

Marie Webster Quilts: A Retrospective

March 24 – September 30, 1991



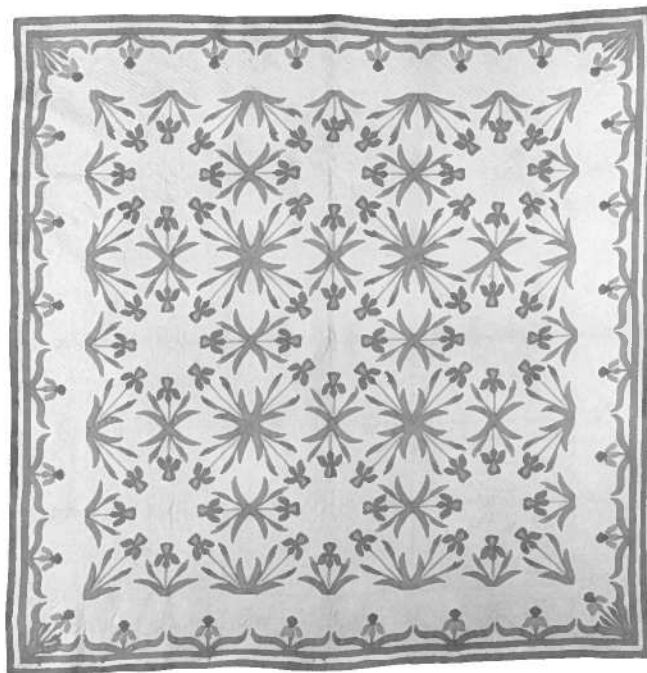
Indianapolis Museum of Art

In January 1911 *Ladies Home Journal*, one of the leading women's periodicals of the time, published four quilts by a virtually unknown woman from Marion, Indiana. The *Ladies Home Journal*, like the *Craftsman* magazine, was very active in the promotion of Arts and Crafts ideals in the United States. Among the many artists, architects and designers who were commissioned to produce ideas and plans for the *Journal* were such prominent ones as Hugh Garden, Will Bradley and Frank Lloyd Wright. Artists such as Maxfield Parrish and Jessie Willcox Smith were also commissioned to design patterns for quilts.

But when Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, decided to feature quilts in full color for the first time, he chose four quilts by an amateur quiltmaker from Indiana. The appearance of these quilts in *Ladies Home Journal*, a magazine with a circulation of over one and a half million and among the largest in the country at that time, made Marie Daugherty Webster a household name.

The local newspaper hailed Marie Webster and her achievements. The *Marion Daily Chronicle* in its Friday, February 10, 1911, edition stated: "Mr. Bok, editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, has taken a great interest in Mrs. Webster's work. The magazines, like the *Greeks*, are always seeking some new thing, and in Mrs. Webster's quilt designs Mr. Bok found something so unique that they have strongly appealed to him."

Another article extolled her achievements and credited her with "quietly revivifying, by her own efforts, the ancient art of quiltmaking . . . with a poet's sense of subject matter and an artist's eye for color . . ."



Iris, 1910
linen appliquéd on
cotton
83 x 82

Lent by Rosalind
Webster Perry

Marie Daugherty Webster was fifty years old when she made her first appliquéd quilt in 1909. The oldest of six children, she was born on July 19, 1859, to the Daughertys, a prominent and prosperous banking family in Wabash, Indiana. Like many other women of her time, she was discouraged from entering college after graduating from high school. However, she pursued her education in literature, history, Greek and Latin on her own and with the assistance of a local priest. After her marriage in 1884 to George Webster, Jr., a banker, and settling in Marion, Indiana, she led a quiet and normal life.

A sophisticated and educated individual, she traveled widely throughout the United States and toured Europe in 1899 at a time when the Arts and Crafts movement was at its height in England and throughout the Continent.

The turn of the century ushered in a number of changes in the art world. Rebellion against the decorative excess found in nineteenth-century Victorian designs, and aversion to industrialization, led artists and designers on a search for new forms. The aim of Arts and Crafts reformers was to create a style based on the virtues of simplicity of design, quality of craftsmanship, attention to detail and integration of art into everyday life. They used nature as a prime source, and their designs were closely related to the function for which they were intended. Their fundamental ideology was "art for life's sake" rather than "art for art's sake."

