

Design Dynamics of

Log Cabin Quilts

**Selections from the
Jonathan Holstein
Collection**

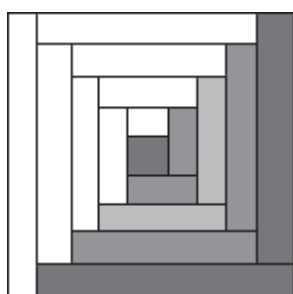
Gallery Guide



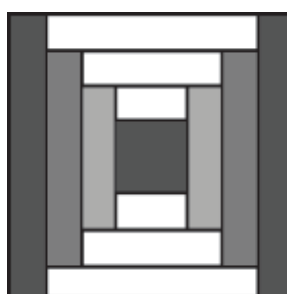
Design Dynamics of Log Cabin Quilts: Design Perspectives

Log Cabin Block Variations

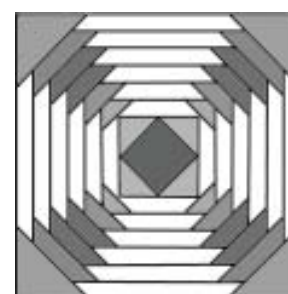
Log Cabin quilt blocks are constructed in three basic formats:



Log Cabin

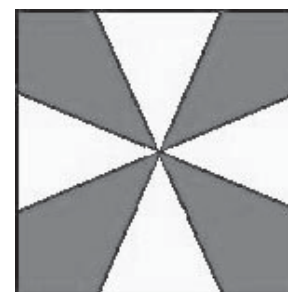
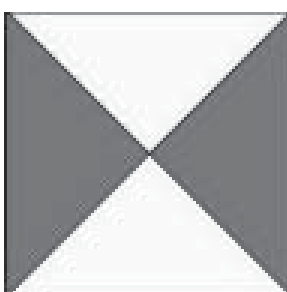
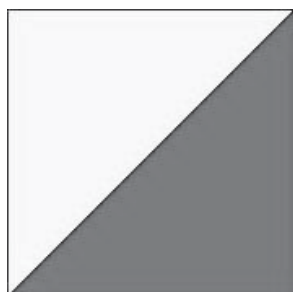


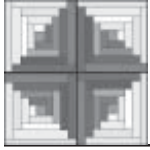
Courthouse Steps



Pineapple

These three formats—Log Cabin, Courthouse Steps, and Pineapple—are characterized by the way in which each block is divided into distinct light and dark areas:



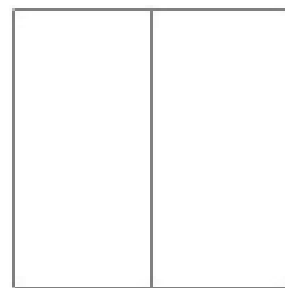
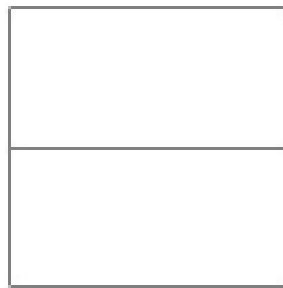
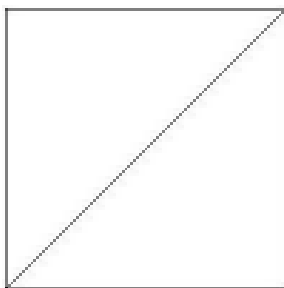


The position of light and dark fabric pieces is very important in quilt block design. What the human eye seeks first when viewing an object or image is *value contrast*, the point at which the darkest dark of a design meets the lightest light. The human eye perceives the adjacent dark fabrics (and alternatively, light fabrics) as whole units, as can be seen in this Log Cabin block.

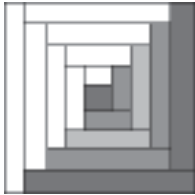
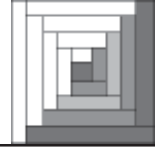


IOSC 2003.003.0175

Diagonal lines appear to be more dynamic than horizontal or vertical lines:



In Log Cabin quilt blocks, value contrast usually occurs along the diagonal. This quality often translates into an overall diagonal movement across the surface of Log Cabin quilts, increasing their visual liveliness.



