

THE OCEAN WAVE

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I BOUGHT AN antique quilt last spring. I don't usually spend that much money impulsively, especially for a quilt. In my family, we make our own or have them handed down from ancestors. I was browsing at the annual Kalona Quilt Show, overwhelmed by the fabrics and designs and stitches. When I came around the corner and saw this one, I stopped. I stood and gazed at it, enjoying its quiet quality, both from a distance and close up. It was a variation on the Ocean Wave pattern, pinwheels alternating with the patches that feature a center diamond. I'd never seen anything like it.

Eventually, I moved on to other quilts. But they weren't as fine, especially the more recent ones. In them the designs showed little imagination, the quilting stitches were scant, and the corners of the patches met sloppily. I returned to admire the Ocean Wave and decided to make a drawing of it, even though I knew I would never have the time and patience to piece one myself. Even if I tried, I could never repeat the effect this one had.

After leaving the show, I debated mentally. "I'm going to buy it," I concluded. I had money in the bank that was supposed to be saved so I wouldn't have to worry about finding a job the following summer. I purposefully put the funds into the Kalona Bank so I couldn't withdraw it without making a twenty-mile trip. I was trying to prevent impulse spending.

I hurried to the bank, fingers trembling as I signed the withdrawal slip, not wanting to dawdle and chat with the clerks for fear that the quilt would be gone if I waited. Besides, they would have thought this was just another quilt. I was in a hurry, not because I'd seen quilts being sold quickly at the show, but because of the irrational idea that something I want badly will be taken unfairly from me, that perhaps I don't deserve it. But the quilt was still there. With relief I approached one of the women wearing a corsage and patchwork on her jumper and asked how I went about buying a quilt. She didn't even ask to see any identification with my check.

I showed my Ocean Wave to the owners of Unto Others, a shop in Kalona filled with quality hand-made goods. One of them noticed a bright gold patch, sticking out as the only jar to the eye. She said her mother always put deliberate flaws into her quilts to show that she "wasn't God" and couldn't

make a perfect quilt. I decided that if God made quilts, this is what they'd look like. Since then, I've been showing it to my friends whether they are quilt lovers or not. I want them to share my pleasure.

Also since then, I've thought about why this quilt attracted and bound me. The unique pattern captivates me. Instead of the usual squares in the centers with hundreds of tiny triangles surrounding the main patches, it is composed of regular patches alternating with a pinwheel design, the mark of someone's innovation. This variation moves the eye to see designs within designs, and to see one pattern, but then shift perceptions and see another. The colors are mostly red and blue, the same ones which make stained glass windows live. The neutral colors are less unattractive because of the presence of the blues and reds.

It's obviously a quilt made from material the maker had collected over time, but much more a work of a caring artist than the ones some "thrifty" women turn out today, just putting scraps together to use them up, thinking it wrong also to have a quilt pleasing to the eye. The show catalog said my quilt is from the 1890s. I don't know how they know that, but the fabrics are not ones I could find anywhere today. They are small prints and plaids, probably leftovers from the garments the maker sewed for her family. She may have had to buy fabric for the large blocks and the backing. But she probably wouldn't buy whole pieces of fabric just to cut them up so she could sew them together again. I enjoy seeing what sorts of fabrics people used in clothing then. It's a detail which gets left out of history books, along with other details of domestic life. The quilt-show guidebook didn't say where it came from. Nor who made it. Nor the story behind it. I was first attracted to it not only because of the striking design, but also because my mother had recently pieced an Ocean Wave and I knew it took her weeks. The small triangles on this quilt are smaller than my mother's were; these are no more than two inches on the longest side.

In addition to there being so many patches, all the patches are pieced together by hand. I can tell by pulling the seams apart gently and looking at the stitches. Only the die-hards hand-piece today. I picture the maker, sewing patient patches, one to the next, stitching the rows of triangles together. I see her finding the good colors, planning the unusual design—these took time. The tiny quilting stitches complement the design of the pieced work by running parallel to the seams of the smaller patches. The stitches in the larger, plain patches echo this pattern, unifying the sections.

