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Quilting Sisters

Richard G. Oman

Bishop Sheets's Quilt, Eighth Ward Relief Society, Salt Lake City, 1872, Collection of the Museum of Church History and Art, Gift of Mrs. Eva West.

The quilt shown on the front cover of this issue was a gift by the Female Relief Society of the Salt Lake Eighth Ward to a beloved bishop, Elijah Funk Sheets. Bishop Sheets served the Eighth Ward as bishop from 1856 to 1904, the longest service of any bishop in the history of the Church.¹

The center panel depicts a beehive surrounded by bees, symbolizing Latter-day Saint cooperation, order, and industry.² What better symbol for the Eighth Ward Relief Society working together in a quilting bee than the bees surrounding the hive? Above the beehive is embroidered an all-seeing eye representing the Lord. Above that is embroidered "Holiness to the Lord," which served to remind all that everything we do should be done in accordance with the will of the Lord. "FRS" stands for "Female Relief Society." "1872" is undoubtedly the date the quilt was completed.

Surrounding the center panel are blocks depicting roses and baskets full of grapes and strawberries. Zion is blossoming as a rose³ and bountifully producing crops. In outer blocks are doves, each holding an olive branch, a joining of two ancient symbols of peace.⁴ The border of the quilt is an appliqué of intertwined vines. Vines have long been an ancient symbol of Israel⁵ but can also symbolize Christ.⁶ The quilt tells the Eighth Ward Relief Society's bishop that they are righteously laboring to bring forth the Lord's Kingdom on earth.

This quilt was made one year after Sheets was given the additional calling of being a "traveling bishop" to several stakes in central Utah. In this job, he supervised temporal affairs for the Church.

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Detail from *Bishop Sheets's Quilt*. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

He also served as assistant trustee-in-trust for the Church under Brigham Young.⁷ The Relief Society probably made this quilt to celebrate Bishop Sheets's additional calling.

Senator Edmunds's Quilt, Women's Home Mission Society of Ogden, Utah, 1882, Collection of the Museum of Church History and Art.

American women have used quilts to express their opinions and celebrate important events for almost two hundred years. The quilt shown on the back cover of this issue was made by Protestant women in Utah as a gift to Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont to express their appreciation for his part in passing the Edmunds Bill. The bill placed severe legal penalties on the Mormons for practicing polygamy.

This quilt is a "parlor throw" quilt made in a tumbling block pattern. On it are embroidered the names of 130 non-LDS women from Ogden, Utah, plus Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes, the honorary president of the Women's Home Mission Society. In the center is the name of the recipient, "Gov. F. Edmunds. U.S. Senator from Vermont."⁸

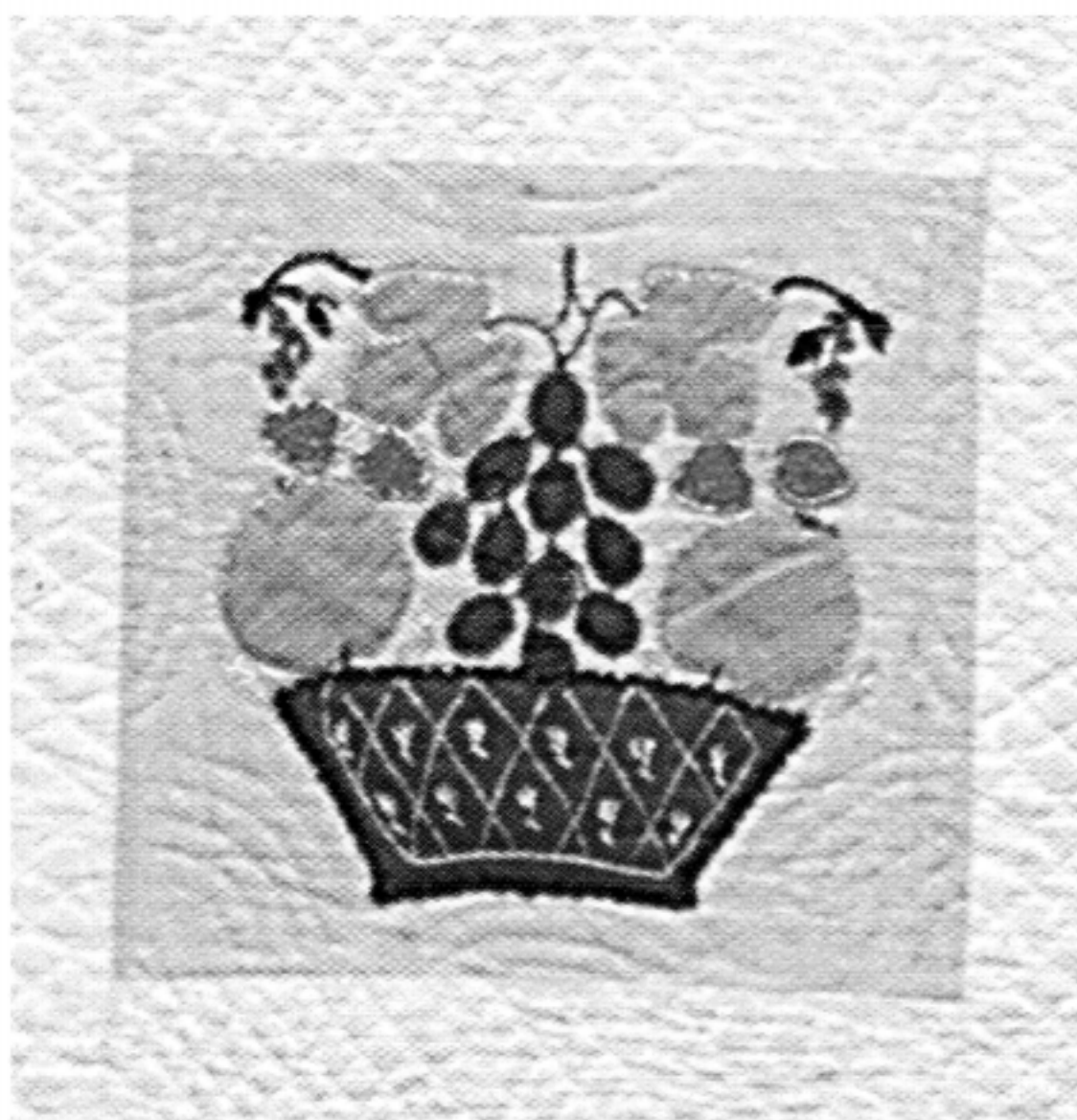
In the late nineteenth century, parlor throws became fashionably upscale. Rich cloth, especially velvets and silks with deep, saturated colors, were avidly sought for these quilts. Cloth was especially prized if it had been part of a wedding dress, silk hair ribbons from a graduation, a baby dress, or other highly symbolic costume. Expressive embroidery and rich fabrics, rather than intricate and time-consuming quilting, were the main decorative embellishments. These quilts were not used for personal bedding; rather they were placed in parlors for viewing by visitors.⁹ The donors probably expected (or at least hoped) that the Edmundses would display this piece in their parlor.

