

Quilting Sisters

Richard G. Oman

Bishop Sheets's Quilt, Eighth Ward Relief Society, Salt Lake City, 1872, Collection of the Museum of Church History and Art, Gift of Mrs. Eva West.

The quilt shown on the front cover of this issue was a gift by the Female Relief Society of the Salt Lake Eighth Ward to a beloved bishop, Elijah Funk Sheets. Bishop Sheets served the Eighth Ward as bishop from 1856 to 1904, the longest service of any bishop in the history of the Church.¹

The center panel depicts a beehive surrounded by bees, symbolizing Latter-day Saint cooperation, order, and industry.² What better symbol for the Eighth Ward Relief Society working together in a quilting bee than the bees surrounding the hive? Above the beehive is embroidered an all-seeing eye representing the Lord. Above that is embroidered "Holiness to the Lord," which served to remind all that everything we do should be done in accordance with the will of the Lord. "F R S" stands for "Female Relief Society." "1872" is undoubtedly the date the quilt was completed.

Surrounding the center panel are blocks depicting roses and baskets full of grapes and strawberries. Zion is blossoming as a rose³ and bountifully producing crops. In outer blocks are doves, each holding an olive branch, a joining of two ancient symbols of peace.⁴ The border of the quilt is an appliquéd of intertwined vines. Vines have long been an ancient symbol of Israel⁵ but can also symbolize Christ.⁶ The quilt tells the Eighth Ward Relief Society's bishop that they are righteously laboring to bring forth the Lord's Kingdom on earth.

This quilt was made one year after Sheets was given the additional calling of being a "traveling bishop" to several stakes in central Utah. In this job, he supervised temporal affairs for the Church.



Detail from *Bishop Sheets's Quilt*. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

He also served as assistant trustee-in-trust for the Church under Brigham Young.⁷ The Relief Society probably made this quilt to celebrate Bishop Sheets's additional calling.

Senator Edmunds's Quilt, Women's Home Mission Society of Ogden, Utah, 1882, Collection of the Museum of Church History and Art.

American women have used quilts to express their opinions and celebrate important events for almost two hundred years. The quilt shown on the back cover of this issue was made by Protestant women in Utah as a gift to Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont to express their appreciation for his part in passing the Edmunds Bill. The bill placed severe legal penalties on the Mormons for practicing polygamy.

This quilt is a "parlor throw" quilt made in a tumbling block pattern. On it are embroidered the names of 130 non-LDS women from Ogden, Utah, plus Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes, the honorary president of the Women's Home Mission Society. In the center is the name of the recipient, "Gov. F. Edmunds. U.S. Senator from Vermont."⁸