Among the pioneers of the Arts and Crafts movement in England was William Morris, whose stylized forms, simplified outlines and flat areas of color have provided us with a legacy of good design. A practical and visionary reformer, Morris spread the gospel of the Arts and Crafts movement. He perfected a naturalistic style that captures the growth and primary characteristics of flowers and plants. His own love of gardening is evident in his imaginative representations of nature and gardens at their best, budding and blooming in spring and summer. William Morris's philosophical framework had a major impact on the cultivation of the Arts and Crafts movement in Europe and America.

The diversity and complexity of the Arts and Crafts movement appealed to a wide range of individuals including designers, architects, artists and craftsmen. For many of them Arts and Crafts was about change and transformation, about simplicity and sophistication, about good design and innovative production, about honesty and truth to materials. Most of all it

was about life. The Arts and Crafts philosophy greatly influenced the arts of the United States and the aesthetic quality of pieces created here in the early part of the twentieth century. During the 1890s many societies and art groups were founded throughout the United States to promote the ideals of Arts and Crafts through exhibitions, newsletters, periodicals and classes.

The various amateur art clubs were not only formed in large cities, but they also came into existence in rural towns throughout the country. In Indiana, between 1883 to 1897, art associations were formed in cities such as Fort Wayne, Muncie, South Bend, Lafayette, Richmond and Indianapolis. In the early 1900s Brown County was one of the major rural art colonies in the Midwest, and the Hoosier Group represented modernity in the heart of the country.

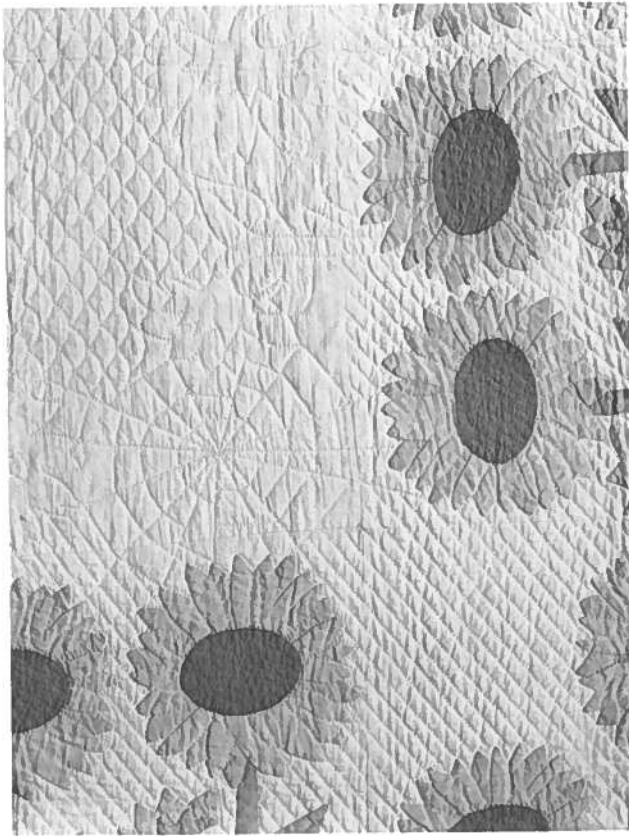
The setting was just right for a talented and visionary woman who wanted to make quilts. Like many other artifacts of the late-nineteenth century, quilts were cluttered and over-decorated, and they were often rendered in intense shades of colors. Disenchanted with the quilt designs of the previous decades, Marie Webster decided to create her own patterns. A keen gardener, she turned to her flower garden and nature for sources of inspiration. By utilizing the familiar shapes of flowers and plants, and combining them with fine workmanship, she achieved designs of outstanding aesthetic quality.

The *Iris* (1910) was among the first four quilts that appeared in the January 1911 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*. She describes this quilt: "In this design the iris plant has been conventionalized so as to make it consistent with its natural growth—the flowers stretching up in stately array beyond their long-pointed leaves. Here again the quilting pattern follows the flower, and in keeping also with this very striking design is the double striped border in two tones of the violet linen to match the flowers." The iris flowers are executed in soft, pastel shades of purple, and their clean, crisp linear quality represents this tall and upright plant. The flowers are arranged in a circular format in the shape of a wreath. The innovative arrangement of the extended stems and leaves, which creates a second pattern, is evidence of her knowledge and mastery of design. She utilized the shapes of the leaves and stems to control the pattern and create movement throughout the quilt. An impressive three-dimensional effect was achieved by repeating the iris flowers in the quilting pattern through superb workmanship.