A parlor throw quilt was the perfect vehicle for the Women's Home Mission Society to express their social status, group solidarity yet individuality, and up-to-date fashionableness to Senator Edmunds. Perhaps the self-consciously upscale nature of the quilt was meant to contrast with the inferred "backwardness" of Mormon women as depicted in the popular press. The quilt mixed the concept of women taking a growing public role with an overtly domestic art form.

Contrast this quilt with the one made by the Eighth Ward Relief Society. Both quilts were made by Utah women. Both were gifts



Detail from *Bishop Sheets's Quilt*. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.



Details from Bishop Sheets's and Senator Edmunds's quilts. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

to men who were seen as championing the women's values. Both were seen as supporting a religious point of view. Yet one quilt celebrates individualism, stylish fashion, public display, and an appeal to secular power. The other focuses on cooperation, unity, building Zion, private display, and a celebration of religious power.

Richard G. Oman is Senior Curator of the Museum of Church History and Art.

NOTES

¹ Acquisition Record Form, Bishop Sheets's Quilt, Museum of Church History and Art.

² Richard G. Oman, "Beehive Symbol," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:99.

³ Isaiah 35:1.

⁴ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 35.

⁵ Psalms 80:8-10; Isaiah 5:1-7; Alma 16:17.

⁶ John 15:1-5.

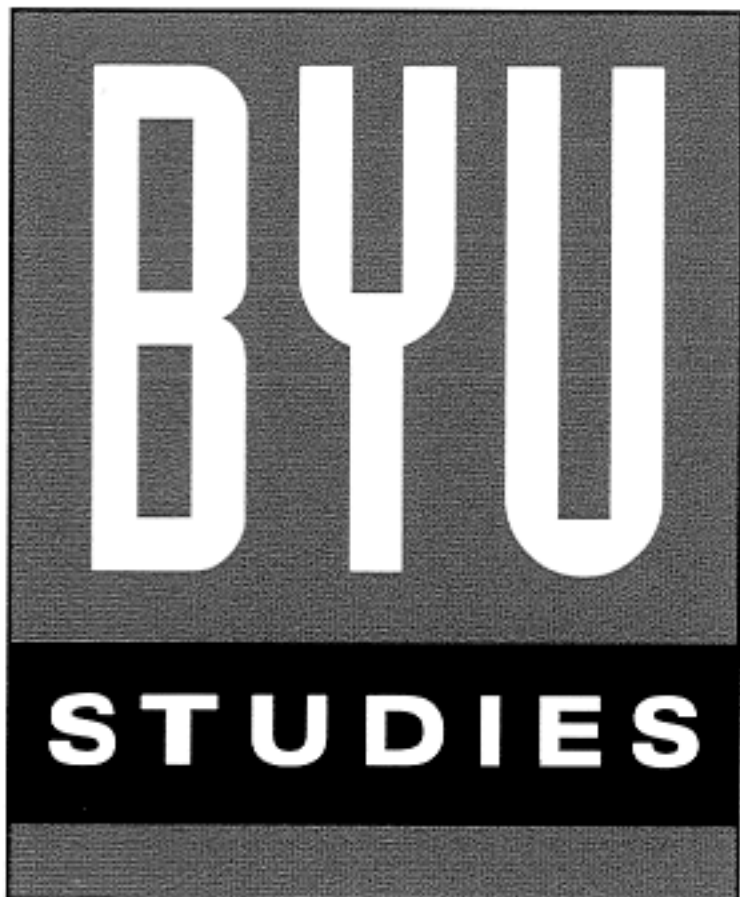
⁷ Andrew Jensen, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jensen History Co., 1901-36), 1:614-16.

