Bedcover Made from Cigar or Tobacco Rectangles Known as “Top Sheets”

1913
Theresa Zett Smith
Background on Quilts

Although quilts had a functional purpose as bed coverings, they were also equally important as display. Early bedrooms frequently possessed only one piece of furniture, namely, the bed, and the quilt displayed upon it was the central motif. Quilts were first made in America as the product of necessity as well as tradition. Before 1750, quilting was the universal form of needlework in America, practiced in all households by all females old enough to hold a needle. Even after economic circumstances eased somewhat, girls were still taught to sew even before they were taught to read—there are many beautiful quilts made by girls younger than ten years old. Making quilts, though a necessity, was virtually the one area in which women could express themselves creatively—a woman worked on her quilt in the evenings after she had done the day’s chores. The importance of quilts in women’s lives is best expressed in the statement of one 19th-century farm woman: “I would have lost my mind if I had not had my quilts to do.”

Women reserved their “best” quilt for guests of honor or special occasions, and, when it was on the bed, drew the curtains to prevent fading. Quilts were made in three ways: pieced, appliquéd, or by the use of quilting stitches alone on a solid color background. The majority of quilts, like this one by Theresa Zett Smith, were “pieced”; for economic reasons small pieces of fabric were joined edge to edge to make up the top of a single layer of fabric. The designs the quilters developed reflected their environment, as well as the religious and political concerns of the times. A young woman’s first quilt was usually made from long strips of fabric stitched together across the width of a bed. These designs often are framed with a border made of long, narrow strips of cloth or small pieces stitched into squares and sewn together. Since the process of piecing makes curved designs very difficult, most pieced quilts have straight edge designs found on squares, rectangles, triangles, or diamonds.

Besides the top designed layer, quilts have two other layers: the padding for warmth and the backing. All three layers are held together by the “quilting,” that is, the tiny stitches which go through all three layers and contribute their own design to the quilt.

Bedcover with Cigar or Tobacco-Box Rectangles, 1913

In the early part of this century, cigar and tobacco boxes were lined with “top sheets,” or pieces of fabric with colorful designs or pictures printed on them. People collected top sheets the way we collect baseball cards today and hung them in frames or sewed them together to make cushions and other household decorations. Bedcover with Cigar or Tobacco-Box Rectangles, sewn from 108 top sheets, was made by Theresa Zett Smith to celebrate the birth of her nephew. She hoped that a bedcover with flags from around the world would appeal to a young boy. Some countries represented by these flags, such
as Persia (now Iran) and Bohemia (now a region of the Czech Republic), have changed their names or no longer exist.

Theresa Zett lived with her family in Syracuse, New York. It is thought she later married Darius Smith. She had two sisters and one brother. Her father was president of the George Zett Brewing Company, which was sold in 1933 after 78 years of Zett family ownership.

Glossary

**appliqué**: To attach a piece of fabric to a larger piece of fabric, turning the outer edges of the smaller piece 1/4 inch under and stitching it in place.

**block**: Individual square which is sewn together with other blocks to make the quilt top.

**motif**: Dominant idea or central theme; single or repeated design color

**pieced**: Method of sewing together patches for quilt blocks. Proper pinning, sewing, and pressing is required for accurate results.

**sashing**: Horizontal and vertical strips that frame each quilt block
Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

Math Quilt

Most quilts are based on combinations of geometric design. Discuss and demonstrate how geometric shapes may be combined, repeated, and inverted. Ask each child to create a 9-by-9-inch paper design using paper geometric shapes. Consideration should be given to color selection. Join the individual pieces together into a room banner quilt. Consider extending the result into a fabric quilt.

History of Quilts

Have the student research the history of the American quilt, exploring the basic craft of quilting—its historical and regional significance, its tradition as a feminine skill, the quilt as a means of personal expression—and comparing standard quilting designs with the newly developed patterns we see today.

Research quilts made by other cultures.

