

How To Display An American Quilt

by Kaye Evans, CPF, GCF, CMG

A few days after September 11, the editor of this magazine called to firm up my article for this issue. It had been previously decided that the article would be about textiles but the exact details had not been worked out. These details became obvious, as events have unfolded. The importance of preserving our heritage has reached new heights and became much more evident with each and every passing day. The American heritage is long and strong and close to the core of it is the American Quilt...“defined as a coverlet for a bed, made of two layers of fabric with some soft substance, as wool or batting, between them and stitched in patterns through all thicknesses in order to prevent the filling from shifting.”

This definition does not tell of the warmth given from the cold of the pioneer nights, nor the signals from a Log Cabin Quilt hung on a porch of a “safe” home en route to the North during the Civil War, nor the quiet grace of the nimble and weathered hands of quilter Elizabeth Griscom as she stitched the quilt that would cover America. Only one layer thick and containing only three colors, this stars and stripes “quilt” would serve our nation well and rise

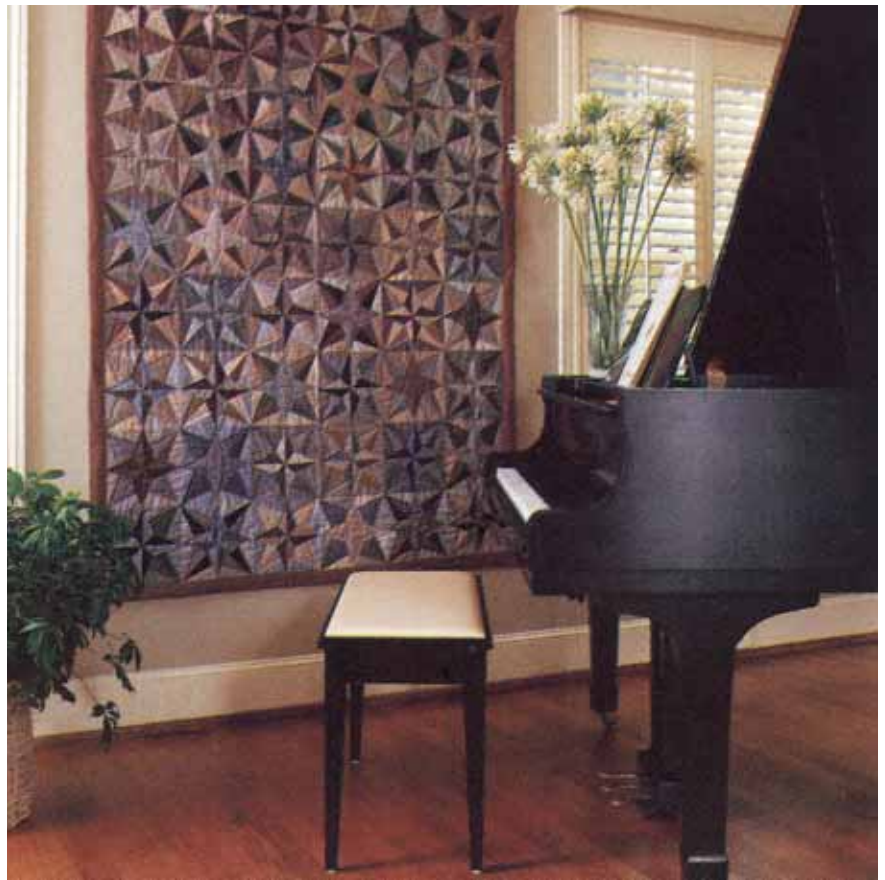


Photo 1: Quilts make a dramatic statement when displayed. (Designed and quilted by Emiko Toda Loeb a professional quilter from New York.)

with it to great heights.

She would come to later tell her children, grandchildren, relatives, and friends of the fateful day in 1776, when three members of a secret committee from the Continental Congress came to call on her. Standing before her were George Washington, Robert Morris, and George Ross, ask-

ing her to sew the first flag. General Washington pulled a paper from his coat with a rough design that included a six-pointed star. Betsy, being an avid quilter quite capable with scissors, demonstrated how to cut a five-pointed star in a single snip. Impressed, the committee entrusted Betsy to make our first flag.