⁸ Acquisition Record Form, Senator Edmunds's Quilt, Museum of Church History and Art.

⁹ Carleton L. Safford and Robert Bishop, *America's Quilts and Coverlets* (New York City: Weathervane Books, 1974), 297.



Brent's Japanese Mission Quilt, Karen Searle (1935-), Shelley, Idaho, 1980. Used by permission of Brent Searle. Missionary quilts, usually made by the missionary's mother or grandmother have become an increasing popular form of distinctively Mormon quilting. This quilt was made by Karen Searle for her son Brent, who was serving in the Japan Oyama Mission. The oriental character means "Peace, happiness, and health." Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.



THE SAINT AND THE GRAVE ROBBER

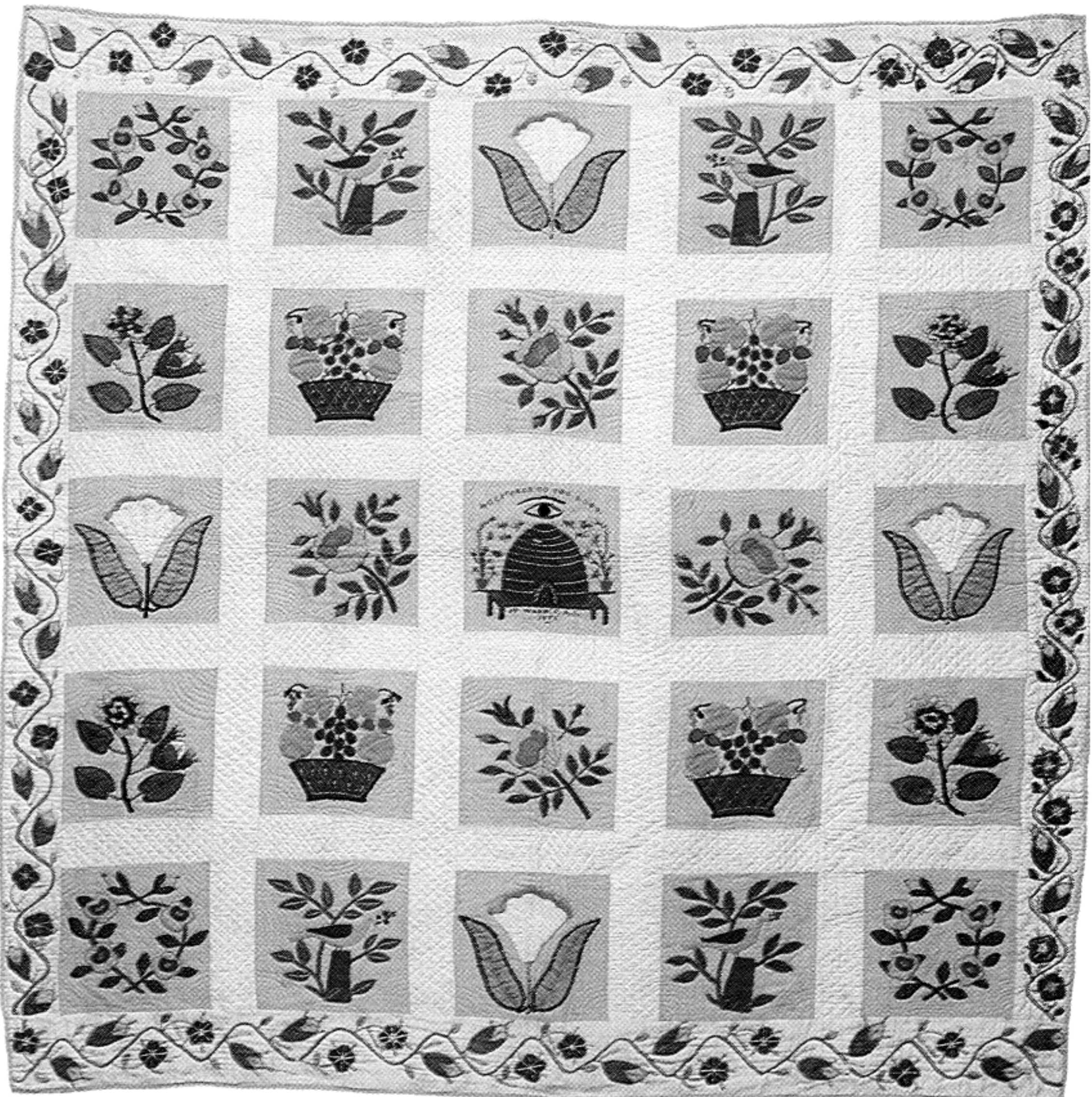
