

Make-Do Primer

by Pam Buda



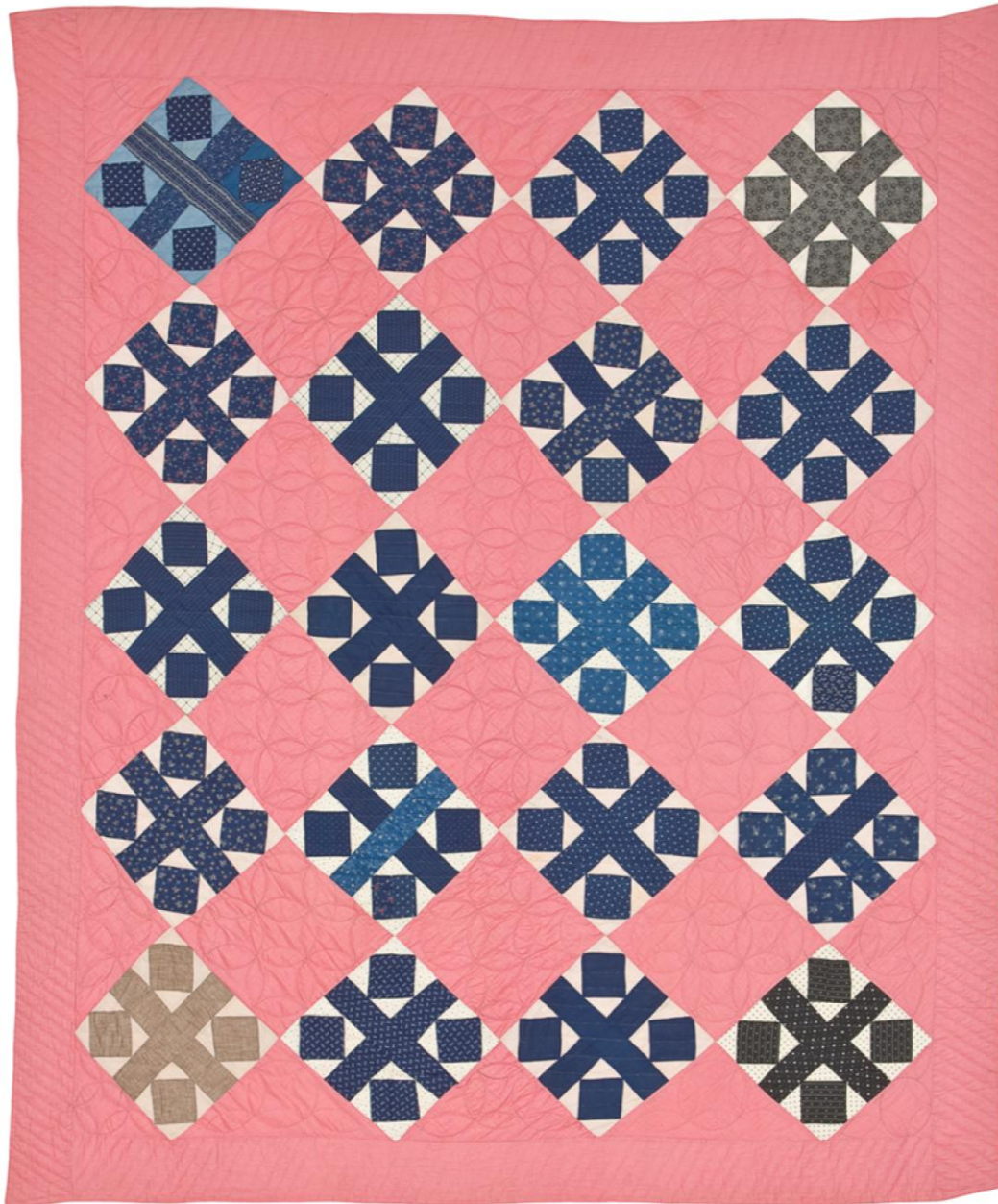
You won't be alone if you've never heard of a "Make-do" quilt or aren't quite sure what one is! Make-do quilts have long been a part of American quilt history, and these sweet and charming quilts can be found in museums and private collections. In fact, you may own one yourself and not even know it!

