

## AMISH QUILTING

# Then and Now

DISCOVER THE INTRIGUING SECRETS BEHIND THE CRAFT OF AMISH QUILTING...

### WHO ARE THE AMISH?

Originating in Switzerland in 1693, the Amish were a religious group led by Jakob Ammann. The early 1800s saw many of the Amish emigrate to North America in search of religious freedom following religious persecution. It is thought they first arrived in Pennsylvania and established their communities away from other towns, careful to avoid contact with regular society where possible and practising their beliefs. Eventually they spread across the Midwest and there are now Amish communities in over 25 different states. It is thought that there are about

281,000 members, according to a study in 2012 by the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, Elizabethtown College ([www2.etown.edu](http://www2.etown.edu)).

The Amish are incredibly devout and believe their faith is supported and strengthened by living a life that highlights plainness and simplicity, rejecting many modern amenities like electric and cars (although the use of electric does vary between settlements). They tend to wear black or darkly coloured plain clothes, favouring the norm, as opposed to standing out – it is frowned upon to stand out and this can result in being shunned by the community. Although the 'norm' varies slightly from community to community, the Amish way of life is led by order ('Ordnung'). Family values are rooted in this way of life and they pride themselves on truth, humility, obedience. Their social lives centre around family and the church and the Amish bring up their children hoping that everyone will add in their way to the community and are very proud of the ability to

"Amish women can spend months working on a single quilt. Their needlework is said to be some of the finest in the world and they often sew 8-10 stitches per inch."



*Heart and nine Patch, Image courtesy of Almost Amish, LLC United States, [almost-amish.com](http://almost-amish.com)*



*Log Cabin Barn Raising Variation, Image courtesy of Almost Amish, LLC United States, [almost-amish.com](http://almost-amish.com)*

live without many materialistic goods. Traditionally earning a living from farming, the Amish turned to crafts to financially support themselves in the winter when there were no crops to harvest. This included carpentry and quilting. Initially established as something to signify a life event like a birth or a wedding, Amish quilts are somewhat of a status symbol. It is thought that the Amish learned quilting from people who were already in the US. Robert



*Double Wedding Ring, Image courtesy of Almost Amish, LLC United States, [almost-amish.com](http://almost-amish.com)*

Hughes, author of *Amish: The Art of the Quilt* believes it was not a skill they brought with them from Europe, but one rather that they learnt from surrounding influences in the US.

Quilting is a communal activity for the Amish and quite often they will hold quilting bees. The quilt top is usually sewn together using

a manually powered sewing machine, then the wadding and backing are layered up and put onto a quilt rack ready for quilting. Amish women can spend months working on a single quilt. Their needlework is said to be some of the finest in the world and you can expect nothing less than 8-10 stitches per inch. A single quilt will feature thousands of tiny stitches. The Amish traditions, style and philosophy of 'order' is very much reflected in their quilts through the use of dark, muted colours and simple geometric lines. Although the piecing is often simple, when it comes to quilting patterns, Amish women are incredibly creative and you often see feather designs, florals and leaves sewn into their quilts.

### WHAT IS AN AMISH QUILT?

What is it that defines an Amish quilt and makes it Amish? We spoke to experienced quilter and author of *The World of Amish Quilts*, Amish Wall Quilts and *World of Amish Quilts*, Rachel



*Quilts hanging on a line at Amish roadside store, Lancaster PA, Image courtesy of Tracey and Hannah Orchard, Photographer Hannah Orchard*



*Quilt hanging in Amish roadside store, Lancaster PA, Image courtesy of Tracey and Hannah Orchard, Photographer Hannah Orchard*

Thomas Pellman of Rachel's of Greenfield ([rachelsofgreenfield.com](http://rachelsofgreenfield.com)), Lancaster County who says: 'From my point of view, an Amish quilt is any quilt made by an Amish person. However, I think frequently when people use the term "Amish quilt", they are referring to a specific style of quilt that was made by Amish quilters in the early to mid-1900s when Amish quilts used large blocks of bright, solid colours covered with extensive quilting. This style of quilts was distinctive to Amish quiltmakers in this period.'

