



A PLACE TO COME TO

Frances A. Kenneley

Lit from Within: An Exceptional Amish Quilt Exhibit

LIT FROM WITHIN: Amish Quilts of Lancaster County," is a traveling exhibition of thirty historic quilts made in Pennsylvania between 1870 and 1950 and drawn from the private collection of Doug Tompkins, cofounder of the contemporary clothing company Esprit de Corp., founded in 1968. An avid collector of quilts, Tompkins hung them on walls, in conference rooms, and along hallways of Esprit's San Francisco headquarters. When he left Esprit in 1990, the part of the quilt collection that he took with him included a large number of old Amish quilts. He has been eager to share them with people around the world. Julie Silber, who helped acquire many of the quilts in the Esprit collection and became its curator, is curator of the show. She recalls vividly her first view of Amish quilts (she was on a buying trip for her San Francisco quilt shop) and loves seeing others react as she did to the quilts' brilliant colors in simple and bold geometric shapes—squares, diamonds, and bars. Dramatically lighted, the Lancaster Amish quilts' saturated colors glow and indeed look "lit from within."

Two Amish girls from Lancaster County play hide-and-seek.

Photograph by Jan Folsom.

The Amish are a small but tightly knit religious group whose 100,000 members are scattered across America's heartland. Their religion developed in Europe in the late seventeenth century, when they split first from the Roman Catholic Church, then from a group called Anabaptists. For a time, they were known as the Swiss Brethren, but eventually they called themselves Amish after their leader, Jacob Amman.

From the beginning, the Amish believed in separating themselves from the rest of the world to maintain their religious integrity. This separation, along with the practice of "shunning"

(during which a community, for a stated period of time, ignores the existence of someone who has broken serious rules of conduct), led to their widespread persecution in Europe. The Amish began arriving in America early in the eighteenth century, seeking the religious freedom that has drawn countless immigrants to the New World.

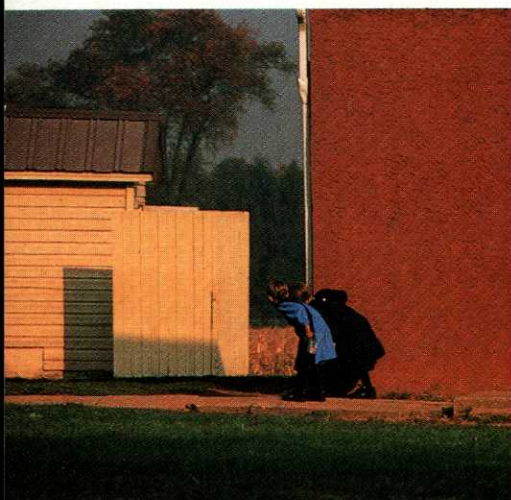
Behavior and way of life are regulated by the church's governing body and by adherence to the *Ordnung*, a code of ethics intended to preserve and strengthen the Amish way of life. Although parts of it are written, most of the *Ordnung* is an oral tradition. Today's Amish still keep much of the modern world at arm's length, rejecting the conveniences of electricity, telephones, and automobiles.

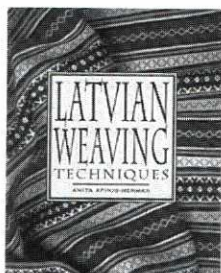
Visitors to Amish country in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana marvel at the communities, which maintain a simple, rural existence. (Each community comprises an area heavily though not exclusively populated with Amish farms.) Horse-drawn buggies share country roads with the cars of outsiders. Farmhouses are lit by kerosene lanterns, and furnishings are utilitarian. The Amish are renowned for their high-quality dairy products and grains, as well as for their skills in cabinetry. Amish women are known for their cooking, quilting, and gardening skills.

"The Amish are instructed," Silber says, "to be in the world, but not of the world. They have a variety of ways in which they are different, dress and appearance being the most obvious."

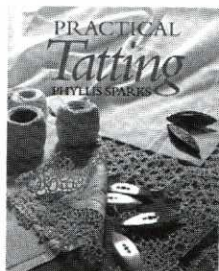
QUILTING AMONG THE AMISH

Traditional Amish dress has clearly influenced the quilting tradition. Acceptable dress is regulated by the church district, which comprises thirty or forty families, an area that can be reached by horse and buggy. Amish men wear broad-brimmed straw or black wool felt hats, richly colored shirts, and simple trousers held up by suspenders. Women dress in blouses, skirts, aprons, and bonnets that have changed little from nineteenth-century farm attire. All clothing fabrics are in solid colors; overcoats and capes are black.

