitched four-pointed stars in vivid colors set against a black field.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Amish quilting in all of the communities had undergone tremendous changes. A lighter color palette gained acceptance among many of the quilters, and synthetic fabrics—often in harsh hues—began to be widely used. Amish women became aware that there are rules in the outside world about what colors go with others, and so their wonderful, uninhibited juxtapositions of colors were replaced by more common combinations. Many quilters also began using synthetic batting, which tends to be thicker than cotton. This results in fewer stitches per inch and the selection of less intricate quilting patterns. Finally, as the quilts became valuable collectibles, some Amish started copying the old patterns for the new market, creating quilts that, while often still very effective, lack the inspiration of the originals.

Amish quilting today, although very different from fifty years ago, still retains its conservative aspect. While contemporary quilters in the outside world experiment with hand-dyed fabrics, three-dimensional constructions, and other

avant-garde techniques, Amish quiltmakers tend to specialize in the traditional patterns that have been popular for the past 150 years. Frequently, these quilts are made for sale to tourists, since Amish women have found that quilting is an acceptable way to supplement their income. But while the restrictions of just a few generations ago have disappeared—for example, patterned fabrics and appliqués are now acceptable—they appear to have been replaced by a resistance to experimenting with the contemporary fashion for creating fabric "art." This is consistent with the tradition of Amish quilting, as one of the reasons Amish women may have been allowed to create such masterpieces originally was that the quilts were intrinsically functional and never intended as works of art. ★

Editor's note: This article is adapted from *Glorious American Quilts: The Quilt Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art* (Penguin Studio, 1996) by Elizabeth V. Warren and Sharon L. Eisenstat.

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NOTES

- 1 Eve Wheatcroft Granick, *The Amish Quilt* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 1989), p. 29.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 3 See *ibid.*, p. 91, for a chart on the evolution of Amish and Mennonite groups in Mifflin County.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 6 In 1980, David Pottinger gave the Museum of American Folk Art ninety-two midwestern Amish quilts. Most were from Indiana, but the gift also included quilts made in Ohio and from the Amish community of Haven, Kansas, which had close ties to the settlements in Indiana.
- 7 Eve Wheatcroft Granick, interview with the author, 1993.
- 8 Granick, *The Amish Quilt*, p. 141.
- 9 Stanley A. Kaufman with Leroy Beachy, *Amish in Eastern Ohio* (Walnut Creek, Ohio: German Culture Museum, 1990), p. 48.
- 10 The Schwartzentruber Amish in Ohio and the Old Order Amish in Indiana are among the most conservative of all Amish groups.

CRAZY PATCH QUILT
Leah Zook Hartzler
Black Topper Amish,
Peachey Group
Mifflin County, Pennsylvania
1903
Wool and cotton with cotton
embroidery
88 × 75"
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William B.
Wigton, 1984.25.15