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Canada

The Quilt as Art:
A Study of the Revival of
Quiltmaking in Manitoba

Cynthia Wall Tanchyk

A Thesis

in

the Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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Canada

ABSTRACT

The Quilt as Art:
An examination of the revival
of quiltmaking in Manitoba

C. Wall Tanchyk

1971 was the watershed year for widespread recognition of quiltmaking. In the United States, the Whitney Museum hosted an exhibition of historic quilts, and in Canada, Joyce Wieland displayed quilts of her own design within her mixed media show, True Patriot Love, at the National Gallery of Canada. Both of these exhibitions opened on July Ist.

The following year, the Winnipeg Art Gallery presented the survey exhibition, Contemporary Quilts and Ceramics. The Seventies was an important decade for quilt revival. Quilt-making, in both its traditional and innovative applications, once again emerged across North America. Not only did this period of time foster appreciation for the craft, but after several decades of neglect, it was once again commanding recognition: as a cultural artifact and as an art object.

Within the Province of Manitoba, quiltmaking became an important medium for art makers. Some individuals found that the quilted fabric was an ideal way to address both sculptural and drawing problems. By the late Seventies, quiltmaking offer-ed an alternative art form for many women.

During the Eighties, numerous quiltmakers would attempt to push the medium to its plastic limits; counter-balanced by those who wished to remain more firmly connected to tradition. The underlying philosphical and aesthetic principles were important as comtemporary quiltmaking was pluralistic in nature. Consideration must be given to the motivations of the practioners.

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CHAPTER 1

THE GENESIS OF A REVIVAL

1971 was the watershed year for quiltmaking in North America. On July 1st., two major exhibitions opened. In the United States, the Whitney Museum presented *Abstract Design in American Quilts*; and at the National Gallery of Canada, Joyce Wieland's *True Patriot Love*. The intrinsic value of both exhibitions was that the quilt had entered the gallery space and acknowledgement was made to its relationship to mainstream art.

Quiltmaking possessed a long history in North America. Quilt displays were also not a new phenomenon, however, their recognition by major art institutions appeared to signal a new phase within both the History of Art and the History of Quiltmaking.

During the Sixties, the United States and Canada were faced by numerous cultural changes. Youth, appalled by the atrocities in Vietnam, distrustful of the Establishment, and *tuned in* by the Hippie Movement, instigated a continent-wide re-evaluation of social mores, Politics, and life styles. By the end of the decade, many people were opting for more simple lifestyles; and handicrafts reappeared in response to the quest for the *hand-made* as opposed to mass-produced goods from factories.

From the Whole Earth Catalogue to Seventeen magazine,[1] handicrafts, including quiltmaking, re-emerged as viable forms of creative expression. Many young drop-outs from society used craftmaking as the basis for earning a living, however marginal.[2] The middle class, conscious of social trends, the ecology, and their decreasing disposible incomes, opted to stay home and create items which would provide a meaningful use of leisure time as well as provide adornment for the home or the individual.[3]

The Canadian publication, Chatelaine, was quite aware of this market and every month craft kits as diverse as handspinning to crewel embroidery were featured. In the October 1974 issue, a pattern could be ordered for making reproductions of heirloom quilts from the R.O.M. collection, (Fig. 1).

The reverberation of social, political, economic, and technical forces in the United States were always manifested in Canada. Although the Canadian Centennial and the beginning of the Trudeau Era promised a resurgence of Nationalsim, Joyce Wieland viewed events in Canada with a critical eye from her New York City studio. Joyce had started to make

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[1]Marilyn Bender, "Crafts Comeback," The New York Times, 28 March 1971, sec. 3, p.2.

[2]Wayne King, "The System's Dropouts are turning to Handicrafts in Search of New Values," The New York Times, 24 Novemeber 1970,p.43.

[3]Judith Glassman, "Hobbies boom as Economy Fizzles," The New York Times , 6 April 1975, p.33 (D).

quilts during the mid-sixties. A showing of some of her quilts at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto in 1967 caused a reviewer to write:

> Joyce Wieland at the Isaacs Gallery works an ironic sleight-of-hands by using the gentle housewifely art of quilting to record some of the sweet silliness-and the savageries of the sixties.[4]

Quilts had always contained overt as well as covert imagery and symbols related to the socio-political climate. In the United States, many geometric patterns were named for political events, i.e. Lincoln's Platform, (Fig.2). It was not, however, a new phenomenon to use the quilt as a medium to express one's politics.Wieland, however, has dared to take an art form dominated by American patterns and reinterpreted quiltmaking in Canadian terms:

> Miss Wieland fills her work with symbols-flags for the power of man, lips for feminine power, strips of film and empty reels. "A film reel spins off dreams," she said. Camera eyes recur as a symbol and the mandela, symbol of psychadelic importance is the theme of one quilt.[5] (Fig. 3).

Film imagery was an important symbol as Wieland used this medium to explore Canadian Nationalism. Nationalism was not packed away after Centennial Year; rather, Wieland's work upon this topic expanded into what would become the exhibition True Patriot Love. This event was significant

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[4] Kay Kritzwiser, "Wieland: Ardent Art for Unity's Sake," Toronto Globe and Mail, 25 March 1967, 17.

[5] Ibid.

as High Art, and objects created from craft mediums, were seen in a major Canadian gallery. Wieland was able to take the traditionally feminine activities of needlework and used them to make visual statements: about the nature of art, about the nature of the Canadian Identity, and about the nature of domestic skills.

There was something highly subversive about domestic art used in this context. Handknit flags and quilted slogans were not inherently radical at first glance, however, their true power lay underneath the soft appearance. These items instead possessed the quality of soft sell for hard goods. Surface belied content and Wieland's crafts should not be dismissed as cute Canadian kitsch.

Writing more than a decade later in a catalogue essay for the AGO exhibition of Wieland's work, Marie Fleming stated about the quilt Reason Over Passion (Fig. 4), that:

> Pierre Elliot Trudeau's assertion of the need to place reason over passion in government, and a feminist issue - the irrational denigration of so-called women's work are combined. The irony in uniting a strong, boldly presented statement with the softness and warmth of a bed-covering is clear.[6]

Reason Over Passion, and its French equivalent, La Raison Avant La Passion, symbolized an uneasy union of opposites. As a symbollic gesture, Margaret Trudeau described in her autobiography Beyond Reason, what she did to the latter-mentioned quilt:

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[6]Marie Fleming, in Joyce Wieland, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1987), 72.

> One day I did what in Pierre's eyes was the unforgivable. We were having a frosty arguement about clothes, and suddenly I flew into the most frenzied temper. I tore off up the stairs to the landing where a Canadian quilt, designed by Joyce Weyland (sic) and lovingly embroidered in a New York loft with Pierre's motto, "La Raison Avant La Passion" was hanging... Shaking with rage at my inability to counter his logical, reasoned arguments, I grabbed at the quilt, wrenched off the letters and hurled them down the stairs at him one by one, in am insane desire to reverse the process, to put passion before reason just this once.[7]

This became the ultimate gesture of the male/female dichotomy; cool male rationality versus hot female emotions. Although one cannot condone the former Mrs. Trudeau's destructive actions, this did, however, prove to be a valuable commentary about the nature of this sort of art. The quilt not only functioned as a metaphor for the uneasy balance between male/female concerns, but it also became the physical embodiment of this conflict.

In comparison to traditional work, Wieland's quilts were not radical departures in terms of construction or basic design. The Major differ ce, howver, was her subject matter. By rendering contemporary icons and ideology in this medium, Wieland created her own designs rather than interpret the patterns of another. As her quilts were meant as wallhangings in the broadest sense, they did not have to rely upon the criteria demanded for successful bedcoverings: size, shape, materials, and warmth. Although the quilts possessed no functional intent, only Water Quilt and Arctic

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[7]Margaret Trudeau, Beyond Reason (New York: Paddington press, 1979), 240.

Day (figs. 5 & 6), really could not be used upon a bed.

This led to the dematerialization of the quilt as a practical as well as functional object. Regardless of the criticism leveled at the show True Patriot Love, the public could no longer look at quilts and other crafts without making some rudimentary parallels between functional objects removed from their normal context and their reemergence as art. During the seventies, quilts would be no longer seen, nor even created solely for functional purposes as a bed covering but rather as a piece of art to be hung on the wall. In retrospect, several ideologies laid claim to the heritage of True Patriot Love: Nationalism, the Ecology, and Feminism. In terms of Nationalism, Wieland promoted the geography of Canada inherent to the more unpopulated regions, especially the North. The Arctic Day quilt possessed similar characteristics with the traditional Yo-Yo quilt, (Fig. 7). Both quilts are composed of fabric rounds joined at the sides. Although the traditional quilt would deal with the more abstract notions of connections and continuity of the circle, Arctic Day presented surface drawings of the fragile bonds of the northern biosphere.

Another commentary about the ecological fragility of the Canadian wilderness was Water Quilt. Individual coverlets embroidered with wildflowers covered pillows printed with exerpts from James Laxer's book, The Eneregy Poker Game, a slim volume warning of the impending dangers of American

dependence upon Canadian fuel supplies. Each of the pillows were lashed together with cords crossed diagonally through grommets. As in Arctic Day, the ecological continuity of these plants were tenuously interconnected with the actions of economic exploitation of hinterland resources..

Nationalism and the Ecology merged as closely linked issues warning of impending disasters, if mankind could not reconcile economic growth with the protection of the environment.The earth, in particular, Canadian land, was feminine in relationship to its fecundity and provision of sustenance for the biosphere. Allegorical rape scenarios by the forces of Technology instigated the dialectic between universal male and female principles. An article from the early Sixties entitled "Joyce is a Zen Cook"[8] was not far removed from her true principles; Taoism was perhaps closer to her quest for the union of opposites and their subsequent reconcilliation.

Quilts served as a mediator for these issues. Providing a buffer zone, harsh realities appeared more accesssible and recognizable through this medium. Wieland did not use the quilt as a means of covering up possible problems, but conversely, as a method of exposing the truth. She presented her philosophy through a medium which possessed a long history of supporting, albeit abstract, human concerns.

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[8] Helen Parmelee, "Joyce is a Zen Cook." The Telegram (Toronto), 23 November 1963.

For women, True Patriot Love reaffirmed their sense of pride in the domestic arts at a time when conflicting messages were expressed by Society. Women who wanted to be taken seriously by the art community relinquished any ties with traditional women's work in lieu of more masculine mediums. Wieland, through her incorporation of the handmade presented a positive view of female activities. Needlework was recognized for its value as a vehicle for socio-political statements. Cognizant of the act of empowerment, Wieland later related in a statement for Eclectic Eve that:

> First of all, who could take the quilt seriously in the art world? How could that be art if it had to do with a quilt? It invigorated a lot of people to start quilting -and that was the best thing. The quilt form reaches people; they can relate to it. That's why I wanted a common basis. It would be nice if we could get the art out there, but not in the way that we make corny art for people. I'm interested in working on basic symbols that we know, creatures, trees, and we recognize these instantly.[9]

The truth of the matter was that quilts succeeded where art had often failed. Quilted abstractions were more readily comprehended than abstractions in other art mediums. This grahic quality emerged as the basis for American art galleries to host quilt displays.

The legacy of this phase of Joyce Wieland's artistic career was her support of crafts and the impact of the artist upon design. Wieland was responsible for the initial designs for the quilts, but the execution was left to

[9] Janice Cameron and others,eds., Eclectic Eve (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1978) unpaginated.

skilled craftspeople, like her sister Joan Stewart. In the correct sense of the word, Joyce Wieland was not a quiltmaker, but she was responsible for drawing attention to this medium as a source of the aesthetic experience.

Quilts had been used in 1965 as a visual juxtaposition for an Op Art display at the Newark Museum in New Jersey. Featuring artists such as Anuszkiewicz, Noland, Poons, Stella, and Vasarely, a Newsweek reporter referred to this painting exhibition as inferior to the quilts since:

> Some of the liveliest op pieces currently on view are most functional indeed - warm, comforting quilts in splendid, radiant colors and inticate geometric patterns, made by little old New England ladies a full century ago.[10]

This critique highlights a quality found in numerous quilts; that they possess the qualities of optical illusions. Using geometry, the principles of light and shade, and color theory, early quiltmakers knew intuitively how to interpret those design elements quite successfully into large-scale illusionary quilts. This ability was also recognized by the cartoonist for the New York Evening Sun; only it was applied as a chastisement to the cubist works at the 1913 Armoury Show, (Fig. 8).

These same garphic qualities prompted Jonathan Holstein and Gail Van der Hoof to persuade the Whitney Museum of Art to host the exhibition Abstract Design in American Quilts.

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[10] "The Joy of Quilting," Newsweek 79 (10 January 1968): 42.

Opening on 1 July 1971, the most salient parallel between the Whitney Quilt Show and True Patriot Love, was the fact that **they** were both exhibitions of quilts within major gallery spaces which functioned as national arbiters of what constituted important art. The New York exhibition, however, differed vastly from the Canadian, in that the former exhibited antique quilts. Gail Van der Hoof had always admired quilts and enjoyed hunting for antique ones. Although initially disinterested in his companion's collecting habits, Holstein was eventually attracted to the antique quilts by their visual appearance which suggested similarities to current modern paintings. In an article for The New York Times, he stated that:

> I found this horizontally striped one, dating from 1870. And I said, by god, that's what's today's painting is about - that flat, spare, design, the reductive sense of line and form.[11]

This connection between quilt design and contemporary aesthetics was embraced by Holstein, who further remarked that: "In effect, quiltmakers painted with fabric and we began to judge them like a body of painting."[12]

By attracting attention to the graphic qualities of the quilts, Holstein and Van der Hoof were able to mount a show within a mainstream institution. Art historian and critic

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[11] Grace Glueck, They're Shoofly and Crazy, Man," The New York Times, 27 June 1971, p. 24(D).

[12] Ibid.

Hilton Kramer praised this exhibition, recognizing that:

> For a century or more preceeding the self-conscious invention of pictoral abstraction in European painting, the anonymous quiltmakers of the American provinces created a remarkable succession of visual masterpieces that anticipated many of the forms that were later prized for their originality and courage.[13]

This exhibition raised two important issues: quilts preceeded all of the Twentieth Century Art Movements in terms of innovative design and exploration of colour, line, form, and illusion within the two-dimensional mediums, and, unfortunately, the _artists_ were seemingly anonymous.

In regards to the visual impact of the quilt, this was the instrumental feature for their inclusion within the context of an art exhibition. This would also function as the hook to lure in traditional art audiences. The quilt as an art experience suddenly brought widespread recognition within the art community for the medium and this change in status provided the opportunity for writer David Shapiro to wax poetically in _Craft Horizons_ that:

> The tesselated exposure of these quilts would make a dead constructivist blush. Their peacock and polychrome perfection makes a second generation Joseph Albers look ineffectually nebulous, and much optical work beside these appear cadaverous. The work, a floor below it seemed like patchwork gone day-glo drag.[14]

The Whitney show of quilts attracted many converts, however,

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[13] Hilton Kramer, "Art Quilts find a place at the Whitney," _The New York Times_, 3 July1971,22.

[14] David Shapiro, "American Quilts," _Craft Horizons_ 21, (December 1971): 43.

it also caused numerous feminist historians to reexamine the theoretical basis of the anonymous woman as quiltmaker. Patricia Mainardi, founding editor of Feminist Art Journal, was enraged by this supposition and she wrote numerous articles about this historical omission. She strongly felt that:

> These women did not choose anonymity. Rather, it has been forced on them. The great pains taken by art historians to identify all works of male artists, even if only by conjecture, coupled with the intentional omission of names of those women artists, even when they signed their work, makes mockery of all pretensions that male scholarship is anything but a tool of sexist oppression.[15]

To defend her position, Mainardi began her own study of quilts and found numerous examples of signed as well as dated ones. Neglect of the quiltmaker was blatantly a symptom of a system which did not take pains to document certain objects. On this point, Mainardi further expounded that:

> Quilts have always been underrated precisely for the same reasons that jazz, the great American music, was also for so long underrated - because the wrong people, were making it, and because those people, for sexist and racist reasons, have not been allowed to represent or define American culture. The definitive institutions of American culture - museums, art history, and schools - are all under the control of a small class of people, namely white males, who have used their power to gerrymander the very definition of art around the accomplishments of all those who are not white and male.[16]

To see quilts only from the perspective of their graphic content was to deny any credit to the maker.This was not

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[15] Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," Radical America 7,(1973); 38.

[16] Ibid.

done to real artists and it would be unthinkable to present an exhibition of paintings done by anonymous painters. The Whitney exhibition neglected the quiltmaker but quilt documentation projects would start to develop across America later on in the decade to trace the history of quilts and their makers.

