

Pattern and Paradox

The Quilts of Amish Women

The Faith and Stephen Brown Collection of Amish Quilts at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Faith and Stephen Brown first encountered Amish quilts in 1973, when they visited the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery for the exhibition *American Pieced Quilts*. They found inspiration in the many arrangements of pattern and color and in the bold designs that seemed at odds with how they imagined the so-called "plain" people. The Browns' delight and knowledge grew in tandem over the years, and their compiled array of quilts became distinguished for conveying the depth and breadth of creativity across Amish communities. The quilts the Browns so carefully gathered over some four decades reveal the astonishing skills of Amish women from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other American settlements.

When items made for home and family are viewed in the museum, they prompt important questions about art, culture, and their many intersections. *Pattern and Paradox: The Quilts of Amish Women* looks beyond quilting as a utilitarian practice and considers the journey of Amish quilts from the domestic realm to the art museum setting. The exhibition explores the creative practice of Amish quiltmakers in the United States and celebrates Faith and Stephen Brown's transformative gift of Amish quilts to SAAM.

Pattern and Paradox presents fifty selections from this extraordinary collection of around 130 "Sunday best" quilts; it is the largest and most widely representative group of Amish quilts ever to be acquired by a major art museum. Given and pledged to SAAM over a period of years, the Browns' collection has now come full circle, finding a home in the institution that first inspired their collecting quest.

Pattern and Paradox: The Quilts of Amish Women is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by:

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Pattern and Paradox: The Quilts of Amish Women

The quilts in this exhibition reveal a world riddled with paradox. The Amish women who painstakingly conceived, pieced, and quilted these bedcoverings never intended for them to be viewed in a museum setting. In fact, they never intended their quilts to be seen as artworks at all. *Pattern and Paradox* reveals historical quiltmaking among the Amish as an aesthetic endeavor that walked a line between cultural and individual expression. Amid an array of inherent contradictions, Amish women devised a practice that twinned the plain with the spectacular, tradition with innovation, and a worldview grounded in humility with the creation of objects now regarded as extraordinary works of art.

In the late nineteenth century, Amish women adopted quiltmaking—an artform already well-established elsewhere—and made it distinctly their own. They developed communal and familial preferences, with women sharing work, skills, and patterns. The quilts herein were all made between 1880 and the late 1940s, in communities united by faith, shared values of conformity and humility, and a rejection of “worldly” society. When Amish quilts traveled into the mainstream world in the late twentieth century, they developed a dual identity: part icon of Amish culture, part abstract artwork, with many art enthusiasts embracing them for their

resemblance to modern paintings. This exhibition considers the unique role of Amish quilts in American art today—roughly a century after those in this collection were made.

The Amish

The Amish are a Christian denomination, currently scattered across hundreds of settlements in the United States, Canada, Argentina, and Bolivia. They are united by an ethos of pacifism, mutual aid, humility, conformity, and a clear separation from the secular world. Each settlement has multiple church districts composed of twenty to forty households. Members in each district determine and follow the *Ordnung*—localized guidelines that govern practices of faith and daily life. Today, the Amish church is thriving—in fact, its membership has doubled to almost four hundred thousand since the year 2000. Amish families are generally large, and most children choose to remain in the church as adults. Historically, many Amish farmed, but since the late twentieth century the culture has embraced entrepreneurship. The Amish own and run construction companies, greenhouses, and quilt shops, for example, and sometimes work in non-Amish owned businesses.

The faith group traces its lineage to a small Anabaptist sect that emerged in 1525 as an offshoot of the Protestant Reformation. Facing persecution from an intolerant state church, they met in caves and other discreet outposts in German-speaking parts of Europe. In 1693, the Anabaptist preacher Jakob Ammann led a faction of the group who sought a stricter church discipline; his followers became known as the Amish. In pursuit of religious freedom, many Amish began immigrating to Pennsylvania in the mid-1700s, establishing settlements during the 1800s in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, and Illinois. During the late nineteenth century, a split began. Gradually, over decades, tradition-minded districts emerged as the Old Order Amish, the plain-dressing, horse-and-buggy-driving group we know today. The more progressive districts merged with the Mennonite church, another thriving global population rooted in Europe's Anabaptist movement.

