

Chapter 1

The Art of Quilting

In This Chapter

- ▶ Deconstructing the quilt
 - ▶ Exploring the history of quilt making
 - ▶ Appreciating quilting today
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For centuries, quilts have played an important role in people's lives, providing their makers and recipients not only with warmth and comfort but also with colorful, attractive works of art. Traditionally, quilts also have been showcases for the talents and skills of their creators.

Throughout history, most households, regardless of income level, had certain quilts used only for special occasions or when honored guests visited. Quilt makers put their greatest efforts into these quilts, using the best quality fabric they could afford and covering them with miles and miles of beautiful quilting stitches. Many of these rarely used “best quilts” survive today as a testament to the history of quilting and the talents of their makers and are highly coveted by quilt collectors.

In this chapter, I explain what a quilt is and document the quilt's rich role in the texture of human life. I also share some of the newest developments in quilting and talk a bit about how quilting has become a modern form of artistic expression.

Following the Recipe for a Fabric Sandwich

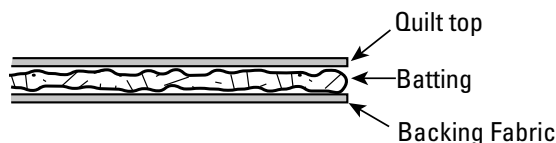
A quilt — that soft, cozy, comforting hunk of fabric and filling — in its simplest sense is a textile *sandwich*; in fact, that's how the quilt layers are traditionally described. This simple sandwich is what distinguishes a quilt from any other sewn object.

All quilts — whether intended for use on a bed or as a simple potholder — consist of three layers:

- ✓ Pieced or appliquéd quilt top
- ✓ Filling (called *batting* or *wadding*)
- ✓ Fabric backing

The top, batting, and backing layers are held together, or *quilted*, using a series of basic running stitches. You can also tie the layers together by stitching yarn, narrow ribbon, or pearl cotton through the layers at regular intervals and tying off the ends. However you do it, your goal is to prevent the layers from shifting during regular use and washing. You can see a cross section of a quilt in Figure 1-1.

Figure 1-1:
The layers
are what
make a quilt.



Some folks call various types of bedcoverings “quilts,” but if it doesn’t consist of three layers (top, filling, and backing), it isn’t really a quilt but rather a coverlet, bedspread, or throw. Also, although the word “quilt” is casually used to refer to a quilted bedcovering, many other objects — such as place mats, vests, wall hangings, and diaper bags — can be quilted.

The quilt top

The topmost layer of the quilt sandwich is the *quilt top*, which is typically made of fabric blocks that are pieced, appliquéd, or crafted using a mixture of both techniques. Quilt tops can also be devoid of individual blocks, made instead of whole cloth.

Piecing things together

A *pieced* (also called *patchwork*) quilt top can be made up of tens to hundreds of small pieces of fabric joined together by hand or machine to create a pattern or repeating design. Modern cutting and stitching techniques make the work of piecing both fun and easy to do. I discuss these techniques in Chapters 8 and 9.

Patchwork is the most recognized form of quilt making and was devised as a way to turn a bunch of fabric odds and ends into one cohesive unit, eliminating waste by using any fabric available. Over the centuries it evolved into the art form we know today. Patchwork uses basic shapes such as squares, triangles, rectangles, and hexagons to form patterns ranging from simple to complex. To create a patchwork top, you piece various patterns together into one block and then piece each block to another to create the overall quilt design. I talk more about patchwork in Chapter 4.

Layering up with appliqué

Appliqué is another method of creating quilt tops. To create an appliquéd top, you stitch various fabric shapes onto a base fabric. In the past, appliqué was used mainly for “best quilts” — the quilts used when company was expected — because of the money and time involved in making them. Stitching a piece of fabric on top of another piece wasn’t a very frugal use of precious fabric, making the quilts more expensive to create than patchwork ones. Appliqué also takes a bit longer to stitch than piecing, but the appliqué method allows you to create interesting patterns that can’t be pieced, such as dainty flowers with gracefully curving stems.

You can do appliqué work either by hand or by machine. Machine appliqué provides a variety of creative possibilities and is easy enough for even the rank beginner to master yet can be done intricately enough to produce a masterpiece worthy of a blue ribbon at the state fair. Chapter 10 covers appliqué in more detail.

Working with the whole top

Whole cloth quilts are one more branch of the quilt tree that bears mentioning. These were the fanciest of quilts, often created by wealthy women for only the most distinguished guests. In whole-cloth quilting, the quilt top consists of one large piece of fabric without seams (wide fabric widths were uncommon and very costly before the invention of modern fabric looms in the 18th century). This single piece is intricately quilted with delicate, closely-spaced stitching designs. One of the unique features of a whole cloth quilt is that it’s reversible, with the front being identical to the back. In France, these types of quilts are known as *boutis*. Today, whole cloth quilts are often referred to as *white work* or *bridal quilts*, and due to their intricacy, they’re still reserved for the best occasions.

