

[Media contact: Mark Kornbluh, MATRIX, (517) 355-9300 or [mark@mail.matrix.msu.edu](mailto:mark@mail.matrix.msu.edu); Marsha MacDowell, MSU Museum, (517) 355-6511 or [macdowel@msu.edu](mailto:macdowel@msu.edu); Shelly Zegart, Alliance for American Quilts (502) 897-7566 or [zegartquilt@aol.com](mailto:zegartquilt@aol.com)]

## **NEW WEBSITE FOCUSES ON AMERICAN QUILTING TRADITIONS**

### ***Innovative use of technology allows access to images, surveys, and documentation***

EAST LANSING, Mich. – A new web site is putting historical and contemporary American quilts at the fingertips of anyone with a computer and Internet access.

The Quilt Index (<http://www.quiltindex.org>) brings together the resources of four separate archives, including the Michigan State University Museum, the University of Louisville Archives and Records Center, the Illinois State Museum, and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

From a Civil War-era family graveyard quilt to variations on a hexagon theme to an original contemporary design featuring Elvis Presley, the Index provides central, searchable access to more than 1,000 quilts documented in the four archives. Quilts can be viewed by archive as well as searched across the collections for patterns, individual quilters, themes, techniques, and many other characteristics.

The four participating archives contributed quilt images, surveys and documentation from state and regional projects and public collections to create the Index, which 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.

The advantage of a single comprehensive Quilt Index is enormous, project architects say.

"The Index provides a rich, deep resource for students, teachers, scholars, quilt makers and the general public," said Marsha MacDowell, curator of folk arts at the MSU Museum and professor of art and art history. "Quilts and quilting are made far more accessible than ever before."

Quilts are windows onto the lives of the diverse cultures of the United States. Traditionally considered a women's art form, they have attracted wide interest

and respect among scholars for the past 30 years. Besides providing aesthetic pleasure through their craftsmanship and beauty, quilts can be read as documents of history—revealing the stories of their makers and users, as well as the traditions of families, artists and communities.

"Access to this varied cultural material across institutions illuminates patterns in the art's growth and transformation," said Justine Richardson, Quilt Index project manager at MATRIX.

Shelly Zegart, co-founder of the Kentucky Quilt Project and the current board president of the Alliance for American Quilts, says the Quilt Index is the culmination of more than 20 years of effort to document and preserve the nation's quilt heritage.

"The Quilt Index has long been a dream of many who study quilts and work to preserve their history," she said.

### **The innovative technology behind the Quilt Index**

Establishing a pattern, gathering materials and patiently piecing is what it takes to make a quilt. That same process—using bits and bytes of electronic information instead of bits and bolts of fabric—was required to create the Quilt Index, 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 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 for an integrative index and a distributed, web-based posting and delivery system. Each archive needed flexible and individualized access to manage records remotely and to accommodate information unique to its region or quilt documentation project.

"The synergy of our research in digital library preservation initiatives has permitted this broad application for public humanities, art history, folklore, and history," said 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 promote meaningful searching and sorting

capabilities. The faculty and curatorial staff at the MSU Museum's Great Lakes Quilt Center worked with experts in quilt research, collections management, documentation, and interpretation to develop, define and test the data fields.

Data preservation is a key component of the project. As the Index grows in the coming months and years, the digital information it contains is protected by redundant back-up systems, 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 division of preservation and access. Following the completion of quilt entry from each of the four pilot sites, Michigan State University and the Alliance for American Quilts 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.

### **Quilt Index partners**

The catalyst for the project was the Alliance for American Quilts, a national non-profit organization headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, that promotes projects to document, preserve, and share the history and stories of quilts and quilt makers. The Alliance brings together institutions and individuals from the creative, scholarly and business worlds of quilting to advance the recognition of quilts in American culture. For more information, visit <http://www.centerforthequilt.org>.

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

MATRIX 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. For more information, visit <http://www.matrix.msu.edu>.

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