Poppy, 1911
linen appliquéd on
cotton
91 1/2 x 82 1/2

Lent by Mrs.
Gerrish Thurber



Detail:

Sunflower, 1911
linen appliquéd on
cotton
88 1/2 x 81

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Thurber*

Among the other innovative quilt designs which appeared on the same page in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1911 is *Snowflake* (1910). The revolutionary use of appliquéd white fabric on a dark background was quite effective. She captioned this quilt by writing, "The *Snowflake* quilt design brings to one's imagination the sharp-pointed, glistening snowflakes against a background of blue sky. The quilting in fine stitches simulates the applied pattern, and the border suggests drifts of snow as one sees them after a winter's storm. The quilting in the border is done in curved lines and accentuates this effect of hills and hollows." Her sensitive interpretation of nature along with skillful mastery of technique brought these patterns to life. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of this original quilt is unknown.

For Marie Webster quilting was an integral part of the design of the quilt, and she utilized the process for more than just technical or decorative purposes. The attention given to details, her excellent craftsmanship, and her use of the quilting process as an important element in design are a strong testimony to the influence of the Arts and Crafts philosophy on her quilt designs.

In August 1911 the *Ladies Home Journal* unveiled a series of nine appliquéd patterns for cushions designed by Marie Webster. In a full page in color devoted to these she provided information and gave detailed instructions regarding the choice of material, other sources of design and quilting techniques. "The quilting should be done after the flowers are applied, and must not be carried over them, in order to keep their surfaces as smooth and natural as possible. There may be a temptation to the very ambitious worker, or the one especially fond of ornamental effects, to apply these

designs by outlining, buttonhole work, or couching with embroidery silks, but this desire should not for a moment be allowed even a trial. The charm and simplicity of this work lie in keeping to the real patchwork method."

She discouraged her readers from excessive decoration and urged them to keep their quilts simple for the most effective design. By avoiding heavy ornamentation and paying great attention to details she produced designs that were simple and yet very sophisticated. Some of the motifs of these cushions were later incorporated in the designs of her quilts.

In January 1912 four more quilts were featured in *Ladies Home Journal*. She introduced patterns that have distinct borders and medallion centers, a departure from the overall designs of the previous quilts. Among them, *Poppy* (1911) is the most striking one. Marie Webster captioned this quilt as follows: "As a quilt pattern the form and color of the poppy plant lend themselves well to conventional motifs for a border, and also for irregular sprays as illustrated in the center of the spread. This is applied patchwork and, therefore, much more easily made than pieced work; very simple quilting gives prominence to the design, though a charming bit of elaboration has been added to the centerpiece." The poppy flowers are arranged along the border pointing towards the center of the quilt, thus drawing attention to the central area. The four long-stemmed, swirling and beautifully executed poppies in the medallion provide the viewer with a

sense of beauty that was achieved from precise proportion. She then appliquéd the poppy flower using a fabric the same as the ground color in some areas. The intricacy of this design is astonishing. The skillful mastery of appliqué and quilting is evident throughout the quilt.

Another masterpiece is *Sunflower*. Marie Webster described it in *Ladies Home Journal* as follows: "The *Sunflower* quilt shows a very realistic bold design of vivid coloring, but well-balanced in its relation to space. The border, too, is harmonious, suggesting a firm foundation for the stems. The quilting in the center is noticeably attractive in a design of spider webs, leaves and flowers." Her fresh artistic ideas were expressed through the intricate stitchery of the spider webs in the center of the quilt. Although Marie Webster appliquéd the pieces and designed the quilting, she often hired professional quilters or asked church groups to execute the quilting itself.

The last full-color feature in *Ladies Home Journal* appeared in the August 1912 issue. Under the title "Baby's Patchwork Quilt," Marie Webster showcased designs for baby quilts. She was among the first designers to produce quilts specifically for the use of children.

In 1914 Marie Webster designed two more quilts, *Grapes and Vines* and *French Baskets*, both extraordinary in design. In *Grapes and Vines* she painstakingly appliquéd all the small pieces of grapes, leaves and narrow vines and tendrils using minute stitches, producing intricate patterning. The quilt, which is executed in pastel shades of purple and green, is a delight in color.

