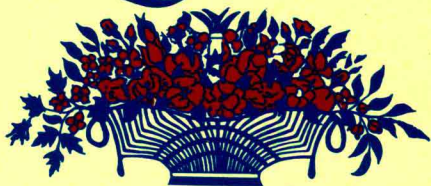


HOW TO MAKE AN AMERICAN QUILT



A NOVEL BY
WHITNEY OTTO

*How to
Make an
American
Quilt*

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[On photography:] "One theme with endless variations, like life itself."

—Alfred Steiglitz

When I was young and bold and strong,
Oh, right was right, and wrong was wrong!
My plume on high, my flag unfurled,
I rode away to right the world.
"Come out, you dogs, and fight!" said I,
And wept there was but once to die.

But I am old; and good and bad
Are woven in a crazy plaid.

—Dorothy Parker

A Note from the Author

In researching my novel, I found the following books particularly helpful in providing quilting details: *Twentieth Century Quilts, 1900–1950* by Thomas K. Woodward and Blanche Greenstein (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988), and *Hearts & Hands* by Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber (San Francisco: Quilt Digest Press, 1987). The work of Setsuko Segawa is a wonderful example of the quilt as fine art; she has a number of books out on the subject as well.

I cannot thank these authors enough and I strongly recommend their books to anyone interested in quilting.

I also wish to thank the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize: 1954–1965*.

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How to Make an American Quilt

Prologue

At first, I thought I would study art. Art history, to be exact. Then I thought, No, what about physical anthropology?—a point in my life thereafter referred to as My Jane Goodall Period. I tried to imagine my mother, Sarah Bennett-Dodd (called Sally by everyone with the exception of her mother), camping with me in the African bush, drinking strong coffee from our battered tin cups, much in the way that Jane did with Mrs. Goodall. I saw us laid up with matching cases of malaria; in mother/daughter safari shorts; our hands weathering in exactly the same fashion.

Then, of course, I remembered that I was talking about *my* mother, Sally, who is most comfortable with modernity and refuses to live in a house that anyone has lived in before, exposing me to a life of tract housing that was curious and awful.

Literature was my next love. Until I became loosely acquainted with critical theory, which struck me as a kind of intellectualism for its own sake. It always seems that one has to choose literature or critical theory, that one cannot love both. All of this finally pushed me willingly (I later realized) into history.

I began with the discipline of the time line—a holdover from elementary school—setting all the dates in order, allowing me to fix time and place. History needs a specific context, if nothing else. My time lines gradually grew more and more ornate, with pasted-on photographs and drawings that I carefully cut from cheap history books possessing great illustrations but terrible, unchallenging text. I was taken with the *look* of history before I arrived at the “meat” of the matter. But the construction of the time line is both horizontal and vertical, both distance and depth. Which, finally, makes it rather unwieldy on paper. What I am saying is that it needed other dimensions, that history is not a

matter of dates, and only disreputable or unimaginative teachers take the “impartial” date approach, thereby killing all interest in the subject at a very early age for many students.

(I knew, in a perfect world, I would not be forced to choose a single course of study, that I would have time for all these interests. I could gather up all my desires and count them out like valentines.)

The Victorians caught my eye almost instantly with their strange and sometimes ugly ideas about architecture and dress and social conventions. Some of it was pure whimsy, like a diorama in which ninety-two squirrels were stuffed and mounted, enacting a basement beer-and-poker party, complete with cigars and green visors pulled low over their bright eyes; or a house that displayed a painting of cherubs, clad in strips of white linen, flying above the clouds with an identical painting hidden, right next to it, under a curtain in which the same cherubs—babies though they were—are completely nude. Or a privileged Texas belle’s curio cabinet that contained a human skull and blackened hand. Or still another young woman (wealthy daughter of a prominent man) who insisted on gliding through the family mansion with a handful of live kittens clinging to the train of her dress.