True Patriot Love and Abstract Design in American Quilts brought to the forefront a new way to examine quilts; modern as well as antique. These exhibitions paved the way for a revival of quiltmaking and the quest for the establishment of a history of the medium. The Quilt, antique or contemporary, introduced a new approach to the way society looked at, as well as made, Art.

CHAPTER 2

THE GENESIS OF A REVIVAL

Early in 1972, Dr. Philip Fry, a curator at the Winnipeg Art Gallery , made an interesting discovery while organizing an exhibition, Manitoba Mainstream, for the National Gallery:

> Working on the theory that "anything a person does well is art" Dr. Fry and his associate amassed a facinating assortment of weaving, macrame, hardinger(embroidery), crochetwork, etc. In the entire collection they found only three really good quilts![1]

Instead of accepting this finding as a true indication of the state of the art for quilts, Dr. Fry was convinced that there must be more quilts available. He was able to prove his hypothesis by traveling through southern Manitoba. With his curatorial assistant, they stopped at hotels or stores in small towns and at local fairs to ask the denizens for assistance in locating the best quiltmakers. While following up the leads, Fry was cognizant of his haphazard methodology,[2] however, he was able to see 171 quilts. Out of this collection, he finally selected 50 which would provide half of the display material for the exhibition

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[1]Molly Stewart, "Art Gallery Presents Unique Exhibit," Winnipeg Free Press New Leisure Magazine, 30 September 1972,3.

[2]Ibid.

Manitoba Quilts and Ceramics.

The juxtaposition of quilts and ceramics was an intering one. Not only was the viewer able to see decidedly contrasting materials, but also divergent aesthetic considerations. It can be noted that except for some sculptural pieces, the majority of the ceramics had a functional basis -- just as the quilts were functional. By their placement within the gallery space, one was able to look beyond the inherent functionalism of both the vessels and bedcoverings. The formal principles of good design can then be noted.

The timing for this exhibition was good, as crafts in Canada were undergoing a surge in popularity. Since it appeared in such close proximity to the Whitney show Abstract Design In American Quilts, it capitalized upon the North American trend of the craft renaissance. Through this entry into the art establishment, crafts achieved recognition for their proximity to art as well as a sense of legitimacy as aesthetic objects. Removed from their normal context -- in the home or some other domestic situation -- one looked upon these items from a new perspective. The quilt, upon placement on the wall, appeared closer to being art than being merely a bedcovering.

In contrast to the Whitney display of antique quilts, the Manitoba show presented quilts made onwards from 1945. Using the classification Contemporary in the sense that the contemporary period of modern art has the arbitrary

assignation of a date onwards to the present, Fry appeared to have made an even more striking reference.

In a Free Press review, printed prior to the opening of the display, the reporter Molly Stewart wrote that:

> Dr. Fry, who feels that too many people are canonized by dying, says with feeling "I get tired of people "oohing" over things done in the past. There are plenty of talented, active artists whose work is available to us NOW. Let us display their work while they are still alive."[3]

As a judge of what constituted art, Dr. Fry seemed to be on the forefront of the wave of thought that decreed that there was no reason why quilts should not be considered art. As in the Kramer analysis, the so-called minor arts were going to be a force to be reckoned with.

In retrospect, Dr. Fry's exhibition opened the doors of the local art world to admit the entry of quiltmaking. This, however, did not guarantee the continuum of the art amongst the members of the younger generation of artists. To this effect, the catalogue for the exhibition stated:

> Quilting is such a lively art in Manitoba that we are certain our two month survey has missed more artists than it found. Of the thirty-five quilters represented in the show, the most elderly was ninety-one and the youngest was forty-four. The average age was sixty-eight. When we discussed these statistics with Mrs. R.E. Marshall, she expressed a great deal of concern. She feels that the more elderly ladies should devote more time to teaching and helping the younger folk to keep the tradition strong.[4]

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba Quilts and Ceramics, (Winnipeg, WAG,1972), unpaginated.

It would be reasonable to assume that within the next few decades, this art would die out with its practitioners if younger converts were not found. The catalogue essay expressed its optimism as well as covert sexism by implying that:

> One very encouraging sign is that men have finally adopted the needle and thread. The strong colour selection and the simple composition used by Mr. Peter Burtnick in his "Four Patch" quilt leads us to think that a masculine influence might lead to creative developments in the whole quilting field.[5]

Unfortunately, as the catalogue was in black and white, one cannot check the authority of the "strong colour selection" in Mr. Burtnick's quilt (Fig. 9) and compare it to others in the exhibition. If strength and simplicity were to be construed as positive criticism, then numerous other works by women (Burtnick is the only male represented in the exhibition) were equally representative. The Straight Furrow version of the Log Cabin pattern by Mrs. Robert McGregor; Arrow Pattern by Mrs. Ellen Jones; Sawtooth Pattern by Mrs. Ford; Jacob's Ladder by Mrs. R.C. Green; Hexagon Chain by Mrs. Pearl Tufford; and Mrs. Hannah Sangster's Birds In Air, all possessed a strong, graphic quality (Figs. 10-15).

As for "creative developments in the whole quilting field", the hourglass pattern found on his quilt can also be seen on a quilt dated 1726 (Fig. 16) from the McCord Museum's collection. Thus, Mr. Burtnick's creative contributions were no greater than any of the women

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[5] Ibid.

working from other tradional patterns.

The 1972 show presented very little innovative quilt-making in the sense that the quiltmakers were interpreting older patterns. This was not to say that imagination, creativity, and a seemingly intuitive sense of good design played no part in the creation of these quilts, but rather the opposite was true.

In the making of a quilt, one usually started with a basic pattern. After this was chosen, the final outcome was entirely up to the quiltmaker, as she had to decide upon colour schemes, whether or not to include sashing or borders, and the design for the sewing together of the three layers of the top, batting and backing together. Aside from quilt kits, the creation of a visually pleasing quilt was a complicated process which required much contemplation on the maker's part.

In the Free Press article, the reporter also stated that:

> Dr. Fry feels that perhaps there has been a change in taste among quilters. Today's artists have replaced their grandmother's emphasis on needlework with more attention to pattern and colour-co-ordination - more concern for the total concept of the piece.[6]

If in 1971, the average age of the quiltmaker was 68 years of age, then this would then realistically place most of their grandmothers as pioneers. Continuing this assumption, the ability to carefully select yard goods would have been a luxury for farm women; making do with old clothes and feed sacks was a more probable scenario. Even within the city

[6] Stewart, 3.

the dry goods merchants catered to homemakers who made clothing for their families. Old clothing and scraps were still the most probable choices for those living within the settlements. As financial circumastances dictated fabric choices, it was then plausible that fancy needlework would be the only redemption for faded patches. The total design concept would also be subordinate to the practical consider -ations of warmth and possessing enough bedcoverings to supply one's family for the winter.

References to these times constituted the overall design of the Red River Settlement Quilt (Fig. 17), designed by Mrs. Sophie May Osborne. The settlement quilt provided a series of vignettes representing various facets of life in the early community located at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. A central panel contained a prophesy for the future: grain elevators, diesel locomotives, modern buildings. If one is to assume that the representation of of the future was contained within the boundries of the smoke, then the airplane outside would read as belonging to the time of the Indian encampment, a rather bizarre anomaly.

As the exhibition endeavored to depict the full spectrum of contemporary quiltmaking, the selection method employed by Dr. Fry:

> Tried to by (sic) systematic and get at least one representative of each variety - pieced, appliqued, embroidered, or mixed mediums. Secondly, we endeavored

to include geometric, abstract and figurative works.[7] As previously noted, the quiltmakers were artists, and now Fry refered to their work in terms applied to contemporary painting: geometric, abstract, figurative. Both Dr.Fry and the gallery hoped:

> that by arranging this unusual presentation they will give viewers an opportunity to discover an art form rich in the field of visual expression.[8]

This progressive attitude would become the vanguard for a decade committed to exploring the connections between Art and Quiltmaking. Recognition of the aesthetic value of crafts by an arbiter of the important within the gallery system prepared the way for other exhibitions at WAG. The appreciation of quiltmaking for more than its needlework virtuosity would give rise to other individuals incorporating this craft into their oeuvre.

By removing the quilt from its bedroom connotations, the public perception of this item changed. Attractive bed quilts were reevaluated in terms of their graphic appearance and their potential as a vertically-hanging art medium. Quilts could be art. Although some artists would choose, as in the case of Joyce Wieland, to design quilts, others would fully control the design process.

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

MANITOBA INNOVATIONS

Although traditional methods of quiltmaking would continue during the Seventies, not everybody was interested in remaining close to the traditional roots. In addition to this, the finished product was less likely to be placed on the bed. Women would see potential in quiltmaking as a vehicle for expressing their artistic sensibilities and their vision of the world around them. The quilt became a medium which provided the basis for exploring female imagery and concerns. Quilts were not just taken up by artists as a transitory medium, but also by individuals who possesses a unique vision for their artistic concerns which could be best expresses by quilts.

Northern Manitoba was not exempt from the Seventies Quilt Revival. Emily Crosby returned to Snow Lake from the Salt Spring Islands, equipped with potter's wheels, small kilns, weaving looms, and other craft supplies. Possessing a lifelong interest in the Arts, she set up a studio shop in the town of Snow Lake. As a witness to the local women's interest in the arts and quiltmaking in particular, she wrote:

> I believe the quilting thing is related to my keen sense, I think, of the needs of women for 1) creative outlets, and 2) sense of worth, 3) and need for some comeraderie in the isolation of remote areas (à la

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> hockey teams, and curling bonspiels etc) 4) to say nothing of the joy of seeing bits and pieces of colourful rag throw-aways become beautiful, decorative and useful works of real art,... In all my association with the arts I've never seen any medium turn on a group like quilting has here.[1]

Similar to the quilting bees of the past, quiltmaking provided opportunities for women to interact socially. Quiltmaking also facilitated creative expression in a form which was not as intimidating as Fine Art mediums. In an environment where supplies had to be brought in especially for a project, the frugality inherent to pieced patchwork could also be appreciated. Making do with fabric at hand may have limited aesthetic possibilities but it certainly improved the artist's sense of creative resourcefulness.

A quiltmaker since 1973, Annette Kirby attributed her attraction to the medium from contact with Emily Crosby. Initially interested in creating a Friendship Quilt with a group of women, this venture instead turned into a solo project.

In terms of her relationship to this medium, Kirby considered herself as an artist since she "never did traditional designs. Cloth designs were an extension of my artistic pursuits in clay, acrylics, and so on."[2] Her original appliquéd designs were based upon observations of northern life and her Ukrainian heritage, (Fig. 18).Highly

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[1]Emily Crosby, Snow Lake, Manitoba, letter to author, 14 April 1989.

[2]Annette Kirby, Snow Lake, Manitoba, letter to author, 29 March 1989.

pictoral, Kirby's quilts make the ordinary extraordinary. The quilt then became a substitute for the canvas, and this medium provided a softer focus upon the issues and events of daily life.

By using the quilt as another art medium, the quilt-maker expressed the seriousness of her aesthetic concerns. Quiltmaking, combining both the qualities of flat surface and relief, offered the artist the scope to explore many formal concerns. Thickness of batting, types of fabric, colour, texture, stitching; all influenced the final appearance of the piece. The quiltmaker must possess a good sense of design, whether learned or intuitive, which enables the finished quilt to be judged as visually successful.

Like Annette Kirby, the Winnipeg artist Marsha Wineman also considered herself an artist rather than as a quilt-maker. She had received a B.F.A. and her undergraduate years were spent studying painting and drawing. Although sensitive to women's issues, feminism was not the impetus for her explorations in fabric in the early Seventies.

Working in cloth evolved from her heritage of having both a father and a grandfather who were tailors. Wineman had always sewed and the receipt of a box of fabric scraps from the father of a friend fostered further explorations with this medium. She did not think of herself as a fabric artist but rather as "a painter who used fabric

and sewing techniques to embellish a painting."[3] Initial explorations yielded stuffed and paint-splattered forms. Unlike traditional quiltmakers, Wineman used the zig-zag stitch as her means of both connecting the layers and as decoration. Straight stitching was more typical of machine-made quilts. There was also no effort made to hide the long, loose thread ends within the quilt; something which traditional quiltmakers were careful to do.

Elizabeth I (Fig. 19) exemplified the need to combine the painterly with quilting. The artist removed the quilted object totally from the realm of the functional. Her quilted work can no longer be seen as a sort of bed-covering but rather as an art object, akin to painting, which could be hung on the wall. Wineman's work encourages comparison with painting as it used the medium to demarcate from on the fabric. The sewn line enhanced the sense of dimensionality.

The series of cloth drawings, Chris (Fig. 20), was a study of an actual model. This factor connected Wineman to the traditional working methods of other artists. Although her techniques were based upon studio practices, her cloth renderings had a different impact from a work on paper. The appliquéd silhouette possessed a greater sense of form and the fabric creases heightened the body's

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[3] Marsha Wineman, interview by author, 6 April 1989.

curved shape. The series was more suggestive of the figure as the soft cloth was evocative of both the human form and the universal human experience of wearing clothes.

Although Wineman's art often turned traditional quiltmaking practices upside down, her connections to tradition were still present. Like the classical quilt, her pieces were composed of three layers; the top, the inner batting, and the backing. All three layers were attached together by stitching. Her works were done in fabric and generally incorporated the repetition of elements. Traditional quilt designs were also based upon the assembly of numerous repetitions of a basic unit, the quilt block.

Work done in 1977 (Fig. 21), demonstrated Wineman's interest in the quality of line created by machine stitching. The textured line of the sewing machine was seen as "coloured line suspended in cloth." [4]These gestural drawings suggested form and movement with an economy of detail. The traditional whole cloth quilts also invested a great deal of interest in the stitched line, as the backround was plain, and of, generally, white fabric.

As she did not want to be stuck within the parameters of the quilt, Wineman also explored drawing on fabric and sewing over lines as enhancement. A technical problem was how to deal with the raw edges. A neatly hemmed edge was too evocative of kitchen banners and her solution was to

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[4]Marsha Wineman, The Artist: Series, produced by John R. Prentice, 15 min., Videon Special Programs (Wpg.) 1986, videocassette.

zigzag stitch around the edges.

Another change to her art was the exploration of printing on fabric. Her evolution in the cloth medium was an attempt to elevate sewing techniques without deliberately advertising herself as a feminist. Wineman wanted to "raise sewing so it is the least minimalized."[5] An opportunity to be a designer with a computer-driven quilter at a quilt factory expanded her possibilities within the medium but paradoxically limited her due to the rather traditional nature of the finished product.

Two of her most recent quilts incorporated the printing process as well as the exploration of a foreign ideology. Wineman was not a devotee of TV Wrestling but the mysterious rituals and archaic male-female relationships intigued her. Off The Ropes and Tamara's Dream (Figs. 22,23), were literal representations about the union of opposites. Slick silkscreened prints of wrestlers contrast with the soft cloth surface; especially the floral backround of Tamara's Dream . The merging of male imagery with a traditionally feminine medium also produced an unusual juxtaposition. Depicting icons of a certain male subculture in this manner subverts the impact of its overt masculinity. The superimposing of a linear Venus de Milo torso upon the grappling figures in Off The Ropes questioned the homophobic nature of this so-called sport. Wrestling, like other all-

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[5]Wineman, interview 6 April 1989.

male events, endorsed cultural assumptions about what is masculine, but at the same time contained covert suggestions about its own sexuality.

Tamara, of Tamara's Dream represented Everywoman, and conversely, the man's face on the quilt became Everyman. The wrestler had the potential to be either a teddy bear or a brute. Men have been conditioned by society not to be vulnerable, and as an actor, the TV wrestler was deliberately not a sensitive being. The very pretty, feminine floral print backround offered insight into the rather complex fasçade; the wrestler then was less egnigmatic. The exterior man belied the more humane interior. To collaborate with the brutal drama imposed by the wrestling federations, the man must adopt the agressive persona in order to retain his source of income. Wineman, through her art, grapples with the male-supremsit myths embodied by these institutions.

A visual consideration of the two wrestling quilts was the connection to two numerical quilt block compositions: the Four Patch and the Nine Patch. These structural units were found in traditional work. Although Wineman often attempted to assert her detachment from the quiltmaking movement, her medium continued to make references to tradition due to the very nature of the materials and the almost unconscious intuition of its inner rules.

