



San Jose Museum of  
**Quilts &  
Textiles**

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Needle Artists Upstage Modernism's Embrace of Abstraction and Collage**



By Flora Ellen Jenkins, 1887.  
Donated by Ellene Sumner



By Stewart West, 1883. Donated  
by Mr. & Ms. Charles Stanley



Unknown, 1890. Donated by  
Laurel Kaleda

SAN JOSE, Calif., July 29, 2009 – *Still Crazy*, opening November 17, 2009 at the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles, mines the Museum's permanent collection to explore how a grassroots response to exhibitions of Japanese and British arts and crafts at major 19<sup>th</sup> century international expositions in the United States gave rise to the glorious Victorian crazy quilt. A purely decorative art object that fused a 16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese patchwork tradition with the fine embroidery revived by the British Arts & Crafts Movement, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century crazy quilt presaged modernists' use of abstraction and collage techniques, and was a forerunner of the contemporary art quilt. *Still Crazy* runs through February 7, 2010. The opening reception, free with admission, is Sunday, November 22, 2:00-4:00pm.

Textile historians suspect that exhibitions of Japanese and British arts and crafts at late 19<sup>th</sup> century international expositions in Chicago, New Orleans, and Philadelphia sparked the imaginations of North American needle artists who created the first crazy quilts. Visitors to the Japanese exhibition at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition marveled at a *yosegire* patchwork screen and embroideries made at London's Royal School of Art Needlework. These exhibits inspired textile industry and interior design pioneer Candace Wheeler to found the New York Society of Decorative Art in 1877. Modeled after the Royal School of Art Needlework's efforts to professionalize needle arts so as to provide female artists in Britain a means of economic support, this organization aimed to help American female artists acquire professional training and venues for the sale of their work via a network of Women's Exchanges.

Wheeler went on to help found similar schools in Chicago, St. Louis, Hartford, Detroit, Troy (NY), and Charleston (SC), and ladies' magazines spread the word about this new kind of needle art. Crazy quilting reached fad proportions in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1913 a *Chicago Tribune* cartoon titled, “The Original Cubist,” lampooned the “modern” artist as a crazy-quilting granny in an attempt to dismiss cubism by equating it with an old woman’s amateur handicraft. In truth it offers compelling evidence that 19<sup>th</sup> century quiltmakers anticipated and upstaged modern artists’ embrace of abstraction and a collage aesthetic.

Many 19<sup>th</sup> century crazy quilts were made of fancy dress fabrics like brocades, silks, velvets and ribbons, and were heavily embellished with areas of decorative embroidery, paint, and even photographic images on fabric. But by the end of the century, you see crazy quilts worked in wools with very minimalist or no embroidery. As new fabrics became available in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they too became fodder for crazy quilt makers.

“The richness of these textiles and their striking composition of all-over free-form patterning are intriguing and captivating to the imagination and to the hand. Texture, color, and pattern come together in a fertile field of inspired design and intricate complexity,” said Curator Deborah Corsini.

According to Corsini, the exhibit features an unusual variety of the kinds of textiles that were created including wall hangings, table covers, comforters, and a one-of-a-kind matching pair of Victorian parlor curtains.

Of the approximately thirty quilts included, many are being exhibited for the first time after being carefully restored by Museum Collections Care Manager Joyce Hulbert and a team of volunteers. “I’m thrilled that the wealth and variety of our crazy quilt collection, born from the generosity of the many donors who have given to the collection over the years, can be featured together in this luscious and sumptuous exhibition,” said Hulbert.

San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles was the first museum in the United States dedicated to quilts and textiles as an art form. In 2005, the *San Jose Mercury News* named the Museum one of the top 10 attractions in San Jose. Museum and Museum Store hours are: 10:00am-5:00pm Tuesday through Sunday; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission is \$6.50 general; \$5 students and seniors; and free to museum members and children under 13. Admission is free on the first Friday of each month. The San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles is located at 520 South First Street in downtown San Jose. For more information, call 408-971-0323 or visit [www.sjqquiltmuseum.org](http://www.sjqquiltmuseum.org).

These exhibitions and related programs are funded in part by the City of San Jose; The David and Lucile Packard Foundation; Arts Council Silicon Valley in partnership with the County of Santa Clara and the National Endowment for the Arts; the City of San Jose; and the Santa Clara Valley Quilt Association.

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Editor’s Note: For available images go to: [www.sjqquiltmuseum.org/pressroom.html](http://www.sjqquiltmuseum.org/pressroom.html)