After reading this and living in the United States today, is there any doubt in one's mind about the importance of preservation framing quilts, flags, and many other textiles brought to us as professional framers? Perhaps the information given below will serve to encourage the reader to become more familiar with preservation-quality methods of framing any quilt or flag that comes across his or her counter. We never truly know

ed to make sure the proper techniques are followed each and every time a quilt is mounted. For this reason it is better to divide the framing of a quilt into sections to understand just what the right techniques are for designing, prepping, mounting, and finishing a quilt. Just the size of a quilt denotes that special consideration will be needed. So let's get to it...

A customer has just come in with an antique quilt that was found in an

measure shows the finished size to be 52"x68" and even though the piece could be matted and framed the client prefers it to look more natural and like it could be spread onto a bed at a moment's notice.

Asking the right questions (always ask permission to ask any questions) will help to determine the needs, wants, and desires of the client. It is determined that this quilt will be mounted onto a covered

strainer frame using a sewn hook and loop fastener strip along the top of the covered frame. (You can use either the Velcro® brand hook and loop fastener, or a generic version.) This will allow the quilt to hang in a "free floating technique," while still lending support. Aside from damage resulting from the weight of the quilt itself, other hazards would be UV and pollutant damage.

Prepping

Once the design process is accomplished, then the various tasks become apparent. These can be listed (not necessarily in the order of importance) as aesthetics, preservation techniques, protection, and finally maintenance.

Aesthetics is probably the number one concern to the client. "What will this project look like in the room?" In this case it was decided to cover the strainer bar in a layered fashion, not only to protect the quilt as it is hanging but also to make the mounting easier. The layers are shown in Figures 2a and 2b on this page and following is the purpose



Photo 2: Sometimes, all that remains of a quilt is one or two blocks from it. Wonderful framing designs can be created from them as well.

when a hero may walk through our door.

How to Display?

This may be a simple subtitle but the information to be given on framing textiles is not a simple subject. The project needs to be broken down into small bits, which can be easily digest-

ed old trunk belonging to a departed grandmother. The quilt is in remarkable condition and even though the exact age is not known, the client wants to "frame it" somehow to hang on a large wall in the family room. It is related that the colors are just perfect for the room and the family had always adored this "Grand." A quick

of each layer.

Strainer Bar: Creates a solid support frame to hold and support the entire project. As is known, a stretcher bar has wedges in each corner to allow the bar to be expanded to tighten. The better choice is a stationary strainer bar. Each corner must be positioned at a perfect 90° angle (see Figure 1).

To reinforce the rigidity of the entire unit a solid piece of conservation-quality matboard can be stapled to the back of the strainer before it is hung on the wall. If the strainer you are using is larger than one piece of matboard, join as many sheets as you need with frame sealing tape. This backing will serve to help keep dust and insects from entering the back of the strainer bar and will add considerable strength to the overall project.

The strainer bar must be sealed to ensure that lignin will not leach into the artwork and permanently damage it. Sealing can be accomplished easily; and just as a wooden rabbet would be wrapped with a

material such as Rabbet Guard or Frame Sealing Tape, the strainer bar is wrapped with one of these tapes.

Fleece Batting: Providing a soft underlayment for carpeting is critical to its life and this is also the case with a framed quilt. This fleece material softens all materials touching the quilt and this will protect it from damage resulting in being positioned against a hard surface. It is important to note that the type of fleece batting is important. It should be made of a polyester batting that has been heat sealed and not chemically sealed to maintain its shape.

Purchasing the better brands of quilt fleece batting will ensure use of only the best archival products. Depending on the weight of the quilt the batting would be applied either next to the strainer or on top of the screening. Heavier quilts should have batting placed between it and the screening. Lighter quilts will be okay with just the fabric between it and the screening.

