

TRC Exhibition Proposal

For a few sacks more

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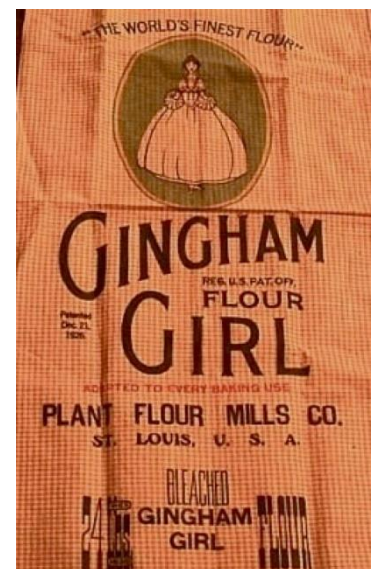
When Marilyn Monroe donned a burlap potato sack in 1952, she was making various (visual) statements about herself, her wardrobe and her ability to wear anything (literally) glamorously. But she was following in a long tradition that is found in many countries around the world, namely the wearing of sacks when nothing else is available. Clothing made from old sacks has been used for centuries to provide basic garments at very low cost. During the Depression in North America in the 1930's, clothing made from sacks was an important source of garments for many families. But instead of it vanishing as the economic situation improved by the 1940's, the wearing of sack clothing was regarded by many as a patriotic duty and in the 1950's the garments were seen as fashionable items that were worn by men, women and children throughout North America.

But what exactly is a feedsack? They have various other names, including flour sacks, flour bags, cotton bags, commodity bags, as well more poetically, 'chicken linen', 'hen house linen' and 'pretties'. Essentially they are cotton sacks that are used to store items such as flour, beans, maize, rice and sugar as well as feed for animals, notably calves, chickens and pigs.



Cloth sacks for feed started to be produced in the mid-19th century, following the development of industrial sewing machines that were capable of producing strong seams on bags that did not burst open when filled or being transported. During the latter half of the 19th century, these sacks were often made of linen and burlap, but gradually cotton became more and more widespread. Such sacks were normally marked with the name of a mill or producer. Small scale farmers only required a few sacks per month, but bakers, chicken farmers and others could use hundreds per month. Sometimes the sacks were returned to the original grain firms, but more often the empty sacks were sold or given away to women to make into clothing and household items, especially a wide range of quilts. The concept of 'waste not want not' was a key factor in the use of these textiles.

It was only in the 1920's, however, that manufacturers realised the potential of the cloth sack decoration to promote sales, by persuading the farmer's wives to purchase specific brands. One of the first to do so was the George P. Plant Milling Company (in St. Louis, Missouri), which started in 1925 to produce a range of brick red gingham cloth sacks under the trade name of 'Gingham Girl Flour'. Due to Gingham Girl's popularity they went on to produce 'Gingham Mother', 'Gingham Baby' and 'Gingham Queen' in different colours. The idea was copyrighted at the time, but it did not prevent other cloth and bag manufacturers from producing cotton bags with a variety of other attractive designs. By the late 1920's, various companies, notably the Bemis Brothers (TN), Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills (Atlanta) and Percy Kent of Buffalo (NY), were creating and producing a range of designs and colours to attract their (female) customers.



1929 witnessed the Wall Street Crash, which was followed by a series of droughts and harvest failures. It resulted in the 'Great Depression' that was to last over a decade. The acute lack of money meant that many already poor families literally had very little to wear. There are numerous contemporary photographs of women and children dressed in sacks and very little else. Not surprisingly, the widespread availability of cheap material that could be used to create garments became very popular and the bag companies, following on earlier developments, started to produce an even wider range of materials, qualities, sizes and designs. The brand names were printed on the cloth with inks that could be relatively easily washed off (bags often came with washing instructions). In later years, paper labels were introduced that could be simply soaked off. Women started coming together in groups to sew, swap and save for particular patterns. In addition, itinerant peddlers travelled with empty bags to more remote areas in order to help satisfy the demand for the printed cloth.



