

Dr. Clarke, though not a quilter, is an accomplished needleworker in her own right. Before she donated the collection, Dr. Clarke prepared cross-stitched quilt labels in colors complimenting the fabrics and detailing the maker, dates and history of the quilt. These labels were stitched to the back of each quilt, forever linking them to their history.

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Much of this information was extracted from the writings of Lynne Swanson and Mary Worrall of the MSU Museum.

*"From its inception, quilting has taken place within families. Fellowship between mothers, daughters, and extended family transpire as women gather to stitch quilts, while strengthening family bonds... Families cherish their quilts as physical and emotional ties to their past. MSU Museum is proud to ensure the safekeeping of many collections of family quilts so they can be treasured by future generations."*

— Lynne Swanson on the Clarke Family Quilt Collection



## QUILTING IN THE 1930S

The Clarke Family quilt collection offers a unique glimpse into the quilting lives of a Detroit family. The quilts and supporting materials reflect the entire quilt making process from inception to completion as well as the entire output of quilts by one family over a 20-year-period. Additionally, the collection reflects regional and national trends in quilt making during the Great Depression, when there was a rejuvenation of interest in quilt making and home arts, often referred to as the Renaissance of American Quilting. In the 1930s, Detroit and other cities across the US burgeoned with quilting activities, including groups, shows and newspaper columns devoted to domestic arts.

With the resurgence of interest in quilting, many new pattern and fabric companies came into being to take advantage of the new market of consumers eager to join the fad of producing and decorating their homes with quilts. Commercial quilting patterns were circulated in newspapers and in mail order catalogs, since shopping by mail order was increasingly popular among women. Companies hired quilt designers to produce patterns and fabrics that would add a "modern" look to the traditional craft.

The resulting quilt patterns were based loosely on traditional quilt designs. 1930s quilt designers such as Marie Webster and Anne Orr favored floral appliqué designs that were adapted from the elaborate floral medallion quilts of the Victorian era. Though the patterns were often based on traditional 19th century quilt designs, there is a distinct shift in the look of quilts from this period. The 1930s brought hard times for most Americans, but 30s quilts were bright and cheerful. Designers chose to use a new palette of clear, solid, pastel colors, such as buttery yellow, "thirties green," pink, lavender, light blue and tan. Novelty prints and lively calicoes, made available through advances in the textile industry, were the new fad in fabric. The commercialization and mass merchandising of quilt patterns and fabric lead to quilts that were both homogeneous in style and palette.

To encourage and foster quilt making, companies introduced new time-saving products. Quilters no longer had to trace pattern pieces and mark lines for cutting and sewing. Similar to a garment pattern, the new commercial quilt patterns came in a large envelope with actual size patterns printed on a large sheet of paper, which could then be traced to create templates. The pattern

envelope also included instructions to make the quilt top, as well as suggestions on color and finishing. For women who were willing to pay a little extra, quilt kits could be purchased with the pattern pieces already stamped on a bleached cotton sheet, commonly referred to as the "paint-by-number quilting technique." The quilter merely had to cut out the appliqué and apply it to its stamped location on the sheet. \*

Quilt patterns were often purchased or copied out of newspapers and magazines. If a pattern was bought, it was usually shared with friends. Of the thousands of commercial quilt patterns distributed across the country, a few of the patterns were so popular among the quilting public that they soon became recognized as classic quilt designs, such as *Dresden Plate*, *Grandmother's Flower Garden*, *Double Wedding Ring* and *Sunbonnet Sue*.\* The Clarke collection is a textbook example of these "Depression Era" style quilts. Quilt patterns found in the scrapbooks of the Clarke family included those designed and marketed by Anne Orr, McCall's Pattern Company, Mountain Mist Batting Company, and those published by the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*.

In the 1920s, people became fascinated with the "Colonial Times" and attempted to recreate them or at least pay homage to them through quilts. However, 20s quilts were more than just a warm blanket. They became a decorative piece for the home reflecting the prosperous times of the decade. The fabrics were pretty, and the women had the money to buy them. But when the times got harder in the 30s, these pastel, decorative fabrics continued to be promoted in magazines, and there was again very much a purpose to quilting.

In the 30s, women were forced to fall back on their pre-industrial domestic skills of sewing and knitting by hand, since sewing machines were harder to afford. Quilting called on these domestic skills while serving a functional purpose of using scraps of fabric to create blankets for warmth. Many of the quilts by Bozena Clarke were made collaboratively, using scraps of fabric saved from the tailoring of the family's clothing. During the Depression, Bozena used every scrap of fabric she could salvage in her quilts.

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\* *Soft Covers for Hard Times* by Merikay Waldvogel pg. 11-16.

Much of this information was extracted from the writings of Marsha MacDowell, curator of the MSU Museum.