Editor’s Note: This is the first installment in a new series where we trace the history of well-known quilt styles and patterns, and talk to IQA members and industry leaders who create them.

Long admired for their bold and instantly recognizable look, Hawaiian quilts are among the most visually impressive styles of the artform. Plus, they’re way more elegant than those ubiquitous island-themed shirts with palm trees, coconuts, and hula girls. But behind those designs of flora and fauna lies an incredibly interesting story of how history, geography, and culture came together to create a style that continues to evolve even to this day.

Before the arrival of the first American missionaries in 1820, there were no woven fabrics in the Hawaiian Islands. Rather, native Hawaiians used kapa, a cloth created from the “pounded” inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, to create garments and bedcoverings. But kapa cloth was neither washable nor easy to make, so Hawaiian women welcomed the introduction of American fabrics and the needle and thread.

The women of Hawaii’s royal household were the first to learn how to quilt. But within a short amount of time, quilting was being taught in the islands’ missionary schools as well. The earliest quilts were made using the patchwork techniques of the visiting missionaries, but Hawaiians soon began adapting their quilting to fit their own needs and personal style. There are several theories on the origin of conventional Hawaiian quilting, according to Hawaiian quilter, instructor, and entrepreneur, Keri Duke.

BIRD OF PARADISE (21" x 21") by KERI DUKE
“One is that the art of Hawaiian appliqué originated with a woman who laid her sheets on the grass to dry them in the sun,” Duke explains. “When she came back to collect her laundry, a nearby tree cast its leafy shadow upon the sheets. Using a technique she learned from the missionaries, she folded her sheet into eighths, drew on the design, and cut out the pattern. It was then appliquéd onto another sheet and quilted in the echo style, mimicking the waves lapping on the shores of the islands.”

“Another theory,” she continues, “is that Hawaiian quilting was developed from the Baltimore Album-style quilting that missionaries brought with them from New England. It is still not known exactly how the traditional appliquéd Hawaiian quilt evolved.” Regardless of its exact origin, it became an artform deeply connected to the people and traditions of the Hawaiian Islands.

Many of the customs practiced in Hawaiian quilting are actually the product of superstition. For instance, it was considered taboo for any individual other than the quilt owner to sit on a quilt while the design was being added—though some considered it rude to sit on a Hawaiian quilt at all. Also, according to tradition, a quilter should sleep with a quilt for one night before giving it to the person for whom it was made.

Furthermore, the design of each Hawaiian quilt was completely original and unique to its maker. Thus, quilt names were not based upon design alone, but also often included the name of the quiltmaker. And it was considered utterly unacceptable to reproduce someone else’s design. In fact, quilts were never hung outside to air with the design visible for fear that it might be copied by another and passed off as their own.

Early Hawaiian quilt patterns were heavily influenced by the designs found on the kapa cloth. Since most of these patterns were inspired by the maker’s natural surroundings, they commonly took the form of native Hawaiian flowers, plants, and trees. Although designs featuring the likenesses of coconuts, sugar cane, animals, or people were unacceptable—the latter of which, it was said, would come to life and visit the maker at night!

Pattern aside, all traditional Hawaiian quilts included a single appliquéd design, which typically spanned the length of the quilt. Unlike the American missionaries that taught them, Hawaiian quilters ordinarily cut the designs for their appliquéd from a single piece of fabric. The fabric—or paper, as is often the case today—was folded into a triangle, out of which an intricate design was cut. The fabric was then unfolded to reveal repeating patterns that radiate from the center.

Once the design had been basted onto the background fabric, it was affixed using a countless number of tiny stitches. After this layer was joined with the middle and bottom layers, they were contour quilted to create a rippled effect. Traditional Hawaiian quilts were composed of only two contrasting colors—often white or off-white paired with another vibrant hue.

For Hawaiian quilters and enthusiasts like Nancy Lee Chong, this is the true beauty of the authentic Hawaiian quilt. “I think what first attracted me to Hawaiian quilts was the contrasting two colors,” she says. “How could you not notice that?”

It certainly caught the attention of Chong, a Hawaiian quilter, instructor, and designer with Pacific Rim Quilt Company. “I have no memory of ever knowing that quilts existed until the day I saw my first Hawaiian quilt,” she explains.