Twelve-year old girl of family of nine living in one-room hut built over the chassis of abandoned Ford truck in open field on U.S. Route 70 between Camden and Bruceton, Tennessee. View also shows one of the small boys in family; the girl is dressed in a meal sack (1936; courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-fsa-8a01638).

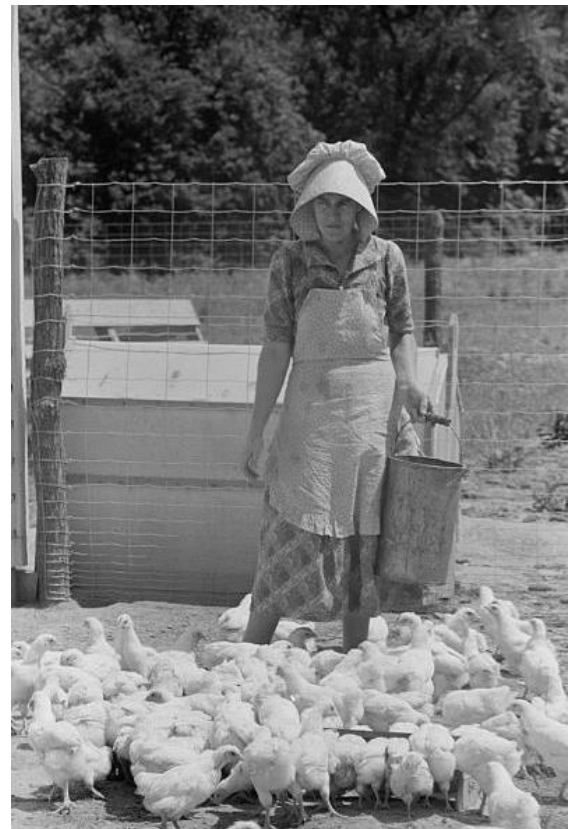
Then came World War II (1939-1945) and the rationing of various forms of goods. Commodity bags, as the feedsacks were known, were exempt from the rationing in order to help persuade families to move from imported and more expensive brands of cloth, and the more robust sacking that was needed for the war effort, to lighter and cheaper cotton bags that were brightly coloured with a wide range of designs. The use of these bags was seen as being patriotic and thrifty, while at the same time the cloth was marketed as being practical and

fashionable. Numerous booklets were produced by various groups to encourage women to produce more and more garments and other items at home, using these materials.

Farmer's wife with chickens, Scioto Farms, Ohio (1938; courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-fsa-8a09537). [[see exhibition object 80]]

The popularity of these textiles continued well into the 1950's, but their time was slowly coming to an end as paper feedsacks were being produced that were considerably cheaper than the cotton versions. To help counter this development, various national groups (backed by the cotton industry) were set up to support, develop and encourage the production of cotton sacks and their use for garments and household items. They developed a series of activities, including state competitions for garments, quilts and other items made from feedsacks.

In addition, international sewing pattern companies, such as those of *Burda* and *Simplicity*, produced catalogues and patterns that were especially designed to fit the sizes of commercial feedsacks. And this is where the fashion models started to come in. Various American mannequins were photographed wearing printed feedsacks to encourage the notion that sack clothing could be and was glamorous! And by intent



or coincidence, Marilyn Monroe was photographed in late 1951 or early 1952 wearing a specially made fringed dress made from a burlap potato sack.



Jorena Pettway and her daughter making chair cover out of bleached flour sacks and flower decorations from paper. She also made the chairs and practically all the furniture in the house. Gees Bend, Alabama (1939; courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-fsa-8a40071).



