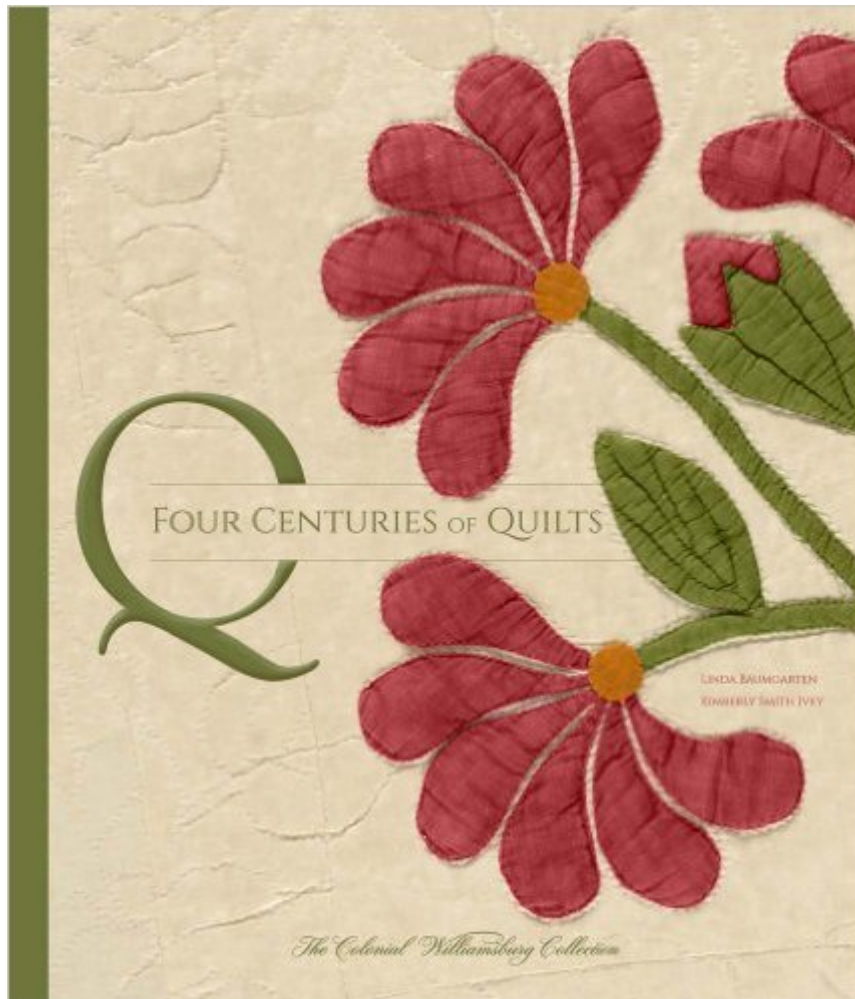


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# Four Centuries Of Quilts: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



## Synopsis

An exquisite and authoritative look at four centuries of quilts and quilting from around the world. Quilts are among the most utilitarian of art objects, yet the best among them possess a formal beauty that rivals anything made on canvas. This landmark book, drawn from the world-renowned collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, highlights the splendor and craft of quilts with more than 300 superb color images and details. Fascinating essays by two noted scholars trace the evolution of quilting styles and trends as they relate to the social, political, and economic issues of their time. The collection includes quilts made by diverse religious and cultural groups over 400 years and across continents, from the Mediterranean, England, France, America, and Polynesia. The earliest quilts were made in India and the Mediterranean for export to the west and date to the late 16th century. Examples from 18th- to 20th-century America, many made by Amish and African-American quilters, reflect the multicultural nature of American society and include boldly colored and patterned worsteds and brilliant pieced and appliquéd works of art. Grand in scope and handsomely produced, *Four Centuries of Quilts: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection* is sure to be one of the most useful and beloved references on quilts and quilting for years to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If I had to select but one book from the year's many fine titles in quilt books, it would be this one. Its authority, careful use of museum materials, and design set it apart and assure its status as