Pattern

People have patterns; quilts have patterns. Patterns go beyond the way something looks; they encompass traditions, practices, rituals, and habits. For both the Amish and their bedcovers, patterns and preferences have changed over time. Before the United States industrialized, the patterns of Amish life and those of mainstream society had considerable overlap. As the nation embraced new technologies and conveniences, the differences between the Amish and mainstream society became increasingly pronounced. Technological advances spurred schisms within the Amish church as well—use of lightning rods, telephones, and automatic milking machines all contributed to the splintering of Amish into separate communities, each with different restrictions and behavior patterns.

Quilt patterns reflect the choices of the individuals who select, explore, and alter them. Favored patterns then mirror the preferences of a particular community, such as a given settlement or extended family network. Between 1880 and the end of the 1940s, when the quilts in *Pattern and Paradox* were made, no specific guidelines—spiritual, cultural, or stylistic—governed their patterns or colors, so Amish women explored an uncharted territory. The probing of aesthetic boundaries varied widely from community to community, but quiltmakers ultimately established the standards and patterns that became prevalent within their various localities. Some preferred simple fabric patterns with large areas of fine stitching, while others gravitated toward elaborate patchwork and bold color design with stitches you can barely see.

The repeated adaptation of quilt patterns over time has resulted in an infinite array of results—from the widely recognized to the utterly original.

Paradox

Amish quilts present a particular quandary for art museums and audiences. Their makers rejected notions of art and artistry alike, yet here we see objects originally made to cover beds and be given as family gifts hanging on the walls like paintings.

Amish women took up quilting in the late nineteenth century, at a time when Americans generally considered it an old-fashioned practice. Making the practice their own, they pushed cultural limitations by innovating, sometimes creating unconventional—even wild—designs within a community that values modesty and adherence to rules. Paradoxically, such quilts reflect individual pride within a culture of conformity and humility.

By the late twentieth century, museums were showing Amish quilts with increasing frequency. A rift then arose between how their makers understood their quilts and how mainstream culture repositioned them as artworks and commodities. As audiences embraced the striking colors and inventive patterning of Amish quilts, the Amish themselves were—again paradoxically—uneasy about possessing museum-worthy, valuable artworks. Consequently, Amish families began to divest themselves of the quilts that had captivated the art world and American consumer culture alike. Some Amish women kept making quilts while others preferred to purchase their family’s bedding. Some rejected the “old dark quilts” the art world so relished and shifted to lighter and brighter colors for their own quilts. Others in more conservative communities continued the older ways, and many Amish women began making quilts for outsiders as a source of income.

Although vintage quilts remain among the most recognized manifestations of Amish culture, they represent the historical, localized trends of only a finite period from a living and changing culture.



Attributed to **Mrs. D. Miller**

Kalona, IA

One Patch, Triangles variation

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Patch Variations

Patch variations are practical beginner’s quilts; many girls recall learning to make their first quilt blocks through these simple but eye-pleasing patterns. “Blocks” are the basic design unit of a quilt. Most often square, each block is made by stitching together individual patches of fabric in a repeating pattern. Working on simple quilt blocks—for example, three rows of three patches each—girls became adept at piecing, learning how to accurately align and sew the intersection of each patch. The overall pattern took shape as the individual blocks were joined together into a larger whole.

Patterns can be “set,” or arranged, in different ways, resulting in dramatically different designs even though the basic block patterns are the same. Look closely at the patch variation quilts; can you find the repeating block that drives the design of each? Among the examples here are a Nine Patch within a Four Patch, a Double Nine Patch with an ornately pieced inner border, and a small-scale One Patch crib quilt made from soft blues and grays. Two Nine Patch quilts—one with strong diagonal lines and another with a black latticelike pattern over lighter colors—reveal how different a pattern can appear when the colors are organized differently. The Puss in the Corner variation alters the width of select patches, changing the overall look yet again.



Unidentified maker

probably Kalona, IA

Nine Patch

ca. 1920

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.22



Unidentified maker

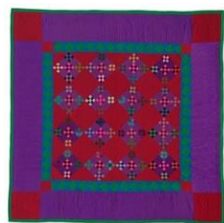
probably Indiana

Nine Patch

ca. 1930–40

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.25



Unidentified maker (Initialed "ME")

Lancaster County, PA

Double Nine Patch

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.27



Unidentified maker (Initialed “LAY”)

Buchanan County, IA

One Patch

ca. 1940

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.19

With its wide outer borders, inner frames, and repeated blocks within an interior field, this One Patch, sized for a baby, scales down a pattern you might see in a full-size quilt. Amish families welcomed many babies with crib quilts, which, with such small patches, made ingenious use of scraps. Seeing these crib quilts up close allows the viewer to grasp the petite scale of the blocks and borders; the squares in this One Patch, for example, are each just three-quarters of an inch. Small patches make handwork more challenging, but crib quilts can essentially be made in any pattern the maker fancies.

