

A Stitch in Time

THE QUILTS OF THE VIRGINIA PIEDMONT

by MARY WINSTON NICKLIN

THE QUILT RIGHTLY CONJURES IMAGES of cozying up to the fireplace to ward off a winter chill, but these brilliant, patchwork textiles—as displayed here in our Winter Art Gallery—serve more than a utilitarian purpose.

Quilts are a unique artistic medium and part of the historic record. From the early colonial period in Virginia through the Civil War to the present day, quilts convey personal stories that are part of Virginia heritage. Some are the homespun work of slaves, others are elaborate and colorful patterns derived from ladies magazines by the landed gentry. Some capture the ideology of a certain time (Confederate flags stitched from velvet and silk), others embody the camaraderie between women who made friendship quilts side-by-side—each square embroidered by a different quilter. Contemporary quilts like Maria Ellena Cosimano-Kohl's are works of art in their own right (see previous pages), designed by modern-day artisans.

In fact, there is an entire book devoted to the Virginian quilt, a gorgeous and fascinating volume entitled *Quilts of Virginia 1607-1899: The Birth of America Through the Eye of a Needle* (Virginia Consortium of Quilters, Schiffer Publishing). Published in 2006 to celebrate Virginia's 400th anniversary in 2007, the coffee-table book pres-

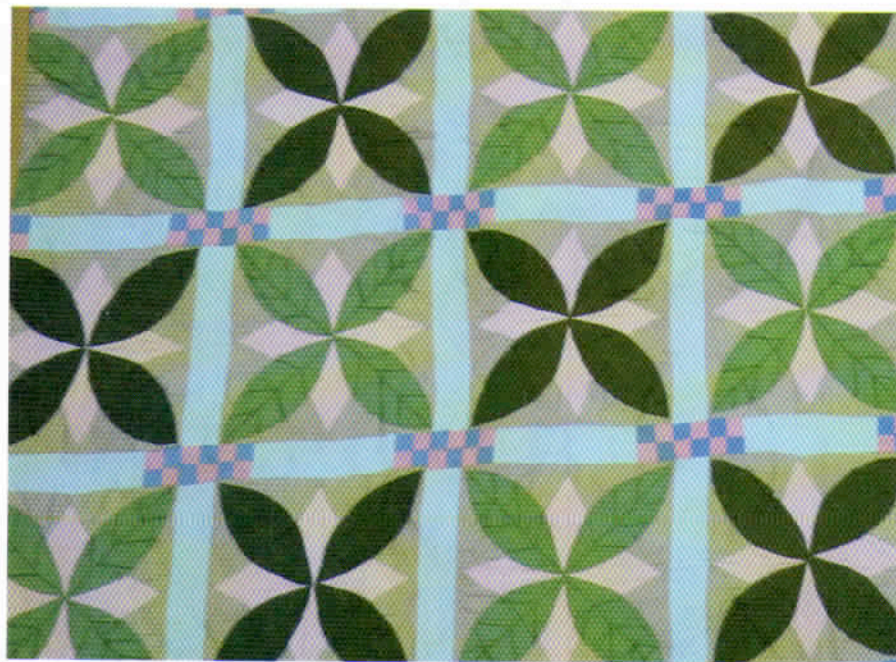
ents 270 quilts spanning the centuries since the founding of Jamestown. In fact, these quilts can be viewed in the broader context of American history for "in the beginning, all America was Virginia," to quote William Byrd II. Eight Virginia-born U.S.



"Appalachian Folk Dance" (right), designed by Susan Hinkel and made by the Piedmont Quilter's Guild, took 14 years to make and was a finalist in the Fall 2004 International Quilt Festival put.

presidents find a place in this book: Martha Washington sewed toile depicting William Penn's peace treaty with the Indians in 1682; Dolley Madison made elaborate silk pink cushions; President Monroe's daughter Maria Hester created a masterpiece of hexagons with the honeycomb mosaic pattern found in *Godey's Ladies Magazine*. Most notable, perhaps, is the quilt made with scraps of Mary Todd Lincoln's dresses by an African-American dressmaker who, as seamstress for Jefferson Davis's wife and other prominent society women, was able to purchase her own freedom from slavery with her earnings.

In a state so haunted by history, residents can explore a unique part of Virginia's past by heading over the Blue Ridge Mountains to Harrisonburg to check out the Virginia Quilt Museum (www.vaquiltmuseum.org). Open to the public as a resource center to examine the role of quilts and quilting in the cultural life of society, the museum preserves quilts in a permanent collection displayed on the second floor. After its sea-



sonal holiday closure, the museum will reopen on February 1, 2009 with "Floral Abundance," an exhibit showcasing applique quilts crafted by members of the Old Dominion Applique Society. ■

"Tobacco Leaf," by Lula Mote Owens Dulaney of Gordonsville, from the collection at the Virginia Quilt Museum—a public resource center examining the role of quilting in history and culture.

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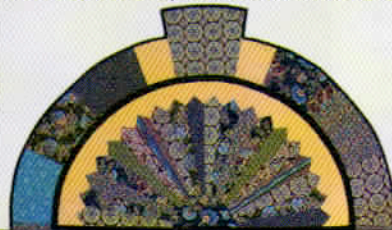
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