Fiberglas® Screening: Yes, I said

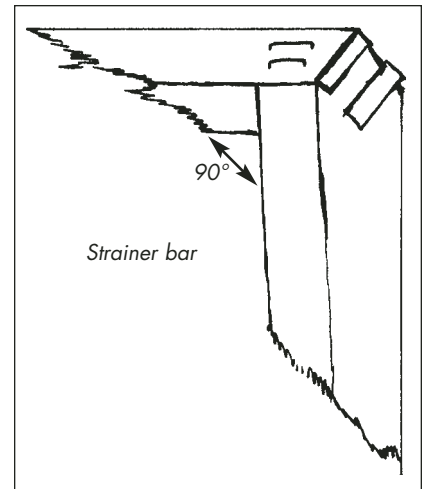
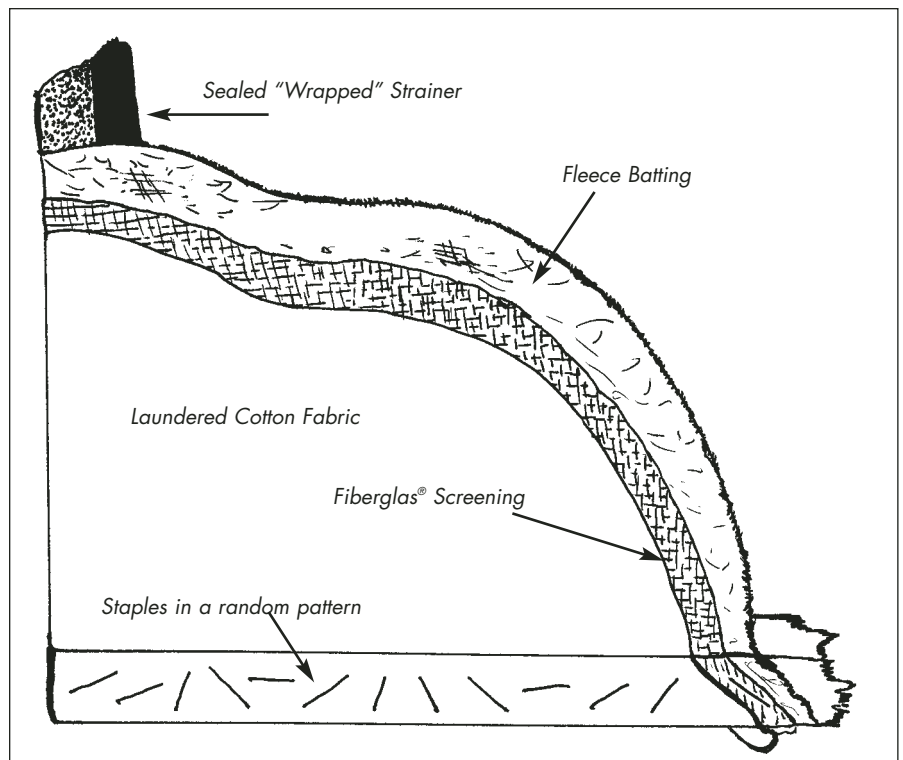


Figure 1: Whether using a stretcher or a strainer bar (a strainer is my recommended choice), each corner should be at a 90° angle.

screen wire! This is a wonder product that is inert and can add much needed protection for the quilt as well as support for the entire project. If the quilt is to be “couched” (see Figure 3) down completely on the strainer bar then the screen wire will allow the stitching to be supported through small holes in the screening. It is great and could be the tip of the year for a creative framer. Not only that, but it is archival in its application.



Figures 2a and 2b: In order to protect the quilt when it is hanging, the strainer can first be sealed, then covered with fleece batting, screen wire, and a cotton fabric.



Remember; never place a quilt or other textile directly on the wire.

Underlayment Fabric: This should be a stable cotton fiber that has been laundered to remove most of the sizing, which also contains acids. It needs to be an attractive color and in this case the deep taupe tone was one that worked well with other colors in the room. It was decided that 1½" would be exposed around the perimeter to create a "fabric" framed appearance.

Mounting

By striving to provide preservation methods into the design, you will not only ensure the life of the quilt but you will also sleep better at night. Just as Betsy Ross was well served in being a quilter, you will benefit from being able to sew when mounting a quilt is concerned.

In this project, the loop side of non-adhesive hook and loop fastener should be carefully "couched" to the upper back length of the quilt taking care not to stretch the quilt as the hook and loop fastener is attached. Details of the couching technique are shown in Figure 3.

Framers will find a new friend in hook and loop fasteners. It allows a soft (loop side only) hanging material to be attached to the quilt itself (see Figure 3a); the hook side would then be sewn by couching to the covered strainer bar along the top (see Figure 3b). When sewn in one continuous length, these fasteners will hold a great deal of weight.