The crib quilts in this exhibition were all made in the Midwest; this points to a preference for small works among the Indiana, Iowa, and Ohio Amish. The Pennsylvania Amish, who often worked with harder-to-wash wool, primarily made only full-size quilts.



Unidentified maker

possibly Mifflin County, PA

Nine Patch, Puss in the Corner variation

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.33



Unidentified maker

possibly Mifflin County, PA

Nine Patch in Four Patch / Block Work

ca. 1935–45

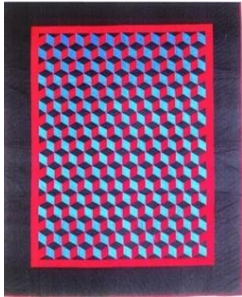
cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.26

Tumbling Blocks

The Tumbling Blocks pattern showcases Amish quiltmakers' abilities to combine precise spatial skills with extraordinary design instincts. The pattern—a combination of three 60-degree angles that creates the illusion of a three-dimensional cube—requires a technically challenging type of piecing known as a Y-seam, the shape formed by the intersecting seams. Achieving the precise points of the cube is difficult even once. To combine hundreds of diamond-shaped blocks that

together produce the optical illusions in Tumbling Blocks quilts requires expertise in aesthetics, geometry, and needlework. Each of these variations employs a different arrangement of the pattern, resulting in three distinct quilts, each with tremendous dynamism.



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Tumbling Blocks

ca. 1940–50

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.6



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Tumbling Blocks, Stairway to Heaven variation

ca. 1935

cotton

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Tumbling Blocks

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.1



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Broken Star

ca. 1930

cotton

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

This Broken Star quilt was meant to be noticed. In contrast to the many Amish quilts that reflect the modesty and plainness of their culture, this one is ornate and dazzling. Even though its maker would not have imagined her quilt installed on gallery walls, she might have envisioned how it would look hanging vertically—as it would be seen when drying on a clothesline.

Black sateen forms the pattern's negative space, a shiny weave that sets off the Depression-era shades of yellow, green, blue, and pink. The maker's skill shows in the precise piecing of 45-degree diamonds and the uniform quilting of the feather wreaths. This quilter may have swapped skills with others to achieve such an extraordinary quilt overall. For example, she may have lent her piecing abilities to another quilt project in exchange for help with the sawtooth binding edge, which required a special expertise to successfully execute.



Unidentified maker

from the Lapp family

Smoketown, Lancaster County, PA

Lone Star / Star of Bethlehem

ca. 1935–45

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.10

With its careful arrangement of colors that create a gradient effect, this large center medallion Lone Star quilt seems to pulsate. Amish women had no formal training in color theory, yet their palette decisions can be eye-popping—alternating light and dark shades and combining colors in unexpected and complementary ways.

The border makes this quilt unusually wild, especially for having been made in Lancaster County, where quiltmakers have long favored conservative and time-tested patterns. Pieced in different hues from those in the 45-degree diamonds shaping the star, the arrangement of the square patches in the border results in a pixelated effect, particularly if you squint at the design. The

distinctive border treatment sets this extraordinary quilt apart from the crowd—a star in more ways than one.

Unique Quilts

Each quilt is the result of an individual’s personal vision, even when the design is guided by tradition. Within Amish quiltmaking, there have been quilters whose designs fit neatly within established conventions. Others pushed the boundaries of both culture and craft by innovating—creating radical quilts within a community rooted in conformity and humility. The guidelines that structure Amish life—the *Ordnung*—frown upon individual pride. Yet ego has existed within Amish culture just as it has within the surrounding society.

Some Amish quilters adhered, perhaps proudly, to regulations for plainness. Others let moments of pride shine through with elaborate stitching—fiddlehead ferns, grapevines, wreaths of feathers—covering a quilt’s surface. Still others pushed back against conformity and created stunningly original quilts, comparable to none. As Amish women explored individual vision within bounds of community cohesion, they found an affinity for the spectacular within a plain lifestyle. Through these quilts, we discover that tradition and innovation are not always at odds.