THE LAIE PROPHECY

VISION UNDER A PEPPER TREE

SISTERS UNDER THE SKIN

ANOTHER WINTER'S TALE

JESSE SMITH'S 1814 PROTEST

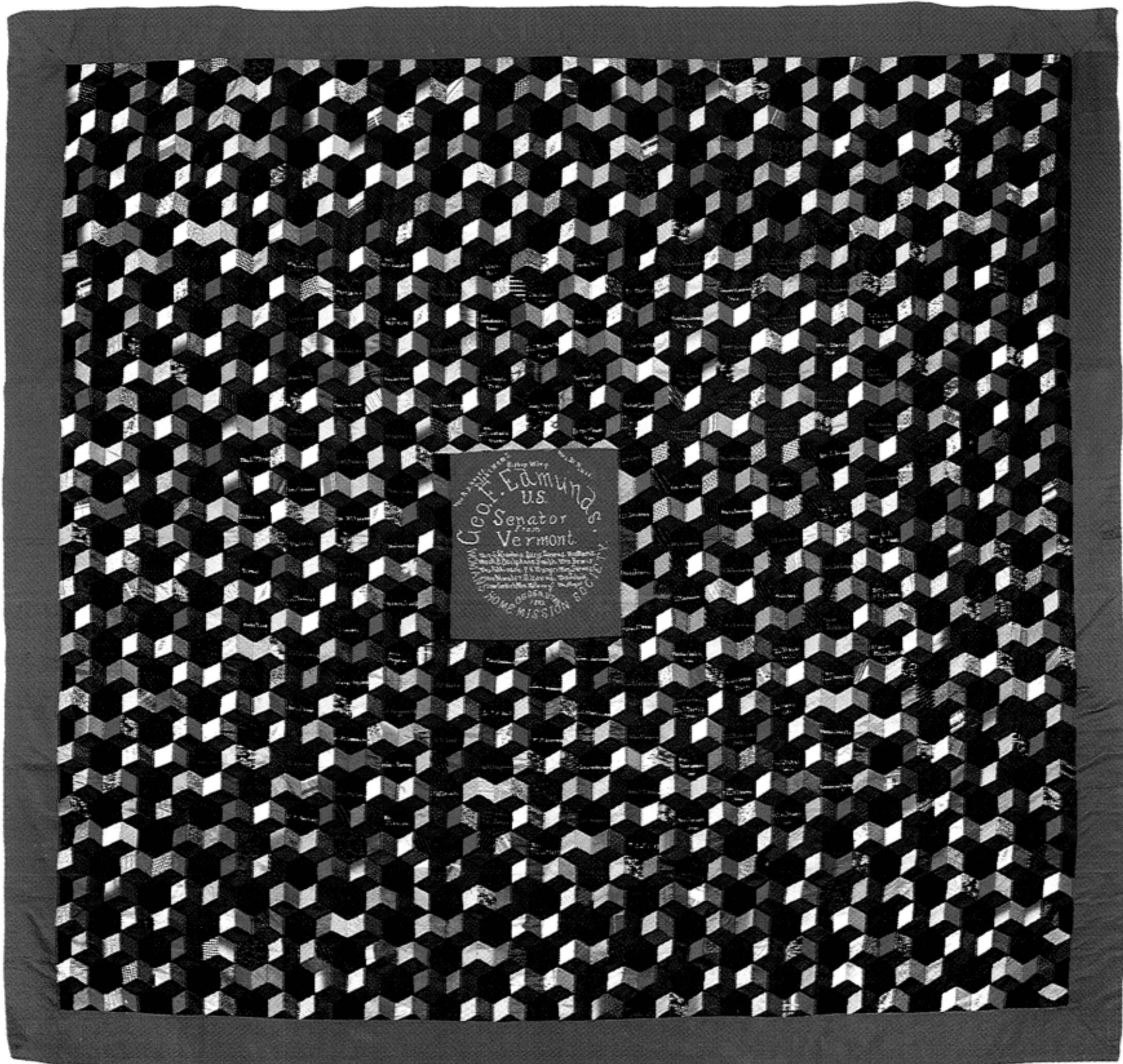


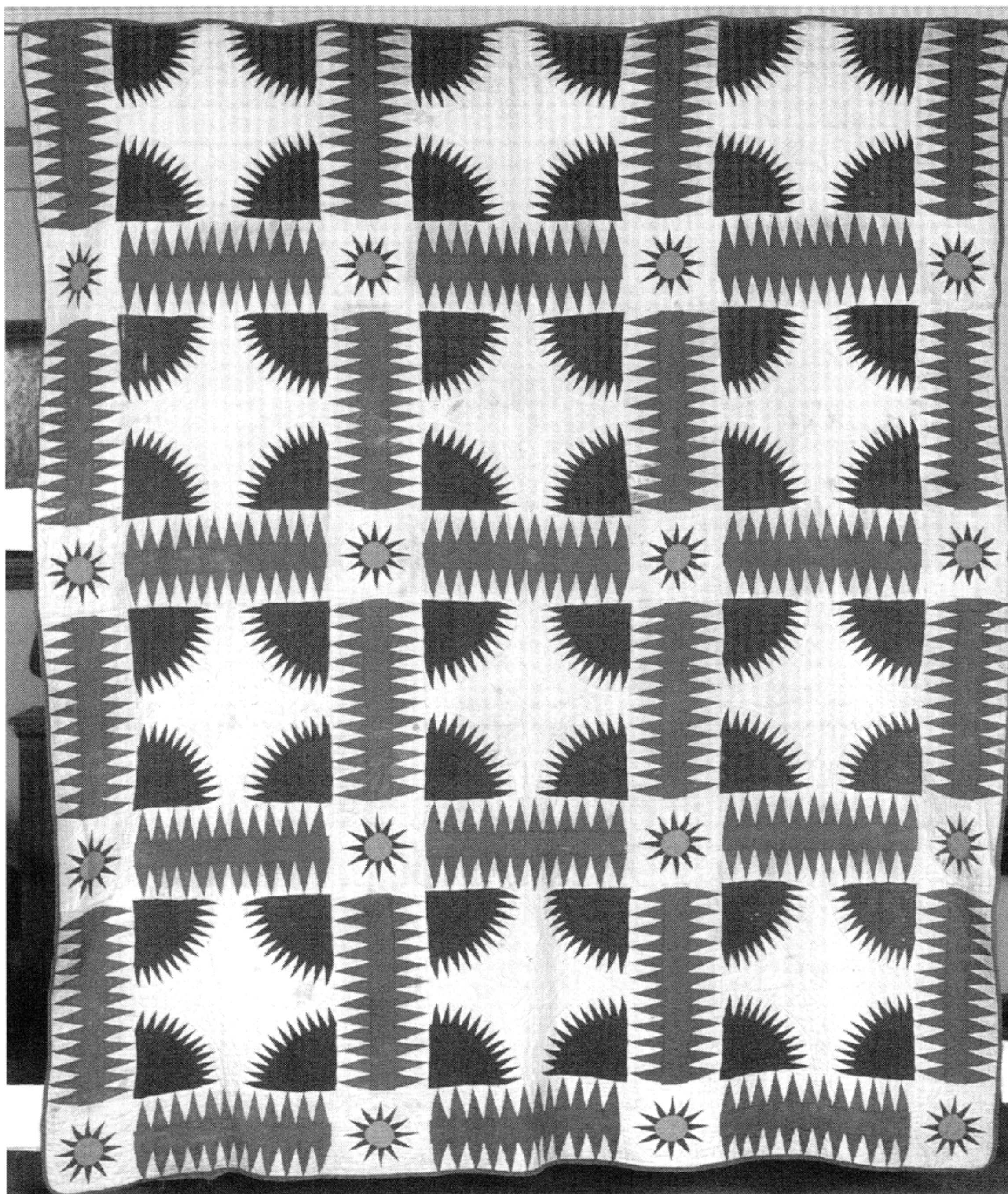


Center panel from *Bishop Sheets's Quilt*. The symbols in this block express the Latter-day Saint quilters' values of cooperation and industry (the beehive) and faith (the all-seeing eye of God). See "Quilting Sisters" in this issue for more details. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

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Sunrise in the Pines, Dorinda Moody Goheen Slade (1808–1895), Pine Valley, Utah, 1862. Collection of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum, Salt Lake City. Reproduced courtesy of Jeana Kimball. Dorinda was born in North Carolina and eventually settled in Texas, where she and her husband had a four-thousand-acre cotton plantation. Upon joining the Church, the couple freed their slaves, sold their farm, and prepared to “gather to Zion,” but Dorinda’s husband soon died, making her a widow for the second time. In time, she married a widower and headed west with a family of sixteen; several children died on the trail. Once in Utah, she and her family were sent to St. George to raise cotton. After a year of floods, drought, and searing heat, the family moved to Pine Valley, where Dorinda spent the rest of her life. This quilt celebrates both her hope, in spite of the loss of so many family members, and her home amid the evergreens of Pine Valley.