Basic Log Cabin Quilts

In viewing the overall pattern of a quilt, the eye will be drawn to the areas of greatest value contrast. Once a quilt top is assembled from many individual blocks, this becomes evident:



Barn Raising
IOSC 2003.003.0313

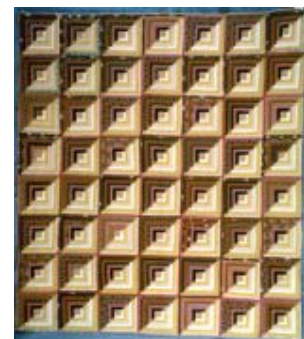


Straight Furrows
IOSC 2003.003.0224

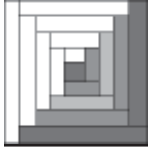


Streak of Lightning
IOSC 1997.007.0825

In some quilts, each fabric appears in the same position in every block. The eye does not have to search as hard to discern the pattern and as a result the overall pattern appears static.



Sunshine and Shadow
IOSC 2003.003.0254



Basic Log Cabin blocks can be arranged many ways to create very different effects in a quilt. For example, the *Barn Raising* and *Chevron* variations are assembled from the same half sections:



Barn Raising
IOSC 2003.003.0175



Chevrons
IOSC 2003.003.0184

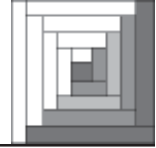
Other Log Cabin quilt arrangements include *Straight Furrows* and *Streak of Lightning* (below). These examples exhibit the illusion of transparency. The dark shapes on a light ground create the same effect as a shadow across a tile floor. The transparent effect creates depth in the quilt's appearance, increasing the eye's engagement with it.



Straight Furrows
IOSC 2003.003.0224



Streak of Lightning
IOSC 1997.007.0825



The color of the center square of each Log Cabin block also has an important effect on the overall design dynamics of a Log Cabin quilt. Red was a popular center square choice. In fact, it was the most frequently found center square color among the nineteenth-century Log Cabin quilts from the IQSC collections. This choice was probably an aesthetic one; the maker wanted a strong red for visual “punch” in the center of each block. Red centers visually advance, creating a push-pull optical effect that increases viewer engagement with the overall quilt design.

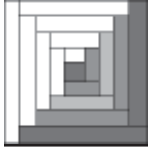


Chimney & Cornerstone
IQSC 1997.007.0294

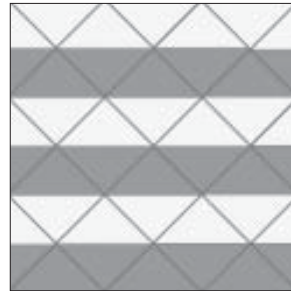
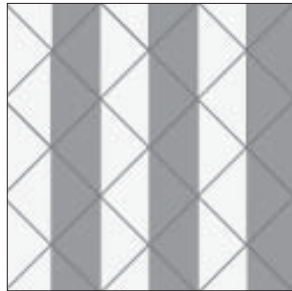
The blocks in this *Barn Raising* variation quilt have bright yellow centers. This changes the value of the center fabric from dark to light, and adds an airiness to the quilt. Compare this quilt to ones with dark value center squares.



Barn Raising
IQSC 2003.003.0237



When basic Log Cabin blocks are set *on point* the result is a horizontal or vertical design:



This quilt is composed of basic Log Cabin blocks set on point, resulting in an overall vertical design. This Log Cabin quilt has a great deal of depth because the vertical bars invite the viewer to look for the pattern behind them.

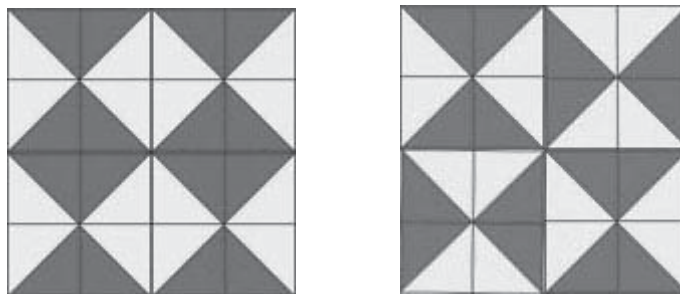


Straight Furrows variation
IQSC 2003.003.0344



Courthouse Steps Variation Quilts

There are fewer quilt design possibilities employing the Courthouse Steps block than the basic Log Cabin block. Due to the vertical symmetry of the dark/light arrangement within the Courthouse Steps block, there are only two ways it may be cohesively arranged:



Most Courthouse Steps variation quilts are arranged as shown in the diagram on the left. There are no Holstein Collection quilts arranged in the format shown on the right, and only one of the twenty-seven Courthouse Steps quilts in the entire IQSC Collection is arranged that way.



