Colours in Old Amish Quilts

Homlong, Siri
University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

The Amish religious movement have its roots in the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. The Amish people are anabaptists and have strict rules for their way of life. They were persecuted in Europe and Amish groups emigrated to Pennsylvania. Today the most traditional part of the movement – the Old Amish People – lives in Lancaster County west of Philadelphia, USA. This paper describes a study of the colours in Old Amish Quilts, traditional Amish patchwork quilts used as bed covers. The patches are single-coloured fabric pieces forming clear symmetrical patterns with deep and strong colours. The quilts are important in Amish culture; they are made for the bride’s wedding chest. Nowadays traditional Amish quilts also are made for tourists as wall decorations – “wallhangings”.

The selection of quilts for my survey consists of five Old Amish Quilts from Lancaster Heritage Museum and The American Quilt Study Group, 15 quilts, at that time, belonging to The Esprit Collection and eight new quilts with traditional patterns (wallhangings). The colour analysis was carried out using Natural Colour System (NCS) with the aim of identifying general principles for selection of colours.

The analysis shows that most hues are located in the lower part of the colour circle – from red (R) to green (G), and most nuances - with relatively high degree of blackness or chromaticness - in the lower part of the colour triangle. Colour choice is often dependent on moral or religious preferences. For example, in quilts from Lancaster County, yellowish colours are - as representing “hochmut” (arrogance) - regarded as bad colour choice.

The strong colours in Old Amish Quilts have no counterpart in public life. In Lancaster county Amish people wear black, brown and dark blue clothes and their wagons are black; colourfulness is restricted to the bedrooms and the private sphere.

Background

This paper describes a study of the colours in Old Amish Quilts, traditional Amish patchwork quilts used as bed covers. The patches are single-coloured fabric pieces forming clear symmetrical patterns with deep and strong colours. The quilts are important in Amish culture; they are made for the bride’s wedding chest and are used in the beds of all family members.

Amish are members of a Christian religious movement with roots in the radical Protestant Reformation in the 16th-century Europe. Their name derives it’s origin from the strict teachings of Jacob Amman, a swiss anabaptist leader (Kraybill 2001:21ff; Nolt 1992).
Amish people consist of religious groups that follow rules rooted in “Die Ordnung”. These rules keep them isolated from modern society and in contact with God and the earth made by Him. They are also called The Plain People, as they live a simple life in which unnecessary things are forbidden, refuse most modern technology and dress distinctly conservative (Kraybill 2001; Kraybill and Olshan 1994; Strai 1995).

To avoid persecution and compulsory military service in Europe the Amish people began emigrating to the British colony Pennsylvania in the 1720s (ibid). Today there are more than 465 Amish settlements in the United States and Canada (Caldwell 2012). Amish live near other Amish, which enables them to support each other's lifestyle and establish local congregations of people with similar beliefs and convictions. The most traditional part of the movement – the Old Amish People – lives in Lancaster County west of Philadelphia in a rural farm society.

The Amish learned to make quilts when they immigrated to America, but they did not follow the Victorian quilt tradition of blocks, built up by smaller pieces of coloured and patterned fabric, repeated all over the surface. The quilts traditionally made by Amish women are to be used in bedrooms and are composed as one huge block, as shown in figure 1 (Pellman et al. 1981; Granic 1989).

![Figure 1. Traditional Patterns in Old Amish Quilts: Center Square, Center Diamond and Bars (from Pellman 1984).](image)

**Methods**

My study is a survey and a phenomenological analysis of antique quilts made by Amish women in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, USA, during the period 1860-1940. It includes empirical analyses of quilts. The aim is to identify characteristic traits of colour and form design. The analysis resulted in a hypothesis concerning the basic principles of colour and form design of old Amish quilts. The selection of quilts for the survey consists of five Old Amish Quilts from Lancaster Heritage Museum and The American Quilt Study Group, 15 quilts, at that time, belonging to The Esprit Collection and eight new quilts with traditional patterns (wallhangings). The colour analysis was carried out using Natural Colour System (NCS) with the aim of identifying general principles for selection of colours (Hård, Sivik and Tonnquist 1996). Literature studies and on-location interviews about Amish Society and Amish women’s work with quilts were conducted to gain an understanding of the social and cultural context of the Old Amish quilt. In Lancaster County, USA, three interviews were conducted with members of the Amish society, one with a salesman of Amish quilts and a telephone interview with an author of many books about Amish society and quilts. This author, Rachel Pellman, had been raised in Lancaster County, belonged to the Mennonite church (a branch of the same anabaptist movement as
the Amish) and made quilts herself. She was also the curator for *The People’s Place Quilt Museum* in Intercourse, Lancaster County for many years.