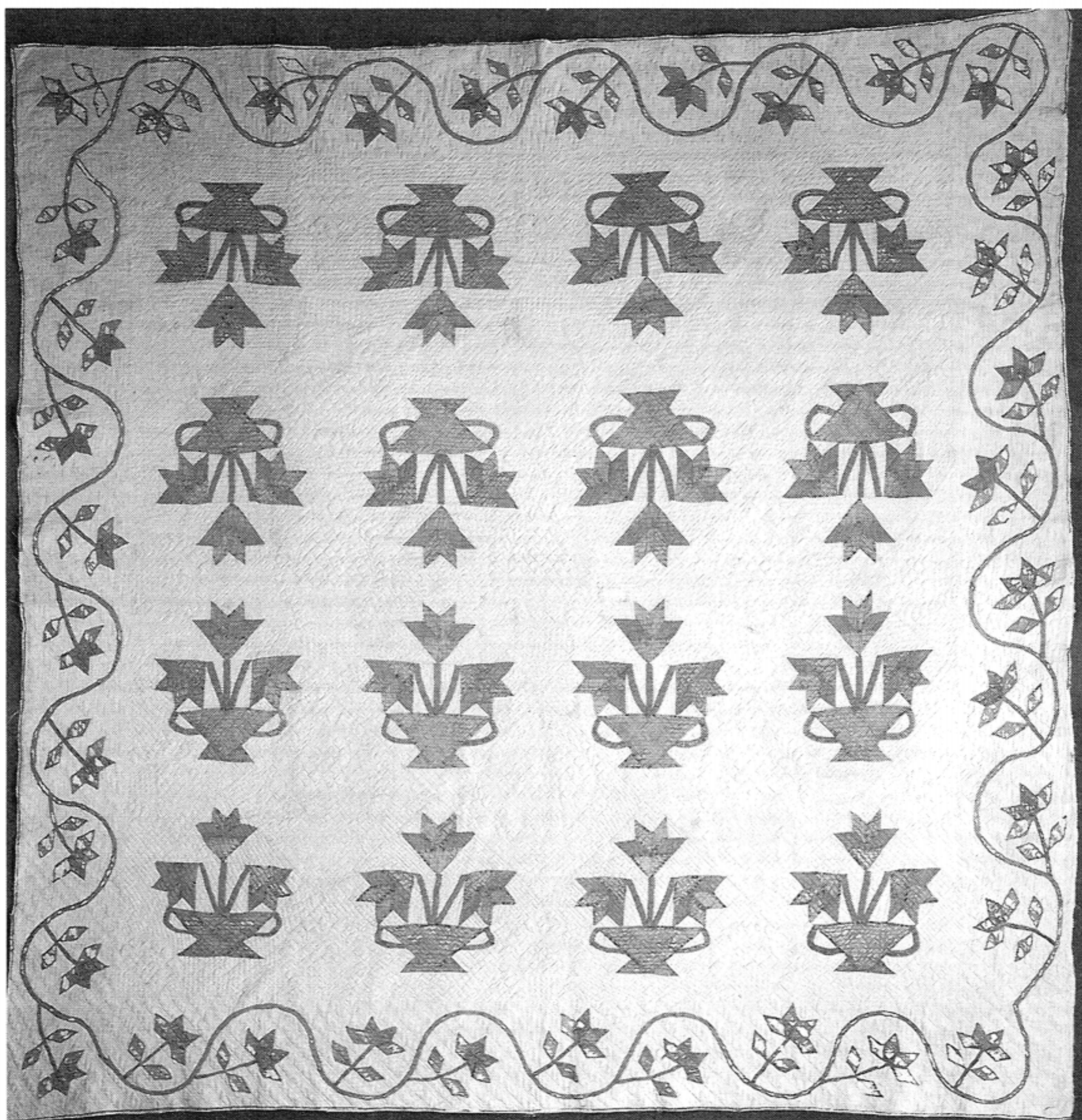


To All Worthy Male Members, Emma Allebes (1931–), Fair Oaks, California, 1990. The quilter created this quilt to celebrate the revelation extending the priesthood to “all worthy male members.” Each upraised hand represents a particular person whose arm and hand Sister Allebes traced or had traced. The people represented came from all over the world, but the quilter particularly emphasized members of the Church from developing countries. To reinforce this geographical and cultural orientation, she used cloth from Indonesia and Africa. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.