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Original Pattern

ca. 1920

cotton and silk

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.18

With its array of techniques and inventive use of small bits of fabric, this original quilt blends design whimsy with extraordinary technical skill. Eighty pieced blocks in three pattern types—fifty Nine Patches, twenty-one in a Monkey Wrench variation, and nine eight-pointed stars—make the viewer’s eye dance around the piece. The diagonal indigo strips cutting across the design field create visual movement, while the stars at their intersections form a twinkling constellation. The bold zigzag inner border—no easy feat to piece—makes the quilt still more dynamic. The crowning design feature is the intricate hand quilting—wreaths of feathers, dense cross-hatching, and cables—uniting the three layers of the quilt.

Ocean Waves

Among the many innovative ways Ohio quiltmakers used fabrics left over from dressmaking is the Ocean Waves pattern, characterized by sections of small pieced triangles and areas absent of pattern. Like the Tumbling Blocks and Railroad Crossing patterns that were also favorites of both Ohio Amish women and collectors Faith and Stephen Brown, Ocean Waves is a versatile pattern that creates fascinating optical illusions, depending on how the maker chooses to lay it out. The four examples here showcase the wide-ranging possibilities of piecing small triangles together as a field, as well as the designs that result from creatively playing with foreground and background. Each of these Ocean Waves quilts speaks with a distinct voice, with each maker achieving an illusion of motion through the undulating waves of triangles. Look closely; see if you can find the two examples that have stitched dates hidden in the quilting.



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Ocean Waves, with Concentric Squares / Framed Quilt back

ca. 1920

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.2



Attributed to **Clara Beachy**

Holmes County, OH

Ocean Waves

ca. 1940

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.24



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Ocean Waves

dated January 1, 1926

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.23



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Ocean Waves

dated 1917

cotton

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Log Cabin

Within the history and folklore of quilting, the Log Cabin pattern stands out as an American favorite. Hand-hewn homes with a central hearth symbolized a do-it-yourself ethos and themes of family. During the Civil War, the pattern became associated with Abraham Lincoln—an American president born in a log cabin home. The quilt pattern, however, may be much older, with versions of the stacked, interlocking logs of fabric found in designs from all over the world. Common Log Cabin settings carry distinct variation names, such as Courthouse Steps, Light and Dark, Sunshine and Shadow, Zig Zag, Straight Furrow, Pineapple, and Barn Raising. Log Cabin variations largely depend on how the maker used color and hue to arrange the blocks. Quilt borders are another place in which a pattern can vary; both examples here have a border pattern called Piano Keys.



Unidentified maker

Western Pennsylvania

Log Cabin, Sunshine and Shadow variation

ca. 1920

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.29



Unidentified maker

Arthur, IL

Log Cabin, Barn Raising variation

ca. 1925

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.11



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Double Wedding Ring

ca. 1940–50

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.28

The pattern name Double Wedding Ring bestows themes of love and marriage onto this design of interlocking circles. In 1928, the Kansas-based *Capper's Weekly* published the pattern, making it one of the most widely recognized patterns of the era, and it has remained an enduring favorite.

The Amish approached mainstream trends with caution, but deftly adapted this appealing design to suit their own tastes and conventions. Depression-era versions made by non-Amish quiltmakers across the United States favored a light background with calico patches and scalloped edges. In contrast, this version is characteristically Amish with its dark ground and wide outer border.



Unidentified maker

from the family of Mrs. Andrew N. Yoder

Holmes County, OH

Crosses and Losses

dated 1898

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.14

Fewer than fifty Amish-made quilts have stitched dates from the nineteenth century, making this quilt and the nearby Railroad Crossing quilt dated 1888 rare examples. Nineteenth-century Amish quilts often feature earthy hues—walnut, brown, burgundy, and indigo—from natural dyes that hold up well over time. Look for the dates stitched into each of these quilts.

Quilting styles and timelines vary from place to place and culture to culture. Crosses and Losses, like other repeat-block patterns, was a popular pattern among the non-Amish before Amish women from Holmes County, Ohio, and other midwestern settlements adopted it.



Unidentified maker

probably Indiana

Fans

ca. 1915

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.12

Fans is a pattern with many variations. This version stands out for its alternating orientation of the fan shapes—they flip back and forth, up and down, creating a rhythmic impression of movement across the quilt's surface. Fans variations grew popular among non-Amish quiltmakers in the late nineteenth century, after a commercially available pattern was published in 1885. Amish quiltmakers were not ignorant of the popular patterns circulating in newspapers and magazines. Many collected published patterns and shared them with community members, adapting them to local preferences. This was certainly the case for Fans patterns, which quilters made with frequency in northern Indiana Amish settlements during the early decades of the twentieth century.



