Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection

Textiles in Time: The James Ray Coverlets

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Laurel Wilson, Editor
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**Textiles in Time: The James Ray Coverlet Collection,**


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Acknowledgement

*Textiles in Time: The James Ray Coverlet Collection* was made possible because Jim Ray, recognizing the cultural significance of these bedcoverings, collected the coverlets at estate sales and auctions within a 50 mile radius of St. Joseph. He began the collection after trips to Cuba and to Guatemala where he noticed the unique beauty of the handmade textiles in those countries. Although, in his words, “collecting was a disease that he has had all of his life,” it was only after seeing the handmade textiles in other countries that he realized there were “home-grown” textiles in the form of coverlets here in America. He appreciated the interesting interplays of color and design created by individuals who wove the bed coverings by hand during the 19th century.

It is fortunate that Jim was the person who collected the coverlets since he had special interest in the arts. He earned his degree in business at the University of Missouri in 1947 but his heart belonged to art, even auditing an art class while he was a student. Jim began collecting art, primarily works of John Wilde and Siegfried Reinhardt after he left school to work in the family business in Southeast Missouri. Art became his vocation in 1971 when he became Director of the Albrecht-Kemper Museum in St. Joseph, Missouri where he worked until his retirement in 1989.

In addition to collecting fine art and hand woven overshot and Jacquard coverlets, Jim collected afghans, today’s folk textiles. He donated his collections of coverlets and afghans to the Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection of the Department of Textile and Apparel Management in the College of Human Environmental Sciences in 2008. These wonderful works of textile design are now available to be studied by scholars and appreciated by even wider audiences.

Laurel Wilson, Ph.D.
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Introduction

Coverlets were woven in the United States in the 18th and 19th Century for use as bedcoverings but they also served as decoration for homes that were sometimes simple one or two room dwellings. Some of the coverlets seen here were woven by professional weavers that operated cottage industries in their homes or in small shops. However, most of these coverlets were made after manufactured cloth became available for family clothing, releasing women to weave more creative textiles than the plain and plaid fabrics needed for garments. The looms that many families had in their homes were homemade “barn” looms that had four harnesses needed to create the overshot twill variations. In addition, general stores in small towns sold manufactured cotton yarns that were used for coverlet warps and the plain weave structure supporting the woolen supplementary wefts that created the pattern in the coverlets. The woolen yarns were usually handspun and dyed with natural dyestuffs grown for their colors or, in the case of indigo and cochineal, were available in local stores. The combination of dyed, homespun, woolen yarns and amazing variety in the ways of arranging twill blocks resulted in designs that were often striking in color and pattern.

All the coverlets featured in this exhibit and catalog were created with the overshot weave structure. It is a four-harness weave using twill patterns in a supplementary weft to form a wide variety of patterns. Because the twill weft picks are repeated to form blocks, it is necessary to bind the warp yarns with a plain-weave pick between each of the twill picks. Most overshot patterns are symmetrical but a notable exception is called “Cat’s Paw/ Snail’s Trail”, not in this collection. However, there is one unusual pattern in this collection that is asymmetrical. The “wheel” is located in the lower right corner of the undulating twill block rather than being centered.
Harnesses are the parts of a loom that carry heddles through which the yarns pass and that open the shed for the shuttle that carries the weft yarns. Home looms in the 19th century usually had two or four harnesses enabling weavers to create the twill patterns seen here.

Twills are made by arranging yarns in a stair-step pattern. The weavers drafts that are used to thread looms resemble this example:

The weft yarns are the cross-wise yarns in a textile and are carried by shuttles. Overshot coverlets have two sets of yarns, one forms the plain weave structure and the other creates the pattern.

Each time the shuttle crosses the warp is called a pick.

The warp yarns are the lengthwise yarns in a textile and are threaded through heddles on the harnesses. They are under tension between the warp beam and cloth beam on the loom.

Laurel Wilson, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Textile and Apparel Management
Pattern: Similar to “Doors and Windows” (Davidson, 78)
Overall Size: 94” x 61”
Dyestuffs: Synthetic dye

Donor: James Ray

The coverlet was composed of small tables with three rows grouped in sets of three with an elongated lozenge between each set. There is a plainer table between each of the dominant groupings that creates a pleasing rhythm in the design. A border was created along the selvage edges by simply using the plain lozenges and tables seen in the rest of the pattern.

The teal, synthetic dye used for this coverlet is unusual since most overshot coverlets were made of fibers colored with natural dyestuffs. The whole coverlet is made of S-Twist (twist from left to right), single ply yarns. The cotton warp yarns and the tabby weft yarns were of a tighter twist than the woolen weft used to create the distinctive pattern.
The quality of the work is even and symmetrical and the selvages are very clean, indicating that the weaver was experienced at her craft. The coverlet was finished by turning and stitching the warp ends to create a neat, hemmed finish.

The coverlet is in good condition but the woolen yarns are somewhat felted giving the coverlet a slightly "seer-suckered" appearance.


Hiu Tung Ching
The coverlet is woven using natural fibers and soft dye shades. The indigo and natural white cotton preserve the beauty of this historical piece. The coverlet clearly displays an artistically detailed pattern that was carefully crafted. This coverlet is particularly wide with two loom widths stitched and joined together in the center of the coverlet so that the pattern matches. There is evidence of wear, but the coverlet is above average in condition bearing in mind its age. This coverlet needs to be handled with great care since the join has started to separate.
This picture illustrates the significance of the pattern and the detail put into it.

Burnham, Harold, B. & Burnham, Dorothy K. *Keep me warm one night*: Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1972


Anna Stephens
Pattern: Similar to Governor's Garden (Porter Davison, 95)
Date: Ca. 1850 (Porter Davison, 95)
Overall Size: 85 inches in length and 65.5 inches in width
Dyestuffs: Indigo and Butternut (Schetky & Woodward, 51)

Date Collected: 2006.2.19a
Donor: James Ray

The weaver is unknown in this example of the Governor's Garden pattern, which dates back to 1850. (Porter Davison, 1953, p 95). The structure is an overshot two shuttle weave, utilizing both cotton and wool fibers. The cotton fibers are not dyed and are displayed in their natural color. The wool fibers have been dyed using both butternut and indigo (Schetky & Woodward, 1984, p 51).
Two elongated panels of the Governor’s Garden pattern were joined together to create the overall composition. When the panels were joined, the pattern does not align correctly creating an obvious seam down the center of the coverlet creating an uneven pulse in the pattern. From the back view, the seam shows beautiful hand stitching. The hand stitching is repeated on the hemmed edges, which is a nice contrast to the frayed selvage edges.


Trudy Rogers- Denham
Weave Pattern: King’s Flower
Date: 1840-1860
Overall Size: 101” x 93”
Notes: 3 loom widths joined.
Dyestuffs: Indigo

Donor: James Ray
Collected: 11.9.97

An attractive pattern, featuring indigo blue wool on natural white cotton, the King’s Flower illustrates four flowers separated from a table by a half cross. The accuracy and quality of the geometric blocks and ovals provide a curious scheme for the viewers wandering eye. The piece shows evidence of wear with slightly frayed selvage edges and several stains. The areas with most wear occur around the edges. Top and bottom edges have been rolled and hemmed while selvage edges have been left unfinished.
All seam joinings show no alignment or symmetry, although have been sewn together with precision. This is evident and seen on reverse side; seams are straight with an even allowance, and edges are evenly hemmed. The weaving is even and tight, making this overshot coverlet much heavier in weight.

The overshot weave was relatively simple and the patterns for these coverlets were largely traditional and based on written drafts (Burnham). These drafts resemble musical notations, and, appropriately, this King’s Flower coverlet, is strikingly rhythmic in design.

The coverlet also features the opposite color pattern on the reverse side. Indigo, a natural dye-stuff that reaches its maximum concentration when the plant is in bloom, was most likely used to create the deep blue color for the weft wool yarns. Indigo is well known for its strong blue color of great permanence (Buchanan). Again, the quality of weaving is impeccable, each of the flowers and tables combining to create a true work of art. An overall delightful pattern created with meticulous skill work was achieved, the origin of this King’s Flower coverlet ranging 50 miles within St. Joseph, Missouri (Kennedy & Wilson).


Burnham, Harold B. Keep me warm one night: an exhibition of early Canadian handwoven textiles. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1971.


Whitney Greene
Title: “The Red Rose” (Davidson, 1953)
Date: 1860s
Overall size: 85” x 102”
Dyestuffs: Walnut & Marigold

Donor: James Ray

When researching my coverlet, I found it was very similar to the coverlet called “The Red Rose.” I chose this coverlet due to its different colors than the others that consisted of blue tones. The colors consist of white, black, and orange. The pattern on the coverlet is elongated and has a border surrounding the “wheels” in the main body. The coverlet is very felted, which makes it very difficult to see the spin and twist of the yarns. This coverlet is very well made and has done a great job of holding up.
It is probable that this coverlet was professionally woven since it consists of just one panel that is 102 inches wide, far wider than could be achieved on most home looms during the 19th century. It shows no evidence of having been double-woven, a technique that would have required an eight-harness loom instead of a four-harness loom normally used to create overshot textiles.

This coverlet pattern was used on coverlets in several Tennessee counties in about 1859. Since many Missourians came from that region, it is possible that the coverlet was brought to Missouri from there or woven in Missouri by a person from that area. Over the years, the coverlet’s primary use was as bedding that offered warmth during the cold months, nevertheless, coverlets added radiance to unadorned homes.

The coverlet is made out of indigo-dyed wool and natural cotton fiber (Skirvin, 1990). Indigo was most widely used in America during the 18th and 19th century. Indigo comes from a leaf like plant that was grown in India and sold in stores throughout America (Skirvin, 1990 Mayo Indigo).
The coverlet consists of a block weave which has no curvilinear elements (Burnham & Burnham, 1972). The pattern on the coverlet is very simple, consisting of blocks that are approximately 16 inches square. Each block is indigo blue and white that reminds one of a checkerboard. In my opinion the coverlet has a straightforward pattern that is easy on the eye yet, using it for bedding would be inviting because of warmth the wool fiber would provide (Burnham & Burnham, 1972). The coverlet appeared to have been washed several times; as a result it is difficult to tell whether there are any flaws in the weaving. The blocks are patterned so that the horizontal direction is dominant (Wilson & Kennedy, 1983). Overall the coverlet, while simple, is rather unique, therefore it has its own sense of beauty.


Pattern: Unknown
Date: 1850s-1860s
Overall Size: 96 x 72
Dyestuffs: Indigo

Donor Name: James Ray
Collected: 8.20.95
Thanks to James Ray, this beautiful coverlet made its way into the Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection. It may have originated in the St. Joseph, Missouri region, most likely during the 1850s to the 1860s. It has an overshot weave structure that is very unusual since the undulating twill that points to a circular pattern is off center instead of being symmetrical, lending interesting movement to the pattern. The square tables that are diagonal to the dynamic twill patterns ground the design, giving the eye a place to rest. The warp yarns are natural, white cotton. The weft yarns are wool and were dyed blue through the use of indigo.

Pattern: “The Red Rose” (Davidson, 1953)
Date: Ca. 1860s
Overall size: 96” x 102”
Dye Colors: Light Purple & Light Green Synthetic Dyes (Acid)

Donor: James Ray
Date Collected: 5.1.97
This coverlet looks similar to “The Red Rose”. It is very delicate and soft looking since it has light colors of green, purple, and white. The dyes are synthetic dyes. The coverlet is very felted so it was hard to see the spin and twist of the fibers.

The pattern is a series of wheels separated by elongated lozenges and has a simple border surrounding all sides. It was very well made and has no visible errors. This coverlet gives me a warm and gentle feeling when I look at it.

The pattern is squared with flower-like patterns in the middle of connecting lines. White yarns create lines in the pattern, and red yarns fill in some of the squares. The dyestuff used to create the burnt orange/reddish color was likely cochineal, which is made from beetles and often results in brilliant red and scarlet. Cochineal is remarkably long lasting and considered a luxury color, thereby making it quite costly. The dye is so expensive because each insect only provides a tiny supply of color; cochineal, however, has been an esteemed dye for hundreds of years and is still very much considered a luxury (Ross, 6).
The two panels of the coverlet do not match up perfectly, and in the middle where they connect the design is not as wide as the rest of the textile. There are also portions of the coverlet where the cochineal red has either worn or was dyed improperly from the start.

The unevenness in the red color indicates that the red was dyed in several dye lots. The top and bottom of the coverlet are hemmed, and there is a selvage edge. There are no trims or borders.

Burnham, Harold B.  *Keep me warm one night: An Exhibition of Early Canadian Handwoven Textiles.* Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1971.


Amanda Peterson
Pattern: Voice of the Woods.” (Davison, 21)
Date: ca. 1850-1860
Size: : 74” x 98” in two panels
Dyestuffs: Indigo

Donor: James Ray
Collected: 6.10.96

The coverlet is made of indigo blue wool supplementary weft on a white natural cotton warp and tabby weft. It is a simple two-block pattern that is very organized as it is block-oriented instead of curvilinear. Indigo, a vat dye, was used to color the woolen supplementary weft used to create the pattern. These dyes are the most unusual natural dyes. Indigo is lightfast and colorfast because when the dye reacts with air, it oxidizes and is fixed permanently. It was discovered in Asia more than 1,000 years ago (Grae, 55).
There is damage to the selvages and to the inner parts of the panels, which have been hand sewn. The warp edges are hemmed, but there is damage present visible by a few tears. Both the warp and the weft yarns consist of a one-ply yarn with a very tight twist. The yarn also has a “Z” spin.


Morven McCulloch
Pattern: Lover’s Knot Variation (Wilson & Kennedy, 292)
Date: Early 1800s
Size: 96”x 58”, panel width 29”
Dyestuffs: Cochineal

Donor: James Ray
Date Collected: Ca. 1993

The Lover’s Knot is regarded as a symbol of the constancy between two lovers (www.answers.com). Perhaps the weaver had this in mind when choosing the vibrant cochineal red and centering the two panels exactly. The overall coverlet is a remarkable display of symmetry and quality, with a beauty mark of darker coloring near one selvage end. The darker coloring was likely caused by using yarns colored from another dye lot.
The two panels were woven so carefully that it was possible to match the patterns at the center.


http://www.answers.com/topic/truc-lover-s-knot

Sarah Smith
Pattern Name: “Jefferson’s Beauty” variation (Davidson, 29) or Pine Cone Bloom (Kennedy & Wilson, 142-143)
Date: 19th Century
Overall size: 96” x 55”
Dyestuffs used: Cochineal, Marigolds or Onion skins

Donor: James Ray
Collected: 9.3.95

The coverlet has an interesting and complex design that consists of a band separating a clustering of maroon roses surrounded by alternating maroon and copper rows of tables and blocks. The design is very similar to “Pine Cone Bloom” in Of Coverlets and also “Jefferson’s Beauty” in A Handweaver’s Sourcebook. The warp yarns are made of cotton, single ply with an S-spin, and are a natural white. The weft yarns are made of wool, also single ply with an S-spin, and were dyed two different colors – copper and indigo. The coppery-red color was probably dyed using madder and the blue was indigo (Buchanan, 52-53, 104-105). The top and bottom finishes are hemmed, but there are no special trims. Overall, the coverlet is very interesting and beautiful and well crafted.
The coverlet has been washed, which resulted in extreme felting of the fibers. Because of this the overshot pattern is difficult to interpret. Also, the washing resulting in the wool fibers shrinking, giving the coverlet a wavy and uneven look, much like a seersucker fabric. There are no noticeable mistakes in the weave structure, which may be because there are none or because the felting masks them.


*Jessica Warren*
Pattern: Similar to “Spring Flower“ (Davison, 32)  
Date: Mid Nineteenth century  
Overall size:  
Dyestuffs: Indigo  

Donor: James Ray  
Collected: 11.9.97

This overshot coverlet was woven by Mary Jane Hughes of Macon, Missouri. It is a beautiful indigo and white color. The weft yarns are dyed indigo and the warp yarns were left white. There is only a single, narrow panel which leads me to believe it was part of a bigger coverlet in its earlier years since threads remain along one of the edges that probably connected it to another panel. The coverlet is very symmetrical in appearance and the weaver must have been very skilled because there are no visual mistakes that an onlooker would notice.
It has a block pattern with curvilinear patterns within the block. Just like all overshot coverlets, this coverlet is damask in appearance. Mary Jane intended for the darker side of the coverlet to be the top because the hem is on the lighter side. The only unusual colorations on the coverlet are how the white yarns have begun to yellow due to age.

Pattern: “Tennessee Trouble” (Wilson & Kennedy, 191)
Date: 1850-1860s
Overall size: 98” x 93”
Dyestuff: Indigo (full strength and exhausted dyebath)

Donor: James Ray
Collected: 5.14.97

“Tennessee Trouble” looks as fun as its colorful name. This overshot was dyed with two different shades of blue made from a full-strength indigo bath and an exhausted indigo bath, making the pattern playful and interesting as your eye moves block to block. Throughout the span of the coverlet you see criss-cross, stripes, circles, and a mixture of them all. Throughout the piece within its symmetry are brilliant curvilinear shapes that keep your eye yearning for more.
This coverlet is three loom widths joined together. Pattern is perfectly matched horizontally at seams. There is evidence of wear so it was used rather than being tucked away.

Pattern: Monks Belt Variation  
Date: Ca. 1859  
Overall size: 84” x 66”  
Dyestuff: Indigo  

Donor: James Ray  
Collected 11.9.97

This coverlet pattern was used in Putnman County, Tennessee in about 1859. The coverlet is made out of wool and cotton fiber (Skirvin, 1990). Indigo was most widely used in America during the 18th and 19th century. Indigo comes from a leaf like plant that is grown in India (Skirvin, 1990 Mayo Indigo). Over the years, the coverlet’s primary use was as bedding that offered warmth during the cold months, nevertheless, coverlets added radiance to unadorned bedrooms (Wilson & Kennedy, 1983).
The coverlet consists of a block weave which has no curvilinear elements (Burnham & Burnham, 1972). The pattern on the coverlet is very simple, consisting of blocks that are approximately 16 inches by 16 inches. Each block is indigo blue and white that reminds one of a checker board. In my opinion the coverlet has a straightforward pattern that is easy on the eye yet, using it for bedding would be inviting because of warmth the wool fiber would provide. Overall, the coverlet while simple is rather unique, therefore it has its own sense of beauty.


Felicia Kelley
Pattern Name: Similar to “Governors Garden” (Wilson & Kennedy, 103)
Date: Mid 19th Century
Size: 76” x 62”, two panels
Donor: Martha Bowen
Accession Number: 2006 219a

Perfectly dyed indigo wools and white natural cottons in this intricate piece display an interesting pattern that emphasizes the complexity of coverlets. Although this piece is worn in its appearance, it will endure through time with the changes of seasons throughout the year. This design took much imagination and originality to create, and should be an inspiration and a sound initiative for those to come.
The pattern is not quite symmetrical, indicating that the weaver got distracted as she threaded the loom. Because the pattern is complex, the errors are not immediately visible but can be seen with careful scrutiny.

Trudy Rogers-Denham, Lynette Yarger, Anna Stephens, Emily Graham, Sarah Smith, and Kelley George

Amanda Peterson, Felicia Kelley, Brittney Weaver, Morven McCulloch, and Whitney Green
Hiu-Tung Ching, Jessica Warren, and Felicity Watring

Katie Adams and Jenny Jackson
Whitney Greene, Felicity Watring, and Trudy Rogers-Denham