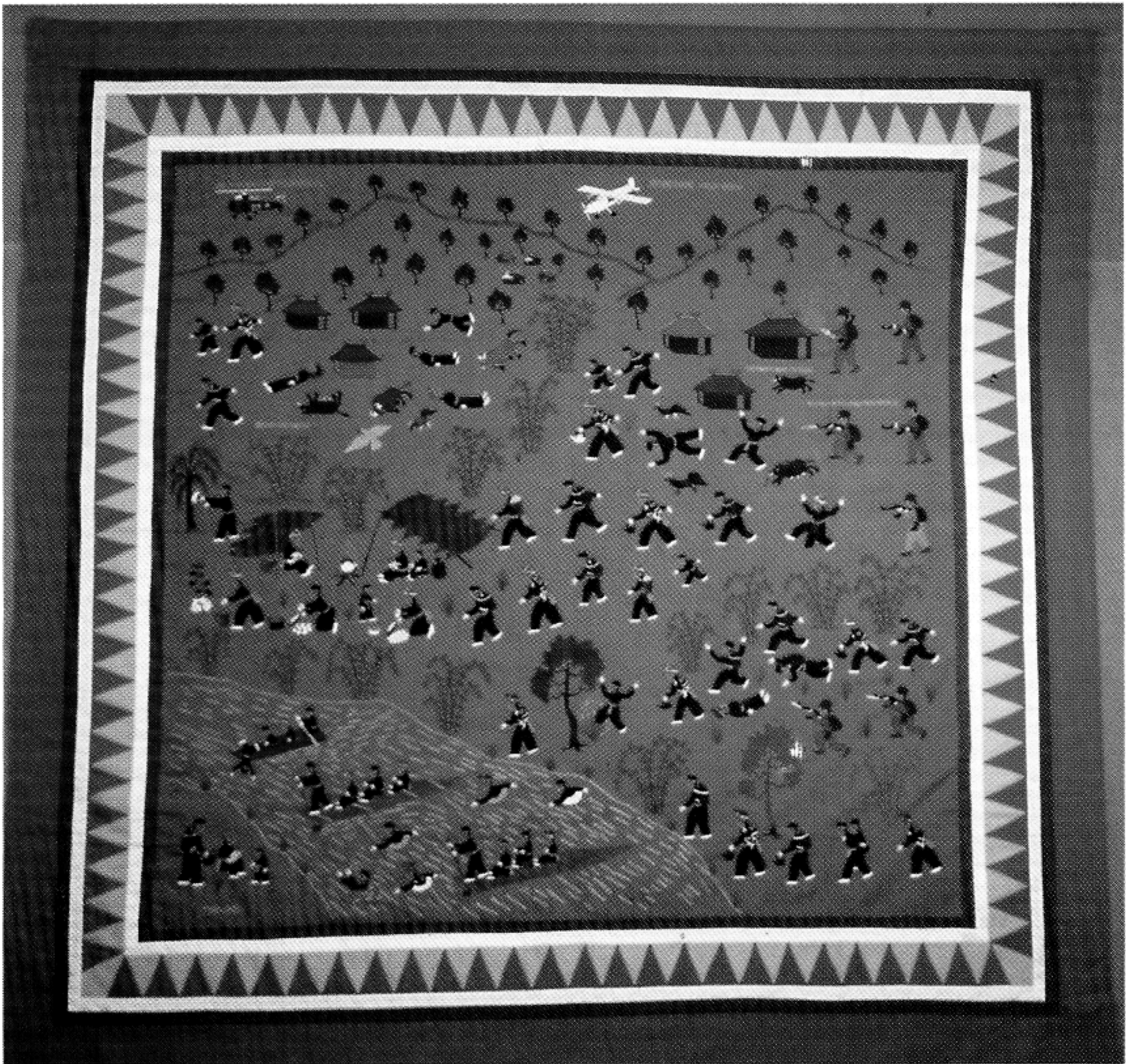
Royal Hawaiian Quilt, Lily Kama (1907-1990), Laie, Hawaii, 1937. Gift of the artist. For many years, Lily Kama demonstrated quilting at the Polynesian Culture Center in Laie. This is the first quilt she made on her own. Lily learned quilting from her family; her great-grandmother was one of the first native Hawaiian quilters.

By focusing on the symbols of Hawaii's earlier independence, this quilt expresses the longing many native Hawaiians felt for that time. In the center of the quilt is the Royal Hawaiian coat-of-arms. The two round topped sticks are "Kapu" and mean "it is forbidden to touch," an ironic symbol considering the eventual history of the Hawaiian monarchy. Surrounding the coat-of-arms are four Hawaiian flags. The form of the Hawaiian flag is a compromise between Great Britain and the United States, both of whom vied for control of Hawaii in the 1800s. The eight stripes of the flag stand for the eight islands of the Hawaiian archipelago. Courtesy Museum Church History and Art.