In *French Baskets* she has utilized an appliqué technique similar to *Snowflake* for the most successful design

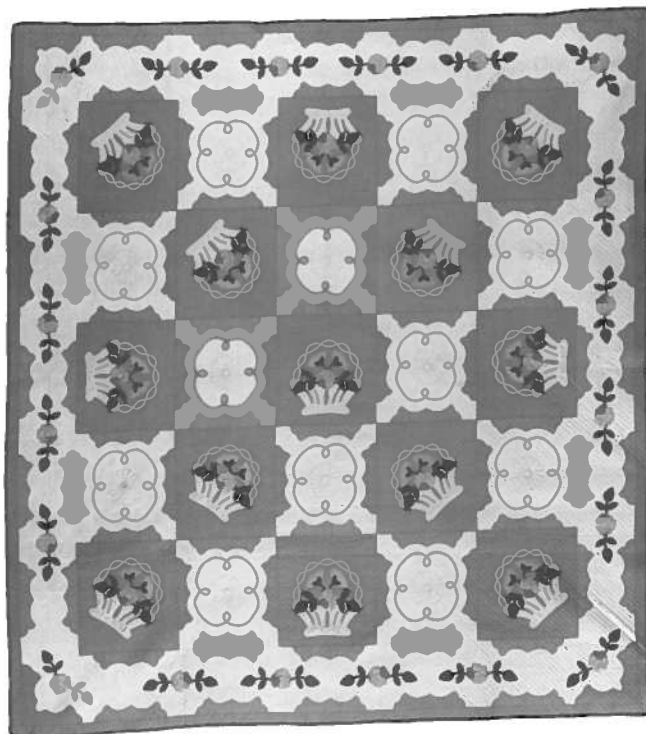
effect. The baskets, in white fabric, were appliquéd to a dark background fabric, and then each square was pieced to the surrounding squares. By using both the appliqué and patchwork methods she produced an outstanding three-dimensional effect in this quilt.

About the same time she was involved with research for her book. In October 1915, Doubleday Page and Company published the first book entirely devoted to the study of quilts, by Marie D. Webster. *Quilts, Their Story and How To Make Them* examines the history of patchwork and quilting. Her extensive research investigates the traditions of appliqué and patchwork in many countries throughout Africa, Central Asia, Europe and America from antiquity to her own time. Her research in many private and public quilt collections resulted in the compilation of an extensive list of quilt designs, which were reproduced alphabetically for the first time in her book.

The book received rave reviews in many newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Boston Herald Transcript*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Indianapolis News*, and periodicals such as Gustav Stickley's *Craftsman*, which was devoted to promotion of Arts and Crafts ideals in the United States. The review in the February 1916 issue of *Craftsman* magazine stated: "Every craftsman and lover of old-fashioned things will be glad to know that Miss Webster has incorporated some of her lore in this thoroughly delightful book. It would seem as though the sins of omission could never be visited upon this studious writer, for truly little has been left unsaid in this book on the pleasant matter of patchwork making. Patterns to work from, a fascinating list of names, quaint histories and traditions, beautiful pictures help to make this book one of the most attractive of the recent hand-craft books. Every New Englander, collector, antiquarian should possess this book, that so far as we know is the only one ever published covering this subject."

French Baskets,
1930
cotton and linen
appliquéd on
cotton
92 1/2 x 82 1/2

Lent by Katherine
Webster Dwight



The endorsements and the enormous success of the sales resulted in the second printing of *Quilts* the following year, 1916. The publication of the book brought much-deserved recognition both nationally and internationally to Marie Webster. Letters of praise and requests for patterns were sent to her from all over the world. She also received a request to submit information to *Who's Who in America in 1915* in recognition of her achievements in documenting the history of quilting. She was invited to exhibit her quilts throughout the country and to lecture on the history of quilting and judge many quilt competitions. Her enormous success and fame did not prevent her from creating new designs for quilts, and in 1917 she designed the *Poinsettia* quilt. The striking, intense colors of red and green and black were quite a departure from the pastel colors of previous quilts. The effectiveness of this design lies in the unusual arrangement of poinsettia flowers and usage of the black-and-white striped fabric running diagonally across the quilt. This exceptional quilt is the only one designed by Marie Webster that incorporates such an innovative design with intense shades of colors.

As her fame grew, so did the demand for patterns from many enthusiastic quilters. In the early 1920s, with the cooperation of two friends, Marie Webster set up the Practical Patchwork Company in her home in Marion, Indiana, to meet the demand for patterns. More than twenty-five different quilt patterns were available for sale through the catalogs. The pattern packets, complete with photographs, directions, fabric swatches, blueprints and tissue paper cutouts of the designs sold for fifty cents. Stamped tops were sold for \$9 to \$12, while basted tops were \$30 to \$37.50. Some of the finished quilts were as much as \$85.



