

CRAZY QUILTS

Historical Context

The Dawson quilt has an important story woven into its borders, one that tells much about the territorial days of the state. In 1884 "the U.S Congress finally provided the District of Alaska with a court system and a governor in Sitka.

"Government officials, support personnel and their families in this remote center practiced a version of the decorous social life based on Victorian sensibilities. The quilt was given to Judge Lafayette Dawson when he left Sitka in 1888. Dawson had been appointed District Judge for Alaska by President Cleveland, and he gained the respect of the people through his fair decisions. Because of the forced absence from his wife and for political reasons, he later resigned." (*Quilts of Alaska*, pg. 21)



FIGURE 2A: A few of the signers of the Dawson quilt were members of the Dorcas Society in Sitka, 1894. ASL PCA 91.45



FIGURE 2: Crazy, dated and inscribed in ink "June 5th 1888, Hon. Lafayette Dawson From the Ladies of Alaska, Sitka, Alaska"

Artists and Origin

The Dawson quilt, made in 1888, is an unusual one in the *Quilts of Alaska* exhibit because of the number of women who worked on it. Twenty-one ladies were listed in State Museum records as having signed or initialed the blocks of the quilt, though some of the names are no longer visible on the quilt itself. The majority of the contributors were teachers and long-time friends.

Design Elements

A crazy quilt is just that...with no regular design and no regular right angles, the shapes in a crazy quilt are whatever the creator wanted them to be. There are no rules or traditional patterns for a crazy quilt.

Compare and Contrast

Find the Scroggs Crazy quilt (FIGURE 3) made by Fannie Scroggs around 1896. Find the scissors design sewn onto the quilt, a trademark of all the Scroggs quilts for three generations.

Examine what other designs are on the quilt, and make a list.

Then look at the Dawson quilt (FIGURE 2) and list what designs are embroidered on that quilt.

What do the designs tell you about the women who created them and about the times and places where they lived?

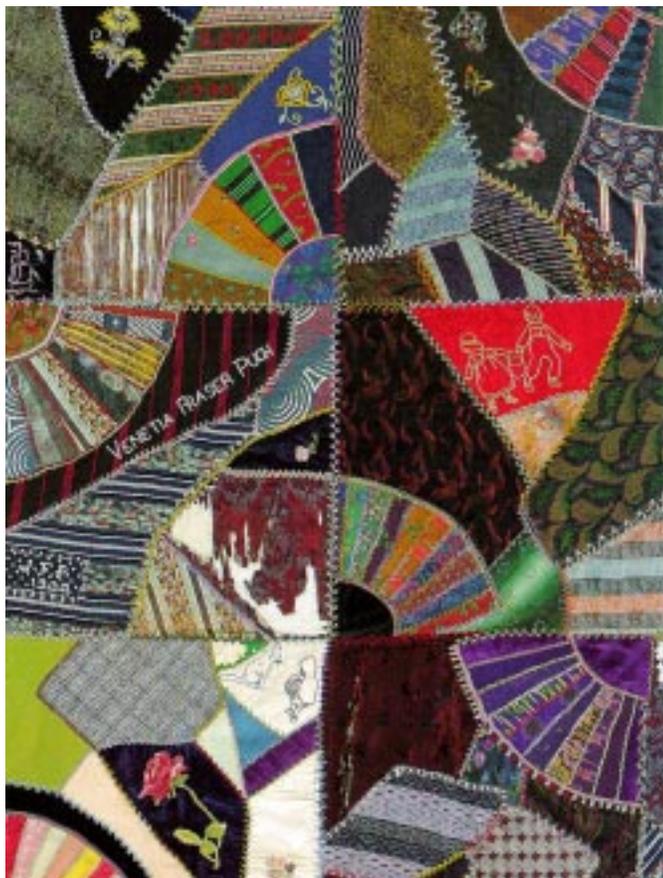


FIGURE 4: Crazy, (detail), dated 1900 and 1930. Venetia (Fehr) Pugh Reed, possibly made in Juneau, Alaska.

Look at the crazy quilt made by Maryjo Kidd Thomas (FIGURE 5) in 1945.

How does it differ from the other crazy quilts you have seen?



FIGURE 3: Crazy, C. 1896, Fannie Laura (Davidson) Scoggs, Texas.

Find the Reed Crazy quilt (FIGURE 4) dated 1900 and 1930. Venetia Pugh Reed made that quilt out of ties and dresses she collected in Sitka, Juneau, Skagway and Ketchikan. Mrs. Reed became a Deputy Clerk of the U.S. Court in Juneau and co-owned a teashop after her first husband died in the sinking of the steamship *Princess Sophia* in 1918. In her quilts she commemorated important events of her life.

Examine her crazy quilt and describe what had been important to Mrs. Reed from the clues you get in the quilt.

Compare the Reed quilt (FIGURE 4) with the Dawson quilt (FIGURE 2).



FIGURE 5: Crazy, child's quilt, inscribed and dated "K Sitka Alaska 1945"

GO CRAZY: QUILTS AS GROUP PROCESS

How can crazy quilts be art?

Level: Intermediate (grades 3-5)

Summary

Small groups of 5 - 8 students collaboratively create a crazy quilt. Each student chooses a symbolic design that has meaning to him/her or illustrates some meaningful event in her/his life on the quilt shapes chosen. Groups then create a paper replica of their quilt, with individuals writing about the personal significance of the shape and symbols on the backside of each shape.