Couching is done using a cotton covered polyester button and carpet thread threaded into a tapestry needle. The stitches will for the most part be buried in the quilt itself and only the tiny loop shows (see Figure 3c) on the top of the hook and loop fastener or

Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c:
The quilt can be attached to the strainer by using the couching technique. A hook and loop fastener can be stitched along the back of the quilt and the front of the fabric covered strainer.

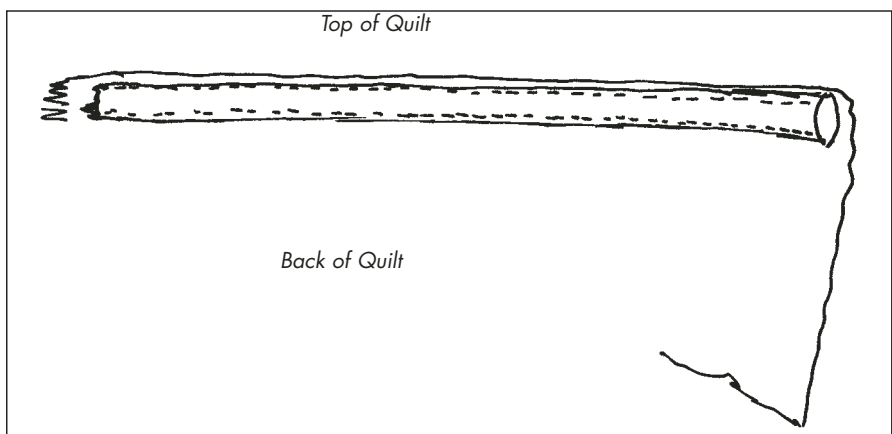
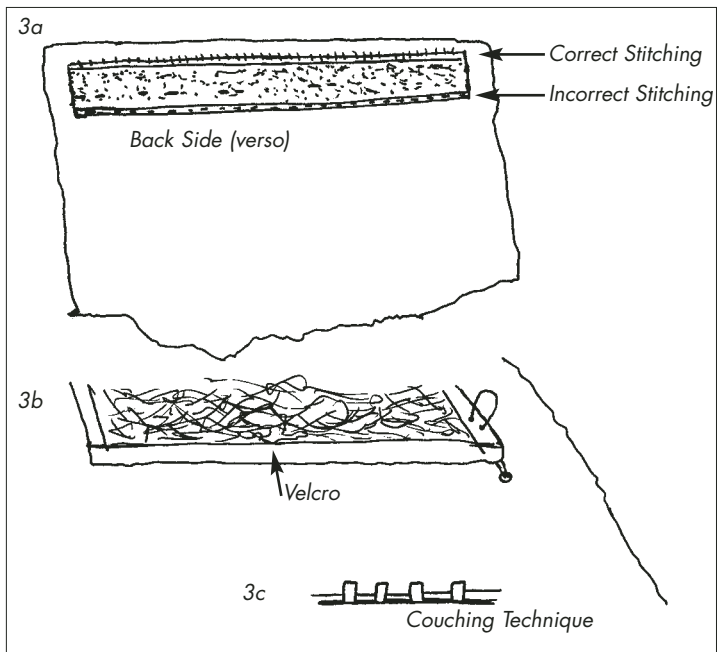


Figure 4: An alternate to couching is to sew a tube of fabric along the upper edge of the quilt to be able to hang it with a wooden dowel.

material.

An alternate plan is to sew a tube of fabric to the upper back side of the quilt (see Figure 4) and slip a heavy dowel rod through the tube. One problem is how to hide the tube and how to support the quilt on something besides this flexible dowel rod. This is a method that quilters have chosen for years but it creates a great amount of stress on the fiber of the quilt. It is therefore better to recommend that they not do this technique.

Protection is a word that is much better understood today than a while back. The protection of the art is a statement that the client will proba-

bly readily understand. Remind them that damage to the quilt can and will be non-reversible and that an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure.

Remember the mention when defining the strainer bar of adding a solid piece of conservation-quality board to the back of the board? Because a quilt is made of fibers it is automatically acidic and needs protection from itself, any internal pollutants, and also from outside damage, any external pollutants. Either or both can do permanent damage to the work.