Poinsettia, 1917
cotton and linen
appliquéd on
cotton
94 1/2 x 64

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Webster Collection
Gift of Mrs. Gerrish
Thurber

Marie Webster's pioneer industry—producing, promoting and selling patterns—became one of the most successful in the country and was in operation for more than fifteen years. Meanwhile, Marie Webster continued designing quilts through the 1920s, bringing the total of her original quilt patterns to thirty-three. What started out as a mere hobby became a well-organized and successful business in the 1920s and 1930s. The success of Practical Patchwork Company encouraged many individuals and companies to establish similar businesses. In many instances her patterns were copied and marketed under a different name, but she was never credited or acknowledged as the designer of the patterns.

The reproduction of her quilt designs in the influential *Ladies Home Journal* paved the way for her transition from the provincial and isolated to the modern and cosmopolitan. Her successful business, lectures and quilt exhibitions had a major impact in the quilt revival of the early 1900s. The landmark book *Quilts, Their Story and How To Make Them* is still being cited as a reference in many quilt books and scholarly articles.

Marie Webster's search for a new and simplified design resulted in an intriguing individual style that revolutionized twentieth-century quilting. By updating and modernizing traditional motifs and using soft pastel colors, she influenced generations of quilters. Her extraordinary workmanship and sense of line and color contributed to a trend of setting high standards for quilting.

Her patterns, with their simple lines and visible structures derived from nature, appear very modern today. Cuesta Benberry, the noted quilt historian wrote of her: "Today it is a wonder how this woman born in mid-nineteenth-century Wabash, Indiana, could be so completely twentieth-century in her outlook, so modern in her creativity to have had so much influence, even indirectly noted, on the present."

And, indeed, like many objects of the Arts and Crafts movement, these quilts are treasures that were intended to be a part of life and art. Her designs are a delight in color and celebrations of nature in its truest sense. Her imagination and artistic ideas, and her sophistication in appreciating simplicity, have resulted in designs that are so new and refreshing that they bring to mind a William Morris textile, a Stickley chair or a Frank Lloyd Wright design, where their aesthetic quality vastly overshadows any function they may have.

Niloo Imami-Paydar

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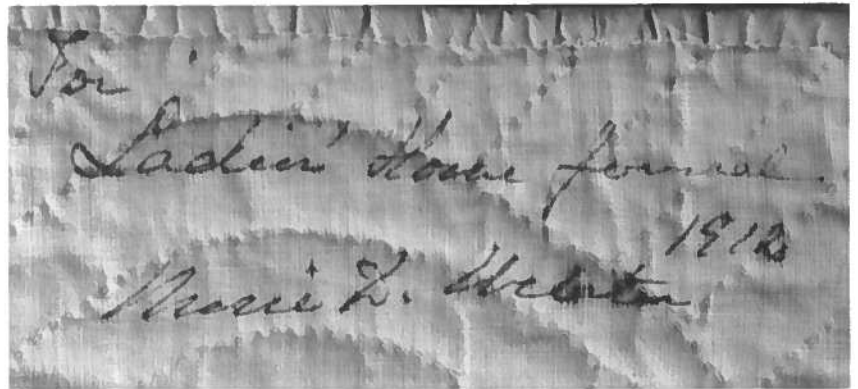
This exhibition is made possible with the support of the City of Indianapolis, the Indiana Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Exhibition Checklist

- 1.* Pink Rose, 1909**
linen appliqué on
cotton
87 x 86

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Marie
Webster's
Signature



- 2. Sunflower, 1911**
linen appliqué on
cotton
88 1/2 x 81

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- 3.* Daisies, 1912**
linen appliqué on
cotton
55 x 44 1/2

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- 4.* Morning Glory, 1912**
linen appliqué on
cotton
55 x 39

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- 5.* Bedtime, 1912**
cotton appliqué
on cotton
46 x 35

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- 6.* Grapes and Vines, 1914**
linen appliqué on
cotton
76 x 75 1/2

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- 7.* Poinsettia, 1917**
cotton and linen
appliqué on
cotton
94 1/2 x 64

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- 8. Magpie Rose, 1920s**
cotton and linen
appliqué on
cotton
85 1/2 x 74

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- 9.* Iris, 1910**
linen appliqué on
cotton
83 x 82