Sisters with the same material for their dresses, family at the Vermont state fair, Rutland (1941; courtesy of the Library of Congress LC-DIG-fsac-1a33924). [[see exhibition objects 73 and 74]]



By the 1960's, however, the increased diversity and cheapness of paper and plastics within the commodity packaging world meant that feedsacks were no longer widely used. And most of the sacks vanished from the shelves, wardrobes and peoples' memories. However, with current thoughts and desires for sustainability this would seem be a good time for the use of printed and colourful feedsacks to be re-examined and re-packaged (sorry for the pun) to fit modern needs! And if not, the story of the feedsacks is certainly surprising, intriguing and says much about American history, the role of women and that of textiles!

Lucy gets a Paris gown

The American comedian, Lucille Ball, is still remembered by many for her television series called *I Love Lucy*, which was about her and her husband and their many (mis) adventures. One episode in particular is a comment on the wearing of feedsack clothing. It is called *Lucy gets a Paris gown* (no. 147, aired March 1956) and describes how Lucy and her friend, Ethel Mertz, go to Paris with their husbands. Both women want Parisian dresses designed by the French couturier, Jacques Marcel (a fictional name). They are persuaded that the latest fashion are outfits made of horse feed buckets and coarse potato sacks. The two women walk around in these garments until they realise that they had been made fools of by their spouses. They force their husbands to buy real Marcel gowns. However, the next day they see French models wearing outfits, designed by Marcel, which are identical to their sack dresses and eccentric headwear. Memories of this and other *I Love Lucy* episodes linger on in the American memory and in 2002 Mattel, Inc., produced a Barbie doll version of Lucy wearing her sack outfit. In 2008, the same company made a joint set of Lucy and Ethel dolls wearing buckets and sack garments.

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The TRC exhibition "A Few Sacks More" about the history and role of feedsacks and in particular their use as garments and quilts will open on the 15th January 2018 and run until the 28th June 2018. It will take place at the TRC Gallery, Hogewoerd 164, 2311 HW Leiden, The Netherlands (www.trc-leiden.nl). It will be available for loan to other museums and institutes after that date. The exhibition has been made possible by the *Small Grant Program* administered by the American Embassy in The Netherlands.

Flour Sack Underwear

When I was a maiden so fair
Mama made our underwear
With little tots and Papa's poor pay
How could she buy lingerie?
Monogram's and fancy stitches
Were not on our flour sack breeches.

Pantywaists that stood the test
With GOLD MEDAL on the chest
Little pants the best of all
With a scene I still recall
Harvesters were gleaning wheat
Right across the little seat.

Tougher than a grizzly bear
Was our flour sack underwear
Plain of fancy, three feet wide,
Stronger than a hippo's hide
Throughout the years,
Each Jill and Jack
Wore this sturdy garb of a sack.

"Waste not – want not" was soon learned.
And "A penny saved is a penny earned"
Bedspreads, curtains, tea towels, too
Table clothes, to name a few
But best, beyond compare
Was our flour sack underwear.

Anonymous

Exhibition Contents

The exhibition is divided into nine main sections, with a number of sub-sections:

- Introduction
 - Early forms of sacks and special inks
 - Introduction of decorative feedsacks
 - Feedsack sizes: large and small
- Feedsack designs
- Decorative feedsacks and sewing
- Feedsacks and clothing
 - Lucy and Ethel
- Decorative feedsacks and toys
- Decorative feedsacks and household items
- Feedsacks, embroidery and lace
- Feedsack quilts
- Some other re-cycling stories