The identity of the artist as quiltmaker was a crucial

issue. Laurie Swim, an artist who turned to quiltmaking, addressed this problem:

> I have often found it hard to describe what I do. I think of myself as a quiltist who prefers to make art. There are artists who sometimes use the quilts as one of their media, even breaking the tradition of cloth and stitching by using plastic, glue, paint, paper - whatever. Yet they somehow retain the concept of the quilt. And then there are traditional quilters with vision who by means of their innate aesthetic sense carry their work into the realm of art. There is plenty of room for all of us in the world of quilts. A lot can be learned from our cross-pollination.[6]

Identity was often synonymous with credibility, seriousness of intent or even where one exhibited their work. Considering oneself as either an artist or a quiltmaker reflected the philosophy of the maker. The medium remained the quilt, and whether made by artist or craftsperson, it still retained connections inherent to quilt traditions.

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[6] Laurie Swim, The Joy of Quilting (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1984), 15.

CHAPTER 4

THE EIGHTIES: THE ARTIST AS QUILTMAKER

The raging debate of the Seventies over the status of the quilt as Art or Craft still remained unsettled during the subsequent decade. Numerous quiltmakers and supporters considered it Art, though in most cases, whether the quiltmaker considered herself as an artist or not hinged upon self-perceptions and goals.

A drawing by an elderly woman from Virden, Manitoba, illustrated this point. To better describe an antique quilt given to her in 1923, Gladys Parsons drew a picture of the design and below it included the caption "As you can see I am no artist."[1] Although she was unable to send a photograph of this quilt, her sketch (Fig. 24), of the appliquéd quilt gave a good indication of what the block looked like. The word artist bore connotations which many women were uncomfortable with. Although some people considered the nomenclature of artist or craftsperson as merely a matter of semantics, it would be too simplistic to end the debate at this point. Artists, in any medium, were the innovators, whereas the craftsperson, **despite**

[1]Gladys Parsons, Virden, Manitoba, letter to author, 22 April 1989.

possessing an abundance of skill , only executed the designs of another.

The person most unlikely to consider herself in terms of being an artist was the hobbyist who may have exhibited her work or even sold her quilts, but worked primarily from patterns found in books and magazines. Those who were artists designed their own quilts and created works which reflected personal aesthetic values and philosophies. The unifying factor, however, between the hobbyist and the artist was the pervasive need to express their creativity. From a survey conducted with the Manitoba Prairie Quilters Guild, 22 April 1989, a common thread was reflected in the completion of the given phrase "Quiltmaking best expresses my...

> "Need to be creative."
> "Creativity. I love the process of planning, designing and buying the fabric. Piecing and handquilting are very theraputic to me.Each quilt or wall hanging allows me to express my individual view of the world around me."
> "Quiltmaking best expresses my personality. We are always putting the pieces back together."
> "Need to create. That is, it is one of the mediums I can use to fulfill my need to express myself with the use of a needle. I've been using a needle long before I went to school - so for me it's a natural way of creating."

The members of this guild range in age from adolescents to seniors, and were quite traditionally-oriented in their approach to quiltmaking. Many even prefered to work exclusively by hand. These women, however, turned to quiltmaking as an outlet for a creativity which was only

[2] Survey, Manitoba Prairie Quilters, 22 April 1989.

allowed to emerge through handicrafts.

The magnetic attraction to the traditional quilt for many women was the fact that they were generally guaranteed an attractive finished product if care was taken to make it properly. As the final appearance could easily be spoiled by careless cutting, layout, or stitching, innovative designs carried the chance for that ultimate danger -- failure. The traditional offered few risks, and many women opted for this success.

Despite divergent goals, quiltmaking satisfied some very basic needs of the women who made quilts. In the words of a quiltmaker from Thompson, Manitoba, "it makes me feel whole."[3] Quilts were not only satisfying visually but also provided a spiritual integration. Regardless if one was making a quilt from a pattern or from an original design, the process was time consuming and much of a woman's daily life surrounded the quilt. The average hobbyist was only able to make one quilt per year, and the artist working fulltime on production, perhaps six.[4] The quilt could then serve as a metaphor for the maker and her life, as so much of the quotidian became incorporated into the final project: visually, spiritually, associatively.

Unlike many of the traditional quiltmakers from the

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[3]Alta Fedak, Thompson, Manitoba, letter to the author, 1 June 1989.

[4]Survey, Manitoba Prairie Quilters.

previous decades, the contemporary (used in the sense indicative of the present time), quiltmaker was more likely to have learned how to quilt from books, magazines, videocassettes, or craft classes, rather than from a female relative.[5] This trend should not seem too surprising in the age of the nuclear family. Although these women often lacked a direct matrilineal connection to the art, modern quiltmakers espoused a spiritual affinity.

Women who chose to make innovative quilts during the Eighties approached this medium from diverse backrounds. Although many possessed an education in the traditional fine arts, quiltmaking provided new aesthetic challenges not found in other mediums.

Coincidence fostered Marilyn Stother's interest in quiltmaking. While chaperoning a Winnipeg high school band at a competition in Toronto during the late Seventies, she noticed that the First Canadian Quilting Conference would be held at York University after the band competition had ended. With hard-won permission from the organizers of the completely booked conference, she was finally allowed to attend as an observer. The subsequent seminars, which featured the American Quiltmakers Michael James, Virginia Avery, and the Gutcheons, provide a panorama of the iconoclastic world of the contemporary quilt.

By the Eighties, numerous men as well as women became

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[5]Ibid.

extemely interested in quiltmaking. Michael James, an artist turned quiltmaker, was a strong advocate of the quilt as an art medium. He wrote:

> It is a mistake to regard the contemporary, non-traditional quilt as primarily nostalgic. Audience and critic alike assumed that the artist using the quilt form are in part trying to recapture some lost historical aesthetic, to tap into the spirit and motivations of the women who made quilts a hundred years ago. For studio-quilt artists, however, nothing could be further from the truth. If some of them became attracted to the quilt because of interest in women's issues, past and present, they have not sustained their individual involvement because of those associations. They are producing serious work because the quilt allows them a flexibilty and a plasticity they have not encounter-ed in other forms. They can deal with problems of design with a directness that other forms do not offer. Color is not merely <u>on</u> the surface; it is <u>in</u> the fiber.[6]

Although quilts entered the gallery spaces in the early Seventies due to direct connections to artists and art movements, the quiltmaking momementum was carried on by individuals who realized that the medium possesses the potential to represent numerous aesthetic and philosophical concerns. As well, numerous exhibitions were being held nation-wide to display the contemporary quilt.

American artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, Lynda Benglis, Mary Beth Edelson, Alice Neel, and Faith Ringgold, all designed quilts during the early eighties. The final product, however, was executed by experienced quiltmakers. These women drew attention

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[6]Michael James, "Beyond Tradition: The Art of the Studio Quilt." <u>Amercian Craft</u> 45 (February-March 1985): 17.

to the quilt, often in quite flamboyant and controversial ways, but none of these women, except for Faith Ringgold, became quiltmakers. Out of this feminist artist reevaluation of the quilt as art, a new group of artists/craftspeople arose. Although not always aligned with socio-political causes, these individuals chose to both design and make the quilts.

The renaissance of the artist/craftsperson and the new quilt permiated the consciousness of many of the participants at the First Canadian Quilt Conference; quiltmaking was a means to express their unique vision and poetry in fabric.

Profoundly influenced by the message of the conference, Marilyn Stothers returned to Winnipeg, and started to make her own quilts. Although her initial efforts were tradition -al, the pervasive influence of the conference stimulated her need for further explorations of the medium. In 1977, after reading about the painter Ellsworth Kelly, she decided to apply his concept of tearing and reassembling canvases to quiltmaking. This synthesis resulted in her development of curved strip-piecing.

Curved strip-piecing emerged from a successful experiment. This involved placing strips of fabric one on top of the other and cutting parallel strips in a curving motion. The strips were then reassembled alternating colours, but matching concave to convex surfaces. Once she mastered the technicalities of this new means of construction, Stothers was not

content to limit herself to simple projects.

One of her most facinating early quilts using this technique was Reflections and Illusions I, (Fig. 25). Not only did this piece demonstrate her mastery of curved strip-piecing, but her precise placement of the strips enhanced the visual sensation of vibration. Both the colour bands and the geometric shapes advance and recede, investing the quilt with the properties of an optical illusion. Although Stothers' quilt was indicative of the contemporary trend in innovative quiltmaking, optical illusions were not a new development. Numerous quilts from the previous century relied upon their illusionary quality to give them vitality.

Other quilts in the Reflections and Illusions series explored the optical properties of colour and line. These qualities were enhanced by the method of construction. Curved pieces blended as well as demarcated colour and form. These juxtapositions were also accentuated by the repetition of the curved strips.

Curving Cubes I, (Fig. 26), was the most obvious reference to the historical illusion quilt, Baby Blocks. Although the latter used a multitude of cubes to create the illusion, Stothers' three composite cubes suggested a shifting appearance which paradoxically indicated space as well as negated it. The geometric pattern, in this contemporary version, now became subordinated to the various curved pieces of warm and cool colours, and indicated

light and shadow, as well as depth.

Another variation on the Baby Block theme was Curving Cubes II, (Fig. 27). The curved strip piecing was less evident, however, the shifting perspectives were enhanced by the use of other geometric figures. A multicoloured hexagonal lattice provided both a window to and a barrier for the dynamic struggle for ascendancy of the cubes and triangles. Fragments of the illusion were also found on the back of the quilt.

Traditionally, the large piece of backing for the quilt was a plain sheet of muslin, or some other inexpensive fabric. Stothers found that for both practical and aesthetic reasons, the back of the quilt should correlate to the front. Instead of one large piece of fabric, it was much easier to work with smaller segments of material. Also, quilt exhibitions often left the quilts to hand free in instead of placing them against wall or some other support structure. As the viewer was able to walk around the quilt, Stothers questioned:

> So why shouldn't it (the quilt) be sculptural? Why couldn't the back have some relationship to the front, which would then intrigue the viewer not only to look at the back but to walk around to see what's on the front.[7]

The concept of creating a quilt in these sculptural terms, rather than as a one-sided, flat surface appeared to be a spontaneous phenomena during the early 1980's. Stothers found that numerous quiltmakers from all over North America

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[7]Marilyn Stothers, interview with author, 19 April 1989.

who were attending quilt shows during those years had simultaneously chosen to integrate the quilt backing with the top surface. Many decided to just make a crazy patchwork for the back, using the frontal colour scheme. Others, however, carefully planned the back design.

Harmonizing the back of the quilt with the front was used on the allegorical quilt Mommy, Will There Always Be Flowers?, (Fig. 28). The reverse side, (Fig. 29), reinforced the bilateral shift from hope to despair as a commentary on the state of world affairs. Stothers was optimistic concerning human destiny and she asserted that the emphasis of the quilt was to focus upon the positive.

The birth of a grandchild in 1986 initiated her reflections upon global issues, such as the Arms Race and the deterioration of the environment. Her concern for this child's future stimulated the creation of a quilt from the innocent hypothetical question of a child asking "Mommy, will there always be flowers?".

The imagery encouraged multiple readings of the quilt, a condition that led numerous viewers to debate whether or not Stothers " forgot the rungs on the picket fence."[8] The seven posts, or missle-like structures stood in front of the flowers, yet the the vivid colours formed a persistantly connected pattern from behind. This decision to make the connections was not just aesthetic; it also strengthened the case for the continuation of life despite turmoil.

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[8] Ibid.

Flowers represented the hope for universal peace.

Instead of working out her entire design on paper prior to constructing the quilt, Stothers prefered to:

> Plan only part of it knowing that I have a direction to go but not knowing exactly how I'm going to resolve it. Resolving it as I go makes it more of a challenge.[9]

Solving design problems as she sewed was aided by the use of flannelette as the batting instead of the thicker polyester batts. The former material acted like a felt board and anchored the pieces of fabric in place. Flannelette also kept the surface flat, and the sense of dimension was heightened by the pieced forms rather than by the higher surface relief caused by the polyester filling.

The choice to move away from the more traditional batting facilitated the ease of both hand and machine quilting of the fabric. Stothers will hand quilt sections if this makes the piece more effective, however, she will not spend a great deal of time with hand quilting "if the design is strong enough."[10] On Mommy, Will There Always Be Flowers?, sections were hand quilted using silver thread, and for additional emphasis, glass beads were regularly stitched on

...Of Cabbages and Kings, (Fig. 30), was the most painterly of all of the quilts as it was assembled from numerous, tightly curving pieces of fabric which imitated the texture and ruffled contours of the ornamental cabbages. This quilt derived its inspiration from the plants which

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[9] Ibid.

were growing in the Great West Life Assurance Company gardens in Downtown Winnipeg. From numerous photographs taken of these cabbages in the late fall, Stothers developed a quilt which explored the exquisite beauty of this rather unusual plant.

The front of the quilt focused upon the bold coloration of the frost-touched cabbages which defied the laws of nature by not succumbing to the usual desicated autumn shades. Choosing this title demonstrated Stother's acknowledgement of the poignant irony; plants in an insurance company's garden which were seemingly attaining immortality.

As a continuation of making the back of the quilt relevant to the front, the reverse side of _...Of Cabbages and Kings_ (Fig. 31), included a screened print of a more verdant season visable through a post and lintel structure. The deliberate choice to leave a relatively plain backround for the cabbages allowed the synthesized forms of the archtectural lines from the insurance building to emerge on the back of the quilt.

Not content to merely replicate traditional patterns, Stothers sought to find the innovative. Her work retained its connections to the history of quiltmaking by the adherence to the definition of what constituted a quilt. Stothers, however, challenged herself to push the medium towards its plastic limits.

Another quiltmaker from Winnipeg was Dianne Higgins. Trained in the Fine Arts, Higgins:

> Gave up making art for 10 years to have a family etc. I then started back but wanted to try a new medium. I taught myself how to quilt through books.[11]

In comparison to the work of Marilyn Stothers, Higgins' quilts were decidedly more abstract. Although both women reied heavily upon the intuitive placement of coloured cloth pieces, Higgins' work was more closely related to the traditional patterns. References were often made to historic patterns, though these appeared in a fragmented as well as layered form. This discontinuity acknowledged the heritage of the quiltmaking past but also realized the need to explore new directions.

Three of her quilts hang in the Province of Manitoba's Vital Statistics office in Winnipeg. This department was relocated to the newly restored A.A. Heaps Building which was constructed in 1908. Although the building was upgraded to meet current engineering standards, the original interior was left intact. Resplendant with brass, marble, gilded ceiling moldings and travertine plasterwork, this very elegant interior appeared quite hard, shiny and cold. The quilts function to soften the architectural elements, but they also echo the interior geometry.

Due to their connections with tradition, the quilts were not out of place within the classical interior of the former Bank of Nova Scotia. The quilts (Figs. 32,33,34), predominantly in shades of blue, white and red, were

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[11]Higgins, letter to author, 1 May 1989.

created from innovative treatment of traditional quilt patterns, especially Log Cabin.

Higgins, who considered herself as "an artist first and a quilter second,"[12] also had her quilts exhibited as a one-woman show at the University of Manitoba's Gallery 1.1.1., located within the School of Art. This was significant as the School did not offer courses in the Fiber Arts. More importantly, however, was the continued acknowledgement of the quilt and its maker on the terms of the traditional art exhibition.

The catalogue essay for this exhibition began with the statement that "the association between modernist painting and the traditional art of quiltmaking is not new."[13] Although this was written in 1988, it demarcated the rather slow infiltration process of the quilt entering into the consciousness of the art school. Despite the work done in the early Seventies, there was still the need more than a decade later to justify the presence of the quilt within the gallery space.

Similar to many contemporary works of art, Higgins' quilts were untitled. This was more unusual compared to other contemporary quilts, which were generally named. As seen in the quilts for the Heaps Building, the ones exhib-

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[12] Higgins, letter to author.

[13] Gallery 1.1.1., Dianne Higgins : Quilts, (Winnipeg, Gallery 1.1.1., 1988), 3.

ited at Gallery 1.1.1. contained some traditional patterns. In Untitled (Fig. 35), even Mr. Burtnick's Hourglass motif reappears. Unlike the latter's rigid regimentation of the motif, Higgins placed them randomly, creating a more visually dynamic appearance. As she approached the quilt like a painting, Higgins added the strips of fabric in a painterly fashion.[14] her quilts then became "soft paintings"[15] with the "emphasis on aesthetic using tradition as reference."[16]

Despite the seeming random placement of the fabric strips, there was an inherent internal organization. The overall design of the quilts were balanced by both colour and arrangement of forms. Similar to a painting, the elements of design operated within the rectangular shape and created illusions of depth through the advancement and recession suggested by overlapping strips. Higgins used the Formalist's vocabulary to create innovative quilts.