The batting

The middle layer, or filling, of a quilt consists of cotton, wool, silk, or polyester *batting* (also referred to as “wadding” in some parts of the world).

Batting is a very important component of a quilt; in fact, it's the batting that makes a quilt truly a quilt. Without that wonderful, soft inner layer, you have a coverlet rather than a quilt. Batting adds depth and dimension to the quilt in that it buffers the quilt top and bottom, and it gives quilts the loft and coziness that make them so special.

Before the invention of commercial quilt batting, quilt makers used whatever they could find as filler. Wool was usually the filler of choice because it could be fluffed, laid out, and felted by dampening, pounding, and rolling the fibers until they meshed together. Quilt making got a whole lot easier when the first commercial quilt batting was produced from cotton in 1846. Cotton is still one of the favorite choices for quilt batting today.

I talk more about batting options and selection in Chapter 3.

The backing

The bottom layer of the sandwich, the *backing*, is a large piece of plain or printed cotton that may or may not be pieced together from smaller pieces to create the proper size. I talk more about the backing in Chapter 3.

After you assemble the three layers that make up a quilt, you have a sandwich of sorts: the quilt top and backing fabric enclose a layer of batting. The next step is to *quilt* the sandwich, meaning that you secure the three layers together by hand or machine stitching them into one cohesive and cozy unit.

“Quilt-thropology:” A Brief History of Quilt Making

Quilt making isn't just an American pastime; it has roots in Europe, South America, and Asia as well. Quilts were essential articles in households of the past, but they weren't used only as bedcoverings. You may be surprised to find out that quilts were used as curtains to keep out drafts, draped on supports and used as tents, used to cover doorways when no door was there, and used as petticoats and waistcoats to keep the body warm. Really thick quilts were even used as armor! Need proof? Head out to a Renaissance fair with a battle reenactment and you'll see something very similar to the quilted armor of our historical past.

Because quilts were so useful, quilting lessons began early in life. As soon as a young girl was able to manipulate a needle, she began her quilting and sewing career. Historic records show quilts included in a bride's dowry, and

no self-respecting bride's family would allow her to marry without a certain number of quilted items in her hope chest.

The power of patchwork

Patchwork quilting evolved from the frugality of homemakers in times when fabric wasn't very plentiful; it was a way to use up fabric odds and ends, ensuring nothing went to waste. Necessity truly was the mother of invention. Women saved every scrap from other sewing projects, and they often recycled worn out items into patches for quilts. Most patchwork quilts were intended for everyday use and were simply patched up when they became worn. If they became too worn, these tattered quilts were often used as fillers for new quilts.

During the U.S. Civil War, patchwork quilts also served another purpose: Many quilts featured special blocks or combinations of colors that made them function as maps of the Underground Railroad, guiding America's slaves from one safe house to another during this tumultuous time in history.

Leaving a social legacy

Quilt making has always been an important social activity. The *quilting bee* was one of the few opportunities women had to retreat from the backbreaking chores of farm life and spend time with one another. These groups of ladies (and sometimes men) often worked together on special presentation quilts to commemorate weddings or births or to express appreciation to members of their communities. These presentation quilts — which often included the signatures of the many makers, either written poetically on the blocks in permanent ink or embroidered in thread — became known as *autograph* or *album quilts*.

Proof that quilting goes way back

The oldest quilted object found thus far, which may date from around the first century B.C., is a rug taken from a Siberian tomb. Quilting may also have been practiced by the ancient Egyptians: Carvings at some ancient sites show the use of objects that have a quilted appearance. As well, many ancient nomadic peoples

created quilted fabrics to use as tents, insulating them from the cold.

The oldest known quilted objects from Europe include armor, saddle blankets, and whole cloth quilts from Sicily.

The secret of Granny's petticoats

Have you ever wondered what granny wore under her billowing skirts to keep warm during icy-cold winters? The answer is a quilt! Garment exhibits at museums often display fine examples of quilted petticoats, corset covers, and waistcoats.

Quilted petticoats for everyday wear were very simple and usually made of wool, serving mainly to keep their wearers warm. The filler material in many of these old petticoats was wool wadding, but some more frugal gals actually used horse-hair — sounds like an itch-fest to me!

Other petticoats served decorative purposes only. These were elaborately quilted and were probably reserved for special occasions or for times when skirts were pinned up to show underskirts and petticoats, depending on the fashion rules of the day. (Showing more petticoat than the rules of proper conduct allowed may have been considered scandalous!) In the 1800s, these fancy petticoats were made of quilted silk or taffeta.

Some quilted items, such as corset covers, had both form and function. They were designed to be supportive but were also highly decorative.