Unidentified maker

from the family of Malinda D. Miller

Holmes County, OH

Railroad Crossing

dated 1888

cotton

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

This 1888 quilt is the oldest with a documented date in the Browns' collection and the earliest known dated example of the Railroad Crossing pattern.

A distinctly Ohio Amish pattern, Railroad Crossing features dramatic intersections crossing through an expanse of triangles. These examples showcase the complexity of the pattern as well as the ways in which the quiltmakers played with concepts of foreground and background, despite being unfamiliar with the jargon of artistic production. The pattern requires that the maker stitch together enough tiny half-square triangles to make a field that appears undulating yet solid. That field of triangles within triangles forms a background, visually overlaid with X-shaped pathways.



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Railroad Crossing

ca. 1930

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.15



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Railroad Crossing

ca. 1930

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.34

Sixteen Patch / Tartan

Like many of the German and Swiss immigrants who immigrated to North America in the 1700s and 1800s, the Amish did not arrive with a quilting tradition. They slept on homespun linen bags filled with straw or cornhusks, and used similar bags stuffed with feathers as insulating top covers. If there was any decorative touch, it was a woven coverlet, either homemade or acquired from travelling weavers.

These Sixteen Patch quilts resemble such woven coverlets, in which irregularly spaced, repeating stripes cross at right angles. The name “Tartan,” like a plaid, refers to a pattern of crisscrossing and interlocking bands of varied widths. It is unlikely that the Amish used this pattern name. Rather, the look of these unique quilts inspired the nickname as they changed hands over the years.



Unidentified maker

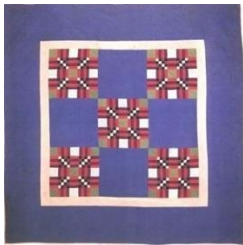
Mifflin County, PA

Sixteen Patch / Tartan

ca. 1930

cotton

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Unidentified maker

Mifflin County, PA

Sixteen Patch / Tartan

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

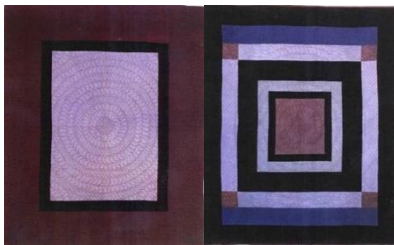
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.17

Center Square

Center Square quilts, sometimes referred to as Plain Quilts, offer a generous surface for foregrounding quilting motifs and tiny, uniform stitches. Frames and corner blocks often surround an interior section. Both the Center Square and Bars patterns appealed to the modern art enthusiasts who began to notice Amish quilts in the 1970s, as they identified coincidental parallels between quilt patterns and the color-field and “zip” paintings of the post-war era.

In this section, a classic Center Square design hangs near a variation sometimes referred to as Concentric Squares or called a Framed Quilt. The latter of the two functions as a reversible quilt, with two decorative sides offering versatility and variety.

In some Amish communities, a given quilt top might not suit the tastes of others in the church district. There are even accounts of women flipping quilts to their plainer side when preparing for a visit with more conservative members of the community.



Unidentified maker

descended in the family of Noah Otto
probably Arthur, IL

Center Square / Plain Quilt, with Concentric Squares / Framed Quilt back

ca. 1930

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.3



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Center Square / Plain Quilt

ca. 1930–40

cotton

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Bars / *Strema*

Bars is one of the classic Amish patterns from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The pattern features wide outer borders and alternating strips of fabric that serve as a canvas for ornate quilting stitches. These examples—two classic Bars and one Nine Patch in Bars—include narrow inner frames, arresting contrasts of colors, and miniscule quilting stitches—typically at least ten stitches to the inch. The quilting stitches form feathered wreaths, grapevines, pumpkin seeds, cross-hatching, and scallops.

Bars, along with Center Diamond and Sunshine and Shadow, is one of three patterns primarily associated with the Amish of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Bars and Center Diamond are plain patterns with expansive swaths of fabric, spaces which allowed quilters to showcase their extraordinary stitching skills.



