

The Textile Research Centre (TRC) Quilt Collection

The TRC Leiden is an independent foundation that was set up in 1991 and whose aim is to enable research into the study of textiles, clothing and accessories. It's main focal points are dress and identity and textile technology.

At the moment there is an exhibition of American Quilts at the TRC and it is interesting to know how this came about.

The TRC operates entirely through donations, both of funds and items, and in 2017 a donation of 35 feedsacks made of printed cloth piqued the interest of the Director, Dr. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood. Feedsacks were something new to her and she began to research these and to collect more items, including quilts. Thanks to the help of the American Embassy, The Hague, this work resulted in the exhibition 'For a few sacks more – How Feedsacks clothed and warmed Americans during the Depression and later'. The exhibition ran from January to July 2018 and can still be viewed on the TRC website (trc-leiden.nl) under 'Activities/TRC Online Exhibitions'.

As many quilts were made from feedsacks, the number of quilts in the collection began to grow and, knowing that the Mayflower 400 commemoration in Leiden was going to take place in 2020, the TRC began to add to its quilt collection so that an exhibition and various, related activities could take place to coincide with this event.

A large donation of quilts was received from American collector Sherry Cook and quilts were also acquired with the help of the American Womens' Club of The Hague. The exhibition was opened on the 5th February 2020.

The exhibition explores the history, meaning and making of American quilts over the last 200 years.

It begins with a 'technical' section (for non-quilters specifically), showing battings, quilting tools and many blocks, which were developed in American quilting. There are also quilt patterns, some in booklets or newspaper cuttings from the 1930's and some on Mountain Mist batting wrappers.

Then, on the wall is one of the 'stars of the show', one of our oldest quilts dating from the 1840's – an indigo feathered star, hand pieced and beautifully hand quilted and in splendid condition for its age.

There is a 1930's Rail Fence quilt, made with feedsack scraps (measuring 5/8" x 1 3/4"!), along with two quilt tops embroidered with signatures, one of which arrived with a threaded needle still attached to a half completed signature!

Another spectacular quilt is a feedsack postage stamp made with a multitude of feedsack prints and edged with black and lilac and a prairie point border.

The Starburst quilt, dating from the 1860's, is not in pristine condition and bears several repairs but has a set of 7 initials in the central star, along with 'No. 12', worked in cross

stitch, so we believe that the maker's friends helped her to quilt this, the 12th quilt for her 'Hope Chest'.

There is a crazy quilt, which only arrived a few days before the exhibition opened and so we still have research to do, but we believe it may be from around 1890 – it contains embroidery, ribbons, velvet, painted silk and it is clear that there is still much more to discover about it.

Sadly, we do not have enough wall space to hang all of the quilts, so many of them are displayed on A-frames in the centre of the gallery, where they make quite a show. These are grouped approximately into eras, 1880's -1900's, 1920's – 1930's, 1930's – 1950's and 1970's to the present day.

The exhibition ends with a juxtaposition of a pre-Civil War appliqued Flower and Berries quilt and a modern quilted coat.

As is usual with quilts, very few bear a label with a name, but a couple came to us with some information – a green Cactus Basket quilt was purportedly made by Inza McVay of the Lakota Tribe of South Dakota and the very muddy-looking quilt on the frame looks that way because it was hanging on a washing line in 1874 in the town of Skinnerville when a dam burst and completely destroyed the town.

As word has spread about the quilt collection, more donations have been received, including some Mennonite relief quilts, a couple of which are in the exhibition and more of which will be featured in the next exhibition about the domestic history of World War 2 told via textiles and clothing.

The American Quilt exhibition was due to close on the 25th June 2020 – Coronavirus meant that we had to close and take the quilts down in March and leave them to 'rest' for a while, but now that they are back up the exhibition is being extended until the end of August. They are well worth a visit should you find yourself in Leiden.