one of the classics in the study of quilting and American material culture. Give a copy to the person whose library has no book on quilts or to one whose library shelves sag with books on quilts and quilting. Both will delight in this book. It will not gather dust, but will prove endlessly entertaining and stimulating. Organized chronologically, it begins where bed quilts seem to have begun, in India, where by 1609 the word "quilt" had already become a common term among English traders who brought both white and exotic painted, printed, and embroidered bedcovers back from India to a people newly alive to the world beyond their own chilly terrain. It ends with the work of African-American quilters from Gee's Bend, Alabama, whose bold, primitive designs created a similar excitement among sophisticated urban audiences. Between those ends are found some of the finest quilts in America, representing most significant trends in quilting. The photography is stunning, both in the full-page photographs that dominate this book and in smaller photographs of details. Even now, after a month with this book, when I turn to the photograph on page 91, a border fragment from a pieced and figural quilt circa 1700 and 1730, my hand involuntarily moves to touch the shattering silk backing. The same thing happens with photographs of shimmering silk corded quilts and the heavy utility quilt from western North Carolina, where retilinear scraps of Alamance plaid are tamed by the gentle curves of fan quilting. And the album quilts---I do not believe I have ever seen album quilts photographed so perfectly. At times I forget I am looking at a photograph, not a quilt. The quality and detail of the commentary is equally fine. Although it bears a wealth of information, this commentary never bogs down in technicalities. It is the language of writers long familiar with their subject and accustomed to communicating even complex details in the limited format of museum displays and exhibitions. Baumgarten and Ivey consistently raise questions, note limitations of current conclusions, call attention to an aspect of a well-known quilt that many ignore. Instead of treating the early motif of the tree in a garden as purely Indian in cultural origin, for example, they point to the close relationship between the exotic trees found in English crewel embroidery and the flowering branches of chintzes and suggest that established taste in needlework motifs might have influenced the Indian products, rather than the reverse. A footnote permits the reader to explore this question. Their familiarity with current scholarship and the holdings of other museums serves the reader well. Chapter 2, which features an exquisite silk corded quilt and a fragment from another, similar silk quilt, is a good example. The authors bring their experience and acumen to bear on the origin of the quilts in a way that shows the complexity and sophistication of the early trade in Eastern textiles and the effects that complexity had on textiles themselves. Except for the earliest, traders did not simply purchase what had been produced by Indian artisans and then market those textiles to their clients in Europe. Tastes for

certain designs, colors, and decorative effects soon produced a collaboration between buyers and makers. For instance, Europeans sent dyers and European dye stuffs like weld, a dye believed to be unknown in early Indian textiles, to Goa when it was occupied by Portugal, thereby participating in the creation of what is often thought of as strictly indigenous textiles. Examining Renaissance iconography and the politics of the late 1500s, the authors end by noting the possibility of an eastern European origin for two stunning silk pieces and others mentioned in trade accounts and correspondence. And they do this in easy-to-read prose, bolstered by solid footnotes. Indeed, the footnotes are another joy of this book. I've encountered no book on quilts that goes to greater lengths than this to identify makers, fabrics, origins, donors, milieu, and so much more than is strictly required to support conclusions. Does it really matter that a 1701 crewel embroidered tree-of-life panel was one of the first quilts purchased by Colonial Williamsburg or that Vender Elinor Merrell of New York specialized in what her letterhead referred to as Old Chintzes, many of which she purchased in Europe, especially in France? I think so. Such nuances inform and enliven one's understanding of objects. There are also the small things that force the reader to see objects in a new way and that thus create personal discoveries. For example, in addition to photographs of bed coverings, the chapter on wool wholecloth quilts contains four pages of line-drawn quilting patterns used to make such bed coverings. Looking at these early conventional quilting patterns, one sees many designs that would appear later, cut from fabric, in the pieced and applique quilts of the 1840s and 1850s. One of the bedcoverings that fascinates me is the very early Pieced Quilt and Border Fragment, made in England, circa 1700-1730. It is composed of 12 large block units joined by heavily embroidered sashing, with a border decorated with appliqued and embroidered figures common to lithographs found in late 17th-century books. Most blocks also include ornately wrought figures. A woman in an intricately designed dress holds a parasol in the center of a block constructed of multitudinous tiny pieces of silk arranged in what would one day be called the Broken Dishes pattern. A man dressed in the oriental manner and riding a horse, a seated emperor-looking fellow, and a decidedly oriental-looking man balancing a basket on his head center other blocks. Along with dogs, parrots, a phoenix-like bird, and Jacobean florals, these recur in the border. The piecing is paper-piecing. Looking at this extraordinary piece with a magnifying glass, one marvels, both at the skill and accomplishment of the makers, but also at the variety of designs that emerged in larger form in the 1840s. Another unusual quilt is from North Carolina, circa 1860-1880. One side of it consists of fifty-six blocks, set on point and constructed in the color combination of a blue-green, oxblood, and cheddar that was so popular in the South at this time. As a backing, the maker used a

