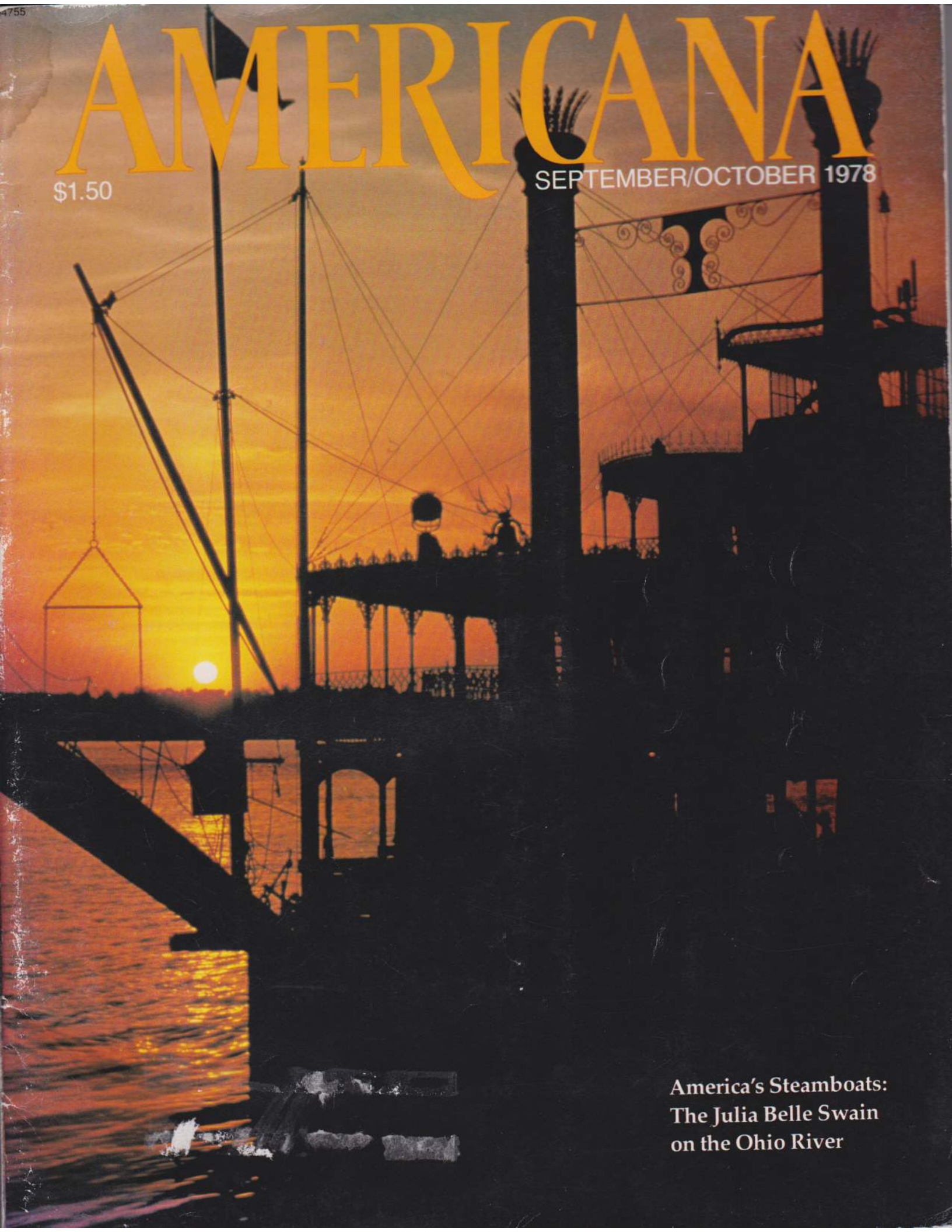


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America's Steamboats:
The Julia Belle Swain
on the Ohio River



SKIRTS FROM WOVEN COVERLETS

Early American textiles were woven to last. The author
has built an unusual business on the theory
that wearing coverlets is a good way to preserve them

by Jenny Bell Whyte

AS A CLOTHES designer, I am always on the lookout for a new cloth to make a new design, so it was a lucky day when a remnant of an early American woven coverlet fell into my hands. It was too small and worn to use on a bed and too ample and intricately woven to cut into covers for sofa cushions, but it was just the right amount of fabric for a skirt. Although I had never seen weaving of this type put to such a use before, I remembered that Scarlett O'Hara had cut a wide swath in Atlanta wearing drawing-room curtains, and I didn't see why I shouldn't have the same success in old-fashioned bedding.