**Colour and form analysis**

There is quite a lot of American literature on the Amish people and their quilts. Books intended for quilters often start with a historical view of the Amish and describe how they live today, and then gives information about how the quilts are composed and made. My introduction to Amish quilts was *Amish The Art Of The Quilt* (Hughes 1990). The book presents colour photographs of 82 Old Amish Quilts from *The Esprit Collection*. Douglas Tompkins, who together with his wife Susie launched the company *Esprit de Corp* in 1962, bought Old Amish quilts with the intention to decorate the company’s new factory in San Francisco. One of the interesting things about this book is that the three authors describe in three different ways why so many people find The Old Amish Quilt so fascinating. Douglas Tompkins chose the quilts for aesthetic reasons; he calls them ”masterpieces of design” (Hughes 1990:7). The American art critic Robert Hughes regarded them as art. Julie Silber, the curator of the collection, looks at them as textile evidence of the Amish women who made the quilts and the culture in which they lived (Hughes 1990:7-8).

The sample of the quilts studied comprised five antique Amish quilts from *Lancaster Heritage Museum* and *The American Quilt Study Group* in San Francisco, fifteen antique quilts from *The Esprit Collection* and eight new quilts made with traditional patterns and colours. Unfortunately, I did not have access to *The Esprit Collection*’s original quilts, but had to analyse these quilts from photographs in the book *Amish The Art of The Quilt* (Hughes 1990). The book, however, provides high quality photographic registration and great efforts were made so that the photographs would correspond with the original quilts.

The quilts were analysed by mapping the colours in the NCS space – in the colour circle and colour triangle. Colour samples corresponding with the colours of each quilt were noted in the NCS space; the notations were combined to form a graphic structure in the NCS space that describes the basic colour codes of each quilt. A limitation was made to the three simplest kinds of quilt patterns *Center Square*, *Center Diamond* and *Bars* in Figure 1.

**Result**

The religious frameworks in which the quilts were made can partly explain the design and process of making them. The Amish consider artwork unnecessary, but all homes need many bed quilts, as Amish families usually have many children. However, in quilt making, the artistic woman had an opportunity to express herself and show her artistic ability (Rachel Pellan, February 1998). From the present visual study of antique Amish quilts, some principals of Amish quilt making were observed. The reasons for these principals were sought through literature studies and interviews and will be presented below.

---

1 The *Lancaster Heritage Museum* got *The Esprit Collection* in 2002. From September 2006 a rotation of the 82 quilts was exhibited at the new *Lancaster Quilt & Textile Museum*. In 2013, lacking money to buy/take care of the collection, the museum lost *The Esprit Collection*.
Pattern design

In contrast to the Victorian quilt tradition, the antique Amish Quilt patterns in this study are not composed of repeating blocks. The quilts are big enough to cover a bed, normally 75x75” – 80x80”, and most pieces of fabric are bigger than those used in Victorian quilts. In the middle of these patterns there is a plain square, a square with a diamond, or a grid /“bars” (figure 1). The centre is framed by a border that may have small squares in another colour in the corners (corner blocks). This first border is then framed by another, wider border that also may have corner blocks. A narrow binding finishes the quilt (Granic 1989; Pellman and Ranck 1981; Pellman and Pellman 1984).

Colour design

The results of the colour mapping showed that colours used in the Old Amish Quilts are mainly to be found in the marked area of the NCS colour circle and colour triangle in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Characteristic colours of the Old Amish Quilts described in the NCS triangle and circle (dark areas).](image)

The results of the colour analyses showed that the colours of Old Amish quilts are represented in an area in the NCS space that corresponds with colour descriptions used in the reference literature. Therefore, the quilts analysed can be regarded as representative of Old Amish quilts in general. Within the “Amish colour code”, we find close nuances both in the colour circle and the colour triangle. At the same time there are strong contrasts of hues and nuances. Three principles of colour design seem to be typical:

- **Well-defined patterns of patches with distinct borderlines**, whether with or without apparent contrasts. A strict simplicity is characteristic to Amish pattern design.
- **Limited colour areas contribute to a coherent whole**.
- **Contrasts chromaticness/blackness give variation**. The use of colours with a high degree of blackness as well as colours with a high degree of chromaticness are characteristic; it is the combination of the greyish/blackish and more coloured patches that give the visual tension and the surprising effect that is so characteristic of The Old Amish Quilt.
The balance in pattern design, the unity of colour nuances and the special colour contrasts result in a harmonious expression of the patterns even when these principles are used in smaller products. This effect is strengthened by the size; it gives a contemplative, “sacred” impression. The reason why a colour combination holds together is not as easy to predict as the reason why a pattern gives a coherent impression. We know from tradition that harmonious colour combinations contain colours that have one or more colour qualities in common (e.g., redness, blackness, chromaticness, etc.), and that complementary colour contrasts give some kind of harmony. The colour combinations in Old Amish Quilts, however, often deviate from these principles – especially when it comes to complementary colour contrasts – but they give nevertheless an experience of coherence and “holiness”.