When I imagine the maker, I picture an experienced piecer because of the variation on the usual patterns. She may have belonged to the category of women common to that era who had to have thirteen quilts made before they could marry; if so she began piecing at eight or nine years old. This might have been one of her thirteen, but I doubt it because it would be far more worn had it been used on the beds of the large family she would have had. If it was one of her early ones, another explanation for its good

condition might be that the maker never married so the quilt stayed safe from aging in a chest. Along one binding, there is a long faded line as if that edge was exposed to light while all the rest of the quilt was protected.

However, I don't think this is one of the first thirteen. I think this is the work of someone who pieced dozens of others according to the usual patterns before she thought to make up her own. To create her own design involved risk. All those hundreds of patches, all those hours of work could have gone to waste had her innovation not succeeded. And this is not a quiet, restful, prettified quilt. The design is bold and full of movement and life. But yet I picture a careful woman who took pains to organize the colors of the triangles to create unity within the larger blocks. The small, light triangles in each block are all of one fabric, and the dark ones, though of different fabrics, have a pattern to their placement within the larger triangle. I picture a woman with an eye for how color works, to include so much life-giving blue and red along with the somber grays and browns and neutrals and to balance the intense fabrics well with those less striking. I picture a thrifty woman, who wanted her scraps not to go to waste, but who cared enough to arrange them beautifully. I picture a woman who took time to piece this by hand, quilt it by hand and bind it by hand. And she had to have invested time in all the ones she made before which gave her the skill to make this one so well.

Chances are she didn't design it completely by herself. She may have shown the partially-pieced quilt to people whose opinions she respected, as I've seen modern quilt-makers do. Her friends may have encouraged her when they saw how well it would turn out. I imagine the quilt-maker to be a woman, because that's mostly who made quilts back then. One who had no other outlet for her artistic abilities other than in the needlework she was well-trained in, something she could do in the few spare moments, when the housework was done. The material, skills, and tools were all within her world.

There is no hint of why she made it. Was it meant to be for herself? It covers my single bed well, but that may not be significant since in the 1890s two people slept in beds three-fourths the size of our double beds and didn't expect that the quilt would hang far down the sides. It may have been meant as a gift for a niece or a daughter which never got used. I am sure she didn't make it to sell; she never would have gotten enough money for all the time she put into it. Since the women in her world made so many quilts as a matter of course, no one needed another one badly enough to pay for it. My buying her creation was not part of her plan. There is no signature on the back of the quilt to help explain anything. I recently returned to the store which sponsored the show, but the owner was unable to tell me anything about the quilt's origins. Too much time had passed and stores often don't keep records of quilts.

Although the quilt is ninety years old, the only worn spot is that line faded along the binding. Someone preserved it well. I wonder if this person saw the value and wanted to save it. Then who would sell it? Didn't it mean anything to the owner? Did she or he fall upon hard times and become forced to sell it? Did the maker's line die out? If the Ocean Wave had been made by my blood relative, I'd never part with it. In a sense she is my relative. I feel attached to someone who not only had mastered the skill of quilting, but cared for detail, color, design, and quality of workmanship. In whatever I do, I work to make it reflect the best of me.

I never thought I could feel a part of a quilt whose story I didn't know, whose maker I wasn't related to by blood. I still spend time studying it. This June when I took it out of winter storage, I was surprised by it all over again. I can look at one patch and get lost in it, figuring out the motion and the reasoning behind its production. I hope my wonder will last a long time. I hope I'm never so poor that I have to sell it. Then all I'd have would be the money.

I put the quilt on my bed in the summer. Knowing it's there makes me feel wrapped in something I have trouble putting into words. It's as if I am secured to another world, one I can only guess at and admire from my experiences with women I assume are like my quilt's nameless maker.

This weekend I ought to be writing a paper for a class in which I hope to get a good grade. I ought to read a stack of student papers. I ought to mow the lawn. But those obligations seem foolish and frantic compared to the wordless presence of the quilt. Ninety years from now, I'll be gone. The quilt, barring tragedy, will still be here. I hope future generations will be able to read it.