My daytime-length skirt would never have been made if the coverlet had been found in good condition. Generations of laundresses had been at it with lye soap and washboards. Stains discolored it, moths had lived in it, and mice had nibbled away most of the fringe. Worse abuse for a textile could hardly be imagined. Yet some areas were still bright and strong and beautiful. It was the earliest kind of American weaving—Overshot—and there were interesting borders on three sides. I cut it so that two borders would meet in a scarcely perceptible seam down the



Jenny Bell Whyte sits amid coverlets and skirts in the living room of her Manhattan brownstone. Above, she fits a friend, Jane Maynard, for a skirt made from a coverlet with an early Jacquard pattern.

center, and after removing the bad places, I pieced out an extraordinary skirt.

In the business that grew out of that first recycling of Americana—Museum Fabrics to Wear, started in 1971—we have made many woven coverlets as well as important textiles from other cultures into skirts. In this way we get great textiles, the kind that will never be found again, out of archives and attics and into circulation where they will be seen and appreciated. Since our goal is conservation, there is no excuse for random cutting. Therefore we make skirts rather than coats and dresses,

which require piecing and seams that strain the fabric and detract from the basic design. Whenever possible, our skirts are full length, because then we can use the maximum amount of fabric—and long skirts are always in style. Although most of our textiles are bought from private collectors, people often order skirts from coverlets that have been in their families for generations. We restore and research each one before we make it into a skirt. Our collection is shown once a year. The prices range from \$125 to \$2,000.

American coverlets come in three basic weaves:

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY GROSKINSKY



A star pattern frames Becky Storey in the coverlet skirts; left, a Jacquard. An identifying patch, above, was on Jacquards before 1860.

around like recipes, Overshot varied more in quality than design. Any piece of old Overshot, even one that is clumsily woven, will make a stronger and more strikingly original skirt than a woolen pattern dyed and woven today.

To me Double Weave is the most beautiful of the old weaving methods. It is actually two separate cloths simultaneously woven on two shuttles in two colors of yarn (usually beige and dark blue). The pattern catches and exchanges threads so that the design on one side of the cloth is dark where it is light on the other side. Double Weave is particularly effective for reversible wraparound skirts. Unfortunately, the pockets formed between the layers during the weaving process seem to provide an especially cozy nesting place for moths, and Double Weave coverlets are therefore often found in very bad condition.

Jacquard looms were first used in America early in the nineteenth century, revolutionizing the design of coverlets. Familiar objects inspired wonderfully creative patterns. Eagles were a popular motif, and patterns depicting them are prized by collectors.



To make this Double Weave, the heaviest of the patterns, two separate pieces of cloth in two colors are woven together on a double loom.

Houses, churches, farmyards, fences, trees, and garlands were represented on borders. The weavers used two to four colors, which were home dyed with walnuts, madder, indigo, and other natural colorings. The dyes in most coverlets are unfaded even now, and they do not bleed. Professional weavers, many of whom were itinerants traveling about with looms slung on

Overshot, Double Weave, and Jacquard. The earliest technique, dating from Colonial America, is Overshot. It is composed of geometric, plaidlike patterns done in two or three colors, one of which is always the natural flax. Home-dyed wool Overshot was achieved by setting the shuttle for skips. Although pattern variations of less than one hundred were passed

their backs, wove their names, the date, and sometimes the name of the person who had commissioned the coverlet into the lower corners. This advertising device, which also served to protect the design, is useful to historians and collectors today. Many housewives wove their own coverlets, and they too signed and dated their work. Some of the most valuable coverlets surviving today are the work of such talented amateur weavers.

