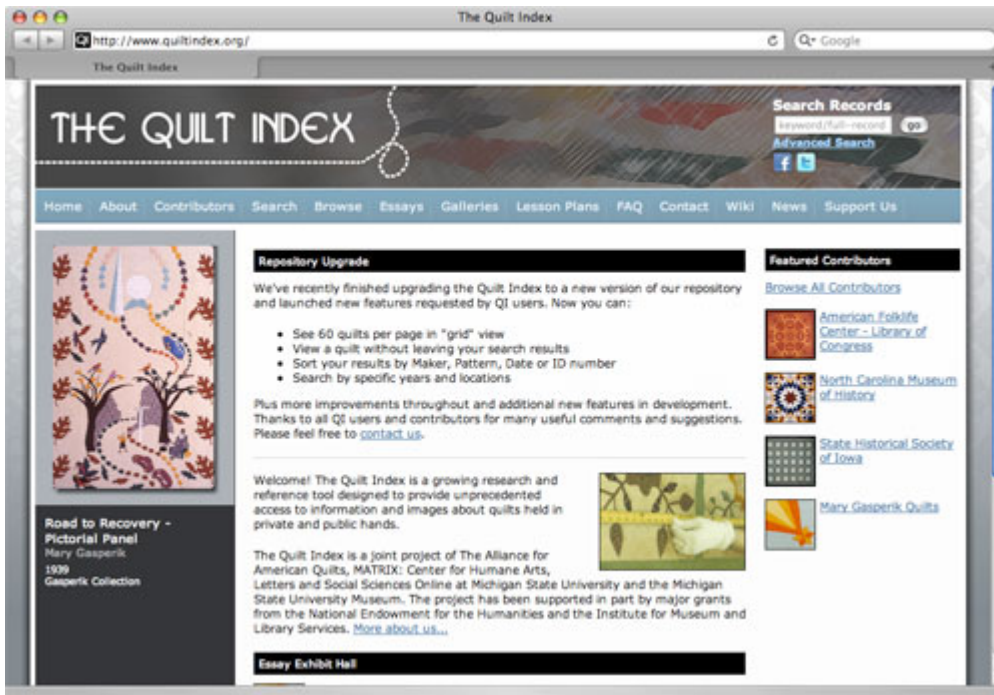


The Quilt Index



The Common-place Web Library reviews and lists online resources and Websites likely to be of interest to our viewers. Each quarterly issue will feature one or more brief site reviews. The library itself will be an ongoing enterprise with regular new additions and amendments. So we encourage you to check it frequently. At the moment, the library is small, but with your help we expect it to grow rapidly. If you have suggestions for the Web Library, or for site reviews, please forward them to the [Administrative Editor](#).

www.quiltindex.org

Quilt-making is often imagined as something grandmothers—your own or someone else’s—did in some timeless past. Interest in quilt-making has grown significantly in recent decades, however. The United States bicentennial sparked a renewed interest in both handicrafts and American history. Since that time, several state-wide projects have documented historic quilts held by museums and in private collections. Harnessing the power of the Internet, *The Quilt Index* [<http://www.quiltindex.org/>] now unites sixteen state quilt documentation projects with the holdings of several museums and private collections in a searchable database that will appeal to scholars and the quilt-loving public alike.

Quilt scholarship exploded in the early 1990s. As interest in quilt research grew, so did demand for a single computerized bibliography that could bring together state and regional quilt documentation projects with scholarship in the decorative arts to make quilts and quilt scholarship accessible both to scholars and the interested public. The resulting *Quilt Index* is a partnership

of The Alliance for American Quilts, MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters and Social Sciences Online at Michigan State University, and the Michigan State University Museum. Since its 2003 launch, funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other sources have enabled a dramatic expansion in its holdings. Years of planning and research have produced a user-friendly searchable database that provides unprecedented access to quilts held by a number of museums and many more private collections, as well as interpretative essays and educational materials written by leading quilt curators and scholars.

The Quilt Index is an invaluable research and reference tool that includes images of and information on more than 50,000 quilts. Many of these quilts are held by private collectors or hidden away in museum storage areas, making them otherwise inaccessible to interested viewers. *Quilt Index* users can easily browse these holdings by collection, style, time period, quilt pattern, purpose, and location of production. While this browse feature would be of interest to quilt lovers, it is perhaps most useful as a starting point for research. It provides a good introduction to what types of quilts are accessible through the Index, and to the site's cataloging system. Not surprisingly, the majority of the Index's quilts date from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, when quilting was most popular in the United States. Its holdings are geographically concentrated in the Midwest and Upper South, where state documentation projects have been strongest. The Hawaiian Quilt Research Project brings stylistic as well as geographic diversity to the Index. While it is designed to also accommodate the global nature of quilting, at present the Index's holdings are almost exclusively from the United States.