I enrolled in graduate school. Then I lost interest. I cared and then I didn’t care. I wanted to know as much about the small, odd details that I discovered here and there when looking into the past as I did about Lenin’s secret train or England’s Victorian imperialism or a flawless neo-Marxist critique of capitalism.

There were things that struck me as funny, like the name Bushrod Washington, which belonged to George’s nephew, or the man who painted Mary Freake and her baby, known only as the Freake Limner. And I like that sort of historical gossip; I mean, is it true that Catherine the Great died trying to copulate with a horse? And if not, what a strange thing to say about someone. Did Thomas Jefferson have a lengthy, fruitful affair with his slave Sally Hemings? What does that say about the man who was the architect of the great democratic dream? What does it say about us? Did we inherit the dream or the illicit, unsettling racial relationship?

This sort of thing is not considered scholarly or academic or

of consequence, these small footnotes. And perhaps rightly so. Of course, I loved the important, rigorous historical inquiry as well. What I think I wanted was both things, the silly and the sublime; which adds up to a whole picture, a grudgingly true past. And out of that past truth a present reality.

You could say I was having trouble linking the two.

I wished for history to be vital, alive with the occasional quirk of human nature (a little “seriojovial”); I imagined someone saying to me, *Finn, what ever gave you the idea that history was any sort of living thing? Really. Isn't that expectation just the least bit contradictory?*

Then Sam asked me to marry him.

It seemed to me a good idea.

Yet it somehow led me back to my educational concern, which was how to mesh halves into a whole, only in this case it was how to make a successful link of unmarried to married, man to woman, the merging of the roads before us. When Heathcliff ran away from Wuthering Heights, he left Cathy wild and sad, howling on the moors, *I am Heathcliff*, as if their love were so powerful, their souls so seamlessly mated, that no division existed for them, save the corporeal (though I tend to believe they got “together” at least once), which is of little consequence in the presence of the spirit.

All of which leaves me wondering, astonished, and a little put off. How does one accomplish such a fusion of selves? And, if the affection is that strong, how does one *avoid* it, leaving a little room for the person you once were? The balance of marriage, the delicate, gentle shifting of the polished scales.

Let me say that I like Sam tremendously. I love him truly.

The other good idea was spending the summer with my grandmother Hy Dodd and her sister Gladys Joe Cleary. Their relationship with me is different from that with the other grandchildren; we share secrets. And I probably talk to them a little more than my cousins or their own children do. I think they have a lot to say and I am more than willing to hear it. All of it. Whatever strikes them as important.

To me, they are important.

So my days are now spent watching the quilters come and go, lazily eavesdropping on the hum of their conversation and drifting off into dreams on my great-aunt's generous porch; thinking about my Sam, my sweetheart. Or lying on my back, in the shade, in Aunt Gladys's extravagant garden, removing the ice cubes from my tea, running them across my face, neck, and chest in an effort to cool down from the heat.

I could wander over to the Grasse swimming pool, but it is always so crowded. Sophia Richards says you never know who you'll meet there—as if I want to meet anyone. As if I am not already staying in a house that has quite a bit of “foot traffic.”

The quilters have offered to make a bridal quilt in honor of my marriage, but I tell them to *Please continue with what you are doing as if I never arrived to stay for the summer*. Sometimes I say, *I can't think about that now* (as if anyone can think clearly in this peppery heat). I can see this puzzles them, makes them wonder what sort of girl it is who “cannot think about” her own wedding.

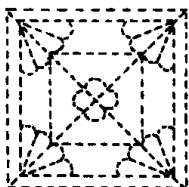
This amuses me as well, since, at age twenty-six, I have lost track of the sort of girl that I am. I used to be a young scholar; I am now an engaged woman. Not that you cannot be both—even I understand that—yet I cannot fathom who I think I am *at this time*. My aunt Gladys told me recently that this strikes her as “healthy and sensible”—to take a minute or so for yourself, to take a little time to think.

