Summary Article: quilting
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form of needlework, almost always created by women, most of them anonymous, in which two layers of fabric on either side of an interlining (batting) are sewn together, usually with a pattern of back or running (quilting) stitches that hold the layers together. This method of securing warmth in covering and clothing has been practiced for centuries in N Asia and Europe. Quilting has been a feature of embroidery in the form of raised work. It was a distinctive type of needlework in pioneer American homes, at first mainly utilitarian, later more ornamental. Quilts were usually of the pieced, or patchwork, type until c.1750, when the appliquéd, or laid-on, quilt and the monotone quilt decorated by trapunto (padding or cording) became popular. A fad for quilted petticoats for women and coattails for men was at its height from 1688 to 1714. About 1830 appliquéd box quilts, made with tops of individually pieced, generally geometric patterns, became dominant.

While some 18th-cent. examples are extant, the American quilt as art and craft is largely a 19th-century phenomenon. Dozens of traditional patchwork patterns have evolved, such as Sunburst, Sawtooth, Log Cabin, Schoolhouse, and Bear's Paw, and have continued in use well into the 20th cent. The quilts of certain American groups are especially compelling works of art. Among the most notable of these were made by the Amish (particularly c.1870–1935) who created utilitarian quilts with geometric designs in areas of unpatterned color—deep, vibrant, and close-toned—now much sought after by collectors. The Victorian period marked the popularity of the crazy quilt, in which asymmetrical designs were made of patches of various textiles in a multiplicity of sizes and shapes often connected by decorative stitching.

Part of the American folk art tradition, quilting is still practiced by Southern mountainfolk, the Pennsylvania Dutch, and other rural dwellers and has been revived as ornamental needlework. Traditional African-American quilts have been particularly praised for their bold, asymmetrical designs and brilliant colors, often complemented by the use of tied knots. Of particular interest are quilts (1930s–present) created by the women of Gee's Bend, an historically black Alabama community—jazzy, colorful works in irregular geometric patterns of remarkable abstract power that have been widely exhibited, e.g., at the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC (2002). The quilt has also been used as a form of textile art, as in the work of Faith Ringgold, who blends African-American tradition with contemporary art. Quilting also has a utilitarian function in modern life with machine-quilted materials used for wearing apparel and in interior decoration, particularly for bed and couch covers.

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