Some of the most well known of these designs include Amish Bars, a design which features long stripes in the middle, each separated by a second colour stripe. The centre bars are then surrounded by two borders and typically quilted with a combination of feathers and a simple cross hatch. The Lone Star design is made up from many small diamonds and is typically arranged to give the impression of radiating

light. Diamonds would typically be stitched in the ditch, with more elaborate pattern around the outside and in borders. Diamond in a Square is literally a diamond in a square surrounded usually by a thick single border. The simple design allowed for more elaborate quilting. Sunshine and Shadow design is made up of



*Amish settlement in Lancaster PA, Image courtesy of Tracey and Hannah Orchard, Photographer Hannah Orchard*



*Goshen College quilt display, Image courtesy of the Elkhart County, IN USA CVB, [amishcountry.org](http://amishcountry.org)*



*Rolled up quilts from the Goshen College quilt display, Image courtesy of the Elkhart County, IN USA CVB, [amishcountry.org](http://amishcountry.org)*



*Quilts ready for sale at Little Helpers Quilt Shop, Image courtesy of the Elkhart County, IN USA CVB, [amishcountry.org](http://amishcountry.org)*

small squares in different colours that radiate out from the centre. Head on over to Pxx to have a look at our Table Runner project which uses this design very effectively. No matter which design, a trademark across all Amish quilts is the use of tiny stitches and elaborate quilting designs. Amish quilts are defined by the use of solid fabrics and black is usually the most dominant colour.

### SETTLEMENTS

The Amish originally settled in Lancaster County and as they began to expand and settle in other areas, their use of design and colour broadened. Now different regions are known for their different styles of quilting. 'Each Amish community produces distinctive quilts, the variations depending upon on a number of factors: availability and choice of materials,

influence from non-Amish neighbours, and the relative conservatism of individual communities as determined by their Ordnung. Therefore, each of the various groups follows distinctive practices in dress, farming and work habits, transportation and quilting,' explains Carolyn Ducey, Curator of Collections at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum ([quiltstudy.org](http://quiltstudy.org)).

Lancaster County people are, according to the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, some of the most traditional quilters, with a preference for darker, deeply saturated colours and 9-patch, centre diamond and log cabin quilt designs. Mifflin County is defined by three different areas: Nebraska, Byler and Peachy/Renno. Nebraska limits its colours to dark shades of purple, grey, browns and blues. Byler, which uses colours from the whole spectrum, except

white but are known for including bright colours like yellows and orange. They are also known for their wider range of quilting designs which are not limited to, but do include Crown of Thorns, Fan, Jacob's Ladder and Tumbling Blocks. Peachy/Renno are also known for their similar designs. Their quilts often (but not always) use lots of bright colours but tend to combine these with black backgrounds. Moving out to the Midwest, which is perhaps the most encompassing region of Amish quilters – these settlements are known for making a whole host of different designs using all colours including pastels (still no white). These often have black backgrounds. Although the styles and colours

may vary slightly from region to region, there is no doubt that Amish quilts are all of amazing quality.

It is thought that the first Amish quilts were wholecloth, but then developed into different, distinct styles which reflected the 'ordnung' way of life. Using only solid fabrics, usually in blacks, burgundy, green, and blue (no batiks or patterns), the early Amish generally made medallion quilts. A medallion quilt is designed around one central block, then more and more borders are added. The focal point of the quilt was always in the centre. Early Amish quilts are recognised by their geometrical shapes and



*Quilts for sale at Little Helpers Quilt Shop, Image courtesy of the Elkhart County, IN USA CVB, [amishcountry.org](http://amishcountry.org)*



*Amish quilter teaching at Little Helpers Quilt Shop, Image courtesy of the Elkhart County, IN USA CVB, amishcountry.org*

symmetrical designs which is the opposite of many modern quilts we see today which consist of repeated blocks. The simplicity of these designs doesn't mean that they aren't incredibly beautiful. In fact, the beauty is in their simplicity. The use of repeated blocks was something that came into play after the crazy quilt phase in America. As time went on and different settlements developed (or didn't, as the case

may be), the styles varied from region to region.