much older American hand block-printed bedcover that reflects in its design the patriotism of an earlier era. Spread eagles are the main motif. The printer had sewed strips of fabric together and then printed the design onto the top thereby created. The printed top was slightly smaller than the pieced front of the quilt and was not perfectly squared, so the maker added strips of gingham to make up the difference. Clearly, it was the top, not the back, that interested her. Today, most would find the back more interesting. The sections on applique, including the album and signature quilts, are particularly fine. Close-up photographs of elements from these quilts are exceptional, both in selection and in the vividness with which the camera renders them. Like everyone else in America, I've looked at a number of photographs of Mennonite and Amish quilts, but for reasons I cannot explain, the photographs of such quilts here capture their vibrancy better than any others I've seen. I was also happy to see the authors included a Welsh quilt in this section, since many of the designs once thought to be unique to the German Anabaptists appear to have been learned from the Welsh, whose westward movement through Pennsylvania overlapped the entry of these Germanic groups, who had no quilting tradition. I have but one caveat about the book---it neglects quilts from the cultures south and west of the original English colonies' borders. Where, for instance, are the Rocky Mountain Roads? the Circular Saws, Pickle Dishes, and Whig's Defeats? Where are the Pineapples and North Carolina Lilies, the many-feathered stars and the sawtooth stripping and borders? Where, in other words, are the most characteristic nineteenth-century quilts made by white women in the American South, a cultural region that includes Texas and areas west of the Appalachians and south of the Ohio River. With four exceptions, the South is represented only by African-American quilts, which comprise two major sections of the book and a large part of a third. Perhaps the absence of examples from this cultural region and those it nurtured arises from a lack of such quilts in the two collections used in the book. If so, the problem lies in the acquisitions department. Yet, regardless of its source, it creates an unnaturally truncated view of American history and the American culture from which quilts emerge. Were it an unavoidable problem, it should have been accounted for. Southern quilts are the quilts of America's first westward movement, begun in earnest after 1798, with the establishment of the Mississippi Territory. They reflect the culture of a dynamic, doggedly independent people for whom change seems constant. Cut off from close interaction with the East and Mid-Atlantic regions by space, early settlers of the South adapted their inherited customs and worldviews to dramatically different circumstances. The diseases that flourished in the many streams that flowed to the Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Mississippi River took the lives of many. Attacks from hostile Indian tribes haunted settlers day and night. From Kentucky to the 31st parallel, Southerners were

defined and united by their relationship to the land, but most lived in relative isolation from their neighbors. Such circumstances breed an independent and improvisational spirit. The evacuation and removal of Indians from the South in the late 1820s brought new waves of settlers into the region and increased the competition for land. It also brought the plantation system and black slavery on a scale unknown by most in the region until then. Sons of planters from Virginia and the Carolinas packed up their families, possessions, and Negro slaves and headed for the newly available land in the Black Belt of Alabama, drawn by the prospect of financial and personal independence from their fathers and the prospect of untold wealth. Newspapers of the time treat this migration as a mass exodus, ruinous to their home states. Unmarried law clerks and ministers from Connecticut flocked to the Natchez Territory, where a bachelor might set up shop as a lawyer or minister, live abstemiously, invest his first year's earnings in land and a Negro slave to help him clear the land; then plant cotton the next spring and use the proceeds from the crop to buy more land and two slaves, and thus become independently wealthy within three years' time (judges and ministers in the Natchez District were the youngest in the nation). Yet, the world of the planter elite was never the norm in the South, which remained a land of small farmers and herdsman. Historians estimate that fewer than 1/8th of all Southerners owned even one slave, and of that group, most had no more than three. In the Upland South, small farmers planted diversified crops of grains and vegetables and planted tobacco as a cash crop. They raised cattle and hogs, and were generally self-sufficient. Cattle and hog herding dominated the economy along the arc of the coastal plain with its pine barrens dotted with cowpens, producing a steady pattern of movement westward to fresh grazing areas. In 1860, the income generated from the sale of pork and beef doubled that generated from the sale of cotton and sugar cane. What determined status in this region, both before and after 1860, was land ownership. It brought with it the political power of the vote and an independent social status. Planters were acutely conscious of the independence of the small farmers or owners of cowpens and took considerable pains to curry the favor of their yeoman neighbors. And when, early in the next century, the sons of these elites failed to honor their needs, men with names like Folsom, Long, and Talmadge would remind them of the power of the common man. After a brutal civil war, fought in their own fields and cities, Southerners black and white were left to their own devices by a nation where the dynamo had replaced the Virgin and which was at last defeated by the orneriness of both blacks and whites in the South. From this world sprang Andrew Jackson and Jacksonian Democracy. Those who died at the Battle of the Alamo came from this world. Helen Keller and her feisty mother were from the Deep South. And so are a body of quilts that are an integral part of America's quilt history. Their omission of quilts made by white