Skirts made from any of these weavings have advantages that contemporary mass-produced skirts cannot match. There are no stronger fibers than flax and wool; no other fibers take dye so well. They wash beautifully in mild soap and warm water, although most have suffered the harshest soaps and boiling water. Any inherent shrinkage has long since taken place. They seldom need steaming or pressing; they pack folded flat or rolled up in a duffel bag. When they are not being worn, they are decorative as throws on sofas or chairs. They should not, however, be hung on a hanger or on the wall because hanging will strain the threads.

Lighter-weight coverlet skirts can be worn in autumn, winter, spring, and in cooler regions in summer. Do not be put off by the weight in the hand, because when the skirt is around the waist, the weight distributes so that

only the warmth is noticed. The skirts are effective with linen or silk shirts, jersey shirts, cashmere and wool sweaters, turtlenecks, and vests. In the winter, boots and a short jacket or shawl are good complements. Jewelry should have smooth surfaces so that it will not catch in the fabric.

If a signed Jacquard or a shred of Overshot is not available in an attic trunk, material can sometimes be found in secondhand stores and thrift shops. Sizable pieces can be picked up for reasonable prices—\$45 to \$85; a whole coverlet, however, will cost from \$300 to \$1,000, depending on the pattern and the weaver.

Other cultures have woven and still weave coverlets, but only in the United States was weaving done in such unique patterns and colors. Ours, particularly the early Jacquards, have a liveliness and a sturdiness that are typically American. That is why they are such a pleasure to wear and pass on to future generations.



Mrs. Whyte's label, "Home dyed wool and linen hand woven overshot, U.S.A. Late 18th, early 19th c." Jacquard, from about 1834, at right.





HERE'S HOW IT'S DONE



Mrs. Whyte removes coverlet seam and cuts pattern.

A COVERLET IN EXCELLENT condition should not be cut at all. Such a coverlet, however, can become two beautiful skirts. Old looms wove no wider than 30 inches. Two facing pieces of this length were sometimes woven and then whipstitched together with strong thread (often flax), making a coverlet for a full-size bed. To preserve the integrity of the fabric and still have a marvelous skirt, pull out this center seam. There will be a neat selvage upon which a waistband can be set. Probably there will be a fringe at the bottom and along the sides. The two pieces will make two wraparound skirts with no cutting whatsoever.

There are a few basic rules for making an uncut wrap-around-style skirt or a skirt from a damaged coverlet that must be reshaped.

1. Back weak spots with a piece of strong cotton or linen carefully appliquéd by hand.

2. If there is usable fringe, retain it at the bottom. If the edge is frayed, bind it with 1-inch washable velvet ribbon or with the same linen—cut in 1-inch bias strips—that was used in the waistband. These will give a neat ½-inch finish.

3. Make the waistband of folded velvet ribbon. This is easy because the edges are selvages. Buy 2-inch-wide best quality satin-back for a 1-inch band. Black is always suitable. Or buy linen for the waistband that will pick up the color of one of the fibers in the skirt. Linen comes in so many shades of beige, off-white, and navy blue that it will usually make a fair to good match. If navy or another deep color is used, be sure to test it for running.

4. Never use machine stitching except on seams.

When the skirt is finished, a label should be put in it. A good Jacquard or Double Weave will already have a label, giving the date and the name of the weaver, woven in as part of the pattern. The new label should include something personal, such as where the coverlet was found, whether it was a family piece or a discovery, when it was made, and perhaps when it was first worn as a skirt. Type this information on a piece of strong pink or white cotton that has been pinked on four sides and neatly whipstitch it on the inside back of the skirt, or in the case of a wraparound, under the piece that does not show.



The skirt below, with the Pennsylvania Dutch lovebird motif, about 1830, was handwoven, unlike the Jacquard above, which was machine woven. Inset, a short skirt in Overshot.