The true source of my interest during this visit, this impasse in my own life, is Anna Neale, another one of the quilters and my aunt's oldest friend. Anna has promised me a long talk one day, she says, when she is not so busy, when there is nothing else to do. But her time always seems occupied. She's remarkably beautiful, Anna Neale is. Even at seventy-three. She can turn heads.

We are all drawn to beauty. I think it is a beacon for us; makes us want to listen.

Well, I am ready to listen.

Instructions No.1



What you need:

You need a large wooden frame and enough space to accommodate it. Put comfortable chairs around it, allowing for eight women of varying ages, weight, coloring, and cultural orientation. It is preferable that this large wood frame be located in a room in a house in Atwater or Los Banos or a small town outside Bakersfield called Grasse. It should be a place that gets a thick, moist blanket of tule fog in the winter and be hot as blazes in the summer. Fix plenty of lemonade. Cookies are a nice complement.

When you choose your colors, make them sympathetic to one another. Consider the color wheel of grammar school—primary colors, phenomena of light and dark; avoid antagonism of hues—it detracts from the pleasure of the work. Think of music as you orchestrate the shades and patterns; pretend that you are a con-

ductor in a lush symphony hall, imagine the audience saying *Ooh* and *Ahh* as they applaud your work.

Patterns with tiny, precise designs always denote twentieth-century taste.

Your needles must be finely honed so you do not break the weave of your fabric. The ones from England are preferable. And plenty of good-quality thread, both to bind the pieces and adorn the quilt. Embroidery thread is required for the latter. You will need this to hold the work together for future generations. Unless you are interested in selling your quilt at an art fair or gallery, in which case the quilt will still need to be held together for generations of people you will never meet.

The women who circle the frame should be compatible. Their names are: Sophia, Gladys Joe, Hy, Constance, Em, Corrina, Anna, and Marianna. Hyacinth and Gladiola Josephine are sisters, two years apart, and always called Hy and Gladys Joe. Anna and Marianna are mother and daughter, seventeen years apart. Em, Sophia, and Corrina are all natives to Grasse, while Constance is a relative newcomer. When you have assembled the group, once a week for better than thirty-five years, give or take some late-comers, you will be ready to begin the traditional, free-form *Crazy Quilt*.

The *Crazy Quilt* was a fad of the nineteenth century and as such is not truly considered Art, yet still it has its devotees. It is comprised of remnants of material in numerous textures, colors; actually, you could not call the squares of a *Crazy Quilt* squares, since the stitched-together pieces are of all sizes and shapes. This is the pattern with the least amount of discipline and the greatest measure of emotion. Considering the eight quilters surrounding the frame in the room of the house in the small town outside Bakersfield called Grasse, considering the more than thirty-five years it will reveal, perhaps some emerging images will be lambs or yellow roses or mermaids, entwined wedding rings or hearts in states of disrepair. You will find this work to be most revealing, not only in the material contributions to the quilt, but in who enjoys sewing them and who does not. This random piecing together.

More Instructions

What you should understand when undertaking the construction of a quilt is that it is comprised of spare time as well as excess material. Something left over from a homemade dress or a man's shirt or curtains for the kitchen window. It utilizes that which would normally be thrown out, "waste," and eliminates the extra, the scraps. And out of that which is left comes a new, useful object.

Take material from clothing that belongs to some family member or friend or lover (if you find yourself to be that sort of a girl). Bind them together carefully. Wonder at the disparity of your life. Finger the patches representing "lover" and meditate on the meaning of illicit love in early American society. Failing that, consider the meaning of the affair in today's time frame.

The Roanoke Island Company, founded by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585, completely disappeared—all 117 men, women, and children—by 1590 with no one knowing exactly what took place during that five-year period, and a single word carved into a tree the only viable clue: CROATOAN. No historian has figured out what that means. This you will find as the genesis and recurring theme in America as founded by the English: that we are a people fraught with mysteries and clues; there are things that cannot be fathomed.