*Lent by Rosalind
Webster Perry*

- 10.* Poppy, 1911**
linen appliqué on
cotton
91 1/2 x 82 1/2

*Lent by Mrs. Gerrish
Thurber*

- 11. Sunbonnet Lassies, 1912,**
linen appliqué on
cotton
49 x 38

*Lent by Rosalind
Webster Perry*

- 12.* Pansies and Butterflies, 1912**
linen appliqué on
cotton
55 x 43

*Lent by Katherine
Webster Dwight*

- 13. Pink Dogwood,**
about 1925
cotton appliqué
on cotton
83 x 83

*Lent by Katherine
Webster Dwight*

- 14. Wreath of Roses, 1930**
cotton appliqué
on cotton
93 x 80

*Lent by Rosalind
Webster Perry*

- 15. Nasturtium Wreath, 1930**
cotton appliqué
on cotton
89 x 78

*Lent by Katherine
Webster Dwight*

- 16. Gay Garden,**
about 1930
cotton appliqué
on cotton
89 x 77 1/2

*Lent by Rosamond S.
Eliassen*

- 17. Bunnies, 1930**
cotton appliqué
on cotton
60 1/2 x 41

*Lent by Rosalind
Webster Perry*

- 18. French Baskets, 1930**
cotton and linen
appliqué on
cotton
92 1/2 x 82 1/2

*Lent by Katherine
Webster Dwight*

All measurements are in inches; height precedes width.

* These quilts are signed and dated on the back by Marie Webster.

Chronology

July 19, 1859

Marie Daugherty was born in Wabash, Indiana.

1878

Graduated from high school.

February 14, 1884

Married George Webster, Jr., on Valentine's Day.

October 29, 1884

Only son, Lawrence Burns Webster, was born.

1893

Visited the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

1899

Traveled to England, Holland, Germany, Switzerland and Italy.

1909

Designed her first appliquéd quilt, *Pink Rose*, later renamed American Beauty Rose.

January 1, 1911

Pink Rose, *Snow Flake*, *Iris* and *Wind Blown Tulip* quilts were featured in *Ladies Home Journal*.

August 1911

Nine appliqué designs for cushions were featured in *Ladies Home Journal*.

1911

Some of her quilts were exhibited at Marshall Fields in Chicago.

January 1912

Poppy, *Morning Glory*, *Sunflower* and *White Dogwood* quilts were published in *Ladies Home Journal*.

August 1912

Bedtime, *Sunbonnet Lassies*, *Wild Rose*, *Morning Glory Wreath*, *Pansies* and *Butterflies* and *Daisies* baby quilts were published in *Ladies Home Journal*.

1914

Grapes and Vines, *French Baskets* and *Bunnies* quilts were designed.

October 1915

Cushion cover designs and *Wreath of Roses* were published in *Ladies Home Journal*.

October 28, 1915

Quilts, Their Story and How To Make Them was published.

1915

Invited to submit information to *Who's Who In America*.

1916

First reprint of *Quilts*.

1917

Poinsettia quilt was designed.

August 1918

Three knitted vest designs were featured in *Ladies Home Journal*.

1914-1920

Daffodils and Butterflies, *Cherokee Rose*, *Magpie Rose*, *Nasturtium Wreath* and *Clematis in Bloom* quilts were designed.

Early 1920s

Established Practical Patchwork Company.

1920-1930

Cluster of Roses, *Dutch Baskets*, *May Tulips*, *Iris in Baskets*, *Primrose Wreath*, *Gay Garden*, *Wayside Roses*, *Rainbow* and *Pink Dogwood* quilts were designed.

October 1925

May Tulips, *Wreath of Roses* and *Morning Glory* quilts were published in *House Beautiful*.

1926

Second reprint of *Quilts*.

1927

Pink Dogwood was featured in *Ladies Home Journal*.

1928

Third reprint of *Quilts*.

1929

Fourth reprint of *Quilts*.

September 1930

Cherokee Rose was published in *Needlecraft* magazine.

May 1931

May Tulips was published in *Needlecraft* magazine.

1933

Son, Lawrence, married Jeanette Scott.

1938

Husband, George Webster, Jr., died.

1942

Moved to Princeton, New Jersey.

1943

Fifth reprint of *Quilts*.

1948

Sixth reprint of *Quilts*.

August 29, 1956

Died in Princeton, New Jersey.



Marie Webster, 1905

On the cover:

**Grapes and
Vines**, 1914
linen appliquéd on
cotton
76 x 75 1/2

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