

BULLETIN

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AN INFORMATION SOURCE FOR ALASKA'S MUSEUM COMMUNITY

Spring 2001

"I've seen hundreds and hundreds of quilts in the last 25 years, and I've never seen quilts like these before."

That quote, from quilt historian Laurel Horton, sums up many of the opinions of visitors to the Alaska State Museum who have enjoyed the Museum's latest exhibition, *Quilts of Alaska: A Textile Album of the Last Frontier*. The exhibit, which opened on International Museum Day, May 13, 2001, is garnering a lot of attention not only for presenting a unique array of quilts, but for piecing together a part of history that for years has lain forgotten in hope chests, closets, and even in the crawl spaces of homes.

According to Guest Curator June Hall, many of the quilts in the show came from unlikely places. An explorer in Wrangell brought his grandmother's quilts in, though he didn't understand why "anyone would make such a big deal over quilts." One quilt in the exhibit was found in a home's crawl space; another was bought for \$5 at an Anchorage garage sale. Some show Civil War influences; others date from the start of the Gold Rush. Yet they all have one thing in common: they document a traditional art form that spanned the country, the years, and the lives of their makers.

One such quilt, "A Grandmother's Flower Garden," was pieced together by Wiley Post's mother after he died in a 1935 plane crash with Will Rogers near Barrow, Alaska. The quilt was made by Post's grieving mother for Stanley Morgan, a member of the U.S. Army Signal Corps who helped retrieve the bodies from the wreckage. The quilt was carried to Barrow by Post's widow, and now belongs to Morgan's son, who lives in Nome.

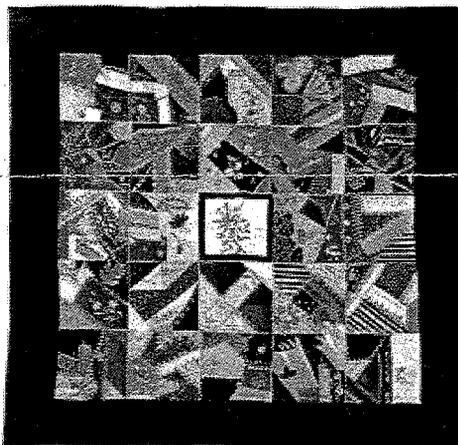
"I just about fell over when that quilt turned up," said Hall.

The quilt show is an outgrowth of the Alaska Quilt Survey, which was launched by the Gastineau

Channel Historical Society in 1992. Traveling throughout Alaska, volunteers held 'Discovery Days' in the different communities, during which residents brought quilts or quilted items to a central location to be documented. Of the more than 1,500 quilts that were documented statewide, 45 were selected for the exhibition and its accompanying full-color publication.

The publication, which shares the title of the exhibition, features a "Duck Neck Quilt" on the cover, created by Jenny (Olson) Rasmuson, of Yakutat,

Alaska. One of the most unusual quilts in the exhibition, it is made of the neck feathers of various species of duck, which the family harvested for food. Considered an 'artistic consequence' of their subsistence lifestyle, the skins were preserved with salt and pouches of peppercorns, then quilted together by Rasmuson, a Swedish immigrant serving as a missionary in the Southeast Alaska village.



Alaska State Museum III-O-979

According to Hall, the exhibit emphasizes the early quilts, which include a "1936 Pennant Quilt" by Jennie (Austin) Hahn of Skagway; the "Rising Sun" quilt, which won Mrs. Maude (Kidd) Steele the 1934 grand prize in the *Detroit News* Quilt Club Contest and which was later given to her daughter in Anchorage; and a Gold Rush quilt, which dates from 1865-1885. That quilt, which is attributed to Frances (Charles) Waring or Jeannette (Waring) de Gruyter, is accompanied by a necklace made of gold nuggets, once worn by one of its creators.

Of sentimental interest to many of the visitors to the Museum are the children's quilts, including "Jack in the Beanstalk," made by Frankie G. Varner of Michigan in 1941 and given to her granddaughter Judy Reece. "I have some quilts that my grandmother made for me, and it's nice to see that they're

CONTINUED ON BACK PAGE

QUILTS OF ALASKA: A TEXTILE ALBUM OF THE LAST FRONTIER

By Vanessa Orr
(Vanessa Orr is a volunteer for the Friends of the Alaska State Museum. She originally wrote this article for the Friends' newsletter.)

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESTORATION

By Scott Carroll, Conservator, Alaska State Museum

In the last issue of the *Bulletin* I described the relationship between conservation, restoration, and preservation. At the end of that article I noted that a good restoration is based on a complex set of criteria and ethics. In this issue I will attempt to clarify what these criteria and ethical questions are.