*Cultural influences on Old Amish Quilt*

The reasons for this simple pattern design, which deviates from quilt making outside the Amish community, may be explained by the rationality of the culture. Use of larger pattern elements reduces the time spent on sewing the pieces of fabric together (Boyon 1985). This may also reduce the decorative effect, as fewer details are included in the quilts. It should be mentioned here that the Amish wish to avoid decorative effects and are therefore forbidden to use patterned fabric in their quilts; they use plain fabrics.

All colours have some degree of grey- or blackness, as in the colours of the Amish clothes used at home. Pure black is most often only found in smaller elements or the narrow binder that surrounds the quilts. In an interview with an old Amish woman named Nancy, she said that this is the way they use black in quilts even nowadays (Nancy, February 1998). Black is not used so much in the quilts made by Amish women in Lancaster, although it is common among Amish in the Midwest (McCauley and McCauley 1988). Reasons for why black is not used so much in quilts were not given, it simply seemed to be a custom. Granic (1989) says that the Amish in Lancaster County cannot remember any rules for the use of colour in quilts, but they all noticed that yellow and white were not good colour choices. Yellow is not used in quilts from Lancaster County. When I asked why yellow is not used in Amish quilts from Lancaster County, Nancy said firmly: “Hochmut”\(^2\). However, yellow is used in quilts and on the roof of the Amish horse wagons in Ohio, yet Nancy said “but that is not our way” (Amish woman Nancy, February 1998).

The Amish people are supposed to be plain and not expose themselves. For instance, Amish people were not to be photographed, as this would make them more visible. They are supposed to cultivate the land of God, not themselves. It seemed that bright yellow is still a colour considered too intensive to be used, while nowadays white is often used in Amish quilts in Lancaster County. I also noticed that pink and pastels were colours used in later quilts from Lancaster County. The literature says that pink was popular in dresses in the nineteen thirties and that the use of pastel colours became popular during the 1940s (McCauley and McCauley, 1988). Nancy did not understand the question when I claimed that pink was not common in quilts. She said that pink was used in dresses for young girls and perhaps dresses used when working at the field. My interpretation is that fashion introduced the pink and pastels from the 1930s and 1940s, and that Amish Society found no reasons to avoid these colours. A clear red colour found already in quilts from the eighteen

---

\(^2\) Hochmut refers to a combination of pride, arrogance and haughtiness (Dimmitt 2013)
seventies was confusing, because this colour diverges from the softer colours used in clothes. According to one Amish woman, the reason for this is, that peddlers made packages of assorted fabrics that they sold at lower prices. They put fabric that was difficult to sell into these packages. The red colour was too bright to be used for Amish clothes, but if the women had just thrown it away, the package price would not have been especially low (Pellman and Pellman 1984:25). Because the colour could not be used for clothes, it ended up in the quilts. From the nineteen twenties, this red colour has been used in larger parts of the quilts (Pellman, February 1998).

The Amish colour code is connected to cultural rules. Some exceptions is allowed, probably because the strong colours in Old Amish Quilts have no counterpart in public life; the Amish people wear black and dark blue clothes and their wagons are black. The colourfulness is restricted to the bedrooms and the private sphere.

The Amish women have their own understanding of the habitus (Bourdieu 1984) in Amish society to cope with when choosing colours and putting them together. They had at hand fabrics in limited colours and were supposed to combine them in a special pattern. Moreover, they probably wanted to make a quilt that did not look like the ones they had previously made. They were conscious both of their own habitus for quilt design, of the habitus of other Amish groups (e.g., in Ohio) and of how quilts are made outside Amish societies, but could for the most part not explain the reasons for the existing limitations of colours and patterns.

Nowadays the Amish are strongly influenced by the rest of the American quilt tradition, and make nowadays rarely quilts similar to those in The Esprit Collection. Plain fabric must still be used, and some colour codes exist, but the quilt patterns are much more complex and made up of more and smaller pieces of fabric. White background colour is common (Amish Quilter Hannah, February 1998; Quilt salesman Kim Hondares, February 1998). The reasons for these changes are probably to be found in the influence from the American quilt tradition. The Amish culture has become more and more popular for tourists - starting in the 1940s when a hotel opened in Lancaster and encreasing7 after the film “Witness” with Harrison Ford hiding an Amish woman and her son at an Amish farm. The growing Amish communities cannot isolate themselves as they did earlier (Kraybill and Olshan 1994; Strai 1995). Today the Amish quilters often find inspiration from the American quilt tradition and can also make repeated block quilts with patterned fabrics for sale. The Amish people are, however, not allowed to use these quilts themselves (Amish Woman Nancy, February 1998; Amish Quilter Hannah, February 1998). When the quilts become business it also influences the social fellowship; quilting is traditionally a collective work. When a number of quilters work together with the same quilt the stiches become individual and varying, the customers, however, ask for uniform stiches. The commercial influences on colour and form of the quilts may also influence on future Amish quilts; as the Amish woman Nancy said: “If you cannot get it sold – what shall you do with them?”.

Bibliographic References


---

7 Ten million tourists visit Lancaster County every year (http://lancasterpa.com/visitors/ october 2014).