

Object of the Month—July
Baltimore Album Quilt

Identification:

Name: Baltimore Album Quilt

Artist: Unknown

Date: c. 1825-50

Classification: cotton, appliqué, 91”x 89”

Accession #: 75.9.2

Gallery: not on view currently (7/2011)

Social/Historical Context:

The first quarter to the middle of the 19th century saw many technological changes that would profoundly affect the distribution of the population of the North American continent. Before 1810, 1 of 10 Americans lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. After 1820 the figure was 1 in 4. Technological advances such as the steel plow developed by John Deere in 1837, and Cyrus McCormick’s reaping machine in 1831 changed agricultural practices. The Erie Canal was completed in 1825, leading to numerous other canal projects, and steamboats opened up river travel on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

Innovative technologies were also taking place in the production of fabric. In 1818 the demand for cotton was 92 million pounds per annum. By 1830 the demand had risen to 300 million pounds. The development of the roller printing machine vastly expanded the choices of printed fabrics. Mills produced millions of yards of fabric annually. The demand for labor for the mills led to what became known as the Waltham or Lowell System. Francis Cabot Lowell, a textile manufacturer, built boarding houses, overseen by “hired respectable widows”, to house young women who became the mill workers. The girls had rigid rules of conduct which included a 10:00pm curfew, regular church attendance and each girl had to save part of her earnings. Young women gladly took the opportunity to leave the farm, and earn some of their own money. By 1834 working conditions had deteriorated, and the ‘mill girls’ organized one of the first major industrial strikes in the US. The Lowell Female Labor Association was one of the first labor unions in the country.

The City of Baltimore was very much at the center of these political, social, and economic developments. In 1840 Baltimore was the 3rd largest city, behind Philadelphia and New York City. It was the furthest inland harbor of any other east coast port. It was the center of a network of turnpikes and railroads. The Baltimore and Ohio Rail Road, chartered in 1828, was the first major railroad in the country. The Baltimore Clipper Ships were the fastest fleet on the ocean trade routes, carrying all manner of goods from cloth to slaves.

Object: The dates of the MIA’s Baltimore Album, 1825-50 place it in the years of the fad for Baltimore album quilts which began in 1840. The years 1846-1852 are identified as

the “peak years”. Album quilts appeared during a time of the great religious awakening that swept the country. Blocks were often inscribed with Bible verses or sentimental sayings. The migration west had much to do with the popularity of the album quilt. Family and friends were uprooted and separated, and carrying a quilt with messages from loved ones eased the pain of separation. “Quilts make you think a little of the person who made it or whose dresses were in there. Maybe you don’t think of them any other time except when you see that quilt”, said Margaret Seebold of New Berlin, PA. The individual blocks could also be sent through the mails to distant quiltmakers. Album quilts are variously known as friendship, bride, freedom, family, presentation, state, and medley quilts, depending on its purpose, and the region of the country.

Quiltmakers in Baltimore had access to a variety of fabrics, imported and domestic. The technique of “broderie perse” was a tradition that the quiltmakers in Baltimore took to new heights. When using the broderie perse technique a maker carefully cuts a design motif from a larger piece of fabric, often chintz. Chintz is fabric with large elaborate motifs most often of flowers, birds, trees, etc. The raw edges of the fabric are then turned under and stitched to a background fabric. Quiltmakers also used a wide variety of fabrics to develop their own designs and assemble the bouquets, baskets of fruit, flowers, butterflies and birds so characteristic of the Baltimore album quilts

The MIA’s quilt is a 4x4 grid of 16 appliquéd blocks. 12” or 16” background would be a typical block size. Each block is a different design. The border is a trailing vine with flowers and leaves. The block in the top left-hand corner shows a wagon, which may be a manually pumped fire wagon. The block to the immediate right of the wagon shows a wreath surrounding a three linked chain, the symbol of the Odd Fellows, a fraternal organization. The three links stand for friendship, love, and truth. The next block in that row is a pineapple, a traditional symbol of hospitality. The second row contains a cornucopia, a lyre, symbol of music, and the last block of the second row contains the traditional symbol of the Freemasons. The block with interlocking hearts with an arrow, show the traditional symbol of romantic love. The block with the hand with a heart on it is the traditional symbol of friendship. The bottom row contains a patriotic symbol, a block with the scales of justice, and a cannon. The cannon may be a reference to Ft. McHenry, which protects the Baltimore Harbor. Seeing the “rockets red glare” over Ft. McHenry inspired Francis Scott Keys to write the National Anthem.

After appliquéing the separate blocks, the rows would be assembled and the border attached. It is likely the border was appliquéd after being attached to the rows, given the continuation of the trailing vine around the entire top. The quilting pattern would be marked. The quilt “sandwich” would then be made. A backing fabric would be covered with the batting. Batting for this quilt was likely cotton. The top would be placed on the batting, and the entire sandwich basted together. Basting stitches are very large and meant to hold the layers together when quilting. They would be removed later. Most likely the quilt was then stretched on some sort of a frame and quilted on the markings. Quilting is necessary to keep the batting from shifting so it would remain evenly distributed through the surface of the quilt. Tiny, even quilting stitches are the goal and

hallmark of fine quilting. It is this three layer “sandwich” which distinguish a quilt from a coverlet. A hand-sewn binding would finish the raw edge of the border.

The MIA’s Baltimore Album Quilt was never designed to be used. The masculine nature of the symbols on the blocks suggest it was made for a male recipient.

Production of Baltimore Album Quilts came to a virtual stop as it was replaced by other needlework fads, and some expanded educational opportunities for women. The Eastern and Western Female High Schools were founded in Baltimore in 1844, and the Baltimore Female College opened in 1849.

Tour possibilities:
Women in Art
Made in America

Possible open-ended questions
What symbols do you see?
What images would you put on a quilt you would make?

Resources:
MIA Handbook of the Collection, p.255
Kiracofe, Roderrick, “The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort, 1750-1950”
Katzenberg, Dena, “Baltimore Album Quilts”, The Baltimore Museum of Art show catalog, 1982.
Interactive Learning Station, “Material Witness” located just off gallery 310