Although Marilyn Stothers and Dianne Higgins were not directlv influenced by other local quiltmakers, Franca Tesloveaunu of Thompson,Manitoba, was. She related in a letter :

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[14] Dianne Higgins, The Artist:Series, produced by John R. Prentice, 15 min., Videon Special Programs, 1988. Videocassette.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

> I saw two quilts by Annette Kirby and got really interested in the medium. I had been weaving and doing batik at that point and had an idea for a weaving, the drawback was I did not look forward to the months of weaving I had in front of me. So I adapted the drawing for a pictoral quilt.[17]

Although she was not formally trained in an art school, Tesloveaunu had participated in numerous fine art workshops, but considered herself predominantly self-taught. Married to another artist, she was discomforted by the fact that their work was always being compared. To diminish the impact of this assessment, she moved into fabric. Tesloveaunu related:

> I did batik for a while but I found that winter ventilation was a problem and I would end up with bad congestion in my lungs. I always liked fabric and started sewing as a teen and enjoyed textures and colours. My grandmother was a gentleman's tailor so I watched her sew a lot whenever I spent time with her. I guess one of the main reasons really was I realized what could be accomplished by seeing what other quilters were doing and that new and exciting patterns could be designed without copying traditional quilt patterns.[18]

Her quilts were meant to be hung on the wall and enjoyed as art. The imagery frequently came from the northern landscape. First Snow (Fig. 36), was reminiscent of the Group of Seven. Her pictoral quilts used fabric to evoke the sense of form, and the economy of details emphasized the salient features of the images. Although the coloured shapes in themselves were quite simple, their bold, graphic effect immediately denoted a strong sense of presence.

Tesloveaunu's more abstracted renderings of flowers,

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[17] Franca Tesloveaunu, letter to author, August 1989.

[18] Ibid.

The Poppy Patch (Fig.37), and Remembering My Summer Garden (Fig. 38), reduced these plants to their simplest geometry. This form of abstraction returned almost full circle to the traditional pattern sources, which were in themselves, abstract symbols of elements from life.

The Manitoba quiltmaker in the Eighties was extremely cognizant of both historical quiltmaking and the principles of art. These three women belong to a minority who chose to create their own designs. Despite the recognition of innovations in quiltmaking, the majority of the province's quiltmakers continued to work in the traditional manner. This conservative approach was partially mitigated by expectations placed upon their work. Except for large national quilt exhibitions, local fairs and quilt displays promoted the ideal of the traditionally inspired quilt. This strong reinforcement of the traditional was also encouraged by competitions such as the Canada Packers Quilt Championships. Since 1984, this corporation has been purchasing the Provincial Champion Quilt to add to their collection. As the competitions at the fairs were under the aspices of agricultural societies, it was no wonder that these events seemed to possess little difference from the livestock or produce competitions. To win the red ribbon. physical similarity to the ideal was paramount.

Historically, fairs and exhibitions in Manitoba had always included competitions for stock, produce and the

Ladies' Work. MOre than one hundred years had passed and good construction and neat stitching still prevailed. Although there was nothing wrong with good craftsmanship, it was unfortunate that the art had not evolved much further from its roots, save for the innovators.

Traditional quiltmaking will always be practiced. New fabrics, sewing equipment, and techniques, will ensure its appeal and continuation.In additon, current trends in home decorating include the quilt within its <u>country</u> style. Familar patterns presented the maker with a sense of stability in a world where everything was changing rapidly. The traditional quiltmaker creates her own personal security blankets, but the innovators will be producing germinal works of Art.

CHAPTER 5

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The essay for the book The Art Quilt stated that:

> With the recent breakdown of barriers between certain parts of the art and art/craft worlds and the borrowing among media that has resulted, Bernice Steinbaum, a New York City art dealer who represents Miriam Shapiro, among others, boldly predicts that quilts will be the next medium to break through and achieve status in the art world. Says Steinbaum, "In the not-too-distant future, art quilts will grace the walls of leading galleries around the world."[1]

As seen in the works of several Manitoba quiltmakers, this was not an impossible proposition. A sociological interpretation of this phenomena was that the complexities of technological society reinforced the human need for outlets of creative expression. An emergent consumer group for art, the middle class, enforced the need for cultural products which were comprehensible yet meaningful[2] Individuals tended to exhibit less anxiety with innovative quilts than with experimental art. The former would then be more likely to be exhibited upon the livingroom wall.

Through their long association with the bed and its

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[1]Penny McMorris and Michael Kile, The Art Quilt, (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press,1986), 69.

[2]Jerry Neapolitan and Maurice Ethridge, "An Empirical Examination of the Existence of Art, Art/Craft, and Craft segment among craft Media Workers," Mid-American Review of Sociology 10 (spring 1985): 47-48.

symbollic comforts, the quilt was a personal experience which was made art. It possessed deep cultural associations for many, and it emphasized the connective as well as diverse fabric of society.

As the quilt was often seen as a metaphor for human society and its interactions, it was not surprising that this medium would be used to make statements about the Arms Race, Universal Peace, and AIDS. As well as expressing innovative aesthetics, the quilt of the future will continue to foster a symbolic human integration.

The Boise Peace Project, initiated in 1981 by a woman in Boise, Idaho, began as a personal crusade to promote the awareness of the need for global cooperation. This venture created numerous quilts: one was raffled off to raise funds for a peace group, another sent to the Soviet Union, and one was put in circulation between U.S. senators who would hopefully sleep under it and dream of peace that would be carried into their waking life. This project progressed to the point where in 1985, a cooperative quilt was made between this group and women in the USSR.

This peace project inspired a Cape Breton artist, Carol Gibson Kennedy, to start her own peace project. In March 1986, she sent letters to her neighbors stressing the need for peace instead of nuclear madness, and requested for those interested to submit their own special symbol of peace. Gibson Kennedy had never quilted before, but Cape

Breton:

> has a history of quilting bees. There are many like myself who are overwhelmed by frightening statistics of the arms race and who feel powerless to stop it. The organization and making of the quilt meet all of these needs.[3]

On 12" by 12" squares of white cotton, the women could use either appliqué, embroidery, or fabric painting to create the symbols. Gibson Kennedy and her artist-husband layed out the individual squares in a manner which was the most visually cohesive. Each square was separated by borders. Early in 1987, twelve women participated in the quilting bees to complete the construction of the quilt.

Since that time, the quilt was on display at various local peace events and a poster was produced to raise funds (Fig. 39). Of the entire project, Gibson Kennedy stated that:

> It has been most satisfying for me. I am very glad I took the initiative to organize the quilt. It continues to give me a feeling of pride. That I did something no matter how small towards promoting peace.[4]

The British Columbia artist Wendy Lewington Coulter also found herself concerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Although she initially turned to quiltmaking because it had "the potential for multiple levels of imagery and messages,"[5] the birth of her daughter highlighted the

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[3]Carol Gibson Kennedy, Baddeck, Nova Scotia, letter to author, 16 May 1989.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Wendy Lewington Coulter, Clearbrook, B.C. letter to author, 6 June 1989.

need for raising the consciousness of others towards this threat. From a distance, National Security Blanket (Fig. 40), and Sheltered Lives (Fig. 41), appeared to be rather traditional quilts. Upon closer inspection of the geometric motifs and the stylized figures, there was the horrific recognition of powerful symbols. Lewington Coulter explained those intentions:

> Firstly, as suggested by the title National Security Blanket, I was playing with the feelings of security and comfort associated with traditional quilts. I attempted to create very benign seeming blocks of calico using images drawn from disturbing issues. To me this was a metaphor for the popular idea of deadly weapons providing a sense of security for society. I wanted the viewer to experience a "double take" when on closer examination, he or she realizes that the friendly appliquéd images are not friendly at all, and in reality, quite threatening. In the same way, the hopeful, brave, and cheerful rhetoric of national security is an enormous threat. Secondly, the quilt form worked for me in that I was able to create various separate blocks which, while addressing separate issues, were inextricably related to the other.[6]

The quilt became a method of exploring the insideous nature of militarism. This was also explored in Sheltered Lives, a grim allegory of what happens to those who fail to recognize the dangers of nuclear war. Entrapped by text from the Canadian Government Publications How To Build A Basement Bomb Shelter and Steps To Survival, the stylized figures recognized their ultimate destiny too late.

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[6]Wendy Lewington Coulter, transcript for speach given February 14 and May 14, 1989, at the Vancouver Museum.

As an actual member of a peace group, Lewington Coulter hoped that her quilts would confront complacency and demonstrate the need for global harmony. The medium of quiltmaking presentedan opportunity for social commentary which was not possible in other art mediums without obscuring the message or diminishing the cause. Quilts were metaphorically linked to integrating different elements within a whole; they were both the message and the medium.

Although nuclear annihilation has been a prominent concern during the Eighties, another devastating force emerged -- AIDS. Historically, men have been peripheral to the creation of quilts. The N.A.M.E.S. Project originated in San Francisco to commemorate the loss of members of the homosexual Community. Men as well as women made quilt panels 1 metre by 2 metres as memorials for their loved ones who had died from this disease. The collection has expanded to include more than 10,848 panels, (Fig. 42).

The individual panels were highly personal memorials to the deceased and represented a powerful testiment to their memory. Never before has quiltmaking encompassed such a magnitude of response. Similar to <u>Friendship Quilts</u>, the AIDS Quilt Project strengthened interpersonal ties and the endeavor not to forget the departed.

Quiltmaking in the Nineties will continue to explore both abstract and figurative designs. Human Rights, Environmental Issues, and the spiritual nature of life provide both

the impetus and subject matter for the creative process.

The tenuous connection between Art and Life during this decade is reinforced by the quilts of Alvina Pankratz . Her quest to produce an exhibition of quilts has **taken** on an almost mystical nature. Pregnancy became the metaphor for the process of planning and executing her designs. Since Pankratz is a Mennonite, her **work** is reflective of her Faith and the spiritual journey travelled while constructing her quilts. Her meditations about the concepts expressed by each quilt are included in both her exhibition catalogue and beside each quilt during the exhibition at the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba.

Entitled Lifelines:A Quilted Portrayal Of Life, the display includes quilts devoted to the major facets of human existence : childhood, marriage, midlife, eternity, the seasons, **and** Heritage. The quilts are all based upon traditional patterns, however, all have been removed from the status of being just another copy .by the careful choice of fabric and the inclusion of the quiltmaker's meditations as a vital part of the display.

The only piece not totally executed by Pankratz is Mennonite Mona Lisa (Fig. 43). A Trip Around the World quilt, pieced from shades of blue fabric, is worked upon by a hand extending from a portrait. This grandmother arch-type, painted by Joan Hibbert, is a tribute to past generations of women who were both artists and role models.

As quilts have often been an important part of the Mennonite experience in North America, Pankratz pays hommage to these women in her reflection:

> Quilt patterns have been handed down
> from generation to generation.
> The basic patterns have remained the same,
> even though the names have changed though time.
> So, a young woman is given a name at birth, marries
> and changes her name
> bears a child who may change her name.
> The woman continues to work, to create, to influence
> and to leave a heritage for her children.[7]

Her quilts express the integration of life, faith, and art. Continuity and connections are not only a link with the past, but they are also expressions pe for the future. The quilts become a religious e. ice for the devout, but they also possess aesthetic sati action for those not actively seeking spiritual affinities.

With the advent of the last decade of the Twentieth Century, the quilt will gracefully continue as an art form. It remains a significant statement of both historical and social magnitude. The modern quilt still retains ties with the traditional as this pluralism provides both structure and nourishment to all ideologies. There will always be quiltmakers; people with the urge to merge things together and make them whole.

Quiltmakers will always espouse pluralistic aesthetics

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[7] Pankratz , Alvina Jean. Lifelines:A Quilted Portrayal of Life,(Steinbach,Manitoba: Derkesen Printers, 1990)37.

and philosophies. It is a medium which is expansive enough to include numerous renditions of traditional patterns as well as innovative experiments. Spiritually, either form fulfills the creative need for integration of life and work.

Quilts were not taken seriously unless they were related as precedents for contemporary abstract art or incorporated as a medium by artists. Women chose quiltmaking not only with pride in its long heritage, but as a method of personal expression accessible to even those who cannot consider themselves as artists.

The quilt becomes a personal symbol of connections: to tradition, to others, to the future. It is an equalizer; that does not denigrate its status as a work of art. Quilt-makers are artists who have realized the potential of this medium to reach diverse facets of society yet still present a complex aesthetic experience. As a medium, the quilt is only limited by the maker's creativity. It is the medium for the future.

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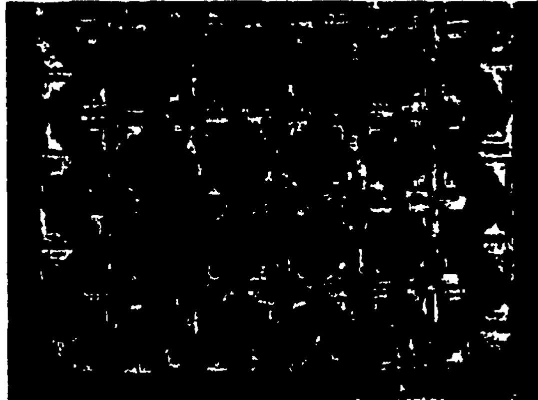
GLOSSARY

Baby Blocks	Optical illusion quilt composed of stacked cubes.
Backing	Large sheet of fabric which forms the bottom layer of the quilt.
Batting	Layer of filling between top and backing; usually polyester, but could also be carded wool, cotton, or thick fabric.
Block	An individual unit of pieced fabric which when combined with other units forms the quilt top.
Crazy Quilt	Quilt formed from irregularly-shaped scraps of fabric sewn together in a seemingly random way.
Lincoln's Platform	Geometric quilt symbolizing political principles of Abraham Lincoln.
Four Patch	Pattern composed of four squares stitched together to form a square.
Friendship Quilt	Quilt containing signatures, mottoes, or other references of a personal nature; often presented to an individual upon a special occation.
Hourglass	Quilt pattern shaped like an hour-glass made from four equilateral triangles.
Log Cabin	Pattern created from arranging rectangular strips around a central square.
Nine Patch	Pattern composed of nine squares arranged in three rows.
Quilt	Fabric construction composed from three layers: top, batting, and back. All three are secured together by stitching.
String Quilt	Thrifty method of using scrap fabric strips to make a quilt block.

Trip Around The World	Traditional Mennonite quilt pattern formed from squares radiating out from a central square.
Yo Yo	A quilt made for decorative purposes; numerous circles cut out from fabric are gathered around the edge and then connected at the sides.

C)

D) 

Heirloom quilts from the Royal Ontario Museum

Canadian quilts of the mid-nineteenth century are second to none in the grace and beauty of their designs. We chose four from the ROM's collection, and had them translated into easy-to-follow patterns. From the top: (a) a pieced quilt from Napanee, Ont., about 1850; (b) from the Eastern Townships of Quebec, 1850, the eight-point star; (c) from the Niagara peninsula, about 1850, the Star of Bethlehem design; (d) from Lincoln County, Ont., around 1875, and known as the Log Cabin design. These magnificent quilts have been chosen as artifacts you'll want to pass on to succeeding generations.

