

Political Quilts: Elephant (Republican Party) and Donkey (Democratic Party)

Discover Vintage America - MAY 2017. – Midwest Edition by Sandra Starley

While quilts generally bring to mind comforting images of grandmothers and quilting bees, there is so much more to quilting including a long and celebrated history of political quilts. Without access to the ballot box, women often took up their needles as a way to voice their opinions and to influence the male voters in their lives. Even after suffrage was granted in 1920, women continued to send political messages through their quilts. One example of this was through the creation of elephant or donkey quilts based on patterns from the Kansas City Star.

The quilted voting between the political party symbols started in June, 1931 when the Kansas City Star published: "Ararat, A Swope Park Elephant". Quilting columnist, Eveline Foland was simply highlighting a popular Zoo resident: "Little did Ararat, slow old elephant that he is, ever think he would find himself gracing a quilt block when he came to live in the Swope Park Zoo, there to become enthroned in the hearts of Kansas City children." She went on to suggest purple and gold colors for the quilt "because they are royal colors, and in the Far East royalty traveled on elephants."

Though Ararat was not intended to be a political animal, The Star immediately received requests for the quilted version of equal time and "Giddap, a Very Democratic Donkey" was published in July 1931. Foland explained: "Remember Ararat the Swope Park elephant who filled this space a few weeks ago? Three guesses as to what the ingenious ladies' aid of the Sedalia, Mo. Congregational church did to him. Well, they made a G.O.P. elephant out of him. Now they are calling for a Democratic donkey to be his running mate. Here is the answer in 'Giddap'. Now the Sedalia ladies can complete their quilt and make their cookie cutters that they intend to use in the window sales during the political conventions and presidential campaign of 1932."

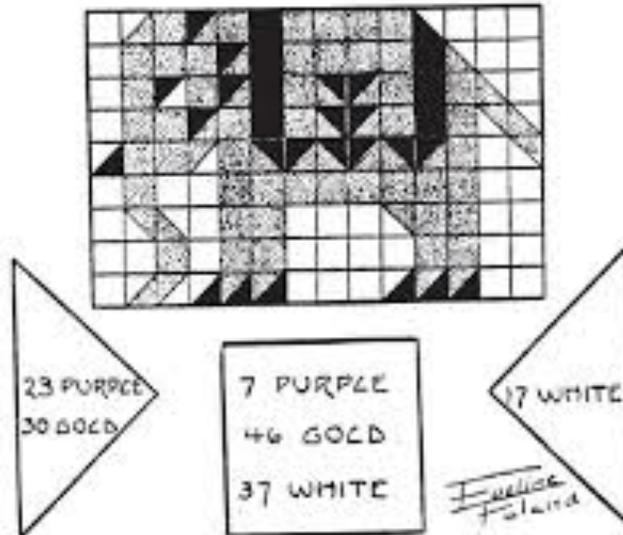
The next year, 1932, Democrat candidate Franklin Roosevelt won both the popular and Electoral College votes in a landslide over Republican incumbent Herbert Hoover. And Giddap also won the quilters' popular vote. Apparently very few Ararat quilts were made as hardly any can be found at this time while there are a fair number of Giddap quilts in collections today. In surveying a large, active collecting group, only two people had Ararat quilts in marked contrast to the number who owned Giddap quilts.

While some of the popularity of the donkey over the elephant was due to the familiarity of the friendly farm animal versus the exotic elephant and the cuteness factor of the donkey pattern, it is clear that many quilters were voting with their needles.

Quilt historian Cuesta Benberry noted this phenomenon: "Black Arkansan Ruth Williamson was making a political statement when she pieced the Donkey quilt (1933) the symbol of the Democrat Party. Further evidence to support that theory is that her quilt was made in the patriotic colors of the United States, red, white, and blue, instead of the colors suggested of brown, white, and orange on the original published pattern of the Kansas City Star." *A Piece of My Soul* (2000).

A SWOPE PARK ELEPHANT FIGURES IN A QUILT BLOCK.

ARARAT



HERE IS "GIDDAP," A VERY DEMOCRATIC DONKEY.