Southerners undermines the authority of the authors' interpretation of the African-American quilts, all from the South. Like many who write about quilts and American material culture, Baumgarten and Ivy treat African-American quilts as cultural anomalies without clearly defining the norm from which they deviate or remarking the specific ways they differ from other quilts in their region. They are presumed to be products of a culture almost hermetically sealed off from Southern white culture. And I do not believe that view can be supported, either by these quilts or other cultural manifestations. One need go no further than the authors' own examples to see the inadequacy of race as an indicator of style in Southern quilts. Included in a section titled "Make Do" is a paper-pieced quilt top from Fort Worth, Texas, presumed to be the work of a white quiltmaker. Yet I defy anyone familiar with Southern quilts to identify the race of the maker based on the traits of that quilt. The same is true of a utilitarian quilt pieced from variously-shaped blocks of salvaged Alamance plaids and quilted in the South's beloved fan design. It is made by a white woman from western North Carolina, but had it been included in a Gee's Bend exhibition, no one would have questioned its placement. Conversely, three quilts included in the general African-American section "a paper-pieced silk Log Cabin Quilt Top, a Field of Diamonds Quilt, and a Coat of Many Colors Quilt (pp. 235-241)" might as easily have been made by a white Southerner as by a black Southerner. I am personally familiar with the Field of Diamonds quilt shown on page 128, made by Mrs. Emma Russell, who lived in nearby Jackson Parish, Louisiana. I saw this quilt under construction. Like most of Mrs. Russell's quilts, it is based on a pattern she had found in a magazine, and Mrs. Russell conscientiously sought to copy the magazine photograph. In the twenty years I knew her, Mrs. Russell almost always chose to make quilts she had seen in books or magazines. Being in print gave them status to her. Only the best got published, she reasoned. Her second choice was to repeat patterns she had made previously, especially the Double Wedding Ring, which she held to be the apex of quilt design. Inspired by a newspaper article about Harriett Powers' quilts, both Mrs. Russell and her sister, Mrs. Annie Dennis of Woodville, Mississippi, made several small story quilts. One of Mrs. Russell's was based on memories of childhood Christmases in Mississippi. When I first met her, she mentioned these figural quilts with pride, telling me they were "African-American quilts." Yet, she sold them as readily as she made and sold quilts to eastern collectors through Roland L. Freeman, whom she had met through Mrs. Dennis and in whose book "A Communion of Spirits" both women appear. I suspect Freeman asked for something more "African-American" (I confess I did that once), but Emma Russell was what in the South is still referred to as "a refined woman," a woman of taste and

skill who worked to the highest standards she knew in everything she did and who had no patience with those who did anything less. In published photographs, she found what she believed to be those standards. And she did not plan to have her name attached to anything lesser. In other words, most of Mrs. Russell's quilts were strongly influenced by commercial motives and printed patterns and photographs found in contemporary publications. The Field of Diamonds shown in *Four Centuries of Quilts* was as close an imitation of a quilt made by a white woman as she could make it. The only thing I know that is distinctively African-American about it is that it was made by a woman whose skin color was dark. I mention the absence of the larger body of Southern quilts partly because the region is so large and its influence reached so far into the Southwest and parts of the West. Its lack of representation raises a question of balance. But I also believe its omission makes it more difficult to understand the selected African-American quilts. We need to ask in what specific ways these quilts reflect the dominant culture of the region and in what ways they reflect something different. Baumgarten and Ivey implicitly asked this question of Amish and Mennonite quilts with their introduction of a Welsh quilt. It's an important question. And there are other important questions: To what extent has the design of quilts like those from Gee Bend been influenced by commercial interests? How many are responses to the request for an African-American quilt? What kind of quilts were black Southerners making in, say, the 1830s or the 1890s? In what particular ways did they differ from quilts being made white Southerners? Are there similarities between the two groups? To answer these requires a careful, dispassionate study of the ways in which black and white women interacted in general. If there were exchanges in their cooking traditions, why would there not be the same in things like sewing and quilts? Romantic eras are always characterized by an obsession with the primitive, the unlettered, the imperfect. It's part of the general yearning for simplicity, the desire that arises when cultures are in change to believe that somewhere purity still exists. I think of the late eighteenth century with its literary hoaxes like James MacPherson's Ossian papers, the many "rough geniuses" discovered or reported in craggy Scottish caves and their odd ballads. In those times, too, these "native geniuses" were parts of a larger argument about the nature of art and the politics of the nation. Sometimes these other issues overcome judgment and require balancing. Proper contextualization is a first step. I would be remiss not to observe that the authors note that quilts made after 1830 come from the collection of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, which represents American untrained or "folk" artists. Not knowing what is in that collection, one cannot know to what extent its limitations account for an omission I consider a limitation. This, however, we can know:



“Four Centuries of Quilts” opens the door to a collection in the way even a museum tour of archives cannot, for the quilts are there on the page for readers to admire and study whenever they choose. The photography is superb, and the commentary is informed, rich, and helpful. And the Yale University Press did a superior job in making the book a thing of beauty. Seldom do all the elements that create a superior book---solid text, perfect illustrations, and exceptional production---come together so well as in this book. I’m happy to own a copy and recommend it to others.

The book not only has beautiful photos but wonderful line drawings. If you know quilt photographs you know that some times it is impossible to see the quilting design. Having line drawings across from the photos is a great idea. Very nicely written didactic information, very interesting history tidbits.

I heartily agree with what I of Louisiana and other reviewers have said about the research and design of the book. It is beautiful, and the information on the early quilts and the Indian and Portuguese connections is amazing. I learned a lot from this book. The problem which I addresses in part seems to be the book’s lack of clear focus. “Four Centuries of Quilts” suggests a comprehensive history; “Colonial Williamsburg” suggests a certain focus on early American (and related) quilts. That part is brilliantly done, and is probably what those of us who bought the book were expecting. But even in that time frame, there is at least one big hole: pieced quilts, almost certainly the most common quilts made at least in the 19th century (and if that’s not true, then researchers of the caliber of Baumgarten and Ivey would be the ones to find out). The chapter on pieced quilts “1840-1910” has 9 quilts pictured; I note that the “1910” date is represented only by a quilt approximately dated 1880-1910. Granted, pieced quilts are in the chapters on paper template, red and white quilts, Mariners’ Compass and Star quilts, and incidentally in other chapters, but if this is a history of quilting, a big piece is missing. Almost as puzzling are some chapters that are there: Hawaiian/Polynesian quilts in a Colonial Williamsburg book? The Amish and Mennonite quilts don’t seem to have much connection. The African American quilts are practically the only ones representing the 4th century of the title, the 20th century quilts (the chapter on miscellaneous applique quilts, “1840-1930,” has one quilt, approximately dated 1920-1930, from the 20th century, and that one appears to be a copy or imitation of a 19th century four-block quilt). Another reviewer mentioned the vagaries of the acquisitions department for the gaps in the collection (though the authors presumably did not have to include something of everything). This again suggests a lack of

focus in that department. To me it seems almost as though someone got caught up in current fashions--Amish quilts are in, let's buy some! Hawaiian quilts are in! African American quilts are in--let's not only buy some, let's get them from the famous Gee's Bend! Devoting these resources to finding quilts with reliable histories or traditions of being made by ante- and post-bellum African Americans would have better helped balance the many quilts made by privileged women with the leisure and resources to make Baltimore album quilts, for example--of which there are so many they tend to run together. Once again, though, I want to emphasize the fine scholarship and superb examples in the earlier sections of the book, the part, I suspect, where the authors' hearts are. Other books have covered pieced quilts, Amish, Hawaiian, African American, and 20th century quilts in much more detail, and Baltimore-style applique in almost as much detail. Read this for information about early painted, embroidered, corded, and whole cloth quilts that you won't find anywhere else.

This book combines the elements of great design, writing and first rate research. It is a feast for the eyes and the mind. It will be a pleasure if you have a casual interest in quilt history or are a scholar. The information is well organized and covers aspects that are not always discussed in quilt histories. A must have for textile geeks!

The Colonial Williamsburg Collection is among the finest in the world, and it makes for an exquisite book. I was fortunate to visit Williamsburg a couple years ago for the "Quilts in the Baltimore Manner" exhibition and "Influences on American Quilts: Baltimore to Bengal" symposium. It was an incredible experience. This book showcases rare and beautiful objects you will not see anywhere else. Kudos to Linda Baumgarten and Kimberly Smith Ivey for a stunning book!

Photo documentation here is superb as expected. The real treasure is found in the detailed drawings of many ornate quilting designs stitched on the surfaces of the quilts in the collection. These are beautifully rendered and there are pages and pages of them, making this the crown jewel of quilt books. I own many quilt books and I look at them all over and over again. This one is just amazing!

If you ever wanted a Coffee Table Book about Quilts, then this is the Book for you. It is filled with Historical Quilts and wonderful artisans that have made some of the most beautiful to the most unusual quilts. I love this book.

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