“PINEAPPLE [HALA KAHIKI] (21" x 21")
by KERI DUKE

“It was in 1977 at a craft fair in Honolulu, and it was for sale—a double bed quilt in red and white for $800. Wow, that was way too much! So I turned to my husband and said ‘I bet I can make it for less than that.’” Chong began studying with quilter Luika Kamaka and, after 20 months, had completed her first Hawaiian quilt.

And after 30 years of quilting and sharing her passion for Hawaiian quilts, Chong says that she still finds it both relaxing and incredibly rewarding. “Quilters are turning to quilting styles that give them a more personal link to the quilt itself,” she says. “We have been told for years to do it fast and efficient and pump out those quilts. The people I know are looking for something more satisfying, and they are finding that in hand appliqué and hand quilting.”

Though it was the simple color scheme of the traditional Hawaiian quilt that originally attracted Chong, she has welcomed the introduction of multi-hued fabric. “No longer are Hawaiian quilts just two solid fabrics,” she says, “They now involve prints, hand-dyeds, batiks, and textures—all of which look like they were invented just for Hawaiian quilts.”

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Quilter, instructor, and IQA Judged Show Sponsor, Dierdra McElroy of Roxanne Products, is doing her part to ensure that the “story” of the Hawaiian quilt continues to live as a part of the artform. “They [the quilts] are like story books,” she says. “They tell the viewer about something that had an impact on the designer’s life.”

McElroy, whose quilting specialty is actually Tahitian quilts (Tifaifai), has taught for the Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu and has recently been asked to help establish a museum in Tahiti on the art of the Tifaifai. Her life-long affection for Tahitian quilting makes her the ideal candidate for the job.

“I began appliquéing when I was 11 years old. My nanny, Taiho, taught my mother and I in Tahiti, where I grew up. So naturally, I began with Tahitian Tifaifai,” she says. Though Tahitian quilts have remained her “passion,” McElroy has created quilts in a number of different styles, including Hawaiian. While Tahitian and Hawaiian quilting are often classified together, there are actually several differences between the two.

“Tahitian Tifaifai designs are only folded on the fourths and then cut out, but Hawaiian designs are folded on the eighths,” McElroy explains. “Tifaifai include a lot of reverse appliqué, whereas Hawaiian quilting rarely has any. Also, Tifaifai generally have a more [folkloric] look while Hawaiian kapas are lacier and feature more flora and fauna. And Tifaifai are not quilted as kapas are.”

The two also diverge in regard to custom and superstition, she says. Traditional Hawaiian quilts were not supposed to have “holes” in the center of the appliqué design, as this could allow the spirit of the quilt to escape; the same is not true for Tifaifai.

Furthermore, Hawaiian quilters believed that by including an animal in a design, one was stealing its spirit, while Tahitian quilters deemed it a fitting tribute to the animal. But both Hawaiian and Tahitian quilting, McElroy says, “symbolize the ‘aloha’ spirit in every way.”

McElroy and Duke both agree that the “simple, yet complex” design of the Hawaiian quilt is one of its defining characteristics. Duke, whose husband is plant ecologist at Haleakala National Park on the island of Maui, finds inspiration for her quilts in the natural beauty of her surroundings. “I love the flora of the Hawaiian Islands,” she says. “And the Hawaiian quilting style gives me a format to interpret my designs.”

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quilting 101: the hawaiian quilt (continued)

Duke launched her online pattern company, Keri Designs, after leaving a job in the wedding industry. “I had been designing gowns in white and off-white for eight years,” she says.

“I needed color in my life.” Her contemporary Hawaiian Quilt designs are actually a bit more “colorful” than the traditional Hawaiian quilt. But Duke says that she has really “tried to take Hawaiian quilting to a new level with these designs.”

So for such a relatively small area of land, the Hawaiian Islands—and the artists who live on them—have certainly made a big impact on quilting.

And the Hawaiian style continues to change with the times, providing a visual vacation that requires no plane ticket purchase to get there. ✦

**You Are in Our Hearts (42" x 42") by Nancy Lee Chong**