Many times, the framing industry points to UV light as the cause of yel-

lowing of artwork. While it's true, this all over yellowing can be UV damage, it can also be caused by internal and external pollutants. Pollution is here to stay and so a system is needed to reduce or eliminate the internal and external pollutants from the environment of the quilt.

For this reason, whenever possible, quilts should be framed within a controlled arena. For instance, sealed wood or aluminum metal moulding, UV blocking glass, mats, mounting, and finishing materials that are made to reduce or eliminate pollutants, and the knowledge to maintain the quilt after it is home.

Finishing

The word is spelled “m-a-i-n-t-e-n-a-n-c-e” and simply put it means taking care of the framed quilt after it is hung on the wall. The hanging itself should be done by a professional, namely the framer. Always offer a hanging service. It will produce more income and will provide a great service to the client. Never position a framed quilt on a wall facing direct sunlight, and in very cold areas of the country it is best not to hang quilts or any other type of artwork on an outside wall.

Since this quilt is done in “free floating technique,” it will get a lot of stress from its own weight and therefore it would be necessary to recommend that the client rest the quilt for a minimum of 30 days every six months. This is perfect for seasonal additions to the room in a festive vein. Perhaps a Christmas quilt or a wonderful 4th of July quilt which the professional framer can prepare to replace the resting quilt.

Resting quilts should be folded in a certain method. To fold a quilt,

spread it face down on a clean, well-worn white cotton sheet. Cover the back with the same type of sheet to prevent the folds from tearing. Then, fold the quilt in an accordion pleated fashion. It takes extra time, but provides the best protection for the stitching and fabric. While it may seem natural to fold it on the seams of the quilt blocks, this can actually put undue stress on the seams. Never store in materials used in manufacturing plastic bags, cardboard boxes and wooden trunks as all can react with quilting fabrics, and should be avoided. Airing the quilt is recommended once a year by spreading them flat in an area with low light, rather than hanging them on a clothesline or similar apparatus.

This also serves as a cleaning method, since it helps eliminate odors naturally. Cleaning quilts can, and should, be done very carefully. Use of a nylon stocking over a vacuum dusting brush is the much safer than shaking or beating the quilt.

Lastly, since the quilt is in greater stress from its own weight, a wedge could be created that could be attached along the bottom edge of the strainer. This wedge will allow the quilt to rest on the covered strainer bar and will relieve a large amount of the weight and therefore a great deal of the stress for the quilt.

This technique is called a “Leaning Board” and was first used for actresses in heavy gowns that needed to rest between scenes. A “leaning board” was created to allow them to simply lean back against the board and the angle would take the weight of the garment off the actress. What will one learn next? Simply cover the wedge with the same fabric as is used in the covered strainer and it will not

be unattractive on the wall (see Figure 5).

Quilts as our Heritage

Framing quilts in their full size is most challenging but when the antique quilt is severely damaged and there are only small pieces left (as in Photo 2), then the only option left is framing pieces of an old quilt to tell the story of the quilt or the quilter. Be sure to use the proper archival materials in the presentation. This will ensure that the story can be told for a long time. Always remember when the artifact is being framed that the real value may not be available to the professional framer until much later. Even the proud flag that now covers and supports the United States started as a dream and became a reality at the hands of a quiet quilter. It was much later when the world truly came to know that this flag is truly an American Quilt! ■

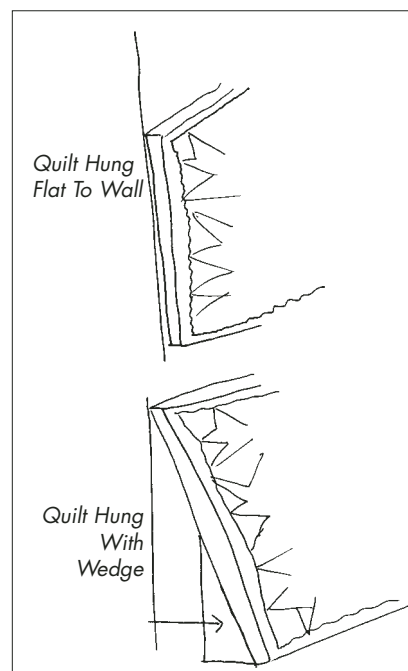


Figure 5: You can relieve the vertical stress of a quilt's weight by allowing it to lean on a wedge attached along the bottom of the strainer.