

Exhibition view of MMofA's Crazy Quilts in *ALL AMERICAN: From the Collection*

# STORIES FROM THE COLLECTION

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## CRAZY QUILTS

Welcome to our gallery of crazy quilts! Although the doors to the museum are temporarily closed, there's no reason we can't take a virtual tour of some of our galleries to, we hope, give some comfort to those at home.

Quilts are all about comfort. They are often made of scraps of material left over from clothesmaking, stitched together with a layer of batting for warmth and a back that faces the surface of a bed.

At least, those are the kinds of quilts I think of when first hearing the word, "quilt."

But the quilts in this gallery are different in that they were not really made to give us physical comfort as much as they were made to give comfort by decorating our homes and commemorating shared events important to us.

These quilts are called **Crazy Quilts** because they are unusually "crazy," meaning asymmetrical and somewhat exotic. The patterns appear to be "all over the place!"

Crazy quilts were inspired by the Japanese exhibit at the **1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia**. Women were inspired by the style and patterns they saw in that exhibition and used that inspiration to transform quilts from carefully planned compositions of geometric shapes into random shapes seemingly stitched willy-nilly. They bought rich silks, velvets, and satins to make their crazy quilts as deeply colorful and rich as they could be.

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But crazy quilts are not just about the shapes of the fabric and how they are pieced together. They are also about embroidery. In late 19th century Alabama, women were brought up to be wives and mothers. Sewing was a necessary domestic skill. Girls learned the art from their mothers, or if their families had the means and desire, from tutors or by attending local “academies.” **Embroidery** was a popular subject, and girls often learned all the different fancy stitches by making their own samplers.

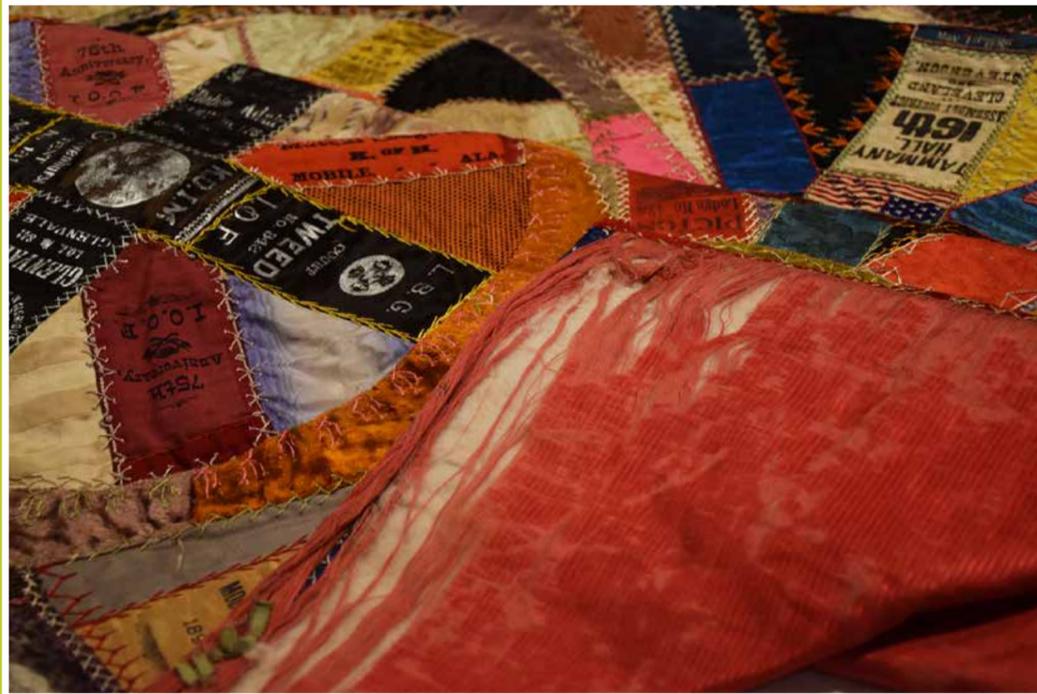
If you look closely at our Crazy Quilts you will see many highly technical and difficult stitches made out of **embroidery floss**, which is made up of multiple-ply yarns and threads so that it adds texture and depth to the quilt’s composition.

In the center of this gallery, we have a wonderful post-Civil War commemorative crazy quilt made in Mobile which was given to the museum by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society. It is perhaps our most important quilt but also the saddest because it has deteriorated over the years and is close to being unsalvageable. We have saved some of our precious crazy quilts in this gallery by asking a textile conservator to restore them. The results have been spectacular, and we hope, with donations from the public and our members, to be able to bring this quilt back to its original glory.

I said this was a commemorative quilt because included in the fabric pieces are ribbons commemorating important civic and military organizations. A quilt like this was not made to go on a bed to give comfort; it was meant to unite a community around a shared history. It was also

Pictured below: Detail of Crazy Quilt, Mrs. William Hunter, 1869, Gift from the Mobile Historic Preservation Society





Pictured above: Details of Commemorative Ribbon Memory Quilt, 1897, Gift from the Mobile Historic Preservation Society

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meant to show off the stitchwork and artistry of its maker. Many such quilts were shown in public and women ordered the fancy fabrics from magazines and bought embroidery patterns and traded materials so they could make their quilts as beautiful as those made by their friends and relatives.

By 1890, crazy quilts had gone out of fashion, but they haven't died out entirely. One of our local quilters guild reports that there are at least a handful of Mobilians who make crazy quilts—still a labor of love, but made a little easier by the sewing machine!

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