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Fig. 1

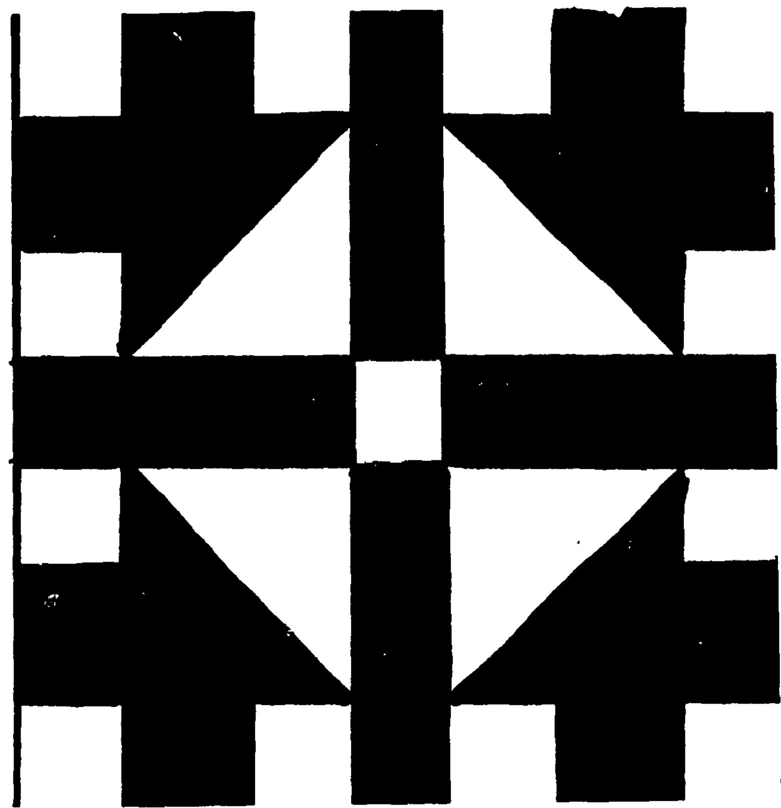


Fig.2

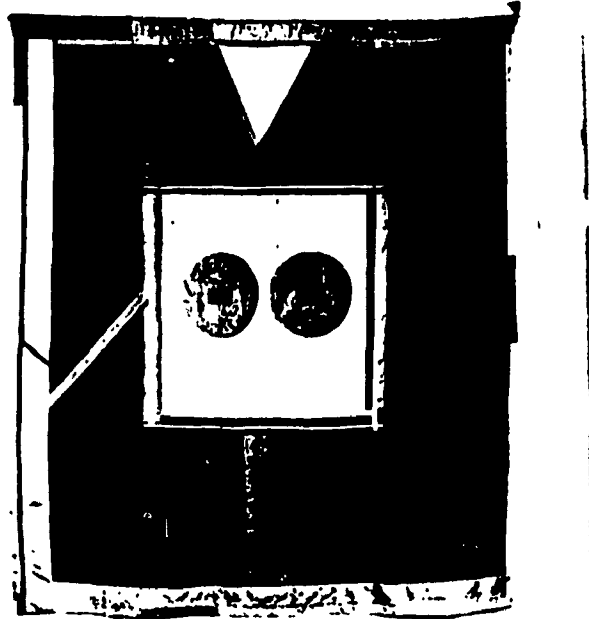


Fig. 3

Fig.4

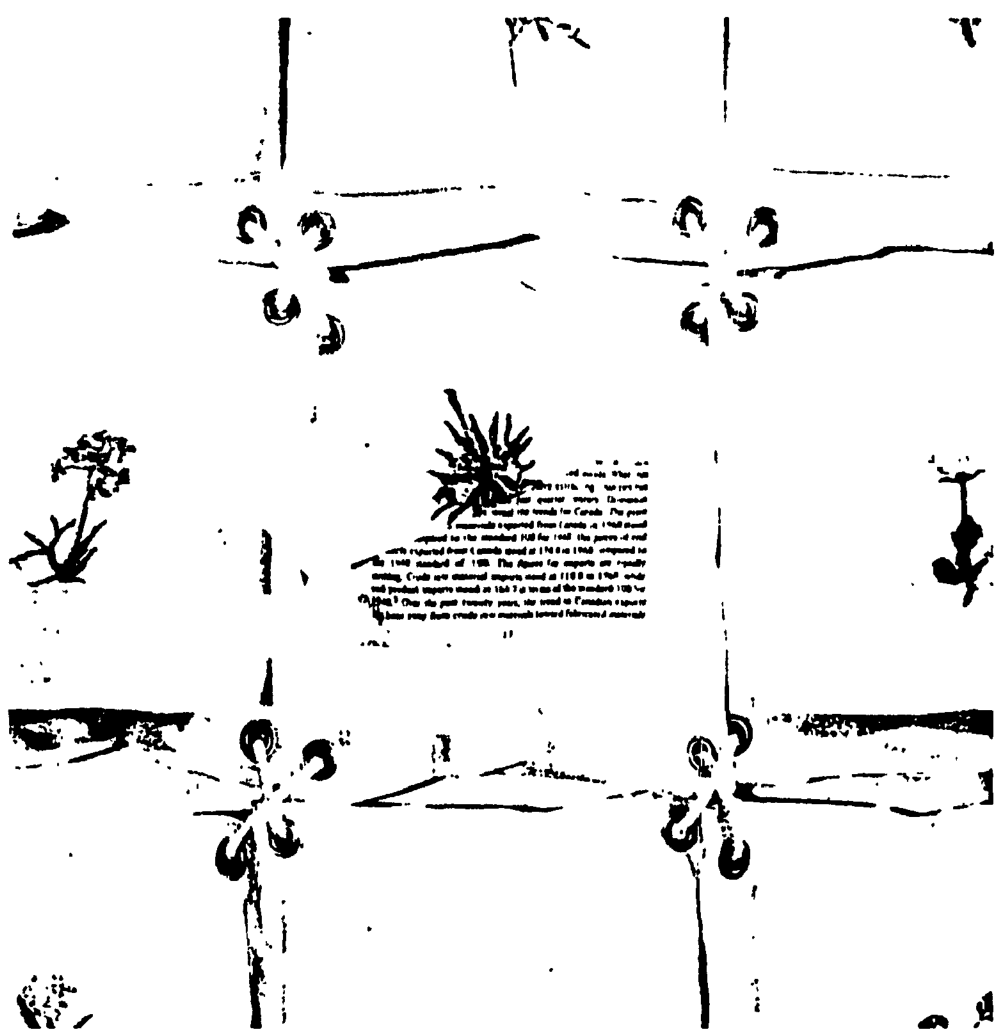
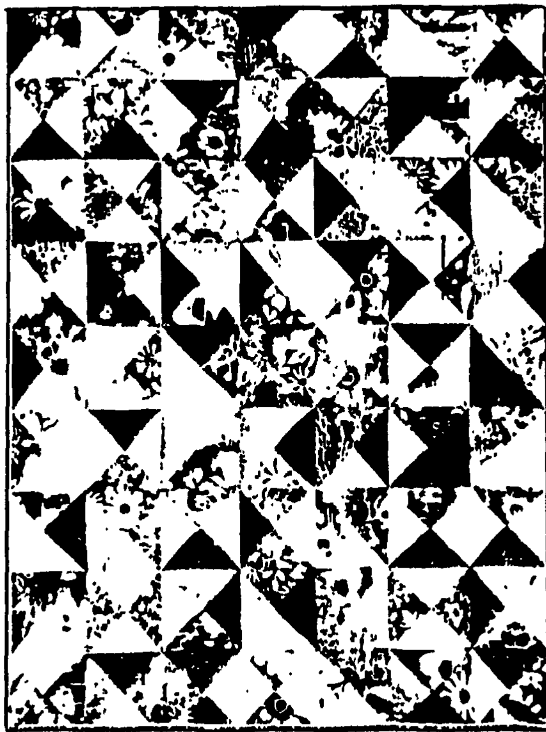


Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8



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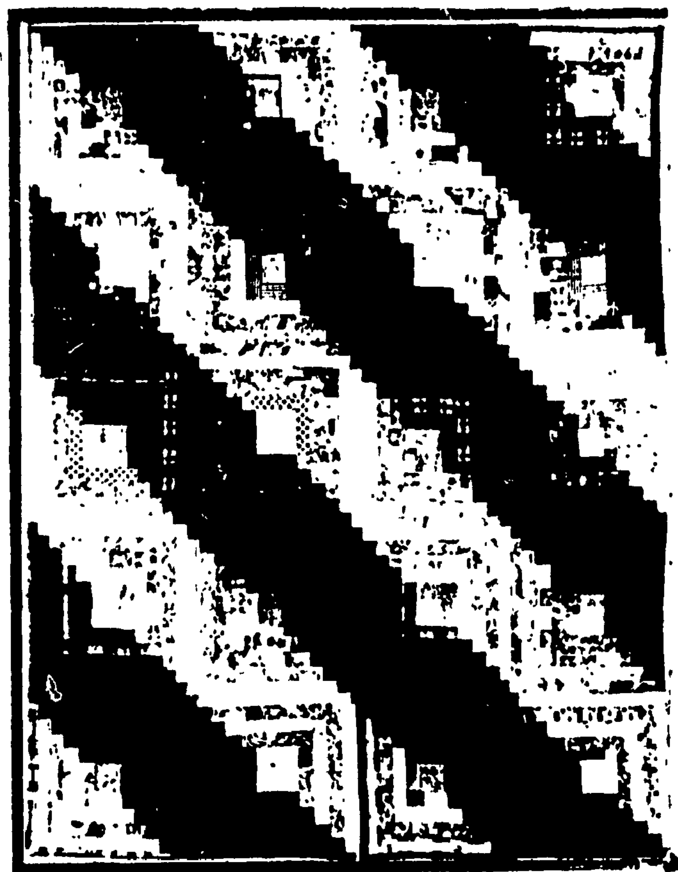
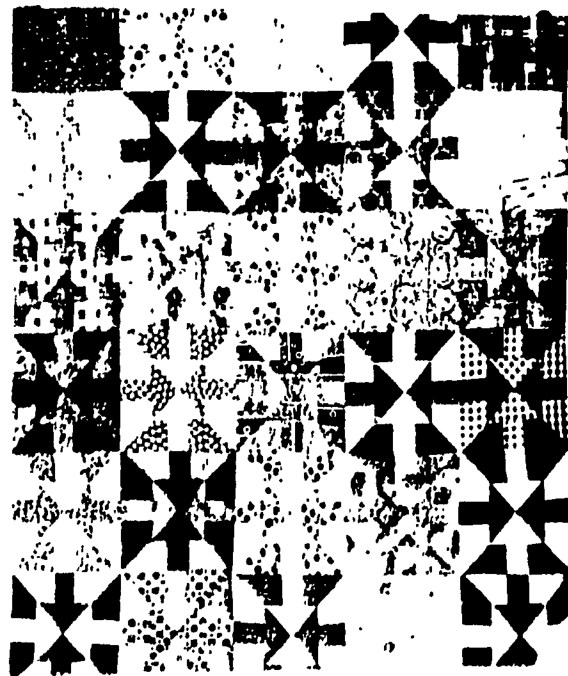


Fig. 10



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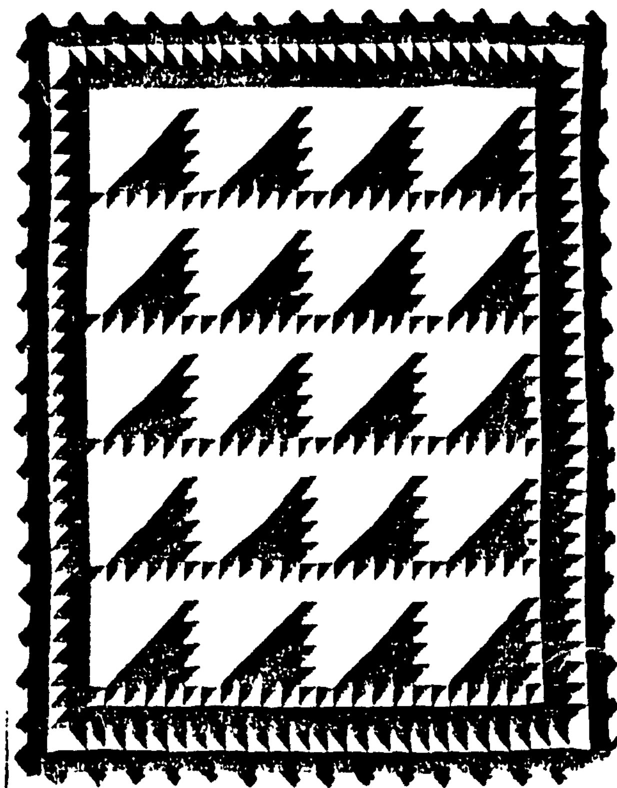

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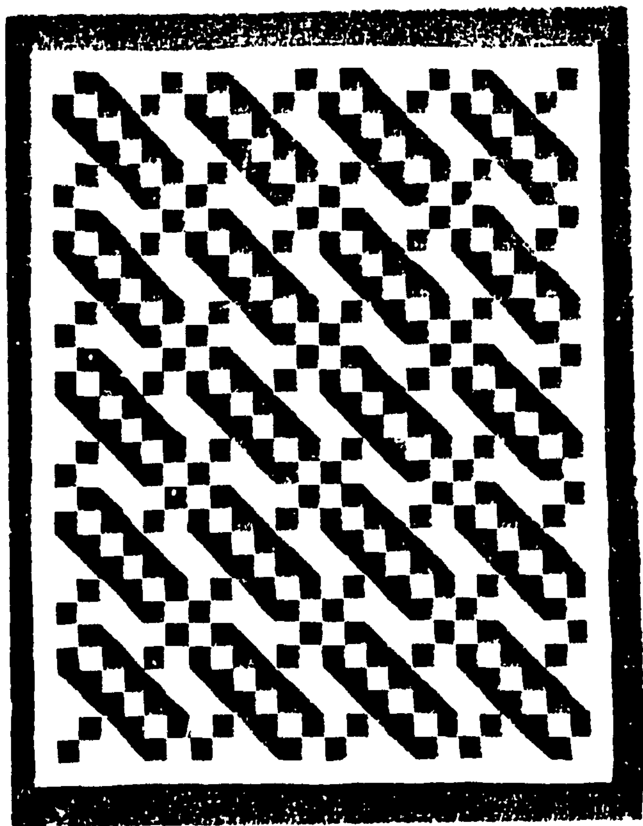

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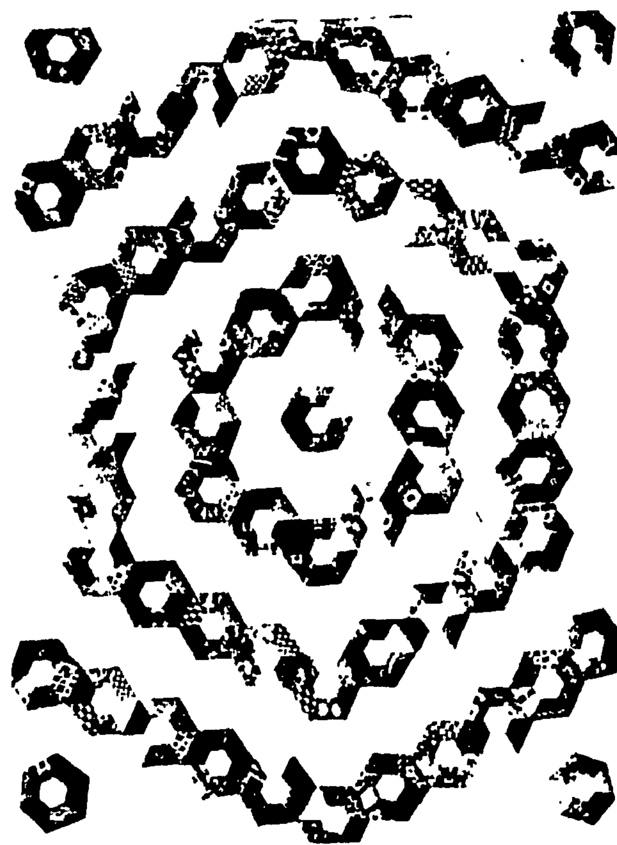

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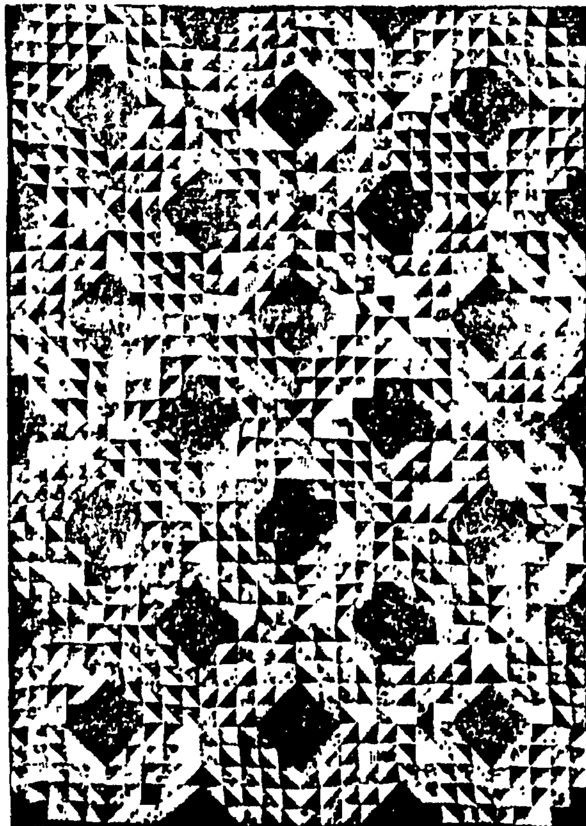

