

# out of THE STORES

## Quilt Collection

Needlework has been an important creative outlet and practical pastime for women throughout Australia's history and is often the only tangible legacy that they leave behind. No social history collection would be complete without some reference to this material and its importance in documenting the social and domestic lives of women. The National Museum of Australia has been collecting examples of quilts since the 1980s and the collection currently includes over 50 quilts (although some could be more accurately described as murals or wall hangings).

Where conservation treatment has occurred, it has been minimal. After detailed consideration and documentation, a treatment is selected based on the individual needs of each quilt. This includes removing surface dust, making minor repairs where necessary to stabilise the weakest of fabrics and regular basic housekeeping for pest management. Part of the treatment philosophy for the Museum is to retain as much of the history of the object while minimising damage. There is a need to maintain an object's structural integrity while taking advantage of the opportunities wear and tear have provided.

In some places it is possible to see into the interior of the quilt and much valuable information can be gained from this. One can see the original colours of the fabric in remaining seam allowances, the type of wadding used and the piecing process. Textile conservators choose fairly transparent fabrics that provide adequate strength to support damaged areas. This also gives researchers a chance to observe the textile in depth while maintaining its integrity.

The quilts in the Museum's collection can be divided roughly into two categories – those made for a practical application and those which were produced as a creative or decorative item, although many quilts obviously fall across both categories.

Quilts made for a practical application, such as Wagga quilts, were often just pieces of old clothing or bedding which were sewn together roughly onto some backing fabric to form a quilt or rug. Wagga quilts or rugs were made by both men and women. Men's quilts were fairly utilitarian, often being constructed of roughly stitched-together wheat bags for outdoor use such as camping. It has been suggested that the name Wagga quilt is derived from the town of Wagga Wagga in NSW which was a major centre for wheat production. The Museum's Wagga Quilt (1988.25.1, donated by Margaret Rolfe) was found in 1986 in an abandoned cottage near Orbost in East Gippsland. It is difficult to date. The last occupant of the cottage where it was discovered died in the 1960s but the quilt itself could have been made anytime between 1900 and the late 1950s. Although it is in a fragile and worn condition it was obviously carefully constructed and contains some interesting and decorative fabric pieces which give a very feminine feel to the piece. As part of its conservation treatment the quilt was cleaned and the worn areas were stabilised with fabric infills and stitching. It is now possible to get an idea of the original colours of fabric pieces and the way the quilt was constructed.



Minetta Huppertz's Farm Life quilt  
Photo: Matt Kelso

## out of THE STORES

The Dunshea quilt (1990.76.1), one of our oldest quilts dated around 1903, was most likely a summer quilt as it has no wadding. It is constructed from rectangles sewn into strips, joined, then overlaid with brown bands of applique. The backing fabric features a large sunflower print in green, but the fabric had been placed face inwards. With time, the pieced and applique front has had much fabric loss and damage and one can see this wonderful print which has not faded as much as it would have if it had been facing out. Detailed documentation clarifies the treatment process. Surface dust was removed then iron stains were eased, which can cause breakage to fibres if left. This fragile quilt is stored flat on a board to facilitate movement without being handled.

The Rolfe crazy patchwork cushion (1990.4.1) is a wonderfully rich sampler of fabrics and embroidery from the turn of last century. It is also a demonstration of how time affects different fabrics in different ways. Some fabrics have disappeared completely and others have lost the weft threads leaving only strands of the warp. In some places, only the hand embroidery is holding the fabric together. Some have been favourites for insects, but once pests are eradicated the damage they have caused is often only unsightly, not unstable. With damage caused by so many different sources or inherent weaknesses, the most efficient treatment is again to stabilise the areas where damage may continue. After detailed documentation, surface dust was removed, then stitching and adhesive repairs made to the most fragile areas and the piece stored flat.

Some of our most beautiful examples of decorative quilts can be found in the Nettie McColive collection. Nettie McColive's quilts were acquired by the Museum after her death in the late 1990s. The collection also includes other items of needlework, photographs and memorabilia. Minetta (Nettie) McColive grew up on an isolated dairy farm during the 1930s and completed her schooling by correspondence. The Museum holds three quilts from this period, Farm Life (see image), Wildflowers and the International Quilt. The Farm Life quilt is currently on display in Eternity and is due for changeover early this year. Patterns for these quilts appeared in the *Adelaide Chronicle* in 1932, 1933 and 1938 respectively. These patterns proved very popular with the women of South Australia who submitted completed quilts to be judged at the Adelaide shows. Nettie's Farm Life quilt won first prize in the schools and junior section of the competition while her mother won second prize in the general section. The quilts in this collection have been carefully looked after and have required minimal treatment from conservation.

The Museum continues to collect both historic and contemporary quilts for its collection. As quilting has become a popular pastime with a new generation of women, we look forward to acquiring contemporary examples of this practical art form.

■ **Quilt care and storage** Most of the Museum's quilts are stored flat because of their fragility, with a few of the stronger ones being rolled. As always, if you feel treatment is necessary it's important to seek professional advice with anything special you own. Basic housekeeping is just as critical – maintaining an air flow to stop mould and reducing pests and light will certainly lengthen the life span of all textiles.

■ **References and resources** If you're interested in looking at and learning more about Australian quilts you may like to visit the Australian Museums Online National Quilt Register at [amol.org.au/nqr](http://amol.org.au/nqr). You can read up on, for example, Wagga rugs made by men or quilts by Greek Australian women or just search the quilt tree. It also provides a comprehensive section on how to care for your own quilts, written by a conservator.

Isaacs, Jennifer, *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts*, Landsdown Press, 1987

McMahon, Marie, *Australian Needlework Report for the National Museum of Australia*, November 1987, Parts 1 & 2

National Quilt Register on Australian Museums On Line @ [amol.org.au/nqr](http://amol.org.au/nqr)

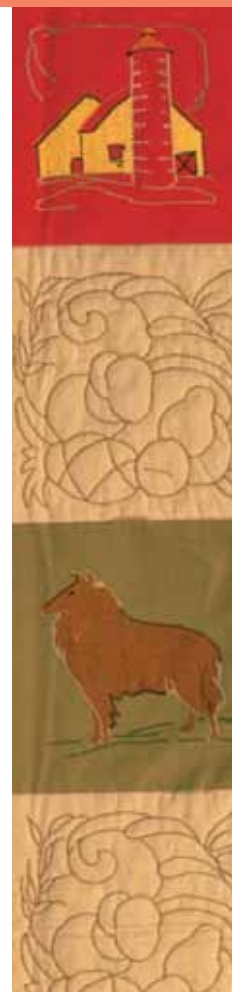
Rolfe, Margaret, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, Greenhouse Publications, 1987

Maria Ramsden

Registration

Judith Andrewartha

Conservation



Detail of the Farm Life quilt

Quilt Collection