

Heirloom quilts: proper use and storage

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With the recent renewed interest in antique collecting and pioneer crafts, quilt making and quilt collecting continue to be popular activities. Often an old quilt, whether it is a treasured family heirloom or one bought at a flea market or antique show, can present some problems when it comes to storing it and using it. An old quilt may be badly worn, the fabric and quilting threads may be weak, and there may be some discolouration and staining. It is a good idea to know the best way of using and storing it, be it a beautiful old quilt or even a beautiful contemporary one.

One might think that the best way to keep a valuable quilt clean and safe is to pack it away in a closet forever. This certainly would save it from wear and fading from sunlight, but once it's hidden, it's easy to forget the quilt is even there. A beautiful quilt should be seen and enjoyed, so the best place to keep it is right on a bed! This distributes the weight of the quilt evenly and the mattress gives added support. Of course, keeping a precious quilt on a bed only works if all the family members understand that quilts are for looking at and sleeping under but that lounging on top of the quilt is strictly forbidden! (This includes the family pets as well, because claws can damage even the strongest fabric and stitches, and pet hairs do cling to cotton and are difficult to remove). The guest room would be the best place to keep an heirloom quilt on display.

Another way to protect a quilt, particularly an old fragile one is to add a transparent covering such as nylon tulle, but never, never plastic.

A quilt could also be hung on the wall, for a very dramatic decoration. Be sure it is hung out of direct or indirect sunlight, and away from a high traffic location where handling is discouraged, as oils from hands can accumulate to soil the surface of the quilt. The more support the quilt has as it hangs, the less strain there will be on any one part of it. Avoid nails or pins as they can create holes and stains. One of the best methods of hanging is to sew a wide band or casing across the top and bottom of the quilt (on the back), and insert a wooden dowel into each one. If the

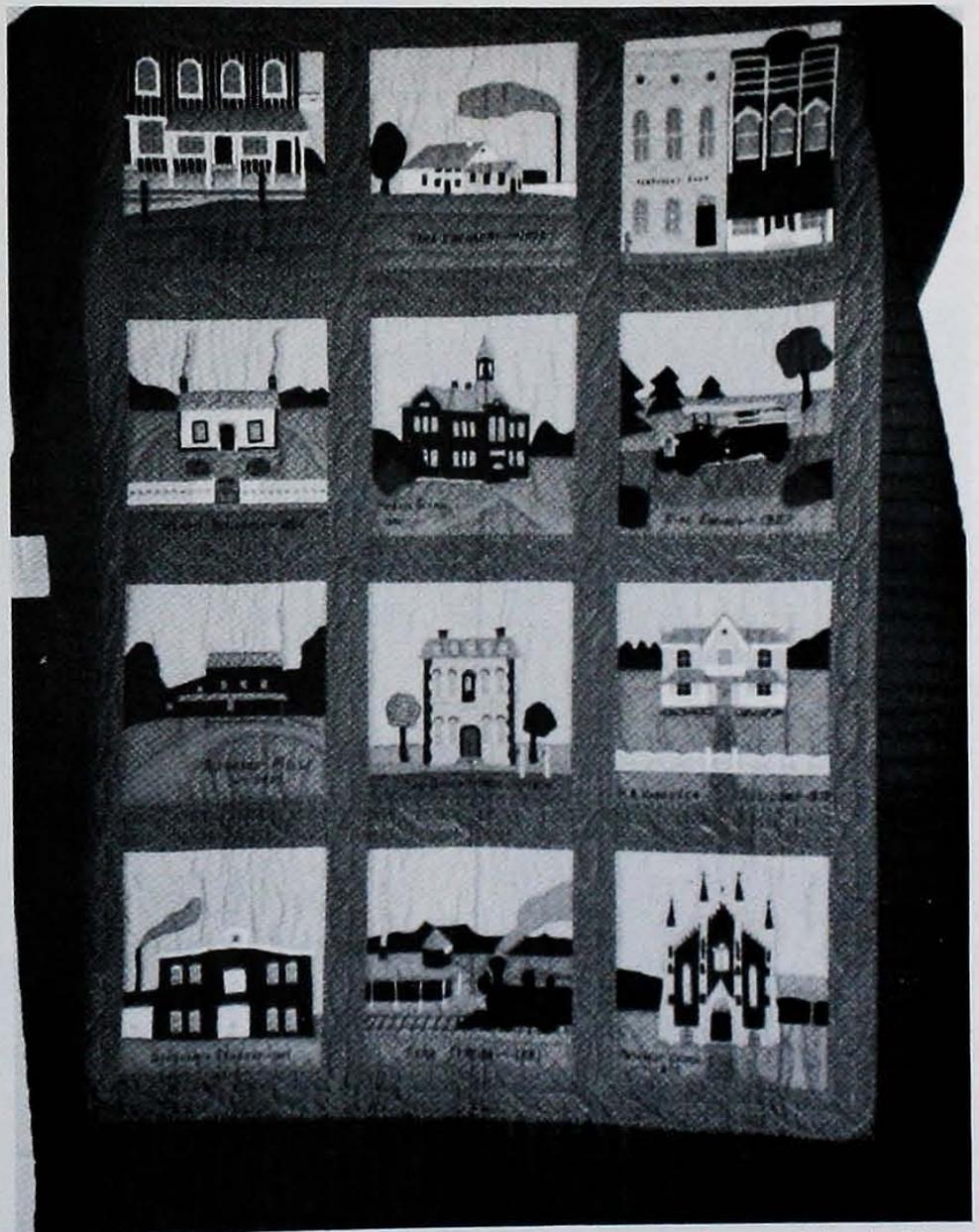
quilt has a balanced design, turn it every few months to distribute the weight.

Very old fragile quilts such as silk, satin or velvet crazy quilts can be displayed at museums under glass to protect them, so perhaps an heirloom quilt could be donated to the local museum for many people to enjoy.

If quilts aren't being hung or used on the bed, the best way to store them is to fold them loosely, with the decorative top of the quilt to the inside, in a cool, dry, dark place, wrapped in a clean cotton sheet. Cotton protects the quilt from dust while allowing air to circulate freely around it. Plastic bags must not be used, as the chemicals in plastic can react over a

period of time with fibres in the quilt to produce stains or discolouration. Plastic also tends to collect moisture and promote growth of mildew. A special acid-free tissue paper or rice paper is available from art supply stores or oriental shops which is excellent for wrapping around old fabrics, including quilts. It can also be crumpled up inside the folds to prevent creases. Try to refold your quilt often, folding it so the creases fall in a different place each time. This avoids permanent creasing and avoids wear on the crease lines.

Take time to consider the best way to use and store your quilts, so that the heirlooms of today will remain the treasured antiques of tomorrow.



Prize winning wall quilt by Joanne Miller of Mississauga, created for the Town of Tara's centennial in 1981.