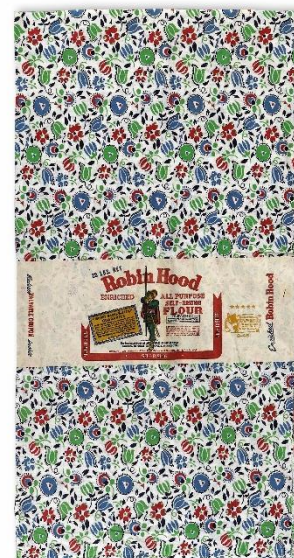
Introduction: early history

1. Feedsack with a pattern of cotton bolls – the start and middle of the story, with much more to come..... (1940's).
2. Feedsack with a typical floral design (1930's).
3. Four feedsacks with the same design (1950's).
4. Fair catalogue with references to prizes given for flour sack objects (1922; Aix, Alberta, Canada).
5. A flour sack with just the name of the company (1920's).
6. A cane sugar sack with washing instructions about how to get the ink off the cloth (1930's).
7. A pig feedsack with washing instructions about how to get the ink off the cloth. The cloth could then be used as a towel (1930's).
8. An alfalfa seed sack with washing instructions about how to get the ink off the cloth (1930's).
9. Feedsack for a striped towel with printed label and instructions how to get into the bag (1930's).
10. Feedsack opener (early 1950's).
11. Ball of thread from opened feedsacks



Introduction of decorative feedsacks

12. Colonial Girl flour sack with original label (1940's).
13. Robin Hood flour sack with original label (1950's).
14. Angel flour sack with original label (1950's).
15. Tortilla flour sack with original label for Marina flour (1990's).
16. Feedsack with an imitation cross stitch embroidery design with label (mid-20th century).
17. Percy Kent: Cloth of the United Nations 233 (c. 1944).
18. Percy Kent advertisement for printed flour sacks (1947)
19. Percy Kent advertisement leather flour sack (early 1950's).

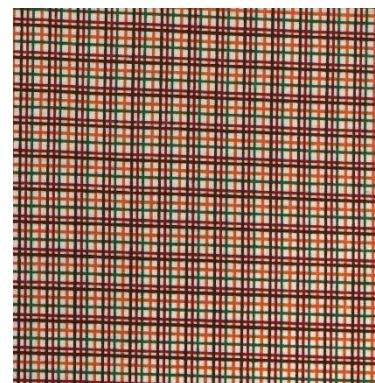


Feedsack sizes

20. Small size flour sack (1940's).
21. Medium size feedsack (1940's).
22. Large feedsack (1950's).
23. Printed feedsack with original labels for PurAsnow Flour. The sack is extra large in order to attract sales (1950's).

Feedsack designs

24. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stripes and checks (1950's).
25. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stripes and checks (1950's).
26. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of checks (1950's).
27. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of small dots (1950's).
28. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of large dots (1950's).
29. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of checks and stylised flowers (19XXX).
30. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised flowers (1930's).
31. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised flowers (1930's).
32. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised flowers (1930's).
33. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised flowers (1940's).
34. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised autumn fruits and berries (1940's).
35. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised cowboys on horses (1940's).
36. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised cowboys on horses (1940's).



37. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised cowboy boots and fences (1940's).
38. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised pigs feeding and playing (1930's).
39. Feedsack cloth with a printed abstract design (1950's).
40. Feedsack cloth with a printed abstract design (1950's).
41. Feedsack cloth with a printed abstract design (1950's).
42. Two feedsack cloths with printed stylised flowers and abstract forms (1950's).
43. Feedsack cloth with a printed stylised yachts (1940's).
44. Feedsack cloth with printed stylised horses, racing with the names of various American race courses (1940's).
45. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised girl's heads (1940's).
46. Feedsack cloth with a printed stylised design of paired birds in cages hanging from tree branches (1950's).
47. Feedsack cloth with a printed abstract design of a female figure (1950's).
48. Feedsack cloth with a printed abstract design (1950's).
49. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of various forms of old fashion transportation (1950's).
50. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of various forms of old fashioned transportation (1950's).
51. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of stylised yachts (1940's).
52. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of various forms of yachts (1950's).
53. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of Dutch windmills (1950's).
54. Feedsack cloth with a printed design of Dutch windmills, plus two people wearing clogs (1950's).
55. Feedsack with a printed Disney cartoon design (1950's).
56. Feedsack with a printed Disney cartoon design (1950's).



Decorative feedsacks and sewing

57. Leaflet called *Out of the Bag* with tips for using flour sacks (April 1929).
58. *Sewing with Cotton Bags* booklet with information and tips about using feedsacks (1929).

