

Hawaiian Quilts: Tradition and Transition.* Reiko Mochinaga Brandon and Loretta G. H. Woodard. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2004. 140 pp.

Reviewed by Marsha MacDowell

In 1989 the Honolulu Academy of Arts partnered with Toshiyuki Higuchi of Kokusai Art to create an exhibition accompanied by a publication edited by Reiko Mochinaga Brandon (*The Hawaiian Quilt*, Kokusai Art, 1989). The exhibition and publication featured quilts from four Hawaiian museums and profiled the quilts of eleven contemporary quilters. With the addition of Loretta G. H. Woodard, the same team has produced *Hawaiian Quilts: Tradition and Transition* in tandem with an exhibition of the same name that featured 52 quilts from contemporary artists and 22 historical quilts drawn from three Hawaiian museum collections. Both the latter and the former publications provide a summary of the history of quilting in Hawaii.

What is different between the two exhibition catalogues? This time the team is able to draw upon the extensive research that has been undertaken by numerous individuals on different aspects of Hawaiian quilting and, in particular, the work of the Hawaiian Quilt Research Project, a non-profit organization that, since 1990 has registered more than 1500 quilt patterns from thirty-seven public and private collections and more than 1,200 Hawaiian quilts.[1] The introduction to the history of quilting is now enriched and expanded, including important newly-collected information that explores the influence of quilt shows, pattern makers, teachers (especially county extension agents and those affiliated with museums and hotels), collectors (especially Laurence S. Rockefeller), marketing of patterns, tourism, and the inclusion of articles about Hawaiian quilting in nationally-distributed women's magazines.

Hawaiians had a rich tradition of textile production before contact with Western societies. Their *tapa* or bark cloth and woven *lauhala* palms, especially, resulted in creative and functional clothing, bedding, and other textile forms. When missionaries and traders introduced Western fabrics and patchwork quilting to the islands in the early part of the 19th century, Hawaiian artists quickly adapted these new materials and techniques to their own aesthetics and purposes. A style known as the "Hawaiian quilt" became popular; it consisted, typically, of an overall design cut into a piece of cloth and then appliquéd onto another bed-sized cloth of contrasting color. Traditional *tapa* designs and motifs associated with each island employing particular colors and flowers and symbols of Hawaiian royalty were incorporated into their quilt designs. Similarly, quilting stitches were inspired by designs used to decorate *tapa* as well as motifs taken from nature (e.g. turtles, rain, shells). *Hawaiian Quilts: Tradition and Transition* does an excellent job of covering this early history in the opening essay and in the extensive notes accompanying each illustrated quilt.

The historical discussion of quilt making dating from the early 20th century to today makes this publication useful to researchers, especially those investigating textile, art, and design studies or Hawaiian history. Particularly helpful were the descriptions of new technological changes and

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their incorporation into traditions, the acknowledgement of vibrant quilting groups, and the in-depth profiles of six living quilters from diverse backgrounds who are held in esteem within Hawaii. These profiles allow the text to include other voices through the excerpts of oral interviews conducted with each artist.

In the foreword, the director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts notes that the 1989 exhibition and publication were enormously successful and introduced Japanese audiences to Hawaiian quiltmaking traditions. Between then and now the number of Japanese individuals interested in making and collecting quilts, including those in the Hawaiian style, has exploded. Although Japanese artists have a long history of making textiles that incorporate piecework and quilting, especially the decorative, patterned style of stitching known as *sashiko*, it has not been until relatively recently that so many textile artists have chosen quilt making as their medium. There are an estimated two to three million quiltmakers in Japan. Throughout the country, annual quilt events (like the Tokyo International Quilt Festival that attracts thousands of visitors) include and sometimes prominently feature Hawaiian-style quilts. Over a century earlier at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, over nine million visitors were exposed to the most extensive showing of Japanese art the Western world had ever seen. As a consequence of the exposition's Japanese Pavilion, American art and design increasingly reflected Japanese motifs. One can only wonder to what extent the showcasing of American quilts in major festivals and shows in Japan and the distribution of articles about American quiltmaking in Japanese publications have contributed to the number of Japanese artists now engaged in quiltmaking. It would be interesting to explore whether the first Hawaiian exhibition circulated by Kokusai dramatically increased the number of "Hawaiian-style" quilts made by Japanese artists.

There are two related issues of nomenclature that the authors could have addressed in more depth in the explication of the term "Hawaiian quilt." Brandon and Woodard acknowledge that "before the turn of the century, Hawaiian quilts tended to be made and used only within the Hawaiian community" (p. 15). By "community" I believe they mean Native Hawaiians, and by "Hawaiian quilts," I believe they mean those exhibiting the appliquéd designs thought characteristic of a Native Hawaiian contribution to textile making. Does the style make it a "Hawaiian quilt" or is it the ethnic background or residence of the maker? Similar nomenclature issues can be found in other works on quilting cultures, for instance "Amish" and "Native American" quilts. Likewise, it would have been helpful if the authors had provided more information about quiltmaking in Hawaii in styles other than the "Hawaiian-style." How extensive are other styles? How are they regarded by quiltmaking critics and teachers? Does it incorporate other regional differences? I ask this as I recall, over the span of the past fifteen years, visiting Hawaiian craft fairs and fabric shops and seeing quilts made of old Hawaiian shirts and in patterns that included depictions of Hawaiian shirts, ukeleles, surfers, pineapples, coconut palms, volcanoes, Hawaiian legends, and oceanscapes.

Many facets of Hawaiian quilting still are yet to be explored in future exhibitions and publications. One issue in need of study is directly linked to the first Kokusai publication. Some of its illustrations were copied by companies based in the Philippines and China that hired ill-paid workers to produce quilts out of poor quality fabric in these copied patterns. Many of the "Hawaiian" quilts now seen in shops catering to tourists are, in fact, made overseas. These cheaply-priced, poor quality, though colorful quilts not only represent an appropriation of

intellectual property but also have undercut the ability of Hawaiian quilters to sell their work at prices that reflect the quality materials and labor they invest in their art.

The text of *Hawaiian Quilters* is presented in both English and Japanese, thereby extending the accessibility of this publication to wider audiences. Once again, Kokusai Art has set a standard for photography of the quilts; the images by Fumio Ichikawa, Shuzo Uemoto, and Tadao Kodaira exhibit a spectacular clarity of texture and color.

Note

1. See Loretta G. H. Woodard (2006) "Communities of Quilters: Hawaiian Pattern Collecting, 1900-1959." *Uncoverings 2006: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group*. 27:1-27, p. 23.

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