Do not forget that the Norse, Spanish, French, Italians, and god knows who else arrived before the English, relative latecomers to this place, and that the Indians stood on the shores, awaiting them all. These same Indians were exploited by the English, who were lazy and preferred to spend their time smoking tobacco on the banks of the James River rather than till the soil, expecting "someone else" to do it for them. Killing themselves by the end of the first winter because, as they emphatically told the Indians, *We are not farmers. We are explorers*, then demanded their provisions. Some say this is where the seeds of slavery were sown. An institution the English were not devious enough to come up with on their own, instead adopting it from the Spanish, who had

been dealing in African flesh for a number of years. But that is another story.

Consider that women came across the Atlantic from the beginning and were not allowed to vote until 1920. A quick calculation leaves you wondering about those hundreds of years in between. You are curious about their power, their spheres of influence. Most historians agree that the first president voted in by the women was a washout, a different sort of man than Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and so on. Men can take credit for those presidents.

Recall that women who came to newly colonized America often outlived their husbands and that it was not uncommon, in those early Virginia days, for them to be widowed and inherit, remarry, be widowed and inherit, remarry, and so on. This, you would think, may have been a frightening cycle to a number of men in the area, never knowing when their number was up, so to speak. But with so few careers open to women at the time, they simply made the best with what they had to work with. Not unlike fashioning a quilt from scraps, if you think about it. And there weren't that many of them, proportionally speaking. With that sort of social arrangement, you find yourself wondering if all these husband deaths were strictly due to natural causes; but to conjecture such a thought, without historical verification, would be to assume the worst about the early settlers. No reputable historian would suggest such a thing: duplicitous, untrustworthy, murderous women. Not just any women, but *wives*.

She used whatever material she had at hand and if she was too overburdened with work she could ask her husband, sweetly, with sugar in her voice, to please, please look into acquiring an indentured servant. England, experiencing a bit of an economic crisis, had a surplus of unemployed citizens it was not much interested in caring for, and Virginia, Tidewater, and Maryland took on the look of an acceptable repository. Ah, but that is to confuse convicts with indentures and, really, they are not the same. An indentured servant is more like a slave, whereas a convict is more like a caged man. Different. You see.

Later, a turn in England's financial fortunes led to a drop-off

of people interested in coming to America as servants, what with renewed opportunity at home (and that unholy Atlantic crossing), and an attempt to fill the resulting American employment gap paved the way for African-American slavery. But that is another story.

The nineteenth century brought an explosion of ideas to the concept of the quilt, of a woman's political voice. Not to mention the domestic conflicts of the Revolutionary War, followed by the Civil War (with one or two small—by comparison—skirmishes in between). Ignore the fact that the Revolution still left some unequal and the Civil War had a rather specific definition of brother against brother, neglecting to include color or gender. That, too, is another story.

Your concern might be trying to reduce your chosen quilt topic to more manageable dimensions. For example, the Revolutionary War could be defined as a bloody betrayal. One can almost hear the voice of Mother England crying, "But you are mine. An extension of me. You promised to be faithful, to send back your riches and keep me in a style to which I have become accustomed." America's answer something like: "I need my space. It isn't that I am not fond of you. We can still maintain a friendly trading relationship."

There is the Civil War, which is a conflict of the blood tie. No one fights dirtier or more brutally than blood; only family knows its own weakness, the exact placement of the heart. The tragedy is that one can still love with the force of hatred. Feel infuriated that once you are born to another, that kinship lasts through life and death, immutable, unchanging, no matter how great the misdeed or betrayal. Blood cannot be denied, and perhaps that is why we fight tooth and claw, because we cannot, being only human, put asunder what God has joined together.

Women were witness to Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Find some quality silk and cotton in red, white, and blue. Cut white stars in the evening as you sit on your summer porch. Appliqué the letters that spell out your name, your country, your grief. Stitch across the quilt a flag held in the beak of a dove. Ponder the fact that you could not vote for the man but will defy any male citizen