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Bars / *Strema*

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.8



Rebecca Zook

Lancaster County, PA

Bars / *Strema*

ca. 1910

cotton and wool

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Nine Patch in Bars

ca. 1915

wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.9



Unidentified maker

Arthur, IL

Bow Tie

ca. 1935

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.16

Center Diamond / *Hals duch Eck*

The Center Diamond is the quintessential Lancaster County Amish quilt pattern. It features a large framed square set “on point,” or tipped to sit as a diamond, situated within a surrounding framed square. The central diamond resembles the large squares of cloth that women pinned to the bodices of the “cape dresses” they wore. Noting this, Lancaster Amish women have called this pattern “Cape,” or in Pennsylvania German “*Hals duch Eck*,” which translates to “neck through corner.” Although it may be merely coincidence, the diamond within a square also bears a resemblance to a design found on the cover of the *Ausbund*, the Amish hymnal.

Center Diamond tops have simple piecing, with long seams stitched on treadle sewing machines, which were common in Amish homes by the early twentieth century. But marking the elaborately symmetrical designs for the quilting stitches—such as the stars and wreaths in the central diamond or the plumes of feathers in the borders—was a specialized skill. Quiltmakers likely exchanged areas of expertise with friends and family members, trading tasks like piecing, quilt-marking, or binding, just as they exchanged cardboard cutouts for patterns.



Barbara Fisher

Lancaster County, PA

Center Diamond / *Hals duch Eck*

ca. 1920

wool

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Center Diamond / *Hals duch Eck*

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.1

Center Diamond Variations

There are hundreds of known Center Diamond examples. Some follow time-tested standards while others build on the traditional pattern. In classic Center Diamond quilts, the fields of color are made with single expanses of fabric, joined with simple piecing. Center Diamond variations add to this staid model in elaborate ways, with patchwork motifs filling the central diamond shape.

Such pattern variations often present visual puzzles. When the central diamond is pieced from square patches, the resulting bands may run at right angles to the diamond shape. The appearance becomes that of concentric squares within a larger diamond. Alternately, the bands of patches might be arranged in the same tipped orientation as the diamond itself. In that case, the design appears as diamond bands descending within a larger diamond. The Sawtooth Diamond, which adds toothlike triangles along the inner border and diamond, is a less common

interpretation of the pattern. In the Sawtooth example here, the jagged blue-gray bands set against a vibrant scarlet field create an exceptionally high-impact color combination. These three variations reveal how even small design decisions can have a big impact on a pattern.



Unidentified maker (Initialed “DL”)

Intercourse, Lancaster County, PA

Sawtooth Diamond

ca. 1915

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.7



Unidentified maker

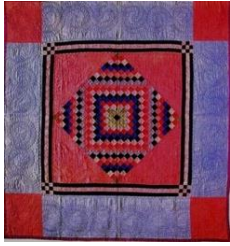
Lancaster County, PA

Center Diamond variation

ca. 1930

wool and silk

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.3



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Center Diamond variation

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.2

Sunshine and Shadow

Lancaster County Amish women prized the pattern often called Sunshine and Shadow; it was a practical choice for using up leftover fabrics, but it also offered an exciting opportunity for playing with color and pattern. Typically called Trip Around the World by the Amish and sometimes known as Grandmother’s Dream, many examples feature a dazzling array of colors, fibers, and fabrics, including crepe weaves, acetates and rayons, cottons, and dress wools.

The name Sunshine and Shadow evokes moments of contrast. To offset the low-key, often deep colors from the adults’ clothing—blues, blacks, purples, and browns—quiltmakers also used the brighter tones common in the garments of Amish children. Amish women also regularly purchased fabrics specifically for a project, especially for larger, solid-color sections like the borders and corner squares. Color choices for purchases might have been driven by the maker’s preference, but it is equally likely that she organized a quilt around remnant fabrics found on sale.

Take a close look at the center portions of the Sunshine and Shadow quilts; notice how they resemble the nearby patchwork Center Diamond variations yet remain a distinct pattern. Unlike

those in the Center Diamonds, the concentric bands of color in the Sunshine and Shadows flow outward all the way to the square border—like waves lapping against a shoreline or rays of light beaming through shadow.



