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A modern craft with a long tradition: Quilts

Traditional Amish patchwork was basic. The simple geometric shapes of squares, rectangles and triangles were used. The early style of quilting was designed simply to hold the quilt together and prevent the batting from slipping between the front and back pieces. As time went on, quilt making became more and more sophisticated, and the later quilts are distinguished by their bold compositions in intense colours and large fields of fabric embellished with ornate quilting motifs.

By the middle of the 20th century a few changes had taken place in Amish patchwork. The use of block patchwork and patchwork designs that depicted objects such as baskets, stars and houses were two of these changes. However, the Amish still used scrap fabrics and limited themselves to a narrow range of colours.

In the early 1960s outside influences began to alter life for the Amish quilt makers. Tourism came to many Amish communities. Although people were impressed with the patterns and workmanship, the colours were not always to modern taste, and Amish women were asked to make quilts in fancy fabrics supplied by the tourists. The Amish realized that quilts could provide income, and they began making quilts to order. Some even decided that buying fabric in pretty prints and making quilts speculatively might be a good idea. For the most part, however, in their homes the Amish continue to use the plain quilts of their tradition.

Quilt making is not limited to the United States, nor the Amish community: There are quilting groups all over New Zealand, with fabric shops catering for their needs. The "disease" has spread to the Swiss community, too: I know of a few infected with this bug in the Wellington Club.



Anna Hunger, Taranaki ca 1830

The earliest known Swiss/New Zealand quilt was made by Anna Hunger, in Taranaki, probably around 1830. As the quilt has been altered over the years, it is not known whether Anna originally made it before she came to New Zealand or brought a whole lot of scraps with her, for she certainly would not have been able to purchase these fabrics in New Zealand at that time. However, the backing at least was hand sewn in New Zealand. It was constructed from flour and oatmeal bags

which depict the trademark names of goods produced in New Zealand, as well as cut-down old pyjamas and tablecloths.

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Swiss folk songs the American way

A CD "Amish Lieder/Amish Songs", was released this year by the Bern-based publisher, Zytglogge. It highlights the debt the Swiss owe North American communities for preserving part of their cultural heritage.

Some of the more conservative Amish groups still speak a Swiss-German dialect and have kept alive Swiss folk songs. Singing is the only way the Amish can express themselves musically since they are not allowed to play instruments or listen to recordings.

Every Amish church service begins with an hour of song, and community members also sing while they work. They love to yodel whether they are doing their washing, sewing, peeling vegetables or taking in the corn harvest.

The Amish have kept alive songs in Bernese which are found neither in printed form nor in folk music archives. An example is "My Vatter isch e Chäser gsi", which was probably never written down because it is slightly erotic.

The most prominent number on the CD is the Hasli-bacher song, a 32-verse ballad about the last Amish martyr, sung by an Amish group and a modern version by three Swiss singer-songwriters.

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