The Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt

By Peggy W. Norris

Fascinating quilts can be found “hiding” in small, local museums. I am part of a team of local historians that recently surveyed quilt collections in ten museums in Bergen County, New Jersey. The Mahwah Museum Society brought out only two quilts for us to see—one of which was a stunning, chintz appliqué quilt, the Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt. The report that follows is based on examination of the quilt, research in quilt literature, and the collective knowledge of AQSG members (via Facebook and the Mid-Atlantic Quilt Study Group [MAQSG]).

The Hinsdale Tree of Life quilt1 (Figure 1) was created using cut-out chintz appliqué (broderie perse). The arborescent chintz features camellias (Figure 2), pomegranates, (Figure 3), holly (Figure 4), and Asian peacock pheasants (Figure 5), as well as fanciful vegetation.2 The DAR museum has a piece of the original fabric.3 They describe the chintz as block-printed in England ca. 1800 and speculate that since the motifs on the original fabric are rather awkwardly placed the fabric was meant to be used for cut-out appliqué. It and very similar prints (the manufacturers copied each other) have been found on eleven quilts identified from books and posts on a thread on the AQSG Facebook page.4 Of the eleven, the place of origin, where known, is the United States, from Maryland south to Georgia, or England. The Hinsdale quilt is probably from North Carolina. Dates from 1800-1825 have been estimated for six of the eleven related quilts (none has an inscribed date). The Hinsdale quilt was likely made during this same time period. Analyzing the attributes of these quilts only highlights the need for further study and examination of the related quilts in person.

Cut-out chintz used for appliqué can be raw-edge or turned-edge and can be attached with several different stitches. Raw-edge pieces can be attached with buttonhole or herringbone stitch, the latter being uncommon in America. Turned-edge pieces are sometimes attached with buttonhole or herringbone, but a whip or a blind stitch is more common. Both techniques are used in the eleven related chintz appliqué quilts. Use varies with personal preference, time period, and geographic region. Barbara Brackman reported on a recent visit to the Atlanta History Museum that of the quilts she viewed that used chintz panels, none used the buttonhole stitch to attach the appliqués.5 Baltimore Album quilts of the 1840s use buttonhole stitch selectively as a decorative stitch.6 Close-up images in published books rarely are detailed enough to examine the stitching. This is an area of research that deserves further study.

The appliqués of the Hinsdale quilt are cut out closely along the lines of the image and secured with euru thread in a buttonhole stitch, at 20-22 stitches per inch. (Figure 6) Although the “spine” of the stitch is usually at the edge of the patch, here it is inside and the “legs” hold down the cut edge. Despite the number of stitches, there is still space between them.
The appliqués are outlined with quilting; the background of the quilt is quilted in an all-over flower/vine/leaf design at 10-11 stitches per inch. (Figure 8) In contrast, the most common quilting patterns on chintz appliqué quilts throughout the first half of the 19th century are the grid or formal feathers. The meandering floral design on the Hinsdale quilt is an unusual feature. Also atypical is the fact that the Hinsdale quilt has no border. Most chintz appliqué quilts have at least one.

The background is 3 cotton strips (26, 26.5, and 29.5 inches wide) seamed the length of the quilt. Seams are less than 1/4", hand stitched and pressed open. The backing is linen of a lower thread count than the front. It is composed of multiple pieces up to 33" wide. Edges are not seamed but are butted together and whip stitched. The batting is very thin, almost wispy cotton and is visible through a small fabric tear. The edge has a 1/4" wide binding, straight grain, rounded corners.

The overall condition of the quilt is good. However, areas of brown chintz are shattering (including the pomegranates, the trunk of the tree, and brown flowers) due to the corrosiveness of the dyes.
The Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt

Before it was donated to the Mahwah Museum, the Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt belonged to Rebecca Hinsdale Kraus (1915-2015). After reviewing all of Kraus’s ancestors, I concluded that the quilt was probably owned by James Turner (1766-1824) and Betsy Park (died 1830) of Warren County, North Carolina. At least two items from this family descended to Rebecca Hinsdale Kraus, a pair of initialed silk socks, part of the collection donated to the Mahwah Museum and a miniature portrait which was sold at public auction. The socks have the initials “SPA” for Sally Park (Turner) Alexander, daughter of James Turner and Betsy Park. The portrait is of Sally’s sister Ann Turner Coleman, wife of Henry Embrey Coleman, Jr. The quilt descended through four generations of women to Rebecca Hinsdale Kraus.

James Turner was the Governor of North Carolina from 1802-1805 and served in the U.S. Senate from 1805-1816. He was a wealthy planter involved in both agriculture and manufacturing. In 1820 he owned 170 slaves. To put that in context, in an economy where wealth was primarily measured in slave ownership, it is estimated that only 2% of slaveholders in North Carolina owned more than 50 slaves. Turner owned more than three times that number. In her study of Maryland quilts, Gloria Seaman Allen states that the fact that quilts function as display pieces “suggests that their use was subject to wealth.” The inventory of Turner’s estate taken after his death includes “13 beds, 21 pair Blankets, six quilts, 33 counterpains, 30 pair sheets...4 Setts Bed curtains.” Compared to the quantity of other items of bedding, quilts were a rarity. The Hinsdale Tree of Life quilt may have been one of them.

The workmanship throughout is excellent, showing the hand of an experienced and talented seamstress with access to fine fabrics. The quilt could have been made by Betsey Park Turner and/or enslaved women on the plantation. On the other hand the quilt could have been professionally made and purchased by the Turners.

The discovery of the Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt demonstrates the value of quilt historians working with small museums. These museums care for a wide range of items and often do not have the expertise to identify what they own or to know how it should be cared for. Study of the quilt adds to the body of knowledge about early chintz appliqué quilts and demonstrates the value of establishing probable provenance with circumstantial evidence.
Quilts using the same (or similar) chintz fabric as the Hinsdale Tree of Life - (identified to date)

Frances Outerbridge, *Tree of Life*, 1812, private collection, pictured on Faceook.

Elizabeth Stanly Armistead, possible maker, chintz appliqué quilt, Tryon Palace, New Bern, NC. Pictured on Facebook.


**Tree of Life and Grapevine Quilt**, 1810s, DAR Museum, pictured at “Eye on Elegance” https://eyeonelegance. dar.org/node/27.

**Broderie Perse Applique and Pieced Quilt**, pictured in Jane Lury, *Meanderings of a Quilt Collector* (La Castillere, France: Quiltmania, 2016), Figure 31, p. 107.

**Broderie Perse Coverlet**, England ca 1820, pictured in Jane Lury, *Meanderings of a Quilt Collector* (La Castillere, France: Quiltmania, 2016), Figure 8, p. 32.

Elizabeth Braun Bruner or Mercy Jane Kern Dye, 1850-1875, private collection (Massachusetts Quilt Documentation Project) pictured on the “Quilt Index” http://www.quiltindex.org/fulldisplay.php?kid=1D-FC-30D.


**Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt**, Mahwah Museum Society, pictured here and on Facebook.


---

**About the Author:**

Peggy W. Norris

Peggy W. Norris is a retired librarian with interests in local history, genealogy, cemeteries, quilting, and quilts. She is leading the committee that is planning the Bergen County Quilts and Coverlets Show, 1800-1976, to be held on September 25-26, 2020. The Hinsdale Tree of Life Quilt will be on display. More info: bergencountyquiltandcoverletashow.com