Make-do quilts were born from the lifestyles of people living in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. As a matter of fact, they often made do in every area of their lives, such as the food that was available, the use of building materials for housing and other structures, tools, clothing etc. "Making-do" was part of quilting as well, as fabric was scarce for many reasons. Making a quilt was necessary for the warmth of their families, and quilt makers used what fabric was available to them.



Prairie Women's Sewing Circle quilt - copyright 2010

There are many ways a quilt maker may have "made-do". In the following pages, you will see the most common examples of "making-do". I think these quilts are very special as they stand as testament to the perseverance of their maker, to do the best she could with what fabric she had! I honor these quilts and their rightful place in our quilting heritage. I hope you enjoy learning about "Making-do", and perhaps you'll incorporate a little "make-do" in your next quilt!



Here is a classic example of a Make-do quilt. You can see that the quilt maker had a color theme in mind for the quilt palette, and the majority of the quilt shows that theme. In this case the theme is a pink and blue quilt. For what may be a variety of reasons, the quilt maker abandoned the theme in some of the blocks in order to get the quilt finished... "making-do" with what fabric she had available to her.

In essence, look for the fabric(s) that are slightly "off" or that just

don't belong as part of the quilt maker's original theme or palette. These charming quilts are evidence of the frugality of the lifestyle of women who "made-do" or did without. This quilt has a few make-do lessons to teach.

Notice that the color palette/theme of the quilt is of dark blue blocks with a light background, set with bubblegum pink fabric. Most of the blocks convey this theme. You can clearly see that there are blocks where everything matches just as we would normally do if we were making the quilt ourselves in the present day.





Here is a Make-do block where most of the fabrics match, but our quilt maker “made-do” by substituting a very similar blue print.

The Make-do block at the right is more of a scrappy block, but since we see so many others in the quilt where she controlled the fabrics, it's safe to say that this is also a Make-do. Notice that the color palette is still the same: light background with dark blue patchwork.

Another classic Make-do element is seen in the blue patch in the lower left corner of the block. Here we see that she has sewn two pieces of fabric together to have a new piece large enough to fit. She's used two different blue prints. It is also common to see two of the same fabrics sewn together as well, which is not as noticeable. That's part of the fun of looking for Make-do's in a quilt!



This example of “making-do” shows the substitution of a color that isn't part of the overall theme or palette. The background of the block is still light but the block is made of black fabrics. Black is often seen as a substitution for blue fabric and vice versa. This type of Make-do is easy to spot.





This block is much like the black Make-do's in that it is made of a color outside of the quilt's palette. However, this example represents a color that isn't close to the original palette like the black was. It still has the light background fabric, and appears to be brown.

This brown fabric may have once been another color and has faded to brown. Only a fabric expert can say. This block teaches us that what may appear as a Make-do now may not have been when the quilt was made.

In our last example, you can see that our quilt maker didn't have enough light background to complete the theme of her quilt. Three of the units have a light blue background, and one has the darker blue background. She has used many fabric scraps to complete this block.



In other examples, such as in a scrappy quilt, you may still see Make-do elements. Perhaps you will see two fabrics sewn together to make one, or maybe the quilt will have perfectly ordered two-fabric blocks, and then you spot a couple of Make-do blocks that use more than two fabrics. There are so many examples. You may see Make-do elements in sashing strips, borders, or binding as well. And when you do, I hope you will think fondly of the quilt maker who made these charming quilts that are evidence of the frugal lifestyle of times past, knowing she did her best with what she had. How lucky we are to have so much fabric to play with!

If you are interested in learning more about Make-do quilts and our quilting heritage, visit my website at www.HeartspunQuilts.com, and click on the Prairie Women's Sewing Circle Club tab which features quilt history and "Make-do" quilts!