59. *Singer Sewing Library* with information and tips about various forms of sewing and the making of garments and household items (1930).
60. *Make and Mend for Victory* booklet with information and tips about sewing and re-use of cloth and garments (1942).
61. *The Reader's Digest* with a short article about American feedsacks (1942, p. 111).
62. *Thread of Victory* by Frank Walton with a short chapter about feedsacks (1945).
63. *The Libelle* magazine with an article about American feedsacks (no. 27, October 1948, pp. 20-21; in Dutch).



Feedsacks and clothing

64. *The American* magazine with an article about feedsacks and fashion (1948, pp. 32-33).
65. *The Southern Farmer's* fashion catalogue with a feedsack pattern for beach wear (1950)
66. *The 1953 Pattern Service for sewing with cotton bags* by the American company of Simplicity.
67. Eight Simplicity paper patterns that are referred to in the *1953 Pattern Service*.
68. Original *The Farmer's Fashion* catalogue (1950).
69. *The Farmer* dress pattern (late 1940's).
70. An original photograph depicting a model wearing a feedsack (1957).
71. Woman's top made from feedsack cloth (1950's).
72. Woman's skirt made from feedsack cloth (1940's).
73. Woman's dress made from feedsack cloth (1930's).
74. Woman's dress made from feedsack cloth (1940's).
75. Woman's dress made from feedsack cloth (1940's).
76. Woman's dress made from feedsack cloth (1950's).
77. Girl's dress made from feedsack cloth (1940's).
78. Girl's dress made from feedsack cloth (1950's).
79. Girl's dress made from feedsack cloth (1950's).
80. Girl's dress made from feedsack cloth (1950's).
81. Clark's booklet for aprons. This type of booklet was frequently copied by women making aprons at home (1940's).
82. Woman's apron made from flour sack cloth (1930's).
83. Woman's apron made from feedsack cloth (1930's).



84. Woman's apron made from feedsack cloth (1950's).
85. Woman's sun bonnet made from feedsack cloth (1950's).

Lucy and Ethel

86. Card depicting Lucy and Ethel wearing sack clothing and headwear (1956).
87. Lucy and Ethel's sack clothing and headwear (Mattel, 2008).

Feedsacks and toys

88. Stuffed cloth doll called 'Dusty the Cowboy' (1935).
89. Flour sack with a printed cloth doll in the *Rag Darling* series (flour company, 1937).
90. Flour sack with a printed cloth doll in the *Rag Darling* series (flour company, 1937).
91. Advertisement for *the Rag Darling Flour company* (late 1930's).
92. Stuffed cloth doll called 'Miss Supreme' (Supreme flour; 1930's).
93. Printed sack with a printed design of a 'Sailor Boy' doll (1950's).
94. Doll's apron made from a piece of feedsack cloth (1950's).
95. Printed design of a Christmas toy reindeer (1930's).
96. Printed design of an Alice in Wonderland toy (1930's).

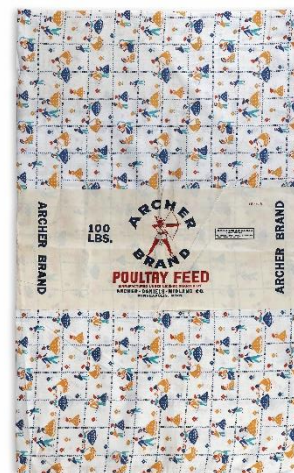


Feedsacks and household items

97. Feedsack for a pillowcase with washing instructions about how to get the ink off the cloth (1950's).
98. Feedsack for a pillowcase produced by KENT Beauty Biscuit flour (1950's).
99. Pillowcase with crochet edge made from a decorative sack (1950's).
100. Pair of decorative sacks that could be used for either curtains or pillow cases (mid-20th century).
101. Flour sack towel decorated with a design of a girl milking a cow (mid-20th century).
102. Flour sack towel decorated with a design of a girl feeding pigs (mid-20th century).
103. Pan holders (pot holder) with an advertisement for a feed (mid-20th century).
104. Embroidered table cloth made from a flour sack (mid-20th century).
105. Laundry bag made from a flour sack decorated with figures of 'Sun Bonnet Sue' (mid-20th century).
106. Seven days of the week design with embroidered flowers (mid-20th century).