Thus, while the Courthouse Steps block may be the easiest to sew of the three Log Cabin block variations, it is less versatile than the basic Log Cabin block.



IOSC 2003.003.0149



IOSC 2003.003.0211



IOSC 2003.003.0319

This Courthouse Steps quilt is unusual for two reasons: 1) the blocks are set *on point*, and 2) *setting blocks*- unpieced blocks that alternate with the design blocks- are used. Log Cabin blocks are rarely found paired with setting blocks.

A likely reason is that the use of setting blocks limits the many variations in overall quilt design otherwise possible in Log Cabin quilts.



IOSC 2003.003.0149



Courthouse Steps blocks and basic Log Cabin blocks may be arranged to create very similar quilts:

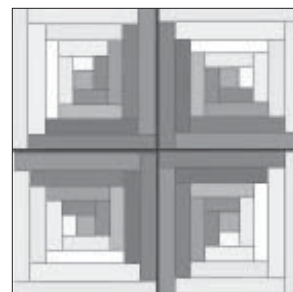


Courthouse Steps
IOSC 2003.003.0149



Light and Dark
IOSC 2003.003.0217

Deciding which block to construct may have been based on how much sewing the quiltmaker wished to do. Twice as much sewing is needed to assemble enough Log Cabin blocks for this quilt design, sometimes called *Light and Dark*. The minimum number of Courthouse Steps blocks required for this variation is two, whereas the minimum number of basic Log Cabin blocks required is four:



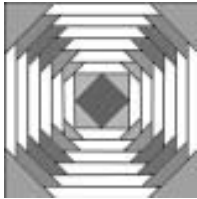
There are more subtle directional changes in the Log Cabin version on the right. These subtle variations make this type of quilt somewhat more visually interesting than the one on the left.



To see an example of how similar certain Courthouse Steps quilts and basic Log Cabin quilts can look, find the quilt pictured at right in the gallery. Is it a Courthouse Steps construction? Or is it a basic Log Cabin construction?



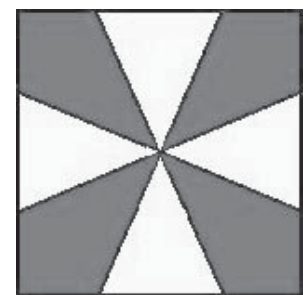
Light and Dark
IOQC 2003.003.0217



Pineapple Variation Quilts



The Pineapple block is the most complex of the Log Cabin constructions. No matter which way the block is rotated, it appears the

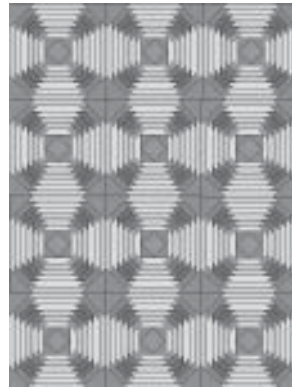
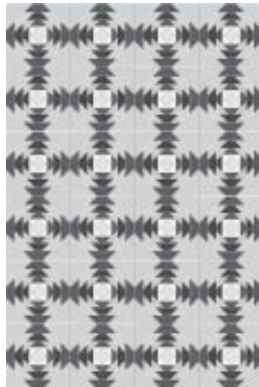
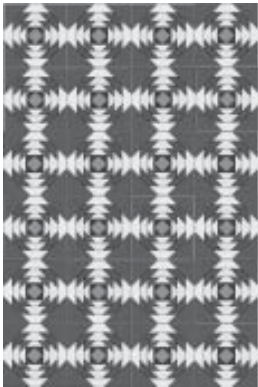


same: it is both horizontally and vertically symmetrical. As a result, there is only one basic setting for Pineapple variation blocks, in contrast with the many variations possible using the basic Log Cabin block.

The Pineapple block design radiates from the center. The overlapping angled strips produce a jagged edge that creates a dazzling whirl of motion. When these blocks are pieced together in a quilt the effect is even stronger. As the eye locates the many small triangular points of this edge, the result is a push-pull effect. This causes the light and dark portions to advance and then recede.