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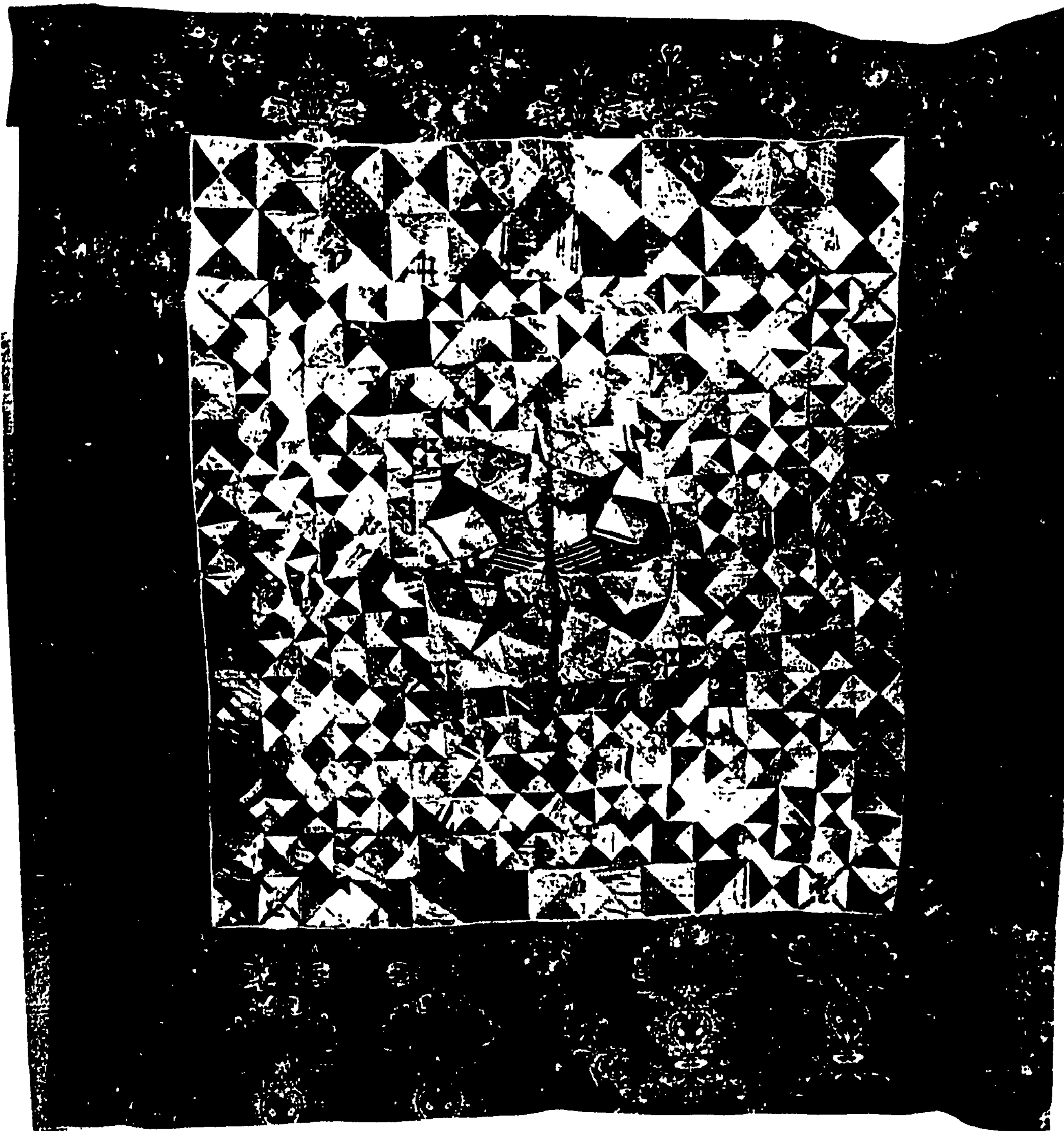
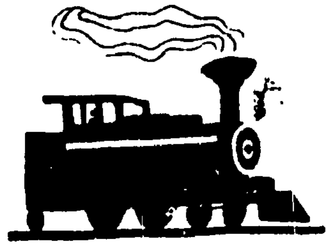
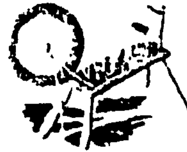
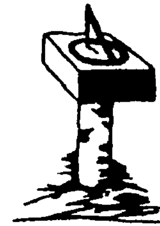
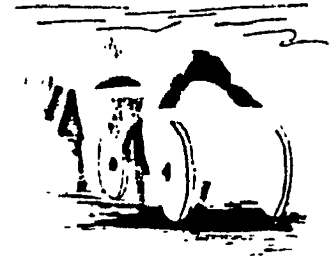
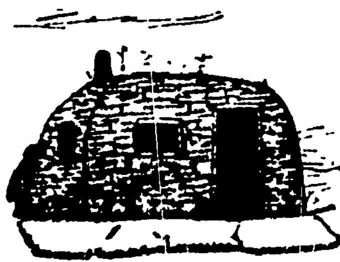
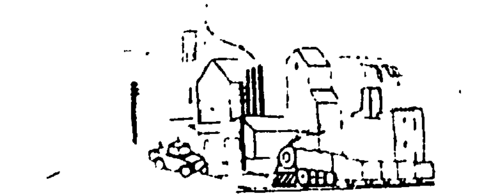


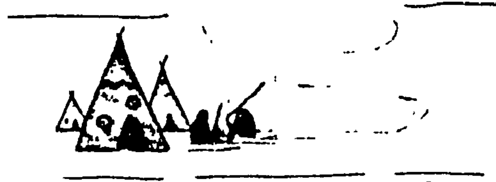
Fig. 16

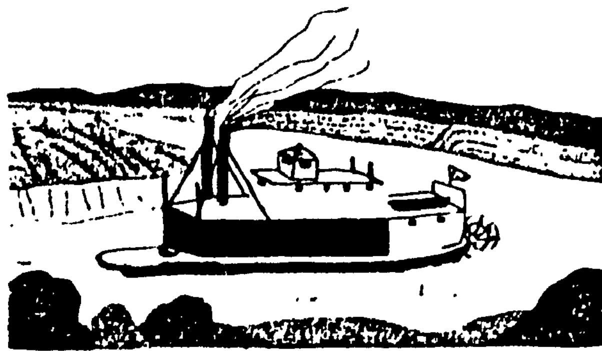










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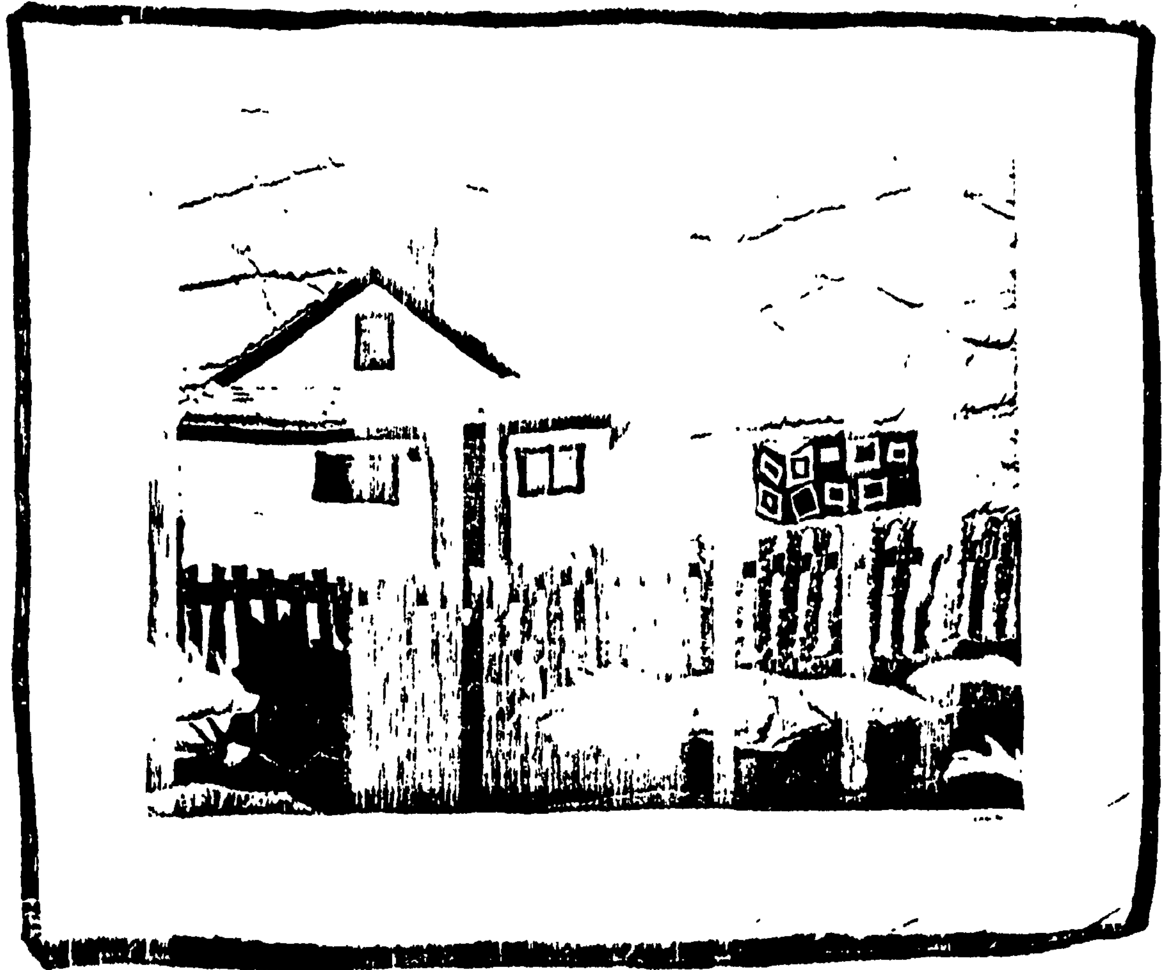


Fig. 18

Fig. 19

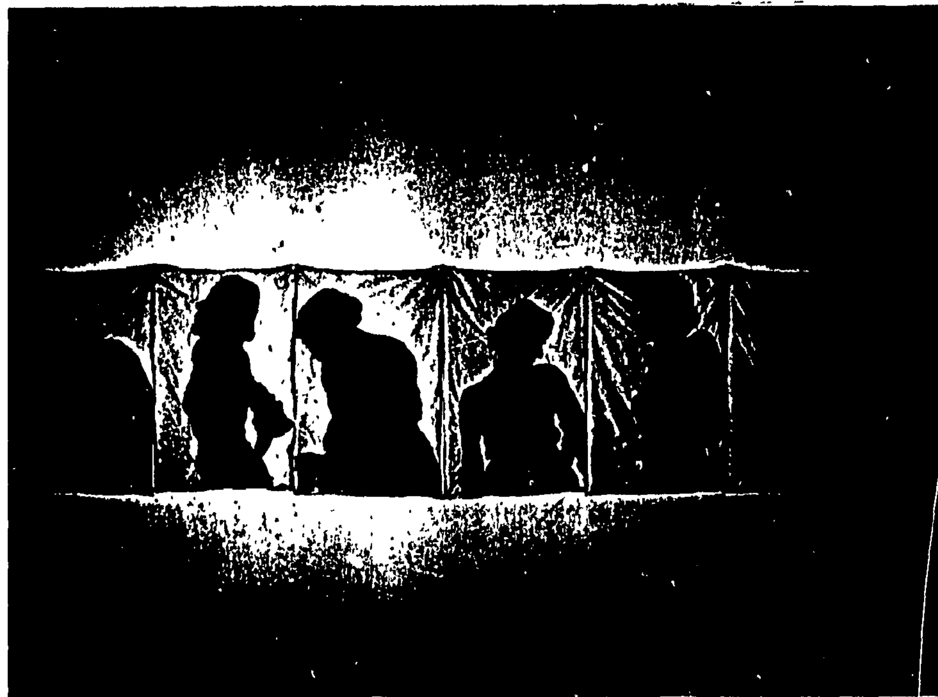
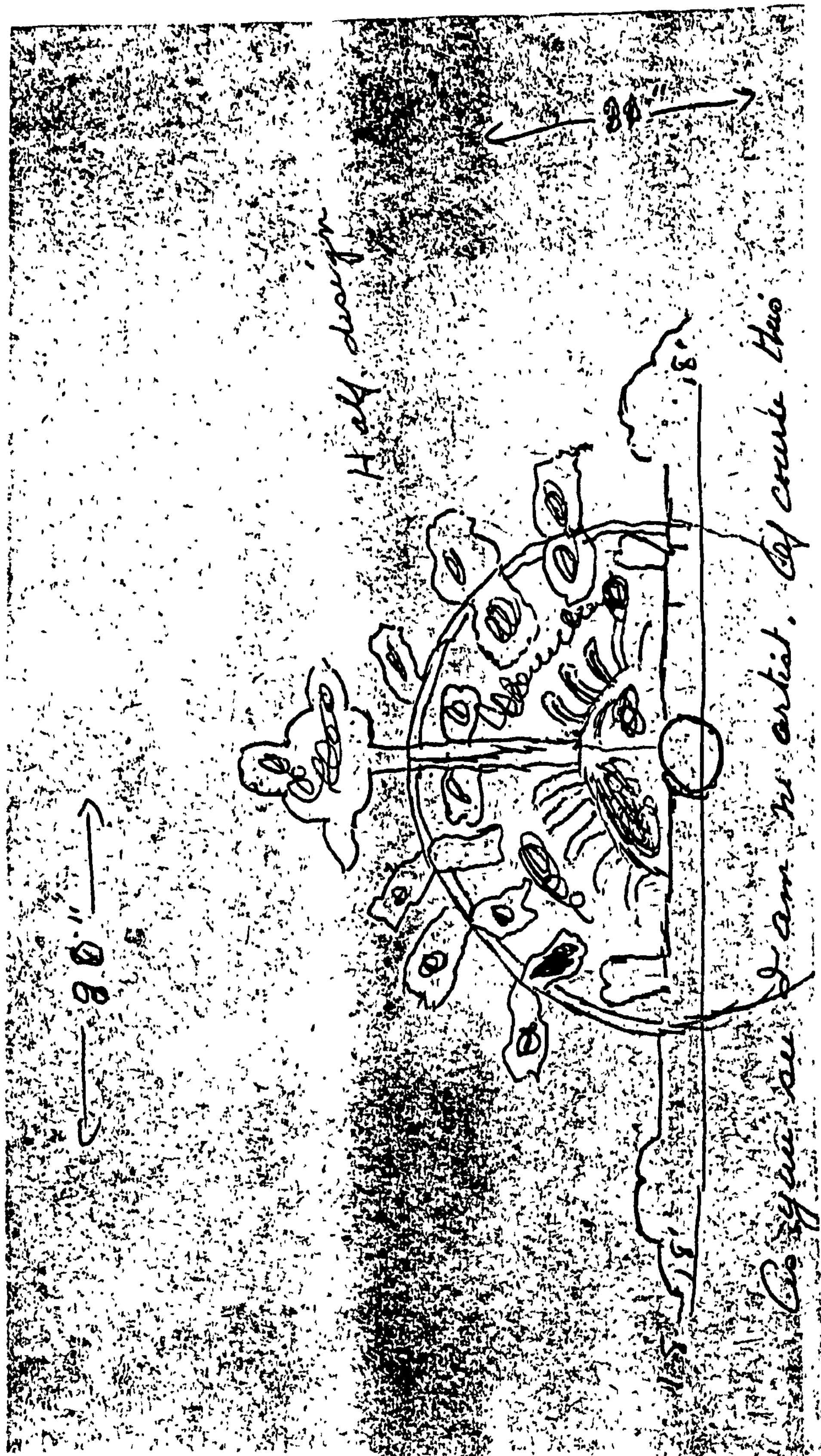


