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**QUILT INDEX LAUNCHED: ONLINE DATABASE UNCOVERS AMERICA'S  
QUILT HERITAGE**

***Innovative use of technology makes quilts and quilt history more accessible  
than ever before.***

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY and EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN – The Alliance for American Quilts and Michigan State University announced today the launch of The Quilt Index ([www.quiltindex.org](http://www.quiltindex.org)), a new website putting historical and contemporary American quilts at the fingertips of anyone with a computer and internet access. This landmark online resource offers a central, searchable database to provide first-of-its-kind access to information and images of this original American art form. The Quilt Index launches today with information for over 1,000 quilts from four separate archives. Yet this is just the beginning of an effort to bring thousands more quilts into the Quilt Index in the future.

The Quilt Index was conceived and developed by the Alliance for American Quilts in partnership with Michigan State University Museum/Great Lakes Quilt Center and MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts and Letters Online, at Michigan State University. Four quilt archives contributed quilt images and surveys from the state and regional quilt documentation projects to create this initial phase of the Quilt Index. The primary collection-holding institutions involved in this first phase are the Illinois State Museum, the Michigan State University Museum, the Tennessee State Library and Archives, and University of Louisville Archives and Records Center.

**Quilts: a vital American art form**

Quilts are a doorway into the lives of the diverse cultures of America. Traditionally a women's art form, they have attracted wide interest and respect among scholars over the past 30 years. Besides the craftsmanship and beauty, they are read as documents of history--revealing stories of their makers and users, and traditions of families, artists and communities. Now, information and images about family heirloom quilts and quilts stored away in museum cabinets are visible and accessible on the world-wide web.

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"The Quilt Index has long been a dream of many who study quilts and work to preserve their history," adds Shelly Zegart who co-founded the first of the quilt documentation project, the Kentucky Quilt Project, in 1981. Zegart, now board president of the Alliance for American Quilts ([www.centerforthequilt.org](http://www.centerforthequilt.org)), says the Quilt Index is the culmination of more than 20 years of effort to document and preserve our quilt heritage.

The advantage of a single comprehensive Quilt Index is enormous, the project architects say. Quilts can be viewed by contributing collection or documentation project as well as searched across collections for patterns, individual quiltmakers, themes, techniques, and many other characteristics. As a result, "The Index provides a rich, deep resource for students, teachers, scholars, quiltmakers, and the general public," notes Marsha MacDowell, curator of folk arts at the MSU Museum and MSU professor of art and art history. "Quilts and quilting are made far more accessible than ever before." MacDowell is also on the Board of Directors of The Alliance for American Quilts.

"Access to this varied cultural material across institutions illuminates patterns in the art's growth and transformation," explains Justine Richardson, Quilt Index Project Manager at MATRIX and Alliance board member. "One especially interesting part of this Index is the Exhibit Hall section, where guest curators can put together quilts and quilt information that has not been compared before and create dynamic virtual exhibits using the quilts in the Index."

Bonnie Leman, founder of Quilter's Newsletter Magazine, observed, "The potential of this Index to positively affect the ongoing health and growth of the art and craft of quilting is huge. Those who have made it happen have given the quilt world a tremendous gift. This is an exciting development in the history of the quilt!"

### **Textiles, technology and beyond**

Establishing a design, gathering materials and piecing steadfastly is what it takes to make a quilt. Using today's technology, that same process was required for The Quilt Index to produce an elegant and complex resource that is more than the sum of its many parts. Major advances in digital library technology combined with years of quilt documentation and research made the development of this comprehensive on-line Index possible.

The complex Quilt Index architecture and web site interface design were constructed by MATRIX, a center devoted to the application of new technologies in humanities and social science teaching and research. The technological challenge was to create a sophisticated database structure to both take in and deliver information. Each site needed flexible and individualized access to manage their records remotely and accommodate information unique to that region or project.

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"The synergy of our research in digital library preservation initiatives has permitted this broad application for public humanities, art history, folklore, and history," explains Mark Kornbluh, director of MATRIX and associate professor of history at MSU. "This is a powerful example of 'humanities technology' at work."

The Quilt Index also required a comprehensive, controlled vocabulary and common descriptions and fields to allow meaningful searching and sorting capabilities. The faculty and curatorial staff at the MSU Museum's Great Lakes Quilt Center with experts in quilt research, collections management, documentation, and interpretation led the development, definition and testing of the data fields.

These records are also better protected for future generations. Data preservation is a key component of the Index project. As the Index grows in the coming months and years, the digital information is protected by redundant back-up systems at the university, especially important as more collections from around the country begin to be incorporated.

Planning and implementation of the Quilt Index was made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) division of preservation and access. Following the completion of quilt entry from each of the four pilot sites, The Alliance for American Quilts and MSU will begin working with other groups around the country to add records for the tens of thousands of quilts that have been documented by state quilt projects and collecting institutions.

"Today's launch is a milestone not only for quilt research, but also for the organizations that have come together to make this dream a reality," explains Zegart. "The goal of The Alliance is to bring together quiltmakers, designers, academic and research institutions, and the quilt industry with one aim in mind -- to bring quilts to the center stage of American culture where they belong. The Quilt Index is a major step toward that goal."

### **The principals: arts, history, technology**

The Alliance for American Quilts is a national non-profit organization headquartered in Louisville, KY, that promotes projects to document, preserve, and share the history and stories of quilts and quiltmakers. The Alliance brings together institutions and individuals from the creative, scholarly, and business aspects of quilts to advance the recognition of quilts in American culture. See <http://www.centerforthequilt.org>.

Michigan State University Museum, the state's natural and cultural history museum, is the home of the Great Lakes Quilt Center. The MSU Museum has a long history of engagement in research, education, exhibitions and service projects related to quilts and holds a collection of over 500 quilts, quilt-related ephemera and documentation. See <http://www.museum.msu.edu>.

MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts and Letters Online at Michigan State University is devoted to the application of new technologies in humanities and social science teaching and research. It creates and maintains online resources, provides training in computing and new teaching technologies, and creates forums for the exchange of ideas and expertise in new teaching technologies. See <http://www.matrix.msu.edu>.

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