'Early Amish quilts are recognised by their geometric shapes and designs that tend to be symmetrical.'

What is evident is that as time has moved on, the Amish have branched out to different, more popular styles of quilting, although these would be strictly for sale and never for use in an Amish home. Rachel says, 'Amish quilters making quilts to sell to the general public will use colours and patterns following current colour trends and preferences that appeal to mainstream society'. In different regions you can often see horse drawn carriages pulled up roadside with a washing line attached and the latest beautiful quilts on display for passersby. Becoming increasingly popular are Amish quilt auctions which will draw hundreds of people in search of handmade Amish furniture or authentic Amish hand-crafted quilts.



*Amish quilter teaching, Image courtesy of the Elkhart County, IN USA CVB, amishcountry.org*



*Detail of Mariner's Compass, one of the earliest named Amish quilts, with origins that go back to the coastal colonies. Image courtesy of Ted Milton and Karen Vasconi-Milton at Amish Spirit (division of RIA Group, Ltd.), amishspirit.com*



*Night Medallions, unlike most medallion patterns, each one in this quilt is pieced rather than appliqued. Image courtesy of Ted Milton and Karen Vasconi-Milton at Amish Spirit (division of RIA Group, Ltd.), amishspirit.com*



*Centre Diamond, one of the most traditional designs, chosen to be as non-ornamental as possible. Image courtesy of Ted Milton and Karen Vasconi-Milton at Amish Spirit (division of RIA Group, Ltd.), amishspirit.com*



*Wedding Ring Quilt, Image courtesy of Denise Foley, flickr.com/photos/six28fifty*

**INFLUENCE IN MODERN QUILTING**

Despite, in the grand scheme of things, coming to quilting late we still see Amish quilting influences in many modern-day quilting projects. Carolyn Ducey, Curator of Collections at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum says, 'Modern quilting has taken some elements directly from Amish quilts, particularly the use of large scale, geometric shapes and large, single colour areas. Amish quilt makers, constrained by their cultural bias against visual experimentation, created unique forms of rich, saturated colours in moving ways. This has inspired some modern quilters to explore possibilities within simple design and emotive colour. Amish quilts, often distinguished by their dark backgrounds – incorporating black and dark blue – offered a whole new approach and colour palette to today's quiltmaker.' Many Amish quilts and Amish inspired quilts are reminiscent of modern abstract art and pop art despite them



*Quilting rack, Ronks, Pennsylvania, United States, Image courtesy of Serge Melki, flickr.com/photos/sergemelki/*



*A woman weaves an intricate design of individual stitches on her way to creating a quilt, Image courtesy of padutchcountry.com, Photographer discoverlancasterpa.com*



*An extraordinary amount of time and dedication go into creating a hand-made quilt, Image courtesy of padutchcountry.com, Photographer discoverlancasterpa.com*

being based in tradition and history. Rachel says 'I think the beauty and popularity of Amish quilts helped to bring attention and popularity to quilts in general. The exhibit of Amish quilts at the Whitney Museum in New York City in the early 70s highlighted quilts as works of art and helped to change the way quilts are perceived.'

No matter what type of quilt the Amish create you can be sure that they'll use incredibly fine stitches and impeccable detail. It's plain to see how and why modern quilts have been influenced by the fantastic Amish quilts of the past in their use of solids and geometric, often minimalist design elements.



*Several quilts hang outside for display at Sylvia Petersheim Quilts & Crafts in Bird-in-Hand, PA, Image courtesy of padutchcountry.com, Photographer discoverlancasterpa.com*



*Lancaster County's handmade quilts are intricate works of art, requiring hours, days, weeks - even years - to complete. Image courtesy of padutchcountry.com, Photographer Coy Butler discoverlancasterpa.com*