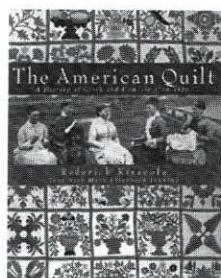




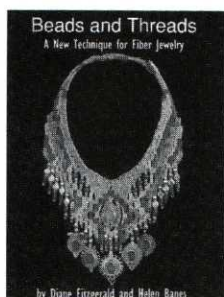
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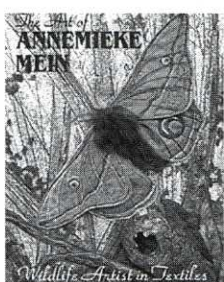
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This Diamond in a Square quilt from the exhibit features more fabric choices than is common for this design. In using corner pieces which contrast with the border strips, the quilter would have been considered quite adventurous by other Amish quilters. 81½ x 79½ inches (207 x 202 cm). Unknown Amish quilter, circa 1930-1940.

All quilts are courtesy of a private collection and part of "Lit from Within." Photographs by Sharon Rise-dorph courtesy of The Quilt Complex, San Rafael, California.

Acceptable colors vary by community or sometimes even by church district. Some groups have strong sentiments against wearing red or orange clothing, while others do not. Other distinctions, such as the number and type of pleats in a woman's bonnet or the width of a man's hat brim, may be so subtle that those outside, in the "English" world, probably wouldn't notice them.

Quilt historians agree that the Amish were latecomers to quilt making, adopting the practice in the 1870s as it was falling out of favor in mainstream America. According to Eve Granick in *The Amish Quilt*, "When Amish women did begin quilt making in the mid and late nineteenth century, they appear to have deliberately chosen

the most conservative and outdated styles." Nevertheless, their quilts became known for their brilliant and unusual color combinations.

In many cases, the fabrics comprising traditional Amish quilts are the same ones used to sew clothing; it's the way colors are juxtaposed that makes the quilts vibrant. Even after 100 years, the color combinations appear fresh and new. Brown, mustard, and leaf green may provide a backdrop for a regal shade of purple, deep wine, and midnight blue. In others, electric reds and blues are softened with teal, slate, and seafoam green in mosaic combinations that resemble those of modern abstract art. Viewed separately, each quilt's colors are captivating, but when three or

Small scraps of dress fabrics were often saved for Sunshine and Shadow quilts. Some historians believe that the Sunshine and Shadow design is an elaboration of

four Sunshine and Shadow quilts are hung side by side, the colors explode.

Scraps from clothing were often used in patterns in which many small squares define the design. Just as often, however, fabric purchases for these quilts were deliberate. The necessary yardage for the wide borders that typify a Lancaster Amish quilt or for a central medallion, as in Diamond in a Square, would be purchased with the family's order for clothing yard goods. Such quilts were nearly always made of a wool batiste, sateen, or cashmere—until wartime shortages forced the adoption of synthetics such as rayon or nylon for clothing and quilts.

A close look at Lancaster Amish quilts reveals only a few designs. Although quilt patterns such as appliquéd Baltimore album quilts and embroidered Victorian crazy quilts proliferated elsewhere in America, Amish quilts—in keeping with the Amish way of life—remained relatively simple.

TRADITIONAL AMISH DESIGNS

"Lit from Within" shows the evolution of designs in Lancaster County Amish quilts from Center Square and Diamond in a Square to Double Nine Patch. Also included are some unusual Amish crazy quilts that are so conservative, it's hard to call them crazy. Accompanying photographs and descriptions help set the quilts in their Lancaster County Amish context.

One of the earliest designs, which was popular in the 1890s, is Center Square, usually a square of solid-colored fabric enclosed by one or more borders. In Diamond in a Square, the central square is turned on point, and additional borders are added. Diamond in a Square was particularly popular between 1920 and 1930 but appears throughout Amish quilt history.