Restoration definitely has a place in a museum conservation program. However, one should always keep in mind that restoration is an intervention that will change an object in such a way that it is rarely reversible. Something as simple as cleaning, for example, is not reversible. There is a right way to clean an object and, of course, a wrong way. That is the kind of decision that a conservator is trained to make. If you clean an object and inadvertently remove an original coating, then that coating is lost forever.

On any recent episode of the PBS television series, *Antiques Road Show*, one can see that expert appraisers are very sensitive to original qualities like coatings, patinas and wear patterns. This is because these qualities provide valuable information about the object. Not just how something was made and when, but how something was used and by whom. This information can significantly affect the value of an object both monetarily and as an historical document. The objects we hold in trust in our museum collections are, in many ways, like documents that provide the details of a story. They are the raw materials of our history. Any significant change to these objects might interfere with the telling of that history.

There are several important questions to keep in mind when considering a restoration: What is the goal of the restoration? What will be the final outcome? What are we losing, for what we are gaining? There are some good reasons to restore an object but "just because" is not one of them. Just because an object is dirty, broken or aesthetically unappealing is not reason enough to go beyond normal preservation activities and significantly alter it. Our notion of what is clean, what is whole, what is pleasing to the eye, can change from person to person

or over time. That is why we must continually question our reasons for considering restoration or run the risk of losing something significant.

A good reason to restore an object is to prevent it from deteriorating further. This idea is easy to understand but difficult to interpret in practice. Many objects look like they may need restoration but in reality might be quite stable. Some object damage occurs as one cataclysmic event. A pot is dropped, for example. It looks terrible, but if the pieces are placed in a box for safekeeping they will not deteriorate any further. The damage is already done. Damage to a basket, however, is different. Baskets, because they are woven, get much of their strength from the structure as a whole. Once a tear has compromised that structural integrity, the basket is substantially weakened and is susceptible to further damage. Restoring a basket can actually prevent further deterioration.

Another good reason to do a restoration is to be able to exhibit an object. Some objects have been so altered by age or damage that it is difficult to interpret their significance or function without a restoration. I am often asked if repainting an object is okay. I don't think it is necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. It depends on what the goal of the treatment is and how the object is viewed within the institution. If it is viewed as an exhibit piece that provides visual information about how people used it, then having it in fully restored condition might be more desirable. If there are many examples of its kind or if it is not a particularly old or rare specimen, then more of an argument can be made for restoration. If, however, it is viewed as an historical document of manufacture and use, then you might want to keep all surfaces original. If it is rare or unique or was perhaps used by someone of note, then there is even more reason to keep it pristine, even if it is in poor condition.

I am also often asked how far to go with a restoration. That questions always reminds me of a story I once heard. A man holds up an axe and says: "This is the axe that George Washington used to chop down the cherry tree. Of course I had to have the handle replaced because it had rotted away. And I also had to have the head replaced because it had rusted away. But it occupies the same space!"

It is important to think carefully about why a restoration should take place, and how it fits in with the overall exhibit and conservation plans. Keep in mind that there are a lot of objects in the world but only limited funds to take care of them. Therefore we have to make sure that we are using our preservation dollars to do the most good for the most objects. ■

After more than 25 years of service, Marian Johnson retired in March as director of the Kodiak Historical Society. Under her tenure, the Baranov Museum grew from a fledgling organization to one of Alaska's most well-respected small museums. The museum is housed in one of the few surviving structures from Alaska's Russian period, not to mention one of the earliest (ca 1808).

Over the past quarter century, much effort has been spent stabilizing and preserving the building as well as the collections. Marian's work on behalf of Alaska's historical community will be missed. Hopefully, she will remain involved in whatever ways suit her as she enjoys her retirement. David L. Kaplan has been appointed the new director of the Society. Welcome, Mr. Kaplan. ■

**Marian Johnson
retires as
Director of
the Kodiak
Historical
Society**

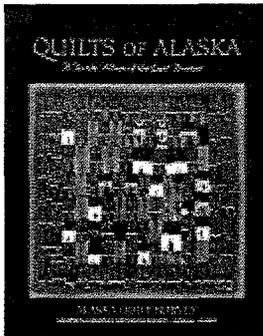
Make plans to attend the Museums Alaska Annual Conference and members meeting in Valdez this September. Keynote speakers include Marjorie Schwarzer, Chair of the Museum Studies Department at John F. Kennedy University (Bay Area); and Claus Naske, UAF Professor of Alaska History. A pre-conference workshop will focus on the basics of exhibit label production. Some of the topics among the fifteen other sessions being offered include: Tourism Impacts, Using Environmental Monitoring Equipment, Toxic Objects in Collections and the

NAGPRA Connection, Basics of Good Web Site Design, Schools and Museums, and Museum Matters Q & A. Add to this the various social events (including a dinner cruise), the annual meetings, the papers being delivered at the Historical Society side of the conference, the sightseeing and post-conference tours, and you have a recipe for a fun and informative finale to your summer.

