

Donation of the Month

Object: Coverlet
Catalog #: 1988.33.6
Donor: Virgil Lovelace



This charming overshot cotton and wool coverlet, in the “Sea Star” or “Monmouth” pattern, was woven by someone in the Garrett family of central Missouri sometime between 1864 and 1867. The term “coverlet” is generally used for a hand-woven bedcover with a loom-controlled pattern. The name comes from the French *couvre-lit*, which means “to cover the bed.” While coverlets were made in America in the 1700s, most surviving examples date from the early to mid 1800s.

Not much is known about the Garrett family. Lucy Ann Garrett, the donor’s grandmother, met her future husband, George Grant Osborn, sometime during the Civil War, marrying him shortly after the conflict ended. George, a Union Army veteran, was never given a middle name by his parents. Since he admired Ulysses S. Grant, he adopted Grant’s surname as his middle name. George and Lucy lived in Missouri and had five children before moving to the old Amos Osborn homeplace in Northwest Arkansas.

In 1841 George’s parents, Amos and Hannah Osborn, emigrated from Rockport, Indiana, to homestead 160 acres on land northwest of the future townsite of Rogers. They came by way of the Ohio River, then the Mississippi, disembarking somewhere in eastern Arkansas before buying an oxen team and loading their possessions for the long trek to Northwest Arkansas. The Osborns, Wights, and other families homesteading the area established a Primitive Baptist Church and named their community Little Flock.

Overshot coverlets like this one are so-called because the weft threads are allowed to “overshoot” several warp threads to make the pattern. These coverlets are produced on relatively simple four-harness or four-shaft looms. The shafts are the frames which raise a set of warp threads and are operated by treadles. Raising different shafts alone or in combination creates a geometric pattern.

Overshot coverlets might be produced by professional weavers, but most were made by women working in their homes. Following instructions called pattern drafts, women made coverlets in a nearly endless variety of patterns. Families passed down pattern drafts from mother to daughter; neighbors and friends also shared their favorites. Like quilt patterns, coverlet patterns were given names based on nature, politics, the Bible, and historical events. But pattern names varied from place to place and women often created their own unique variations.

Early coverlets were made with a linen warp, since homespun cotton was not strong enough for that purpose. After the 1890s much stronger, commercially spun cotton yarn became widely available. Women began to use this yarn, undyed, for their warp. The cotton warp threads were measured out and mounted onto the loom. A pattern draft told how to thread the loom and work the pedals to create a certain design.

While woman purchased their cotton warp yarn, they made their own wool weft yarn at home. The process began with shearing the sheep and cleaning and washing the wool. Wool was prepared for spinning by straightening the fibers with cards. The wool was spun and the yarn measured into skeins using a clock reel (which clicked to indicate when the correct amount of yarn had been wound on to it) or a niddy-noddy, an oddly shaped, handheld device. The yarn could then be dyed using natural or commercial dyes.

One of the most commonly used dyes was indigo, made from the indigo plant and imported from India; because of this many coverlets are deep blue and off-white in color. But natural dyes could create other colors. Red came from Asian madder, brown from red oak bark, and yellow from peach leaves, for example. In the 1850s the first coal-tar-based synthetic dyes were introduced; others soon followed. Unfortunately, many of these synthetic dyes faded quickly.

The dyed woolen yarn was then put onto a bobbin and loaded into a shuttle. The shuttle carried the weft yarn through the shed, the term for the space created when part of the warp threads were lifted by the loom. Since the loom was not as wide as a bed, two woven panels were joined together to make the coverlet. In the South it was said to be bad luck to exactly match the two sides together. (The Garrett family coverlet is mismatched.) When the panels were completed and sewn together, the edges could be finished by hemming the non-selvage sides. The bottom of the coverlet might also be finished in a fringe or a narrow border; fringe might be made on a tiny tape loom and sewn to three sides of the coverlet.