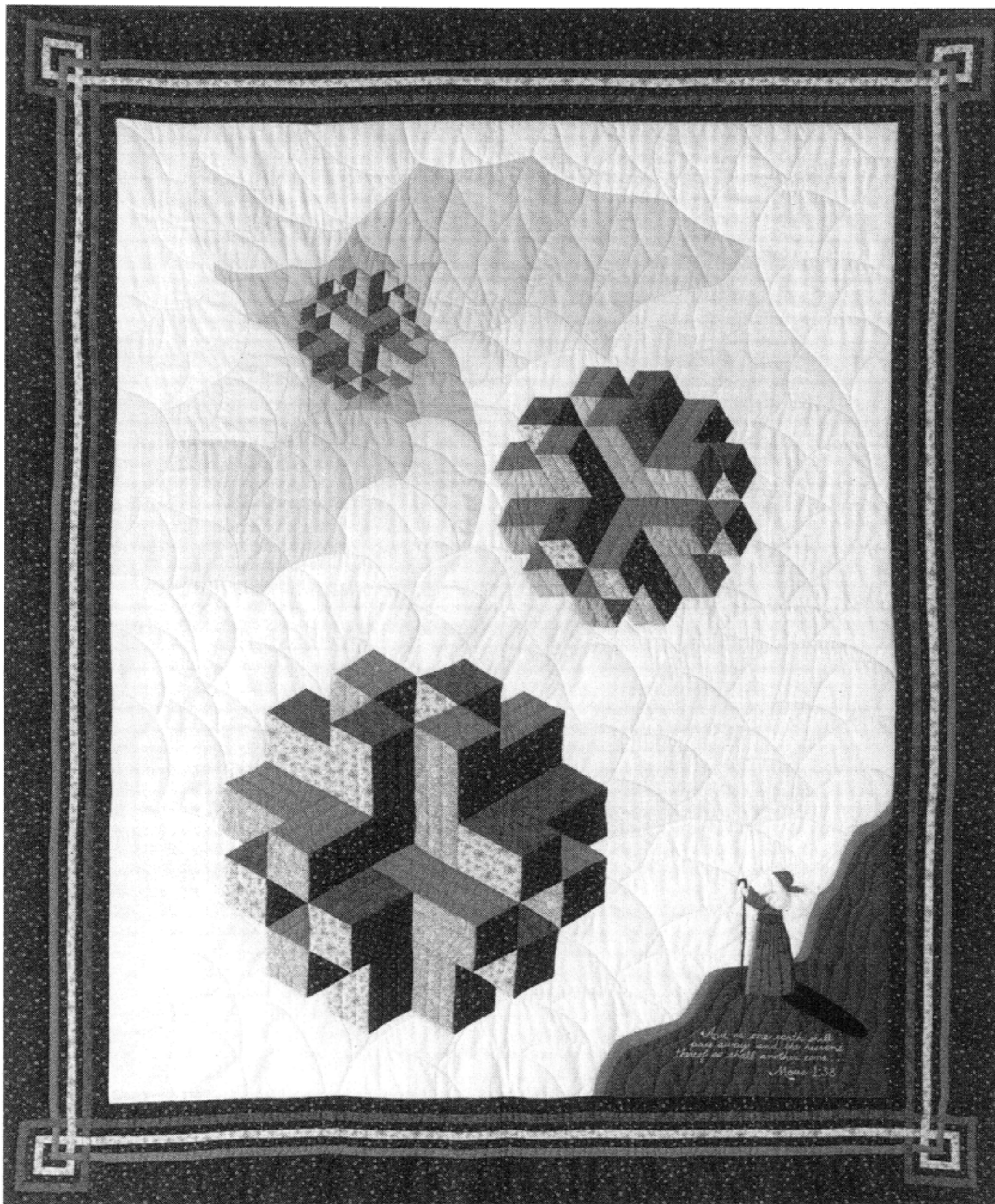
Flower Basket Appliqué Quilt, Ann Kar (b. before 1819), Illinois, before 1840. Fabric hand woven and hand dyed. In 1819 the Kar family settled in Illinois, where a daughter, Ann, made this quilt. Eventually the quilt was passed down to great-great-niece, Bessie Geyer. Bessie, not a member of the Church, was living in Fort Madison, Iowa, near the town of Carthage. She visited the Carthage Jail in 1954 and was so impressed with her experience that she donated this family heirloom to help furnish a bedroom in the jail.

For appliqué quilts, nineteenth-century women reserved their best quilting skills and greatest energy. Requiring a large piece of cloth, usually white, appliqué quilts were quite expensive to make because they could not be made with small scraps. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.



Hmong Picture Cloth, sister of Tong Lor Lee, Thailand, 1984. Thousands of Hmong living in Laos served in a secret CIA army during the Vietnam War. Their specific mission was to rescue downed American airmen behind enemy lines. After the fall of Vietnam and Laos, the Communists used conventional and chemical warfare to retaliate against the Hmong. Many Hmong villages were destroyed, and an estimated one-third of the 350,000 Hmong in Southeast Asia were killed. Tens of thousands of Hmong refugees fled across the Mekong River into Thailand from their mountain-top villages. This picture cloth documents the typical refugee experience. Because so few Hmong spoke English, picture cloths such as this were one of the few ways they could tell the world about the horrors they had personally experienced.

About sixty thousand Hmong eventually made it to America, where many joined the Church. This picture cloth was acquired from Tong Lor Lee, of Kearns, Utah, who in turn had acquired it from her sister, who was still in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand. The cloth was in the exhibition "Hmong Textiles: An Art Form in Transition" at the Museum of Church History and Art in 1985, where the story and art of many Hmong Latter-day Saints was exhibited. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.



Worlds without End, Terry Young (1944-), Myton, Utah, 1983. This quilt depicts Moses when he was taken up on a high mountain and shown a vision of the worlds created by the Lord: “And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof, even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works neither to my words” (Moses 1:38).

Most religious quilts in America are quite abstract. Thus many people unfamiliar with quilting tradition do not recognize those quilts’ inherently religious themes. In contrast, Terry Young has used a narrative style and even embroidered the scriptural reference. This quilt was one of the first made by the artist, who has become one of the top quilters in Utah. She currently lives in Provo. Reproduced courtesy of Carolyn Taylor.