Researchers will benefit tremendously from the ability to search the database by several well-designed categories of information. These include: pattern name; quiltmaker; location; date; materials; fabric patterns; publications, exhibitions or contests in which the quilt appeared; and religious, ethnic, and/or cultural affiliation of the maker. The primary shortcoming for this cataloging system is one already familiar to quilt researchers: similar quilt patterns have been known by many different names. While some catalog entries list multiple variations under the pattern name, most list only one. Searching for "monkey wrench" and "churn dash" yields different lists of quilts with extremely similar quilt blocks featuring four pieced rectangles arranged in a square, with a triangle extending out from each corner. At the same time, searching for "churn dash" quilts also yields a quilt that features only Baltimore Album-style appliqué blocks. The Website's new visual mapping initiative seeks to alleviate this problem by enabling users to search by the appearance of a block rather than by its various names.

Researchers and lay users alike will enjoy comparing quilts made from similar patterns, or quilts from a particular location or period. The default "list" display setting shows a thumbnail image of each quilt, along with its title and maker (if known), its date or date range, and the collection to which it belongs. For those more interested in viewing many quilts simultaneously,

selecting the “grid” display will show images of search results in groups of sixty. From either the list or grid of search results, visitors can then click on individual quilts to read more and to see larger images of that quilt. Selecting “basic info” provides the information most users will be looking for in a user-friendly format; “full record” contains all available information on that quilt. Researchers and quilt lovers alike will appreciate the ability to drag a zoom box over images of full quilts. Utilizing the “compare” feature from either the list or grid display aligns two or more quilts for side-by-side comparison. Click on one or more of the thumbnail images to expand them; click again to close the larger image and return to the comparison screen.



For example, a search for crazy quilts yielded 3,566 results; limiting the search to those made between 1876 and 1900 yielded 1,752. (Because additional detail photographs made available for some quilts appear as separate search results, this slightly exaggerates the number of crazy quilts in the Index. Limiting by the 1876-1900 date range likely excluded a few quilts from those years because not all contributors grouped quilts by period, and production dates are not available for all quilts.) Taken as a whole, this search reveals the diversity of wild quilts made at the height of the crazy quilt craze, when middle-class American women combined odd-shaped pieces of rich velvet and satin with skilled embroidery, painting, and a good bit of whimsy. Comparing these quilts might reveal regional variations or change over time within one region’s crazy quilt designs. Studying multiple quilts made by the same quilter could highlight her technical and artistic development over time. Because many quiltmakers incorporated memorabilia into their crazy quilts, these quilts might also reveal aspects of their makers’ daily lives that are not available in the written sources normally utilized by social historians.

One particularly intriguing new feature is the “signature quilt” search function, which features name and location data for about fifty quilts with multiple signatures. Friendship, Album, or Presentation quilts were made either to remind their owners of loved ones who were moving away or to honor a special individual within the community. Other signature quilts were made as fundraisers, often charging individuals for the privilege of including their name on the quilt. Although this selection represents only a tiny subset of the vast *Quilt Index*, the signature quilt search holds particularly rich potential for researchers to study not only the history of the quilts themselves but also

the social networks of the quilters and their broader community.

For those who prefer admiring quilts to studying them, *The Quilt Index Website* offers virtual museum galleries that feature images of thematic collection of quilts, accompanied by an essay about that collection written by its curator. The "Essays" page also includes virtual versions of physical museum exhibits and other essays and presentations developed for *The Quilt Index*. Quilt lovers will also appreciate the "Quilt of the Day" in the "News" section, which highlights the diversity of the collections available through the Index.

The Quilt Index also offers a series of lesson plans that utilize quilts to teach art, graphic design, and history. Although these lesson plans are designed for high school classrooms, they could easily be adapted for middle school or college level students. Lesson plans tailored to elementary-aged children would be a welcome addition

The Quilt Index is both a valuable research tool and an engaging Website. Its value will continue to grow with additions of more quilt collections. New initiatives underway in visual searching, mapping, and internationalization promise much. In the meantime, researchers, students and the general public will benefit from this enormous virtual collection of American quilts.

Cynthia Culver Prescott is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Dakota, specializing in gender, families, and material culture in the American West. She is the author of Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier (2007).