Increasing the number of fabric strips in the block causes the diagonals to advance (see example below right).



Although just one setting is used for the Pineapple block, the visual motion it creates is as dynamic as the other Log Cabin variations.



Design Dynamics of Log Cabin Quilts: Historical Perspectives

Where and when the Log Cabin quilt pattern first appeared in America is unknown. The pattern is a universal design construct that is found in ancient Roman tilework, Egyptian animal mummy wrappings, and seventeenth-century perfume bags, so it is not surprising to find that quiltmakers eventually adapted it to their own medium as well.

As early as 1863, Log Cabin quilts received commendations at the Ohio State Fair. Other fairs in the 1870s and 80s added premiums specifically for Log Cabin quilts, indicating that their popularity was increasing. For example, in 1880 the Wayne County [Ohio] Independent Agricultural Society fair awarded \$1 premiums for Log Cabin quilts. At the Nebraska State Fair, Log Cabin quilts received their own category in 1886 and 1887, and in 1894 the Ohio State Fair included a separate category for Log Cabin quilts.



Nineteenth-century Log Cabin quilts are rarely inscribed with names or dates. A Courthouse Steps variation quilt in this exhibition, however, is embroidered with the date “1871” and the name “Mary Groff.” It is believed to have been made in Pennsylvania.



Courthouse Steps
2003.003.0211



The Minnesota Historical Society, likewise, owns an inscribed Log Cabin quilt embroidered with the initials “L.L.L.” for Lucy Lee Lamson, the maker, and “no. 352 Du Quoin, Ill. May, 1865.” These two pieces are particularly important because they are among the earliest known date-inscribed American Log Cabin quilts.



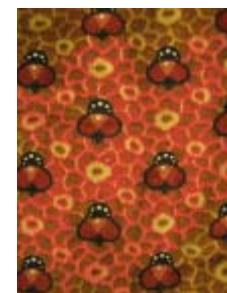
Fabric Choices

The quilts in this exhibition showcase the abundance of fabric choices available to quilters in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a result of the Industrial Revolution. By the mid-1850s, American textile printing factories were producing more than one thousand new designs each year. In the majority of the nineteenth-century Log Cabin quilts in the IQSC collections, a minimum of 20 different fabrics were used and in a few extraordinary cases, over 150 different fabrics were used in a single quilt! During this period a woman's wardrobe likely did not include such a multitude of fabrics, and yet this plentiful diversity found its way into quilts. One possible source for the variety of prints is sharing or trading among quilters. Whatever the source, Log Cabin quilts are evidence of the vast output of the American and British textile industries during the second half of the nineteenth century.



The *Madder palette print*, a style that was exceedingly popular during this period, featured coppery orange, reddish brown, brown, and black in its color schemes, often with pale grayish blue or lavender accents.

Madder is a colorfast vegetable dye that has been utilized since ancient Egyptian times. It must be used with a mordant (a metallic salt) to fix the color to the fabric. Iron mordants produce black while aluminum mordants produce a bright red or pink. Combinations of alum and iron produce a range of browns, and oranges. For centuries, madder was cultivated throughout Europe in farmyard gardens. In 1868 the active ingredient of the dye, alizarin, was synthesized by chemists working in the Bayer laboratories in Germany (known today as the manufacturer of Bayer aspirin.) This was the first colorfast synthetic dye, and its low cost, consistent strength, and ready availability made it popular with textile printers. Both vegetable-dyed and synthetic-dyed madder palette prints can be found in Log Cabin quilts.



Madder palette prints from selected 19th-century Log Cabin quilts in the IOSC collection



Red Center Squares

Quilt lore suggests that the center squares of Log Cabin quilts were usually red, to signify the heart and hearth of the home. Of the 72 nineteenth-century quilts in the IQSC collections 33 have red center squares— 26 solids and 7 prints. Of the remaining quilts, ten have blocks with many different colors for the center square, 6 are orange, 5 blue, 4 pink, 4 brown, 4 black, 2 green, 2 off-white or tan, 1 yellow, and 1 purple. This distribution supports the idea that red was a popular choice for center squares in Log Cabin blocks, although not the choice of the majority of makers. Until supporting documentation has been found, such as comments in diaries or letters, we can only speculate what the reasons for the popularity of red center squares may have been.



Barn Raising
IQSC 1997.007.0543