



## BIRD OF PARADISE QUILT TOP

Artist unidentified

Vicinity of Albany, New York; 1858–1863

Cotton, wool, and silk with ink and silk embroidery; 84 ½ × 69 ⅝"

Gift of the Trustees of the American Folk Art Museum, 1979.7.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Some of the most decorative American quilts are those appliquéd with motifs that are cut from one fabric and then stitched to another. Motifs for the earliest appliqué quilts were cut from block-printed chintzes and applied to another fabric to form new designs, a technique that has been called *broderie perse*, or cutout chintz appliqué. The appliqués in *Bird of Paradise Quilt Top* include a doll-like girl, paired animals, famous racehorses of the day, and the bird with extravagant tail feathers after which the quilt top is named.

The appliquéd elements were made using templates cut from newsprint that were handed down with the bedcover. The collection of patterns, also in the museum's collection, includes the figure of a man who does not appear on the block next to the woman on the quilt top, suggesting that the bedcover may have been begun in anticipation of a wedding. Because the newspapers used in the templates date from between 1858 and 1863—a span that overlapped the Civil War—it has been speculated that the wedding never took place, and for that reason the top was never quilted and completed.

### RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

[www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org)

Fox, Sandi. *Wrapped in Glory: Figurative Quilts and Bedcovers, 1700–1900*. New York: Thames and Hudson in association with Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990.

International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln: [www.quiltstudy.org](http://www.quiltstudy.org)

National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., “Quilts, Counterpanes & Throws: A Selection from the National Collection”:

[www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/quilts](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/quilts)

The Quilt Index: [www.quiltindex.org](http://www.quiltindex.org)

Warren, Elizabeth V., and Sharon L. Eisenstat. *Glorious American Quilts: The Quilt Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art*. New York: Penguin Studio in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1996.

# THE MISSING BRIDEGROOM

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## QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is going on in this image?
- What can we say about the figures in this quilt?
- What themes and patterns do you notice?
- What does this quilt tell us about life in mid-nineteenth-century America? What visual clues lead to your conclusions?
- What more can we find?

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Who do you think might have created this quilt? What can we learn about the maker or makers through careful looking?
- Because the templates for the figures in this quilt survive, we know that a male figure was originally intended to accompany the female figure near the top of the quilt. Why do you think he was omitted from the final design?
- What symbols appear in this quilt? Are these symbols still relevant today?
- The idea of paradise is often depicted in works of art. Do you think the imagery in this quilt evokes paradise? What would you add to emphasize this idea?
- Some quilts are meant to be functional, while others are created strictly for display. Which type of quilt do you think this is? What do you see that leads you to this conclusion?
- Scholars have dated this quilt 1858–1863 because the surviving templates cut from newspaper date from these years. But even if we did not have information from the newspapers to indicate the date of the quilt, what visual clues hint at its time of production?
- Animals are featured prominently in this quilt top: birds with impressive plumage, famous racehorses of the day (Ivory Black and Black Hawk, featured near the center), creatures found in nature, and everyday farm animals. What does their prominent inclusion suggest about the role of animals in the 1800s? Have our uses for them or attitudes toward them changed since the creation of this work?

## QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- What are the functions of a quilt?
- How is a quilt constructed?
- How do we commemorate special events, such as weddings, today?

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- The creator of this quilt top drew on the world around her and the decorative motifs of the day. Using paper or fabric, have students create a similar quilt that reflects the modern world. Students can incorporate images from magazines or other media in the creation of their quilt.

- Have students think of ways that we commemorate special events such as weddings, births, and graduations today. Based on these ideas, ask students to develop either a quilt or another creation to serve this commemorative function.
- Divide the class into three or four groups and charge each with creating a quilt using a set collection of materials. Provide each group with different kits of supplies: one group receives ample fabric and high-quality quilt-making materials, while another receives small scraps of fabric and other materials not well-suited to quilting. For other groups, provide materials that fall somewhere on the spectrum between these two extremes. Upon completion of the activity, ask students to reflect on their experience, highlighting challenges and rewards. How does socioeconomic status play into the creation of objects like *Bird of Paradise Quilt Top*?