Feedsacks with imitation embroidery and lace

107. Feedsack with an imitation cross stitch embroidery design (mid-20th century).
108. Feedsack with an imitation cross stitch embroidery design (mid-20th century).
109. Feedsack with an imitation cross stitch embroidery design (mid-20th century).
110. Feedsack with an imitation cross stitch embroidery design of 'Bless this house' (mid-20th century).
111. Feedsack with an imitation satin stitch embroidery design (mid-20th century).
112. Feedsack with an imitation 'blackwork' embroidery design (mid-20th century).
113. Feedsack with an imitation lace design (mid-20th century).
114. Feedsack with an imitation appliqué design (mid-20th century).



Feedsacks and quilts

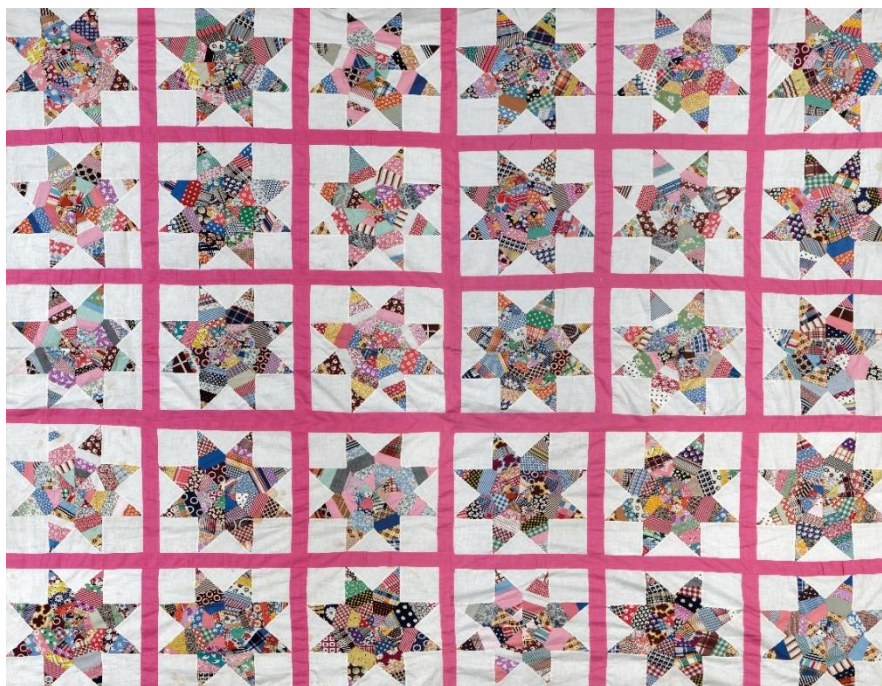
115. Printed patchwork design with hexagonal blocks ('cheater'; mid-20th century).
116. Printed patchwork design ('cheater'; mid-20th century).
117. Printed quilting design ('cheater'; mid-20th century).
118. Quilt paper pattern pieces from the *Kansas Star* newspaper (1930's).
119. Selection of embroidery transfers suitable for quilts (1930's-50's).
120. 'Sugar loaf' quilt blocks made with feedsack cloth (1930's).
121. 'Mayflower' quilt blocks made with feedsack cloth (1950's).
122. Printed quilt block templates on flour sacks (1930's).
123. Patchwork quilt top made with feedsack cloth. The top was made by Margaret Smart, Oregon. Flour sacks have been used to line the quilt top (1930's).
124. 'Crazy' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1930's).
125. 'Crazy' patchwork quilt top made with feedsack cloth (1930's).
126. 'Bowtie' patchwork quilt top made with feedsack cloth (1940's).
127. 'Dresden plate' patchwork quilt top (1940's).
128. Autographed patchwork quilt top made with feedsack cloth (1940's).
129. Autographed patchwork quilt top made with feedsack cloth (1940's).
130. 'Star' patchwork quilt top made with feedsack cloth (1950's).
131. 'Crazy' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1930's).