Another design favored by the Lancaster County Amish was Sunshine and Shadow, an abstract pattern of alternating rows of light and dark fabric. Sunshine and Shadow quilts were prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s; examples have been dated as early as 1910.

The Bars design, which first appeared about 1880 and remained popular through the 1940s, comprised a central rectangle made of rows of fabrics in a few—often just two—alternating colors that is set within wide borders. Some quilt historians suggest that this design mirrors the rows of crops on an Amish farm.

Although the Nine Patch design was not original with the Amish, they adapted it to traditional solid colors. The simplicity of Nine Patch, considered a beginner's design, was attractive to Amish women, who had to beware of designs that might be "prideful." Nevertheless, the exuberant colors and intricate quilting of Nine Patch and Double Nine Patch quilts make them "accomplished" pieces.

LANCASTER COUNTY QUILTS

Lancaster County Amish quilts differ in several ways from quilts made in other Amish communities. They are usually made of wool whereas Ohio and Indiana Amish quilters generally used cotton. Lancaster quilts have borders that are 10 to 15 inches wide and a binding strip as wide as 2½ inches whereas most other Amish quilts have a 1-inch edging. Nearly all Lancaster quilts are square whereas the Ohio Amish, for example, prefer rectangular quilts. However, the single characteristic that distinguishes Lancaster County Amish quilts is their highly skilled, often intricate quilting. These Plain People, for whom patterned fabric was too worldly, executed graceful decorative motifs with their running stitches.

Fiddlehead ferns or "feathers" swirl among the borders of countless Amish quilts. Intertwined cables, baskets, pumpkin seeds, and wreaths of roses appear on many of them. Less common are roses, dogwood flowers, snowflakes, clamshells, and Celtic knots. Some of the most highly prized Amish quilts feature double-line quilting, in which parallel rows of stitches lie only 1/8 inch apart.

As exquisite as these quilts are, the Amish themselves seem to have little attachment to them. When collectors and dealers started snapping them up in the 1950s and 1960s, families were



the Diamond in a Square. This quilt features colors reminiscent of today's popular neons. 81 x 80 inches (206 x 203 cm). Unknown Amish quilter, circa 1930.

willing to sell them, using the proceeds to acquire land for future generations. Although Amish women are still avid quilters, today they concentrate on making quilts that can be marketed to outsiders.

From October 1994 through February 1995, "Lit from Within" was exhibited at the Laguna Beach Art Museum in Laguna Beach, California. Local quilt guild members served as docents. A reproduction quilt was created on-site, with visitors encouraged to try their hand at stitching. Visitors could also experiment with quilt design software, including comparing Amish quilts with their historical counterparts on-screen. As this quilt collection travels to other venues, the exhibit will vary with the size of the museum and the availability of resources. Regardless of variations, the exhibit offers a magnificent look at the craftsmanship of an outstanding group of Pennsylvania quilters who made their mark on the craft.

The collection will be traveling the world over during the next few years. Six of the quilts will be on exhibit May 5–25, 1995, at the Little Humboldt Gallery at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. Eighteen of the quilts will be displayed September 3–30, 1995, at the City Hall Gallery in Constance, Germany.

For further information on the collection's travel schedule, send a business-size SASE to The Quilt Complex, 1010 B St., San Rafael, CA 94901. Many of the exhibit quilts are illustrated in the companion book, *Amish: The Art of the Quilt*, (Knopf, 1993), with text by Robert Hughes, which is available in hardcover with a slip-

case from The Quilt Complex for \$100 plus \$5 shipping and handling. A reissue is forthcoming. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. Frances A. Kenneley, of Irvine, California, is a freelance writer and quilter. She thanks Julie Silber, curator of "Lit from Within: Amish Quilts of Lancaster County," for information on the exhibit.

FURTHER READING

- Granick, Eve Wheatcroft. *The Amish Quilt*. Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 1989.
- Hostetler, John A. *Amish Society*, revised edition. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980.
- Hughes, Robert. *Amish: The Art of the Quilt*. Plate commentary by Julie Silber. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

In this rose-colored Bars quilt, the extensive quilting includes a central snowflake within a border containing two concentric squares of stitched fern designs, a border of stitched grapes and leaves, and an outer border of stitched baskets. 98 x 48 inches (249 x 122 cm), circa 1940.





LEGACY

Identifying keepsakes

Love your man
and darn his hoses
And you will
forever dance on roses.