This is also assembled, and quilts are publicly displayed.

Estimated Time:

400 minutes, over a period of eight – ten days.

PART 1

- Using slides, art books, craft books, real life samples and/or displays from Internet sources, have students view a number of examples of crazy quilts.
- Hold a class discussion on what it means for a quilt to be called "crazy".
- Divide students into small groups of 5 - 8, if possible, or organize the activity as an all-class project.
- Set up classroom environment so that small groups can gather/work on table(s) to create quilts out of scraps.

Part 2 (Directions to give to students.)

PHASE ONE

- In your small group decide whether or not your group quilt will have a theme of some sort.
- Decide how big your group quilt will be.
- Individually pick out scraps of fabric that you like for the texture, color, or design. Have each person choose two - three scraps.
- Cut out shapes that you like from the scraps you have chosen. Keep in mind that you (or someone else, if a sewing machine is available) will have to sew the pieces together, so that the shape should be a little bigger than you want it to be in the final quilt.
- Using fabric crayons or markers, or with embroidery floss, add a symbol or design to each shape you have cut out. The symbols should relate to the theme your group has chosen, OR they should show something from your life that is important.
- As a group, start to assemble the shapes you have cut, so that they all go together. If they don't fit, cut out additional shapes or make a border to go around the shapes you have made so that they do fit.
- Decide who in the group will start sewing the shapes together. Take turns sewing the pieces together.

PHASE TWO

- While individuals are sewing, others should start to make a paper replica of the crazy quilt you are making. To do this, cut the same shapes you made with fabric out of colored paper. (or paper that you can color to look similar to the fabric ones you chose).
- On the backside of the paper, write at least one paragraph per shape, describing or explaining why you chose the symbol that you did for the quilt. What does it mean to you?
- When you finish writing your paragraphs, have a partner check your writing for correct spelling and punctuation. Make any corrections that may be needed.
- Make sure each person in the group has had a chance to cut out, design and sew together fabric shapes onto the group quilt. Cut out, illustrate and then write on the back side of each shape for the paper quilt. Make sure that shapes are signed or initialed, so that viewers can see who made each piece.
- As a group, tape the paper quilt together so that it looks like the fabric quilt.

Part 3

- Have each group decide on a title for their crazy quilt.
- Make museum labels for the fabric quilt to hang next to or below the quilt wherever it will be displayed.
- Arrange to hang the fabric quilts and their paper replicas side by side in a public area.
- If possible, hang the paper quilt on some sort of hanger/wire, so that the back can be seen as well as the front.

Alaska Content Standards

In this activity students will focus on the following:

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

- A.4 Write well to inform, describe, entertain...
- A.6 Use visual techniques to communicate ideas...including graphics and art.
- C.1-5 Make choices about a project after examining a range of possibilities, organize it, set high standards for project quality, and work collaboratively on project.

FINE ARTS

- A.4 Demonstrate the creativity and imagination necessary for innovative thinking and problem solving
- A.5 Collaborate with others to create...works of art
- C.2 Examine historical...works of art, the work of peers and the student's own works.
- D.2 Discuss what makes an object...a work of art.
- D.6 Recognize that people connect many aspects of life through the arts.

Assessments

- Hold a “gallery walk” for other students and parents. Have students from each group stand in front of their quilts and explain how they were made, and why it was called a “crazy quilt.” Answer any questions that the viewers might have.
- Have students write a self-reflection about the project. How did you contribute to the group? What did you like about the final product? Why do you think people have made crazy quilts for hundreds of years? How did you feel, working on the quilt? What did you learn about yourself?

Vocabulary

Crazy Quilt — A patchwork technique in which irregularly shaped pieces of fabric are attached to a cloth foundation. Crazy quilts may be decorated with embroidered designs.

Patchwork — Usually refers to the process of combining fabrics to make a quilt top. Sometimes the term refers specifically either to appliqué or to piecing, but more often it includes both processes.

Materials

- Collection of photos and pictures of crazy quilts (from books, Internet, etc)
- Fabric scraps, varied sizes and colors.
- Scissors, one per student or pair of students
- Needles
- Thread
- Pins
- Fabric markers, pens
- Sewing machine, (if possible and someone to use it, to sew together the group quilts, if you decide to use that method)
- Colored paper, scraps of wallpaper, etc.
- Select appropriate books about quilts to read or display in the classroom.

OPTIONAL:

- Display real crazy quilts, if any of the students can bring one in from home. Use wallpaper scraps for the students to use to make their paper quilt, writing on the backsides.
- Use embroidery floss for symbolic designs on the quilt shapes.

We highly recommend *Quilts of Alaska: A Textile Album of the Last Frontier* for schools and teachers who plan to use the exhibit or materials from the exhibit in their classrooms. The catalog is extravagantly illustrated with full color pictures of selected quilts and historic photographs. Five chapters provide detailed information about quilting as it applies to Alaska. A full index, appendix, bibliography and endnotes make it a valuable resource for reference and teaching. Ordering information: The Store at the Alaska State Museum, 395 Whittier St., Juneau, Alaska 99801. \$21.95 +\$7 (postage /handling) per book.

Hall, June, Guest Curator. *Quilts of Alaska: A Textile Album of the Last Frontier*. Gastineau Channel Historical Society, 2001 ISBN: 0-9704815-0-0