132. 'Long Stripes' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1930's).
133. 'Trip around the World' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1950's).
134. 'Postage Stamp' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1950's).
135. 'Flying Geese' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1950's).
136. 'Snail trail' patchwork quilt made with feedsack cloth (1950's).
137. 'Flower' appliqué quilt made with feedsack cloth (1930's, quilted in the 1990's).



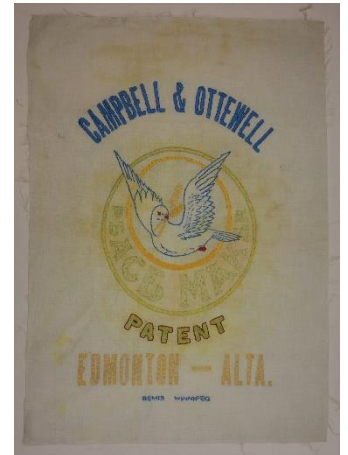
'Crazy' quilt



'Star' quilt

Some other 'stories'

138. Canadian flour sack embroidered in Belgium (c. 1919).
139. Printed flour sack (late 20th century; Mexico).
140. Printed flour sack (late 20th century; Mexico).
141. Top made from a flour sack (late 20th century; Mexico).
142. Apron made from a flour sack (late 20th century; Mexico).
143. Blanket given to an Italian family towards the end of the Second World War. This type of blanket was often remade into garments (USA/Italy, 1945).
144. Christening robe made from a Second World War parachute and decorated with the names of babies baptized in the garment (Netherlands, 1947).
145. Matching blouse and skirt with a lining made from sacks stamped with the name of French, Manchester (Iran, early 20th century).



Technical information

Size of exhibition: c. 150 sq metres.

Number of objects: c. 145 items ranging in size from a thimble to c. 2.5 x 2.0 m bed quilts. The range of items include may vary according to the venue.

Range of dates: 1930's until the 1960's. Most of the pieces are mid-20th century in date.

Sources of objects: All the items in the exhibition come from the TRC Collection, Leiden.

Illustrative items: photographs, original prints, etc.

Lighting: all of the items are 20th century in date and made with synthetic dyes. It is not necessary to keep to a strict 50lux lighting situation for these objects.

Display: Some of the smaller items, magazines and books need to be in showcases, but the majority of pieces can be displayed on podiums, behind waist level barriers, etc. There should be a 'do not touch' policy. The TRC is having a long A-frame made for displaying the quilts, while many of the feedsacks will be hung with wooden pegs on cotton washing lines. The A-frame, pegs and lines will be available if required by other venues.

Intended public: anyone interested in the economic and social history of America and the role of textiles in particular; use of upcycling textiles and related objects; the history, production and use of American quilts; the making of quilts in general.

Lectures/workshops: Linzee McCray (linzee.mccray@gmail.com), a specialist in feedsacks, would be willing to come to various venues to give workshops on the history of feedsacks and American quilts.

Catalogue: An illustrated catalogue in manuscript form (written in English; digitally available) can be provided if required.

Available from: August 2018 onwards

Length of loan period: three to four months (longer is possible if necessary)

Loan fee: €6,000

Courier: flight, plus accommodation and per diem required, to be paid by the loan venue.

Transportation of objects: to be organised and paid by the loan venue.

Insurance of objects: to be paid by the loan venue.

Travelling exhibition: this exhibition is available to travel to venues in North America, Europe and Scandinavia. Elsewhere will be considered upon request.

The exhibition will be on display at the TRC Gallery, Hogewoerd 164, 2311 HW Leiden, The Netherlands, from the 15th January 2018 until the 28th June 2018.