A Norse adage

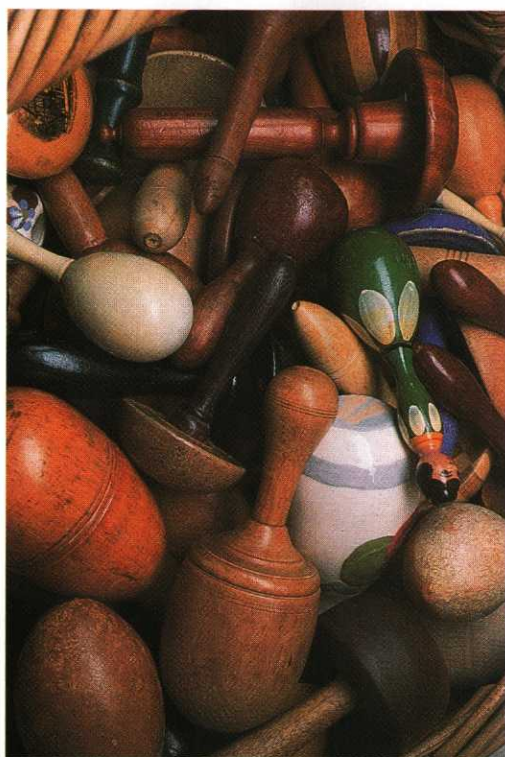
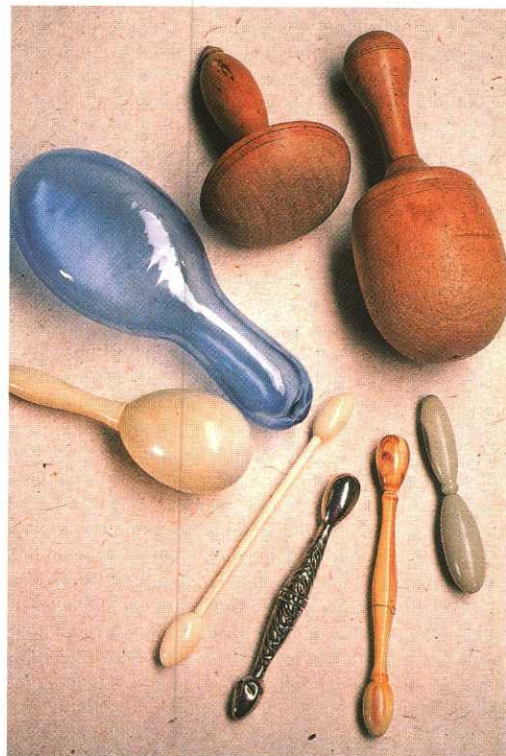
Q. My grandmother had a white wooden darning egg with small blue flowers painted on it that I loved to hold and feel as a child. I understand they were quite common in needlework baskets. What can you tell me about them?

—Renee Shipshaw, Walker, Tennessee

A. I remember the teacher's darning, or rather restoring, her stockings while listening to our recitations. She had knit those heavy white cotton stockings—sixteen pairs of them—when a mere girl. At sixty they still stood her in fair stead! For holes were rarely allowed to develop; all weak meshes were replaced before they broke. . . .

—Gertrude Whiting, *Old-Time Tools & Toys of Needlework* (New York: Dover, 1971)

Darners were once considered an essential tool in the household sewing basket. Today, because most goods are mass-produced, clothing is more likely to be replaced than repeatedly repaired, but well into the twentieth century,



Darners from the
collection of
Loene McIntyre.

Photographs by Joe Coca.

mending was the norm rather than the exception. Used primarily for stockings and socks, darners were also used as an aid in mending other clothing and household textiles. Stretching the fabric taut over the darning meant stitches could be made without piercing the other side of the sock. At an early age, children were taught to mend, and a smooth repair indicated a high level of skill while ensuring comfort for the wearer of the repaired garment.

According to *Darn It!*, by Wayne Muller (Gas City, Indiana: LW Book Sales, 1995), some form of darning tools have probably been used since the forerunner of stockings were made in the last half of the eighth century, although no documentation of their origin has been found. It has been recorded that darners were sold at a spa in Belgium in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, they were being used in the United States.

Early darning tools were simple, rounded objects that could be dropped inside socks.