Roots of Virginia Culture: Quilting Stories

SINCE COLONIAL DAYS, needleworkers from all walks of life have stitched simple and elaborate quilts. Today, quilting is extremely popular throughout Virginia. This spring, the Virginia Quilt Museum in Harrisonburg solicited quilts that memorialized the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. The museum exhibited the resulting creations and several heirloom quilts, which owners donated to the collection. The quilts tell stories of Virginia’s history and culture.

(Above right) “Mariner’s Compass” by Josephine Millett, Mt. Jackson, Virginia

This quilt represents the compass that guided the ships to Jamestown. As one of their duties, ship’s boys had to learn all thirty-two points of the “compass rose,” as it was called. Photo by Harold Anderson, Smithsonian Institution

(Above left) “Celebration of Founding of Jamestown” by Patricia Dew, Gainesville, Virginia

Jamestown is marked on a map of Virginia with a gold star. The ship Godspeed is depicted in the center. Border blocks highlight the state bird and state flower. Photo by Harold Anderson, Smithsonian Institution

(Center right) “The Real Virginia Reel” by Karla Vernon, Vienna, Virginia

Four center blocks constitute the traditional quilt pattern called the “Virginia Reel.” Tobacco, corn, and trout were important to early settlers for economic and subsistence reasons. The state bird, flower, tree, butterfly, fish, and dog are quilted in the background. The Great Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia is in the center. Jamestown ships are in the corners. Stencils were cut to make the border letters, which were hand painted with oil paint sticks. Photo by Harold Anderson, Smithsonian Institution

(Center left) “The Virginia Quilt” made by members of the Quilters Unlimited of Northern Virginia. The six-inch blocks celebrate the diversity of the state—its geography, history, and people. Some of the designs are original; some are traditional. Quilters Unlimited donated the quilt to the Virginia Quilt Museum in 1999. Photo by Harold Anderson, Smithsonian Institution

(Bottom right) The 54-40 African American Quilters from Hampton, Virginia, have enjoyed quilting together for over thirty years. © 2007 Roland L. Freeman

(Bottom left) “Jamestown Artifacts” by The Busy Bees quilting Group, Vienna, Virginia

This quilt represents the artifacts found at the Jamestown excavation site. The artifacts—drinking jugs, apothecary bowls, wine goblets, canteens for field-workers, and bottles for shipping liquids, especially cooking oil—were made in England, Italy, China and other countries. Photo by Harold Anderson, Smithsonian Institution