Fig. 20

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Fig. 23



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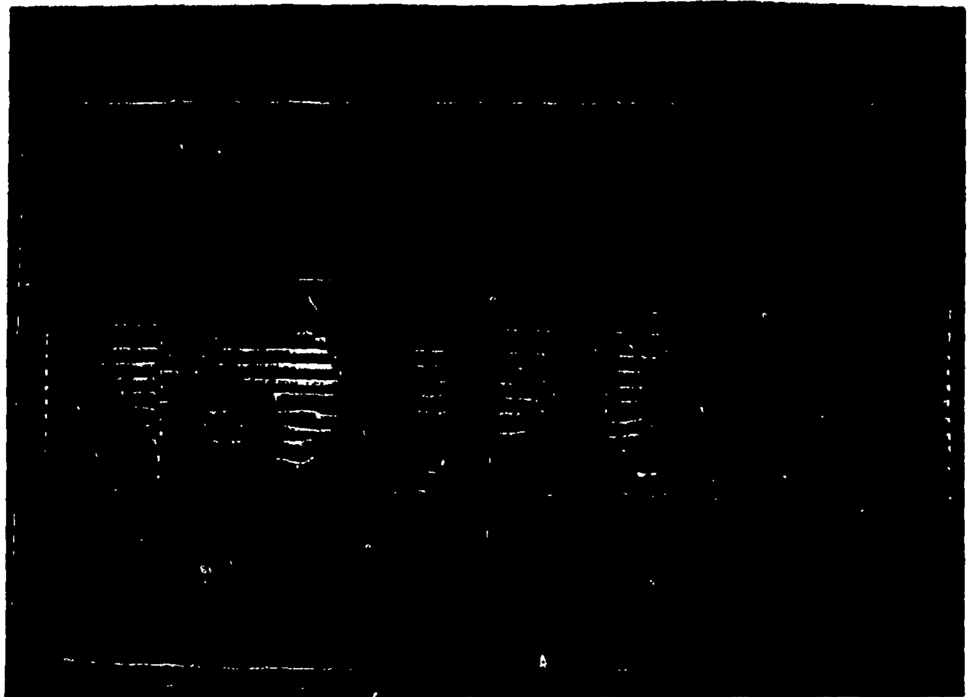
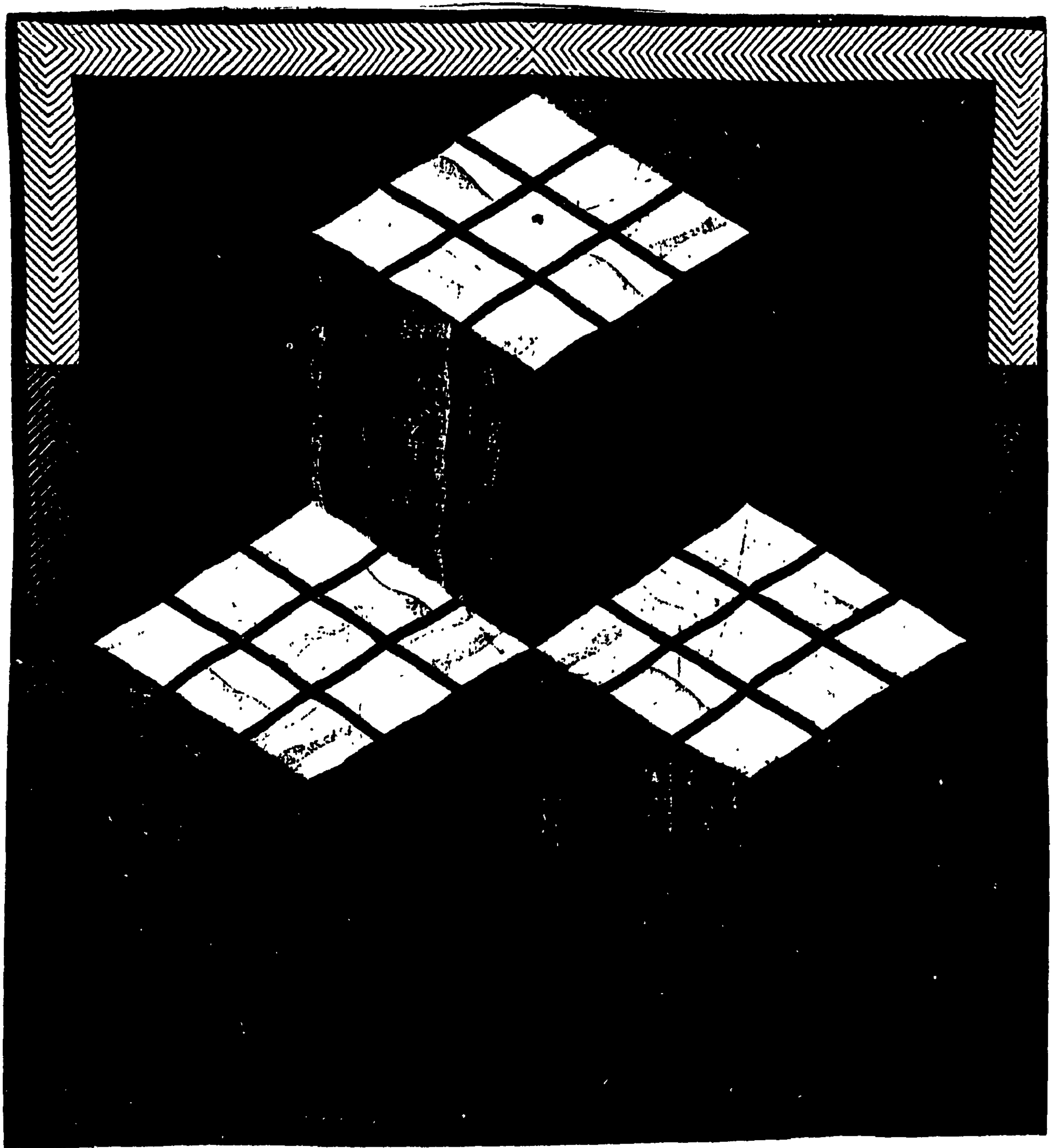


Fig. 25



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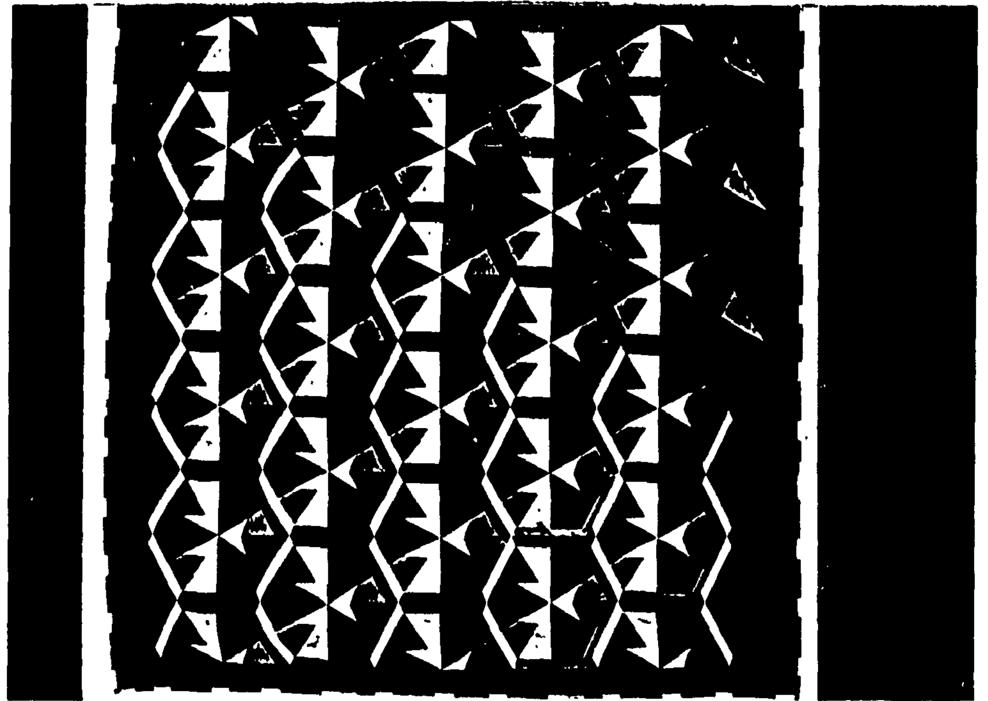
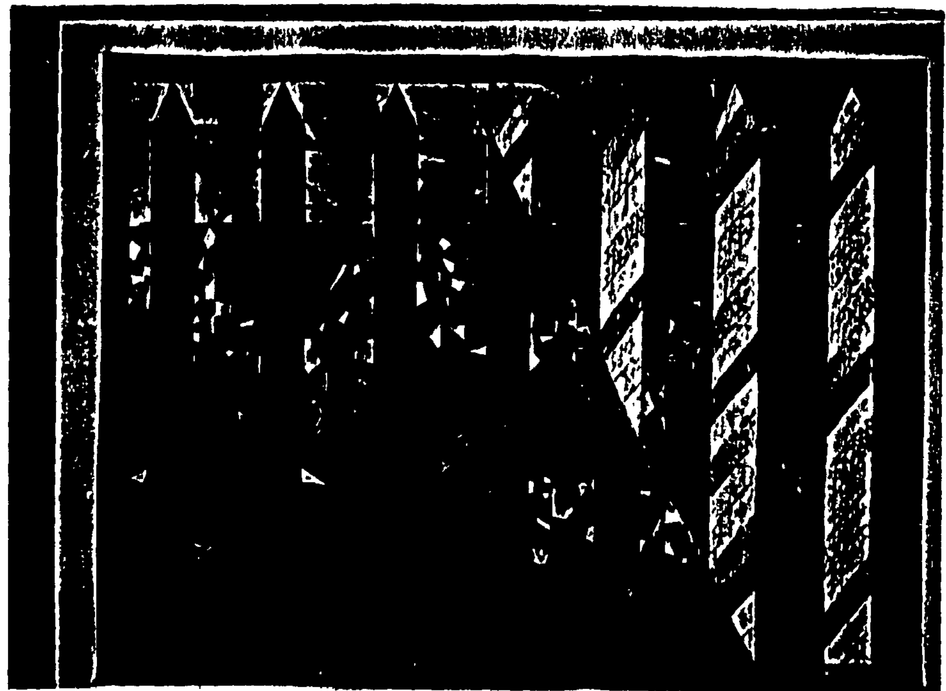


Fig. 27



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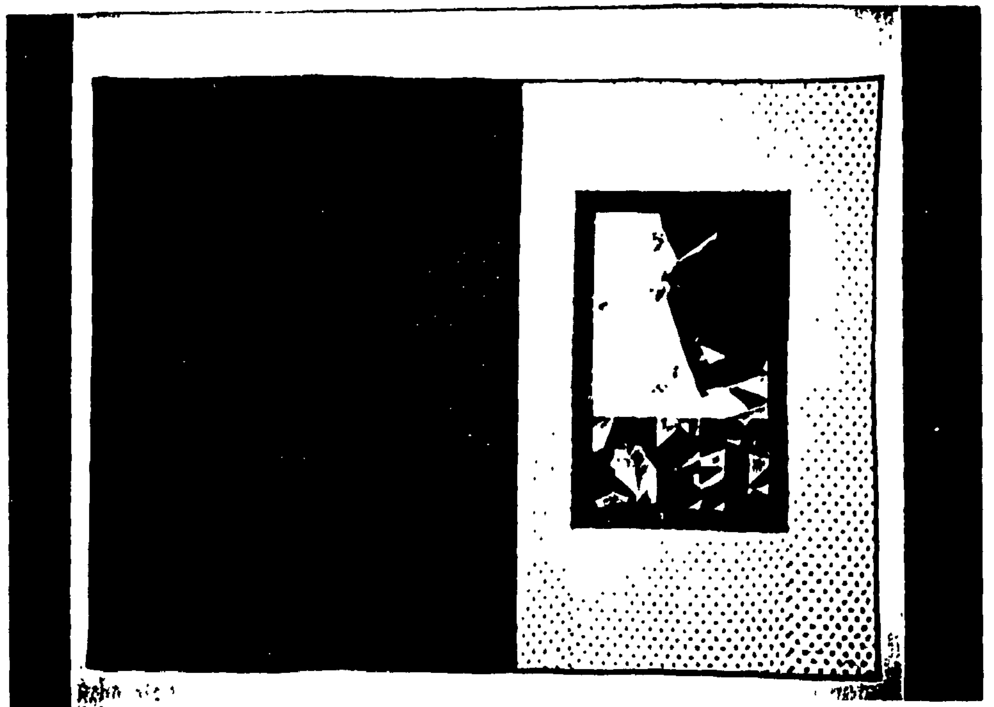

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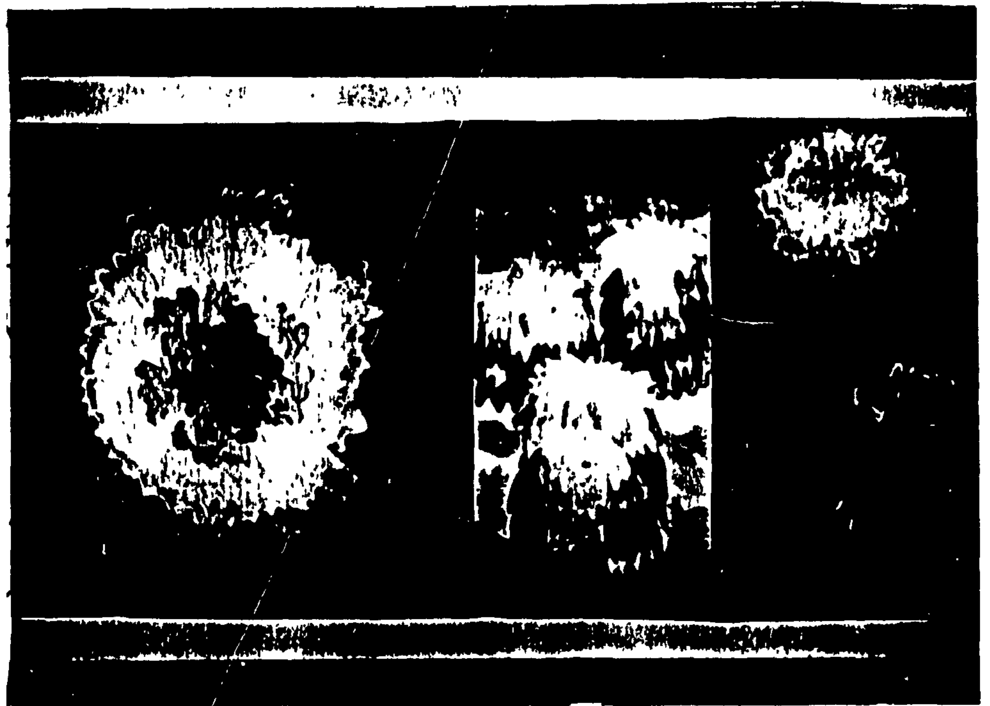

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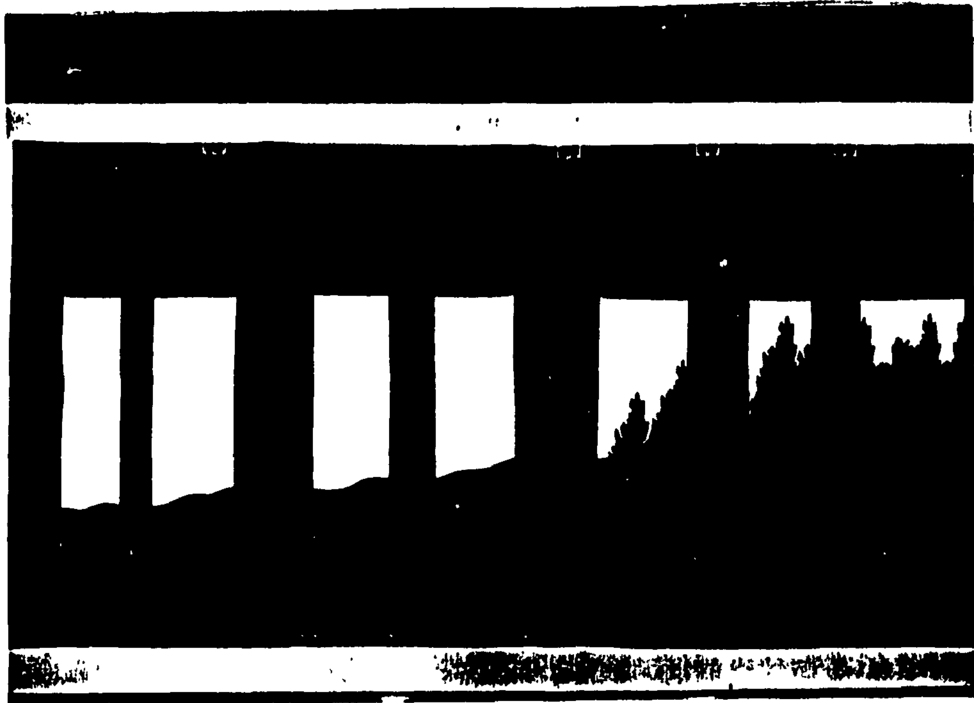

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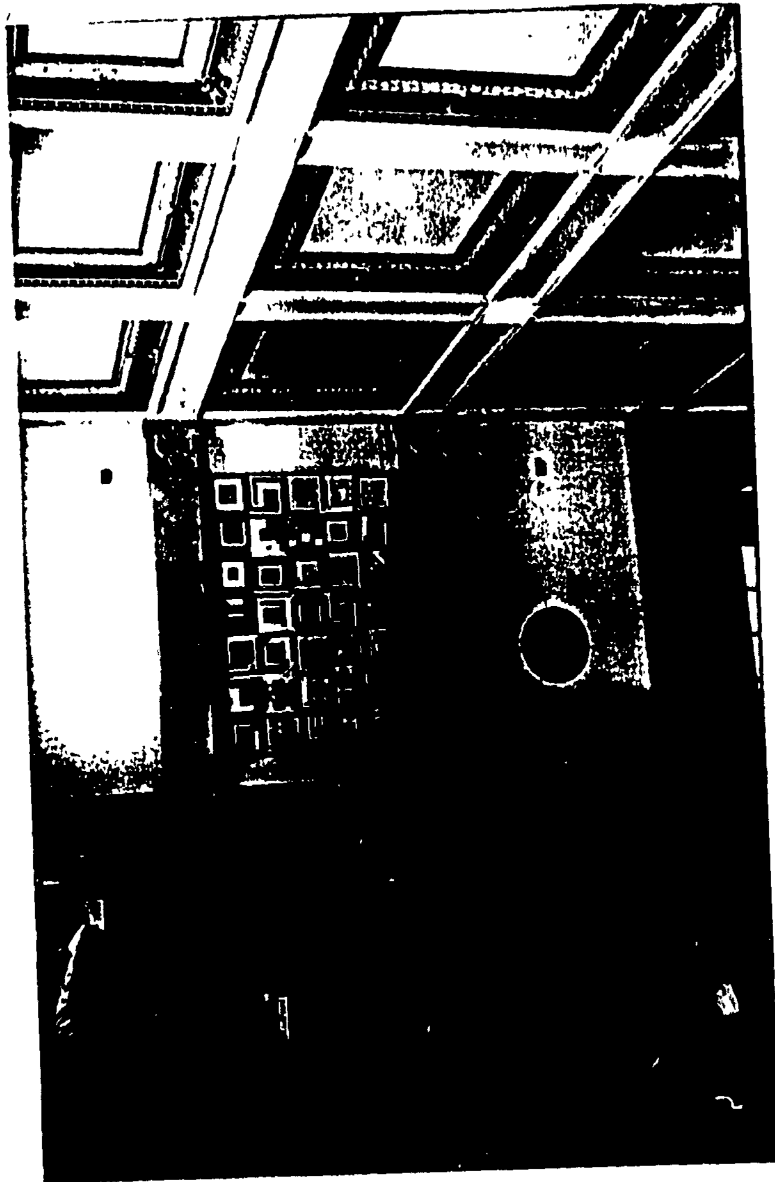


Fig. 32

Fig. 33

Fig. 34

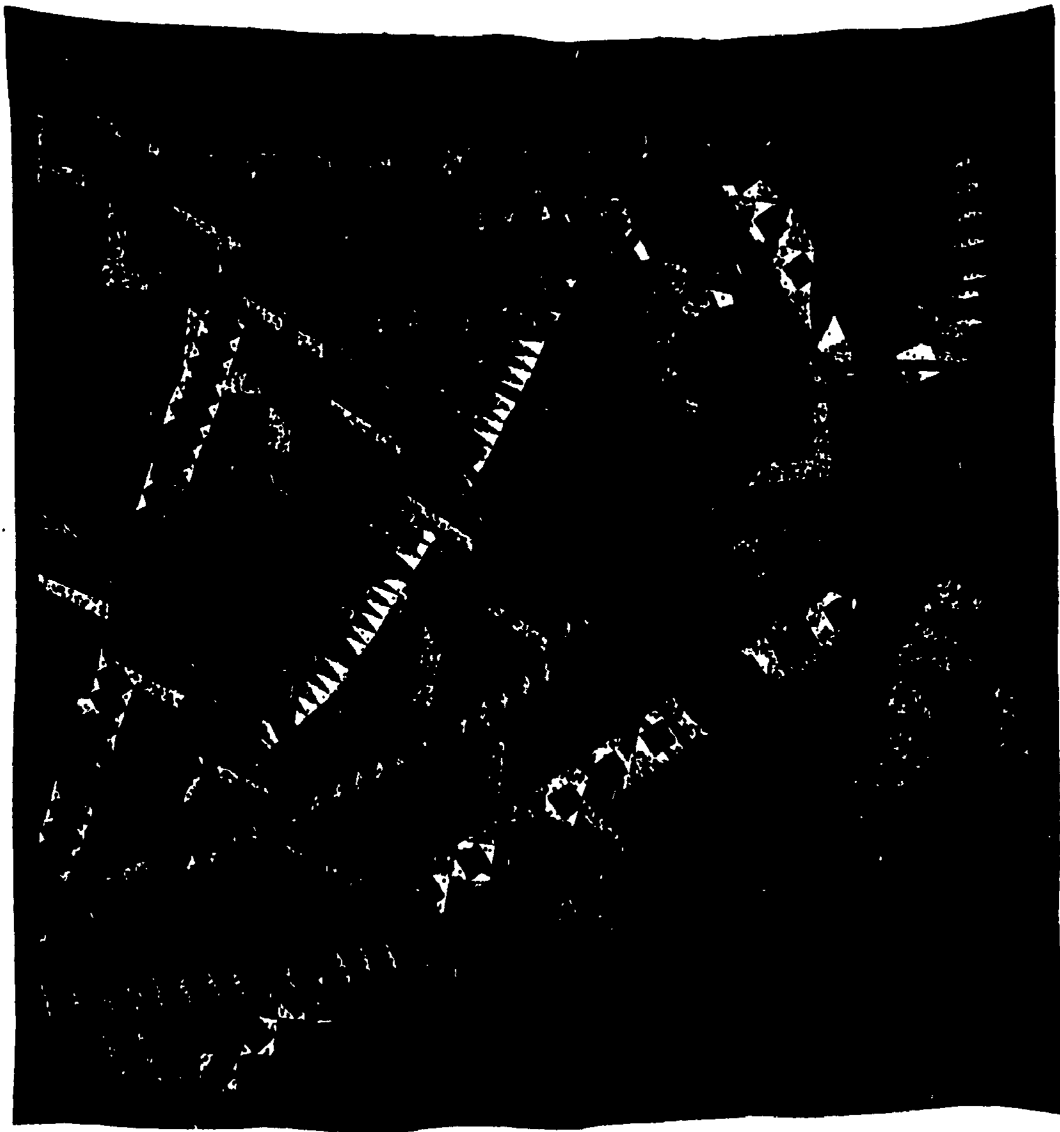


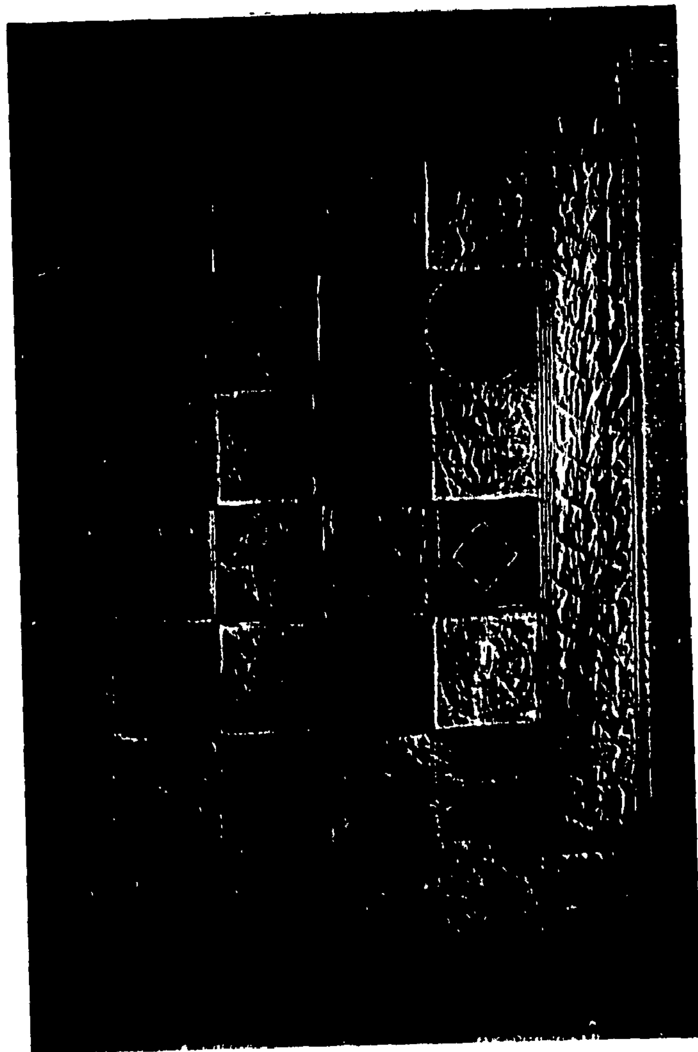
Fig. 35

Fig. 36

Fig. 37

Fig. 38

Fig. 39



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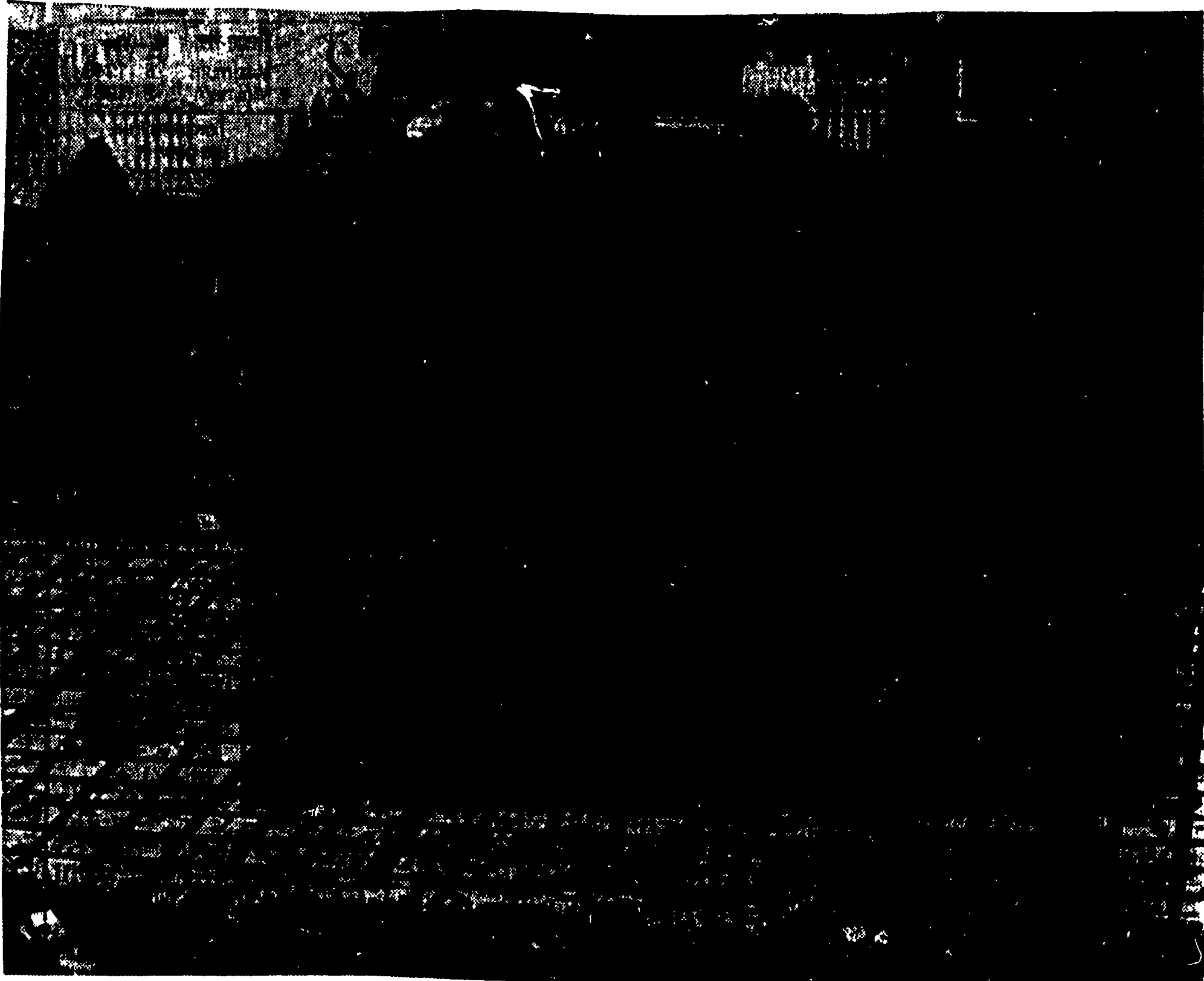

Fig. 42

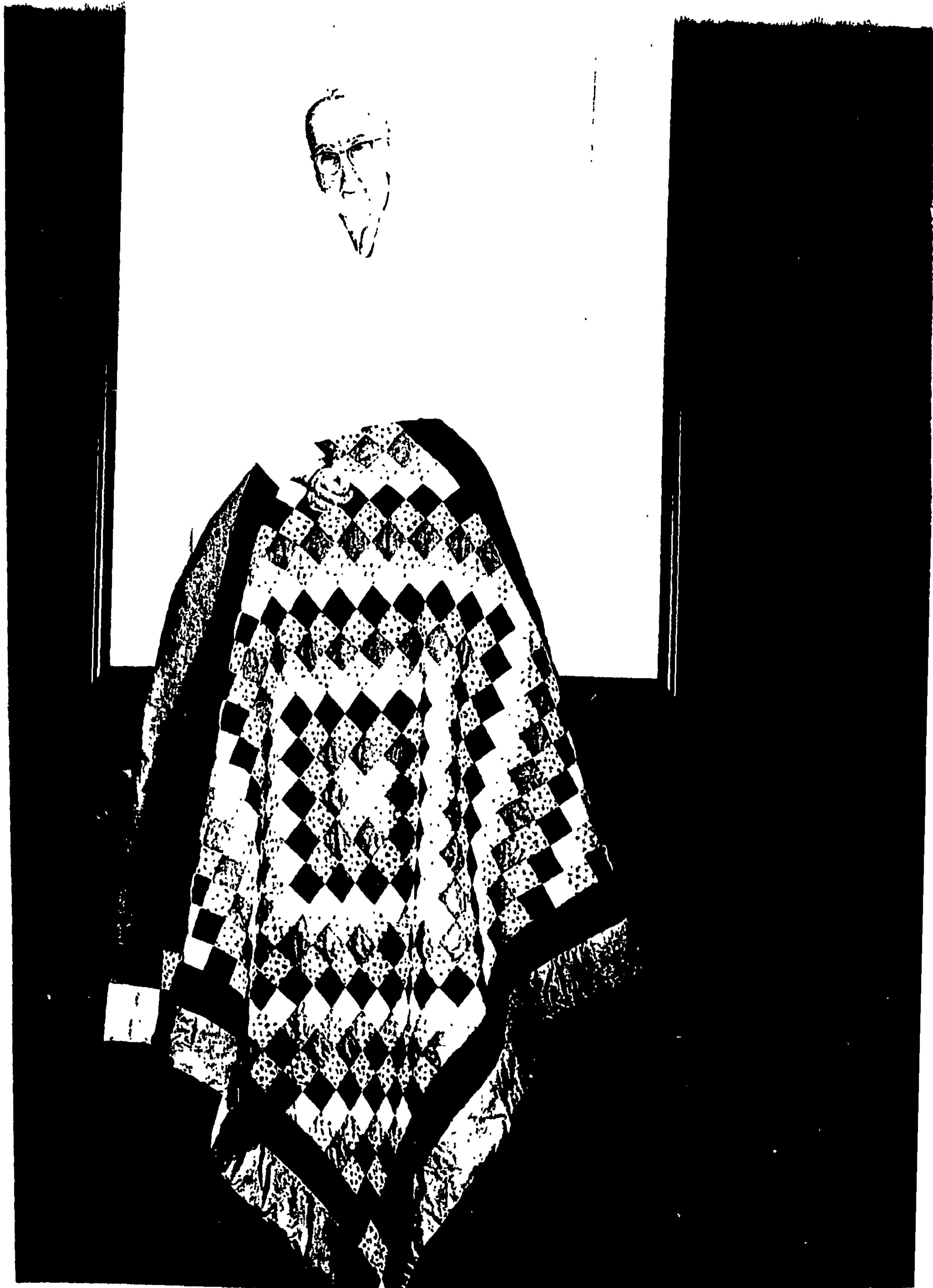

Fig. 43