

The Wild Card Quilt: An Ecological Tapestry of the American Home



Quilts have long been celebrated as treasured heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. They are often seen as symbols of home and domesticity, evoking images of cozy bedrooms and warm family

gatherings. However, a closer examination of these cherished textiles reveals a hidden narrative that transcends the domestic sphere and delves into the wild and untamed natural world.



Wild Card Quilt: The Ecology of Home by Janisse Ray

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The Wild Card Quilt is a unique exhibition organized by the International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska. This groundbreaking exhibit explores the ways in which quilts, traditionally associated with the home, become a reflection of the wild and untamed natural world. By examining the materials, patterns, and stories embedded within these quilts, we uncover the complex relationship between humans and their environments.

Materials: Nature's Bounty

Quilts have always been made from whatever materials were available to the maker. In the early days of American quiltmaking, this often meant using fabrics that were repurposed from clothing, household linens, and other everyday items. As a result, many antique quilts contain a fascinating assortment of fabrics, including prints with animal motifs, floral patterns, and even scraps of wallpaper.

In the Wild Card Quilt exhibition, these fabrics become a testament to the close relationship between humans and the natural world. The animal prints, for example, evoke the wild creatures that shared the landscape with early settlers. The floral patterns speak to the beauty and abundance of the American wilderness. And the recycled fabrics suggest a resourceful and sustainable approach to living in harmony with the environment.

Patterns: Inspired by Nature

In addition to the materials used, the patterns of quilts can also provide insights into the maker's relationship with the natural world. Many traditional quilt patterns are inspired by natural forms, such as flowers, leaves, and animals. These patterns can be seen as a way of bringing the beauty of the outdoors into the home.

For example, the "Lone Star" quilt pattern is said to represent the North Star, which guided travelers across the vast American frontier. The "Flying Geese" quilt pattern is thought to symbolize the migratory birds that flew overhead each season. And the "Log Cabin" quilt pattern is reminiscent of the log cabins built by early settlers.

Stories: Quilts as Narrative

Quilts are not just beautiful works of art; they are also repositories of stories. Each quilt has its own unique history, and many of these stories are connected to the natural world. For example, some quilts were made to commemorate important events, such as weddings, births, and deaths. Others were made to provide comfort during times of hardship, such as wars and natural disasters.

The stories behind the quilts in the Wild Card Quilt exhibition are as diverse as the quilts themselves. There is the story of a quilt made from the clothing of a beloved pet. There is the story of a quilt made to honor a fallen soldier. And there is the story of a quilt made by a group of women who were displaced from their homes by a hurricane.

The Wild Card Quilt exhibition is a powerful reminder of the deep connection between humans and the natural world. Through the materials, patterns, and stories of these quilts, we gain a glimpse into the ways in which our homes are not just physical structures but also expressions of our relationship with the environment.



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