Autograph quilts became popular around 1840 and were made in a variety of styles: Some were constructed of identical pieced blocks, and others consisted of individual appliquéd blocks. Commemorative autograph quilts in elaborate red and green appliqué were quite popular on the east coast of the United States during the 1800s and are known as the Baltimore Album style. From a style that originated in the Baltimore, Maryland, area, these quilts were often made to welcome a new minister to the community, to celebrate a wedding, or to give as a gift on a young man's 21st birthday.

Quilting bees were an established community tradition by the mid-1800s and were even introduced to the Hawaiian Islands by missionaries during this time. The Hawaiian tradition of whole-cloth quilts appliquéd with whole cloth appliqués (basically one huge appliqué centered on one large piece of background fabric) evolved from this point into the unique art form it is today.

Today, community-created quilts are made to honor the fallen (such as the quilts made after 9/11); bring hope to the sick and those afflicted with AIDS, cancer, and other illnesses; and bring comfort to premature babies and the homeless. Quilting is still bringing people together to stitch, chat, and enjoy each other's company.

A Persistent Pastime: Quilting Today

Although they continue to add warmth to many a household, today's quilts are no longer a necessity but rather a means of self-expression. Today's quilt

makers have a dizzying array of fabrics to choose from and decorative threads and other great items to incorporate into their designs. Quilts stores are popping up everywhere offering quilters seemingly boundless choices of fabrics and patterns as well as inspiration. For quilters who enjoy making the quilt tops but aren't too keen on doing the actual quilting, many shops offer quilting services for a fee to their customers and keep a long-arm sewing machine in the back room just for this purpose.

Quilt making today is a hobby enjoyed by men and women alike (although women, with their needle-nimble fingers, still predominate). In many cases, machine techniques have replaced tedious hand piecing and appliqué, but modern quilt makers still take inspiration from quilts of days past, adapting those designs and techniques to today's lifestyles. For example, although some quilts are still made from fabric scraps, the maker is more likely to use the patchwork approach to recreate the charming look of old quilts or to commemorate a life or an event than for reasons of necessity.

Quilting as an art form has become very chic. I'm always amazed at the number of museums here in the United States and abroad that feature art quilt exhibits, and you can even find museums dedicated solely to the art of quilting. Quilting has certainly come a long way throughout the centuries — it has become *fiber art*.

Artistic quilters are dyeing their own fabrics and block-printing unique hand-made designs on fabric to create custom textiles for their art quilts. These artists create their own patterns inspired by nature (such as watercolors or landscapes), geometry (such as kaleidoscopes and *tessellations*, those nifty interlocking block designs that are all identical and fit together neatly and go on into infinity), or life in general (such as portrait quilting, life stories, or dedications). They also mix traditional and unusual fibers with other media, such as paint, beading, embroidery, and even plastic.



Exhibits of gorgeous quilted art at local art museums are fairly common. To find one near you, check your local paper, visit your local art museum's Web site, or check with the local quilting guild. You'll be amazed by what you see on display!

New technologies are also inspiring new generations of quilters. Software allows quilts to be designed, viewed, and altered before a single cut is made or stitch is taken, and special products now make it possible to print fabric using a computer and printer. An ancient art form has gone high-tech.

Talented, dedicated quilters have elevated the art of quilting to an entirely new level, creating a veritable fiber revolution (if I sound excited, it's because I am!).

Do quilting bees still buzz?

Great-granny probably didn't get out all that much, considering the lack of transportation available to her and the fact that she may have lived out on a farm in the middle of nowhere. This is why a quilting bee was so important to her — it was one of her main means of socializing with other women and staying in touch with her community.

Although the quilting bees of days past served a very important purpose, they no longer exist in the same capacity. Society is considerably more mobile now, and a quilting bee is no longer a necessity for social interaction. But before you panic, consider what has replaced it — the *quilting guild*.

These days, most quilters are members of or have attended some form of a quilting guild. Most guilds meet for a few hours on a monthly or bimonthly basis to share news of quilting, show off finished projects, and work on projects in-progress. Some also work on community service projects, such as quilts for the homeless or house-bound, quilts and layettes for

premature babies, and memorial quilts for AIDS victims and their families, to name just a few.

Many guilds have special programs that bring in top teachers from all over the country, and they often host yearly quilt shows, which are an excellent opportunity to check out what other quilters in your area are working on!

Finding a quilting guild is easy. Simply ask at the local quilting supply store or fabric retailer, or check with your local library. Be sure to find out what the "visitation" policy is ahead of time; some guilds allow one or two visits before requiring membership and a nominal fee, and others may charge a per-visit fee (a buck or two). To find out what types of events are being planned by your local guild, contact their program chairperson.

Don't think you have the time for a guild but like to spend hours surfing the Web? Consider a cyber-guild. The Internet is full of great places for quilters to interact with each other without ever leaving their homes!