

Arizona Quilt Documentation
Tucson Region
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Amish Quilts

The Amish began immigrating around the mid 18th century from Switzerland, Germany and France. They did not bring quilts or quilting know-how with them. Within a century and a half, Amish women began making quilts. The when, why and how they started piecing and quilting remains unknown.

There are nearly 1,800 Amish communities across the United States. They are known for living a simple lifestyle, free from technology and away from modern society. People in Amish households prefer to focus on religion community and family, which is why most Amish communities don't have autos telephone inside their home or electricity. Amish quilt making history reflects the simplicity and frugality of the Amish culture.

Amish quilts came into existence around the 1870's. Before that, the Amish were still using German featherbeds as their bedcovers. Early Amish quilts were made from pieces of fabric left over from garments made for members of the family. Amish women made the fabric from hemp, flax or wool which they spun into yarn and then wove into cloth. They then dyed the fabric with natural pigments. Early Amish men wore mostly black, and women wore dark colors of purple and green.

Quilt making likely began in earnest after Amish settlers founded new communities in western outposts, rather than originating in eastern Pennsylvania and transplanting with quiltmakers to new communities. The number of existing dated quilts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries increases right along the growing Amish population. When Amish women began making quilts, the group's population was quite small; accordingly, a mere 25 quilts have dated inscriptions prior to 1890. In 1900-the earliest year with reliable population estimates-there were only 4,800 Amish scattered among fewer than twenty settlements stretching from eastern PA to as far west as OR.

Early Amish quilts, called wholecloth quilts, were usually made of only one color-sometimes with just a single layer of fabric placed over the top-with decorative quilting patterns. Early Amish quilts, made for bed coverings, often contained fewer patterns but became even more detailed and elaborate as the years went on. Amish quilts eventually evolved until they had various shapes cut out, pieced and sewn on top of a layer of fabric.

Quilting became an important activity for Amish women. Quilting circles became social gatherings where women would meet to sew together and discuss homemaking and other community news. These gatherings were a source of entertainment for Amish women. They also provided an opportunity to talk with the younger Amish girls and teach sewing techniques to them.

In the early days, quilts were sewn exclusively by hand. Later, women sewed both by hand and with a foot-powered sewing machine run by a treadle. The piecing for the quilt top is usually sewn together with a machine, but quilting is always done carefully by hand. Amish women still use non-electric sewing machines powered by generator, gas or foot.

The quilt patterns often told stories about the women who quilted them: their beliefs, emotions and events that were going on in their lives. Quilting became a means of expression, which was acceptable to the Amish community since the actual creation of a bedcovering was a practical task. These beautiful patterns were created without the influence of the outside world-no TV, magazines or knowledge of modern fashion, style trends or culture.

Typical Amish quilts usually have a dark background of black, blue, purple or dark red with splashes of bright, solid color. Early Amish quilts consisted of mostly solid material, as printed fabric was deemed too fancy. Classic Amish quilts often feature quilting patterns that contrast with the plain background. The color combinations used in a quilt can help experts determine the community in which the quilt was produced. Modern Amish quilts feature a variety of both solid and printed designs and more updated styles.

The beautiful patterns found on Amish quilts were not only created from the fabric shapes, but also the quilting stitches put in place to hold the quilt layers together. Popular Amish quilting patterns can be seen in the shapes of feathers, swirls, diamonds, vines, wreaths, flowers and grids.

Many popular patterns are frequently seen in Amish quilts. The names of quilting patterns differ according to region and culture.

Double Wedding Ring: It was frequently seen in the decorative objects of German settlers who settled in PA. Usually given to newly wedded couples to celebrate their marriage.

Dresden Plate: This pattern is frequently seen in baby quilts.

Log Cabin: It is said that this pattern was inspired by that which occurs when land is cultivated.

Star of Bethlehem: It is one of the most beautiful, elaborate and commonly seen quilt patterns in Amish design. It is also one of the oldest.

Sunshine and Shadow: It is suggested that this specifically Amish pattern represents their belief in the importance of balance in life.

The colors and types of materials used in Amish quilts of the past varied by the community. Some allowed lighter colors to be used while others deemed them unacceptable. The colors and patterns used in Amish quilting were usually discussed and agreed upon within the community, often with the involvement of the Bishop. Styles that some communities accepted were not okay in others.

Though American culture has changed considerably over the years, Amish culture has remained relatively unchanged. Therefore, their expert quilting techniques have remained unchanged. Amish quilts are even more beloved today due to the reputation the Amish have for expert craftsmanship, attention to detail and hard work.

Quilting and Amish quilts in particular, gained newfound popularity after the 1976 bicentennial. This event saw a revival of all things from the past and Americans beginning to embrace their heritage. Quilting has once again become popular, and it continued to grow in popularity ever since. In 2017, the quilting industry boasted a work of \$3.7 billion. Marketing has played a major role in the popularity of the Amish quilts and quilting.

Amish quilts became a must-have item for fans of the pop-art movement and those living the city. In fact, there are stories of Amish quilts being stolen right off of clotheslines by city folk who were desperate to own a piece of Americana. At this point, Amish women began to open their homes and sell their fine quilts to the public. The quilting styles of this time began to change, with modern designs reflecting brighter styles and bolder patterns.

Though Amish quilts are seen as beautiful works of art, the Amish communities remain humble. To view their quilts as forms of art would be to show egotism, which is shunned in Amish culture. Instead, Amish communities allow their quilts to be sold to outsiders to help sustain their intimate communities.

Quilting is still an integral part of Amish culture today, with special quilts being made for special occasions within their community and to signify events such as weddings, births, and friendships they are also seen as precious family heirlooms to be passed down throughout the generations.