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Sunshine and Shadow / Trip Around the World

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.4



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Sunshine and Shadow / Trip Around the World

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.4



Unidentified maker

Lancaster County, PA

Sunshine and Shadow / Trip Around the World

ca. 1920

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.5



Unidentified maker

Indiana

Variable Stars

ca. 1930–40

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.20



Unidentified maker

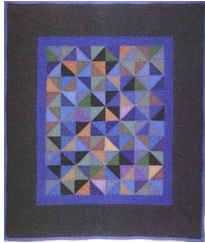
Holmes County, OH

One Patch, Broken Dishes variation

ca. 1930

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.30



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

One Patch, Broken Dishes variation

ca. 1930

cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.21

Roman Stripes and String Quilts

Roman Stripes is a pattern in which half of each quilt block is made with thin strips of colored fabric, and the other half from a solid piece of cloth. In one arrangement here, the strips all run in the same orientation. Another pivots the strips so that each larger block of four forms a diamond shape. The remaining quilt forgoes the solid pieces entirely.

Any quilt that uses narrow—stringlike—scraps of fabric might also be called a String Quilt, but “String” refers to the shape of the scraps, not to any specific pattern. When seen in a larger design, the “strings” look like stripes. The middle example here bears a strong resemblance to the Roman Stripes pattern. However, without half of each block being a solid piece of fabric, String Quilt is a more accurate description.

String quilts vary widely and reflect imagination and improvisation with available scraps—essential skills at the time Amish women pieced and quilted the two examples here. By the 1930s, quilts pieced from the scrap bag were an increasing reality. Depression-era thrift fueled a culture of creative reuse that some Amish makers also embraced. It remains difficult to determine whether fabric had a previous use. Ghost lines of stitching, unusual staining, and faded areas are the most common indicators of reuse.

Initials and Dates on Amish Quilts

A recurring obstacle for scholars of old quilts is that so few of them are signed or dated. The classic Roman Stripes quilt here offers an exception, with chainstitched initials and a date reading “IJY 1912 FEH.” The presence of two sets of initials on an Amish quilt often indicates that it was made as a “gift from home,” given to adult children as they prepared for marriage.

Amish naming practices result in frequent name repetitions within communities and across generations, so initials provide only a clue. Research into this quilt suggests that the first set of initials and date may belong to the quiltmaker and date she made it: Ida J. Yoder, 1912. The second set of initials, embroidered in a different color, may have been added when Ida, who married Eli Hershberger in 1919, handed the quilt down to their adult daughter Fannie E. Hershberger when she prepared to marry and set up her own home.



Unidentified maker

Holmes County, OH

Roman Stripes variation or String Quilt

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.32



Unidentified maker (Initialed “IJY” and “FEH”)

Holmes County, OH

Roman Stripes, with Plain Quilt back

dated 1912

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.31



Unidentified maker

from the family of Neal Bontrager

Buchanan County, IA

String Quilt or Roman Stripes variation

ca. 1940

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.5

Crazy Quilts

Within the American quilting tradition, the “Crazy quilt” is well known. The popular fashion of merging haphazard shapes into pleasingly quirky designs began in the Victorian era of the late nineteenth century. The idea was likely inspired by the cracked or “crazed” glaze of Japanese ceramics or by the ornate needlework practices of The Royal School of Needlework—both seen at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. A typical Victorian Crazy quilt features an array of satins, velvets, and other ornamental fabrics pieced together without a clear pattern, with surface embellishments including decorative embroidery and other adornments.

Amish makers tended to adopt and adapt quilt styles after they fell out of favor with the wider world. This was true of Crazy quilts, which some Amish women made in the early twentieth century. The examples here offer an interesting cross section of communal preferences. The version from Arthur, Illinois, appears as a joyous mishmash of fabrics and colors, reflecting an ease with a disorderly pattern. The nearby Lancaster County edition—a “contained” Crazy quilt with each chaotic block surrounded by plain, unpieced blocks—is contrastingly reluctant to relinquish a sense of order.



Unidentified maker

Arthur, IL

Crazy

ca. 1930

cotton and wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.13



Unidentified maker

Arthur, IL

Crazy Star

ca. 1920

cotton and wool

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Amish quiltmakers have occasionally produced truly innovative quilts that stand out not for their adherence to community design conventions, but because they are entirely unexpected. This is the case with Crazy Star. This quilt's maker combined two distinct practices favored within the settlement in Arthur, Illinois: a large central motif and crazy piecing. The result is a background pieced from fabrics in an array of textures with a superimposed large Evening Star block at the quilt's center. Surprising and delightful, it is truly a one-of-a-kind quilt.



Attributed to **Katie King**

Lancaster County, PA

Contained Crazy

ca. 1938

cotton and wool

Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum