



*Two nearly identical dolls made by Grandma Moses show the diversity of her needlework abilities. She originally gave them to her granddaughters when they returned from the funeral of Anna, Grandma's daughter and the girls' mother.*

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*All images from the Bennington Museum Collection, photographed by James Cummings*

## **Grandma Moses: Early Quilts and Needlework**

*Patricia L. Cummings*

**T**he name “Grandma Moses” to most people conjures up the memory of an aged artist who rose to national fame in the last two decades of her life in the twentieth century. Celebrated for her untutored style of painting, sometimes called folk or primitive art, Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860-1961) created more than 1,500 landscape paintings, as well as hand-painted tiles, during her most productive decades. Less well known is her artistry in quilts and embroideries before she was “discovered.” These include a “King’s Crown” bed-size quilt, patchwork pillows, and needlework pieces she referred to as “pictures.”

After I became aware of her paintings titled “The Quilting Bee” (1950), and “Waiting for Santa Claus” (1960), both of which feature quilts as part of the design work, I wondered whether Grandma Moses had made any quilts herself. It was a delight to discover a few examples of her quilts and

some of her needlework at Bennington Museum.

Famous though it may not be, Grandma Moses produced a twin-size quilt that measures 71 by 80 inches. A gift to the museum from her granddaughter, Betty Moses Grochowski, the quilt is a colorful polychromatic scrap quilt with both pieced and solid cotton square blocks. The commercial (published) name for the quilt pattern is “King’s Crown,” a name thought to be a Biblical reference.

Where did Grandma Moses find the pattern? We shall never know for sure. Instructions for making the quilt blocks for this design were offered in the *Kansas City Star* in 1931 and were further documented in the book *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* by Carrie Hall and Rose Kretsinger (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1935). A description of how to piece a King’s Crown quilt block is found in *The Standard Book of Quilt Making and Collecting* by Marguerite Ickis, originally printed in 1949 by Dover Publications. In that book, the following instructions are provided: “Fold block into 16 squares. Divide 8 squares along the outer edge into two triangles. The corner squares are plain. Erase lines in center of block to form [a] larger central square.”

What any quilter would realize is that the quilt was a labor of love, and a tedious one at that. The quilt has 255 quilt blocks set together without sashing or borders. Some blocks are printed fabric while others are solid. Their small size would have required dedication and work to sew them together. By selecting some solid pieces of cloth for alternate blocks, the quilter saved herself some work. Clearly, the fabrics represent pieces saved in a multi-decade scrap bag. The quilt backing is pieced from medium-scale floral fabric carefully fashioned so that the individual scrap pieces resemble a wholecloth look. The edges are finished in a simple knife-edge fashion, tacked down by a row of sewing machine stitches.

Grandma Moses would have been familiar with quilts. Nineteenth century women in rural towns made quilts out of necessity to use as warm bed covers. Otto Kallir’s book, *Grandma Moses*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1973) provides Grandma Moses own description of the history of quilting:

*“Back in Revolutionary War times quilting bees were a necessity as well as a thing of art. The women took great pride in their needle work. Every well regulated house had one room set aside which was called the quilting room; the quilting frames were set up on the backs of chairs or stands. The women of the neighborhood would gather to sew, sometimes at night, but candle light was very poor for fine stitches, which the women of those days prided themselves in [...]”*



*“The Shepherd Comes Home” is the title of this framed “yarn painting,” one several Anna Mary Robertson Moses made. It measures 18 by 28 inches, shows a shepherd and his flock, a cottage with abundant flowers, and mountains in the background.*  
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Another small quilt, possibly made by Grandma Moses, features triangles cut from various print fabrics. Although it was found among her possessions, no clear provenance has been established for it. The textile was given to the Bennington Museum by Zoecanna Koloseus and Frances Ludowieg, her granddaughters. The quilt’s backing is a red and black fabric with a repeat motif of birds. Parts of the binding appear to be missing or bent out of view in the photo.

The museum collection also includes two patchwork pillows believed to have been made by Grandma Moses. Together, they make a compelling statement about the importance of being thrifty and not wasting the smallest bit of fabric. The wide red border on one of them helps to unify the pillow top that features many late nineteenth century fabrics. A Dresden Plate quilt block was used for the top of a third pillow. It includes a section that has 24 pieced triangles, assembled as a strip, and then sewn to both the block top and the pillow backing to make a small round pillow.

Two never-framed 17 by 7 inch needlework pieces made by Grandma Moses, also in the museum collection, are Oriental scenes probably made from Crewel embroidery kits. They are titled “Around the Corner” and “On the Road to Mandalay.” At the bottom edge of each piece, the same embroidered

inscriptions appear: “Grandma” and “Feb. 1932.” They were also given to the museum by granddaughters Zoanna Koloseus and Frances Ludowieg.

In the same Crewel medium, her first woolwork picture used worsted to create the 10 by 8 inch embroidered scene she calls “Cairo.” The wool yarns show a white-domed building with columns and a Venetian gondola in the foreground. The back of the work indicates that it was made for her granddaughter Zoan in 1933 (the name appears on the back of the piece, misspelled). This was donated to the museum by the same two granddaughters.

### *Sheep: A Theme Since Childhood*

Sheep were featured in Anna’s work from childhood. In fact, her older brother teasingly called some of her pictures “lambscapes,” perhaps pronouncing the word the way she initially said it. Two undated works held by the museum feature sheep. The first is a small shepherd scene titled, “The Shepherd Comes Home from the Hills” and measures 9.5 by 11.5 inches. The piece of needlework framed under glass was the gift of Mary Moses in 1972. The scene depicts sheep being led down a dirt road, with mountains in the background and a river flowing through the center of the design area.

Yet another framed “yarn picture” shows a shepherd and his flock, a cottage with abundant flowers, and again, mountains in the background.



*This Crewel embroidery of an Oriental scene is called “Around the Corner,” with the embroidered inscriptions “Grandma” and “Feb. 1932.” It, and another called “On the Road to Mandalay” were given to the Bennington Museum by Grandma’s granddaughters Zoanna and Frances.*

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“The Shepherd Comes Homes,” measures 18 by 28 inches and was purchased by the museum in 1972. Another needlework piece in the Bennington Museum collection is titled, “Cottage in Winter” and measures 22.5 by 18.75 inches. Depicted is a scene with two rabbits foraging in the front yard of a house that has two red chimneys, a porch, and windows with blue shutters. Brown birds are seen in the distant cloudy sky.

Two dolls that are almost identical are present in the collection and were made by Grandma Moses to console her granddaughters on the day of their mother’s funeral. They measure 9.5 by 15.5 inches and demonstrate the diversity of Grandma Moses’s needlework.

Among the belongings of Grandma Moses are two pincushions. One is well used and has two little Dutch doll shoes attached. The second one appears to be a soldier’s hussif – sometimes called a “housewife” – a sewing kit carried by infantrymen during wartime that has the basics of thread, scissors, pins, and needles to accomplish such tasks as minor repairs or sewing on a button.



*The full view of  
Grandma Moses's  
twin-sized  
King's Crown quilt,  
which measures  
71 by 80 inches.*

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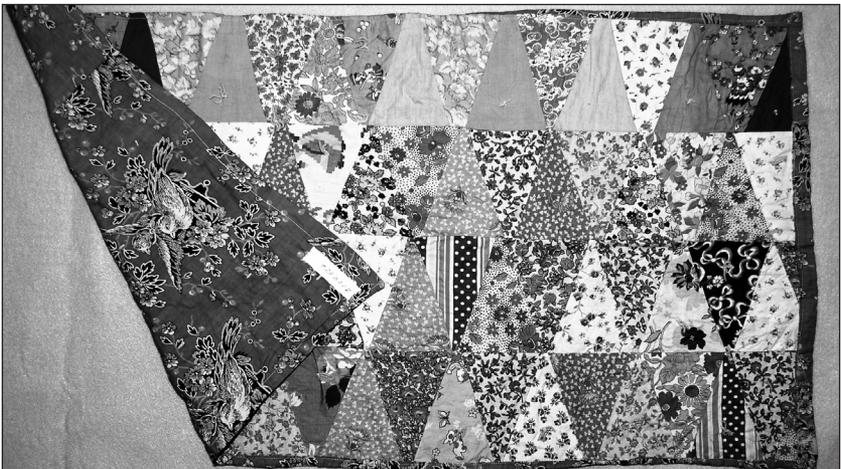
## *Early Lessons*

In her autobiography *Grandma Moses: My Life's Story*, Anna Mary

Robertson Moses recalls the difficulty of sewing seams by hand and how her mother, Margaret (Shanahan) Robertson taught her to sew clothing in that manner. Her father, Russell King Robertson, encouraged his children to draw and paint, and often brought home large sheets of blank newsprint he had purchased for a penny each page.

As the oldest girl in a family with 10 children, Anna recycled any available paper she could to make paper dolls. To add color to the dolls' eyes she would dip a paintbrush into water that had turned blue from the indigo dye released from fabrics her mother had just washed. To colorize lips, she would use natural color from pigments in grape or berry juice. She fondly recalled the occasion that her grandmother gave her colored paper which proved fun in making doll dresses. As one can readily see, in childhood, she built a life-long love of creative projects.

The artistic talents of Grandma Moses were encouraged all of her life by her family. She used whatever materials were available to create works of art. Her last painting "Rainbow" (June 1961), painted when she was 101 years old, culminated a long life of engagement with the arts. To give you an idea of her longevity, she was just four years old when she saw black buntings hung from buildings to mark the passing of President Abraham Lincoln. She lived to receive an award and shake the hand of President Harry Truman. She painted some commissioned work that depicted the farm of President Dwight Eisenhower. She lived to receive accolades from President John Kennedy. Petite, candid in her speech, and with a down-to-earth charm, "Grandma Moses" became a household name by the mid-1940s. Today, her art work are national treasures and we are certainly happy that needlework and quilting are in that mix. □



*Front and back of a small one-patch quilt made of repeated triangles of the same size.*  
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