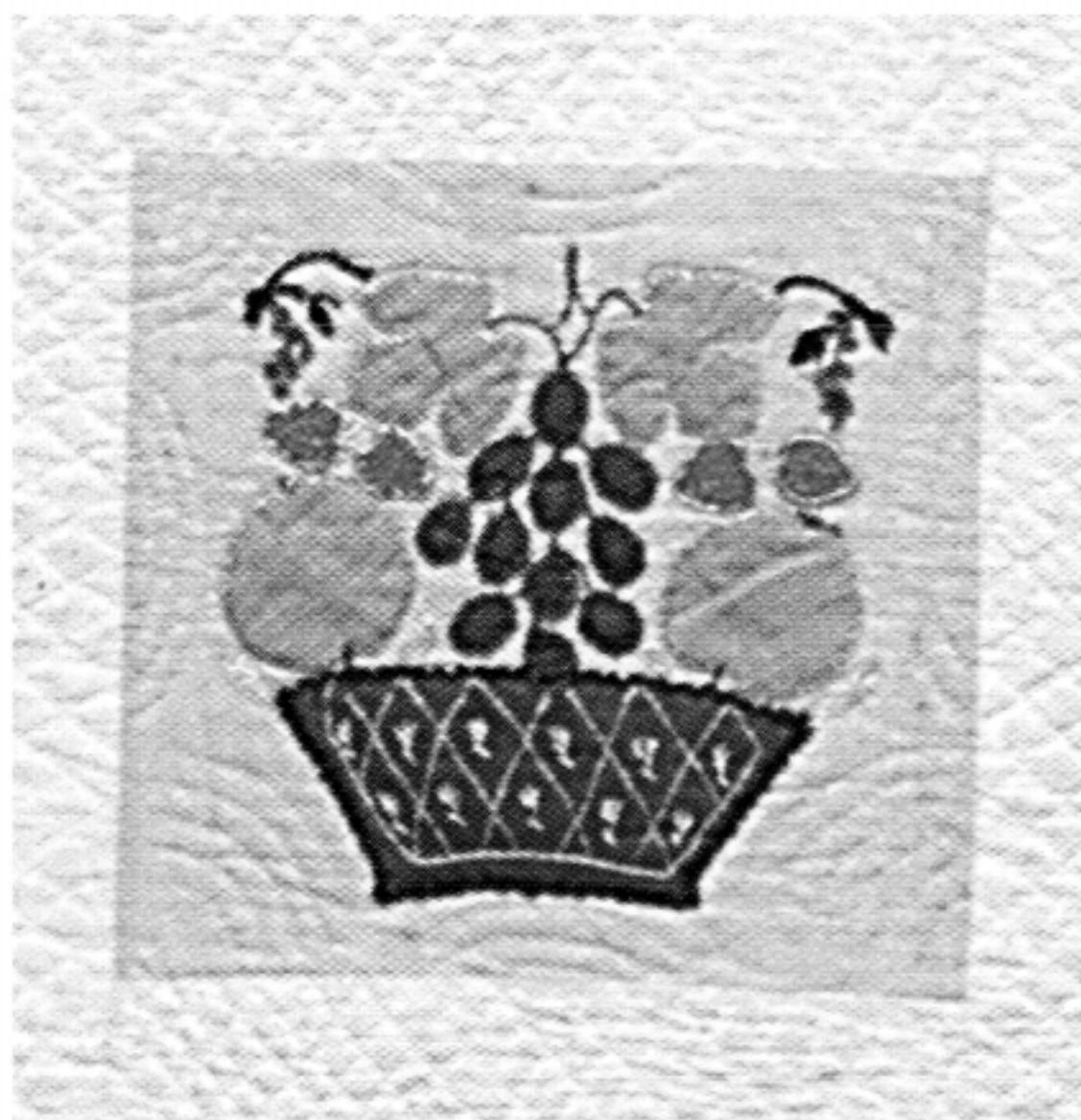
In the late nineteenth century, parlor throws became fashionably upscale. Rich cloth, especially velvets and silks with deep, saturated colors, were avidly sought for these quilts. Cloth was especially prized if it had been part of a wedding dress, silk hair ribbons from a graduation, a baby dress, or other highly symbolic costume. Expressive embroidery and rich fabrics, rather than intricate and time-consuming quilting, were the main decorative embellishments. These quilts were not used for personal bedding; rather they were placed in parlors for viewing by visitors.⁹ The donors probably expected (or at least hoped) that the Edmundses would display this piece in their parlor.

A parlor throw quilt was the perfect vehicle for the Women's Home Mission Society to express their social status, group solidarity yet individuality, and up-to-date fashionableness to Senator Edmunds. Perhaps the self-consciously upscale nature of the quilt was meant to contrast with the inferred "backwardness" of Mormon women as depicted in the popular press. The quilt mixed the concept of women taking a growing public role with an overtly domestic art form.

Contrast this quilt with the one made by the Eighth Ward Relief Society. Both quilts were made by Utah women. Both were gifts



Detail from *Bishop Sheets's Quilt*. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.



Details from Bishop Sheets's and Senator Edmunds's quilts. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

to men who were seen as championing the women's values. Both were seen as supporting a religious point of view. Yet one quilt celebrates individualism, stylish fashion, public display, and an appeal to secular power. The other focuses on cooperation, unity, building Zion, private display, and a celebration of religious power.

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NOTES

¹ Acquisition Record Form, Bishop Sheets's Quilt, Museum of Church History and Art.

² Richard G. Oman, “Beehive Symbol,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:99.

³ Isaiah 35:1.

⁴ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 35.

⁵ Psalms 80:8-10; Isaiah 5:1-7; Alma 16:17.

⁶John 15:1-5.

⁷ Andrew Jensen, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jensen History Co., 1901-36), 1:614-16.

⁸ Acquisition Record Form, Senator Edmunds's Quilt, Museum of Church History and Art.

⁹Carleton L. Safford and Robert Bishop, *America's Quilts and Coverlets* (New York City: Weathervane Books, 1974), 297.



Brent's Japanese Mission Quilt, Karen Searle (1935-), Shelley, Idaho, 1980. Used by permission of Brent Searle. Missionary quilts, usually made by the missionary's mother or grandmother have become an increasing popular form of distinctively Mormon quilting. This quilt was made by Karen Searle for her son Brent, who was serving in the Japan Oyama Mission. The oriental character means "Peace, happiness, and health." Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.