An Atypical Approach for a Typical Problem: Loss Compensation for a 19th Century Quilt

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ABSTRACT

The poor condition of a circa 1850 pieced and appliquéd quilt in the collection of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation necessitated an unconventional approach to loss compensation. The quilt's dynamic design consists of hundreds of diamond-shaped pieces of roller-printed cotton in various colors with small motif prints, surrounded by appliquéd rosettes and swags in green printed cotton. Three fabrics used across the quilt face exhibited significant degradation ranging from small disruptions to visually distracting losses, likely due to chemical deterioration.

Treatment goals centered on stabilization of the degraded printed cotton, but loss compensation was required to reintegrate the degraded fabrics and reinstate the visually engaging design. Stitched overlays of color-matched, semi-sheer polyester fabric were used to secure damaged fabric with a small motif print that had resulted in thousands of tiny losses. Larger losses in dark green fabrics with a black printed design necessitated a different approach. They were treated individually with inserts of medium-weight Japanese paper, toned with acrylic paints. The paper blended well with the surrounding cotton and proved to be more straightforward to manipulate than textile loss compensation materials. Toned paper pieces were inserted below the damaged fabric and secured with stitches around the perimeter of each loss, which served to anchor the loss compensation and stabilize the original fabric in areas of damage.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The quilt (2014.609.1) was made by Elizabeth Ann Kincaid Gilbreth likely near Shippensburg, Pennsylvania around 1850. It features a pieced, eight-pointed Star of Bethlehem or Lone Star in the center. This predominant design feature is composed of hundreds of diamond-shaped pieces of roller-printed cotton in various colors with small motif prints. Appliquéd rosette shapes in a printed green cotton surround the star. The quilt top is bordered by appliquéd repeating swags in green printed cotton. The dynamic design, skillful piecing, and artful hand stitching made this quilt an ideal candidate for display in the museum's introductory gallery.

Figure 1. Star of Bethlehem quilt (2014.609.1) before treatment (image courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

CONDITION ISSUES

- Creases and patterns of soiling suggest the quilt spent much of its life prior to acquisition folded, protected from light exposure.
- Of the 13 distinct fabrics used in the quilt's construction, only three exhibited serious structural problems that required treatment.

Green fabrics

Two green fabrics, similar in appearance, were used in the appliquéd swag and flower shapes around the central star. Both fabrics exhibited substantial damage to the brown/black components of the printed design, resulting in losses (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Damage and loss in one of the green textiles

Pink fabric

The pink fabric printed with small yellow, blue, and black bow shapes was structurally compromised. Damage ranged from small losses to almost total loss, exposing the white batting and quilt backing and disrupting the radiating design (fig. 3).

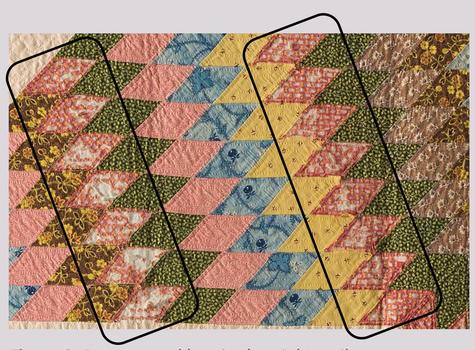


Figure 3. Damage and loss in the pink textile

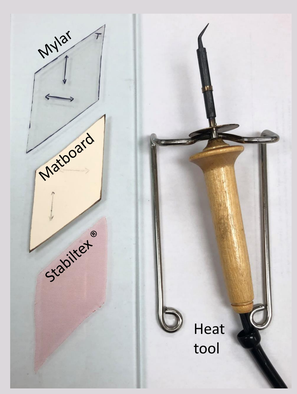
TREATMENT

Loss compensation was necessary to reinstate the appliquéd design of the green fabrics, and stitching was required to secure the edges of the losses to limit opportunity for additional damage. Loss compensation was achieved by toning pieces of medium-weight, machine-made Japanese paper with Golden® acrylic paints to match the green fabric and the brown/black areas of loss. Small pieces of toned paper were inserted between the green fabric and the ground fabric of the quilt and stitched in place with stitches in threads pulled from Stabiltex® yardage. The stitches were worked through the paper fills and all layers of the quilt around the perimeter of each loss. They hold the paper fills in place and secure the areas of damage in the green fabrics to the stable ground fabric below (fig. 4). Paper fills were easier to manipulate than textile fills and could be trimmed without fraying to accommodate lines of quilting stitches or small pieces of original textile that remained intact, as with the pink flower in the image.

Figure 4. Damage and loss in the green textile (left) was addressed with painted paper fills that were inserted below the degraded textile and stitched in place through all layers of the quilt (right).

The degraded pink fabric required a more traditional textile conservation approach to encapsulate the remaining original material. Pre-dyed pink Stabiltex®, a sheer and open-weave polyester fabric, was heat-cut with a small wood-burning tool using a diamond-shaped matboard template that matched the perimeter of the pink quilt pieces (fig. 5). The heat tool fuses the cut edges of the Stabiltex®, preventing fraying and eliminating the need to hem the edges of each diamond-shaped overlay. Each diamond of degraded pink fabric was stabilized with a Stabiltex® overlay, stitched in place with running stitches in beige-colored polyester Gütermann Skala 360 thread around the perimeter of the piece (fig. 6). Stitching extended through all layers of the quilt. The overlays provide structural stability for the remaining degraded textile and reinstate the pink coloration of the shapes to restore the overall appearance of the radiating design when the quilt is viewed from a distance.

Figure 5. A Mylar® template noting the textile's grain direction (top left) was created from the quilt and used to make a matboard stencil (middle left) that was used to heat-cut the Stabiltex® (bottom left) with the fine-tipped heat tool (right)



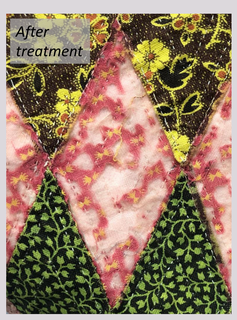


Figure 6. The Stabiltex ® overlays were stitched over each of the damaged pink diamonds

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