For more information contact:
info@museumsalaska.org
or call Donna Matthews at (907) 243-4714. ■

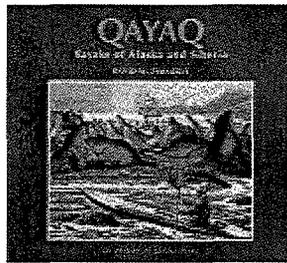
**Museums
Alaska /Alaska
Historical
Society Annual
Conference
Valdez -
Sept. 26-29**

Quilts of Alaska: A Textile Album of the Last Frontier accompanies the exhibit of the same name organized by the Alaska State



Museum and curated by June Hall. The catalog is published by the Gastineau Channel Historical Society and contains contributions from a variety of authors. The full-color, 112-page catalog designed by Laura Lucas is a visual feast. 11" x 9", \$21.95.

QAYAQ: Kayaks of Alaska and Siberia by David W. Zimmerly, published by the University of Alaska Press. This long-awaited reprint of the exhibit catalog, originally published in 1986 by the



Alaska State Museums, contains a wealth of original material on the varieties of kayaks traditionally used by North Pacific peoples. 9" x 9 1/2", 103 pages. \$16.95

These and other publications are available from:
The Store at the Alaska State Museum, 395 Whittier Street, Juneau, AK 99801; phone (907) 465-4840; email: thestore@alaska.net ■

**New
Publications
from the
Alaska State
Museums**

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED MUSEUM WEB SITE:

www.MuseumStuff.com

This site is a gateway to museum links of all kinds, including museums themselves, on-line exhibits and museum resources. Many unusual features. Check it out.

Selected articles from back issues of the Bulletin are available on our web site at: **www.museums.state.ak.us**

QUILTS - CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

appreciated too," said one out-of-town visitor to the show.

"There really is something extra special about the smaller quilts that were made for children," agreed Hall, admiring a children's quilt made in Sitka in 1945. "They're not only nicely made, but there are great stories attached."

One of the most intriguing stories, or mysteries, is that of the "Soldier's Quilt," a rare quilt top made by Civil War veteran Jewett Washington Curtis. According to family history, the quilt was made in Alaska when Curtis was a sergeant in the U.S. Army. In 1898, at the height of the Gold Rush, Curtis' Company B was sent to Dyea, "in the interest of good order," where he presumably continued work on a quilt he had begun earlier. The quilt is pieced of 1-inch diamonds of brightly colored wool. Found in a trunk inherited by Curtis' son, it is part of the textile collection at the Smithsonian Institution, and was brought to Alaska with the help of a \$20,000 grant from the Museum Loan Network.

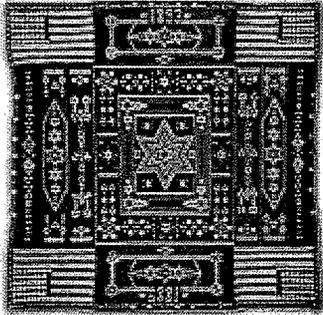
"A quilt like this is very difficult to do; and this one is one-of-a-kind," said visiting quilt historian Laurel Horton, whose presentation *Jewett Washington Curtis: Men Making Quilts* was part of International

Museum Day events. "There's a tradition that when men make a quilt, they try to outdo other people," she explained. "The point is not to put it on a bed, or to back it—it's just to make it."

There is speculation about just what influenced Curtis' creation of the quilt, which includes jewel-colored wool thought to have come from Army uniforms. Hall says she sees patterns inspired by beadwork; other viewers have suggested Islamic and Arab influences similar to those seen in Turkish rugs, or Indian influences perhaps garnered by soldiers stationed in India during the Crimean War.

For those quilters who feel inspired by all of the art they see while at the show, there is an unfinished quilt top set up to allow them to add their own few stitches to the exhibit. Donated by Marie Darlin, the top was made by her mother-in-law in the 1940s, but was never finished.

Quilts of Alaska: A Textile Album of the Last Frontier, will be on display through September 29, 2001, after which a smaller version of the exhibit will travel to Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai and Homer. The exhibition was made possible by support from the Gastineau Channel Historical Society, the Friends of the Alaska State Museum, the Museum Loan Network and the late Elmer B. Rasmuson. ■



"Soldier's Quilt" by J.W. Curtis,
National Museum of American History

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS BULLETIN

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