Flag Quilt

**DISCUSSION**

Ask the class to look closely at the poster. Challenge the students to find the flag with the most colors and the one with the fewest colors. Instruct the students to find the shapes that appear on at least three different flags, such as stripes, circles, crosses, and stars. Discuss and define symbols. Locate a symbol on one of the flags.

**MATERIALS**

sketch paper
8-x-10-inch pieces of felt (or construction paper)
fun “found materials”
scissors
markers
glue
masking tape

**ACTIVITY**

Cities, states, and countries have flags. Even some schools have flags. Why can’t you have your own flag too? Design and create your very own personal flag. Put a symbol, (an image that communicates something about you) on your flag. For example, a symbol could be your pet, your lucky gym shoe, or even your favorite dessert. Try not to use any words. You can use shapes common to the flags on Bedcover, such as circles, stars, or crosses, or you can invent your own design. Keep it simple or make it complex. You are the artist so you decide. Variation: make a dream quilt, a memory quilt, or even a “When I Grow Up” quilt.

• Make a sketch of your flag.
• Choose an 8-x-10-inch piece of felt in a color you like for the background of the flag.
• Cut and paste your design out of colorful pieces of felt onto the background.
• Add fun “found material,” like movie ticket stubs or candy wrapper.
• When every student has completed their flag, arrange the flags in a grid and tape together on the reverse side.
Class Collection Collage

**DISCUSSION**
Ask your class to look closely at the quilt. Encourage them to guess where Theresa Zett Smith acquired the panels of fabric she used to make *Bedcover*. In Theresa Zett Smith’s day, small cotton flags were used to line cigar boxes. She saved and collected these treasures and made them into this quilt. Ask your students what kind of things they collect: movie stubs, foreign currency, baseball cards. Have they ever considered making art out of their collections? Today they will.

**MATERIALS**
- posterboard
- collected materials
- scissors
- glue
- red and blue markers

**ACTIVITY**
You and your class will work together to make a Class Collection Quilt. Ask each of your students to bring in three pieces of found or collected materials from home. One piece should be predominately white, one piece predominately red, and the last predominately blue. Ribbons, scraps of fabric, sponges, buttons, part of a cereal box, and even photographs are examples of possible collected materials. Have extra red, white and blue collected material available to supplement what our students bring in or to give to a student who forgets to collect their own.

In advance, draw the American flag on a large sheet of posterboard.

- Have students glue each of their collected items onto the flag, color coordinating pieces to the appropriate parts of the flag.
- White collected items can be cut into star shapes and glued on.
- Cover as much of the posterboard as possible with the collected material.
- If any posterboard still remains uncovered, color those areas in with the appropriately colored markers.

Flag Permutations

**DISCUSSION**
Look closely at the quilt. How many different flags appear on *Bedcover*? Are any used more than once? What colors appear the most frequently? What shapes?

**MATERIALS**
- construction paper
- scissors
- glue

**ACTIVITY**
Theresa Zett Smith composed a vibrant quilt out of cotton flags. Each of your students will create a quilt-like design using elements of their favorite flag. Here’s how it works.

1. Each student selects their favorite flag and recreates it out of construction paper, using cut and paste techniques.
2. Your students should allow the glue to dry before continuing with the next step.
3. Once the glue has dried, have your students fold their flags into sixteenths.
4. They can accomplish this by folding their flags in half four times.
5. Then they unfold their flags and cut along the fold lines.
6. They now possess sixteen small construction paper rectangles.
7. Ask your students to arrange these little rectangles into quilt design that is four rectangles by four rectangles in dimension.
8. Encourage your class to play and experiment with various arrangements until they find the most visually satisfying composition that is not the original.
9. Finally, they will glue down their favorite arrangement onto a sheet of construction paper.

Hang all of your student’s flag permutations together in one quilt installation.
**Pop Art Quilt**

**DISCUSSION**
Have the students look for the similarities and differences of each of the flag labels on the quilt.

**MATERIALS**
student collection of commercial labels
11 x 14-inch sheets of posterboard
glue

**ACTIVITY**
Theresa Zett Smith collected commercial labels from cigar boxes. Have each student collect labels or wrappers from commercial products. Have students work in pairs and choose a product such as gum wrappers, soup can labels, cereal box trademarks, or yogurt lids. Tell the students they need to collect as many different brands as they possibly can find.

After 20 to 30 labels have been collected by each pair of students, have them lay out and arrange their collections on sheets of posterboard. Ask the students to create patterns, or color complements, and to create balance or harmony in the design as they decide how to place the pieces side by side. Discuss the possibility of using strips of paper to separate the layout into sections such as squares, rectangles, etc. What color(s) strips would look best with their labels?

Display the “label quilts” around the room and invite other classes to view.

**Story Quilt**

Find a well-known story and make a quilt based on that written story or poem, such as *Charlotte’s Web*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, the Harry Potter books, or the following poem.

*My Mother Pieced Quilts*
By Teresa Paloma Acosta

they were just meant as covers
in winters
as weapons
against pounding january winds

but it was just that every morning I awoke to these
october ripened canvases
passed my hand across their cloth faces
and began to wonder how you pieced
all these together
these strips of gentle communion cotton and flannel nightgowns
wedding organdies
dime store velvets

how you shaped patterns square and oblong and round
positioned
balanced
then cemented them
with your thread
a steel needle
a thimble
how the thread darted in and out
galloping along the frayed edges, tucking them in
as you did us at night
oh how much you stretched and turned and re-arranged
your michigan spring faded curtain pieces
my father’s sante fe work shirt
the summer denims, the tweeds of fall

stretched out they lay
armed/ready/shouting/celebrating

knotted with love
the quilts sing on
How to Make a Quilt

MATERIALS
- tape measure or rulers
- pincushions
- masking tape
- fabric
- sewing thread
- sewing needles
- quilting safety pins
- fabric scissors
- batting (low-loft polyester batting)
- backing (5 yards of coordinating, contrasting, or white muslin)
- fabric paint
- fabric crayons

PLANNING AND PREPARATION
Before starting the quilt decide the following:

1. size of quilt
2. overall design of the quilt, color scheme, and borders
3. number of blocks if used.
4. the size and placement of blocks, sashing, and borders on a sheet of graph paper

ALTERNATE QUILT OPTIONS
- Make several small quilts that band together as a whole quilt.
- Make a whole-cloth quilt that is made with one large piece of fabric that is painted, embellished, and quilted.

MAKING BLOCKS
Cut squares to the size needed for the quilt. Allow a 1/4-inch seam on all sides for sewing blocks together. Have students create the design on the squares with fabric paint or fabric crayons.

ASSEMBLY
When all quilt blocks have been completed, sew the blocks to each other or to the sashing to produce a quilt top. Sandwich the batting between the quilt top and the backing. Starting at the center and working out to the sides, pin all three layers together with pins. Then sew through all layers (this sewing is “quilting”).
Related Resources
For Teachers


For more information on *Chicago Schools Quilts: A Millennium Project*, please visit the Chicago Cultural Center, www.ci.chi.il.us/Tourism/CulturalCenter, or call (312) 744-8032.

Related Resources
For Students


Web Sites
For Teachers

AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT
www.aidsquilt.org
Includes information on one of the largest quilting projects and educational projects from around the world.

HEDDI CRAFT’S QUILTING WITH CHILDREN
www.thecraftstudio.com/qwc
Describes organized projects on quilts and offers ideas, techniques, and resources for working with children in making quilts.

QUILTERS COLORING BOOK
www.quilt.com/ColoringBook/QuiltColoringBook.html
Site features quilting ideas and patterns to be downloaded and used in quilt planning.

WORLD WIDE QUILTING PAGE
www.quilt.com
Links to sites with pattern instructions, regional information, quilting libraries, exhibits, and more.

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