



# A FABRIC BED OF ROSES

*A look into the most adorable appliqué technique and its history by Mel Kennelly*

## THE PIECES



A piece of history I've held onto for quite some time is remnants of a once treasured yo-yo project. When my grandmother died, I was lucky enough to obtain all of her crafting wears like sewing kits, fabric remnants, and this seemingly unfinished project. I'm unsure who actually started this project, I believe it was my grandmother, Sammy Hartman (1930-2017), but my mother thinks it was made by my great aunt Louise. While I don't know specifically who made it, what I do know is the piece was carefully created by a woman in my family, with the tiniest hand stitches throughout and the careful placement of the various cheerful patterns.

Upon initial observation, I perceived this project to have been "unfinished" but in fact, I believe it was finished, and then deconstructed and repurposed. The empty interior of this piece has jagged scissor marks on every yo-yo around the edges. I believe the interior was removed in order to apply it to something else as a decorative patch. I believe this was initially supposed to be a doily/placemat because of the size and pattern of yo-yo placement.

There were multiple loose pieces of yo-yos, and I previously believed they were all part of one project. But, the stitching tells a different story. The patterned yo-yo piece has stitching that is small, exact and precise while using a neutral cotton thread color, while the solid color yo-yo pieces seem to have messier, looser stitches and are done with a bright purple polyester thread. After interviewing some family members, I've determined that the patterned yo-yo's were probably created by my Great Aunt Louise (or as we knew her, Aunt Wheeze) who was

known for constantly keeping her hands busy, and when watching her many nieces, would teach them this technique in order to keep them quiet and busy as well.

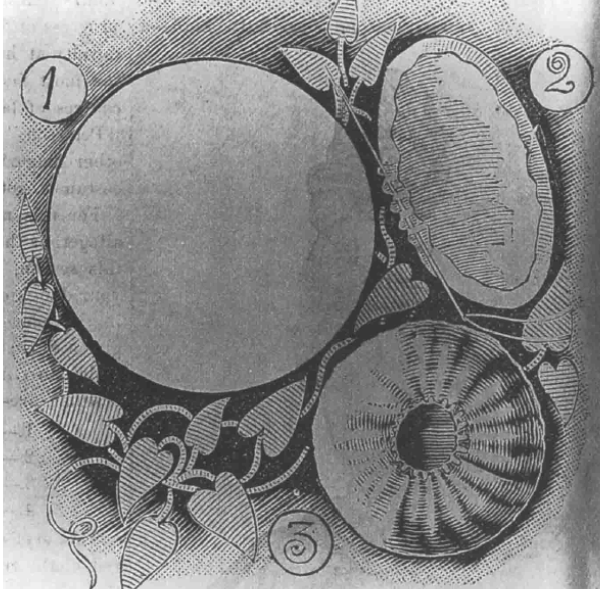
Due to the composition of thread and fabric, I believe the patterned piece is much older than the solids. The Patterned yo-yos seem to be 100% cotton whilst the solid ones are a cotton/poly mixture. This brings more excitement for me to unite these scraps into one beautiful piece, a few generations in the making.



## THE TERMINOLOGY

This technique was known by many names over the years including Yo-Yo quilt, bed of roses quilt, bon-bon technique, powder puff pillows, and more.

## THE HISTORY



### -WHAT-

Yo-yo quilts are some of the most charming quilts created. Comprised of many circular motifs made by cutting fabric circles, turning under the edge with a small running stitch, and sinching the stitching to form a disk with a small hole in the center, yo-yo quilts are a time consuming feat. It is a bit of a stretch to even call it a quilt, as the objects created with this technique never have any batting and are usually only one layer, not the usual three of a standard quilt. While not a realistic choice for warmth, the decorative and sustainable aspects of the yo-yo's is to be admired. As far as I can tell, there is no comprehensive history of this technique, all we have are examples of finished products, but no one knows where or how it really started.

### -WHEN-

The earliest examples of yo-yo's I have found date back towards the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, after fabric had become widely available due to the industrial revolution, and dressmakers and tailors suddenly had many scraps to turn into trims and embellishments. It is noted that circular embellishments were very on trend during the Rococo period as they could possibly resemble rosettes, and whimsical natural forms were a defining feature of the era. The technique has picked up various adorable names such as bed of roses quilts, bon-bon technique, or powder puffs.

The trend seems to subside during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but is wildly revived by the 1920s. There are examples of people describing how to make a "puff pillow" by using the yo-yo technique on a large scale, and stuffing the disk with feathers. (*see above photo*)



This technique became popular again because of the great depression, it was a great way to use up old scraps and turn them into something useful. Most quilts from this era are comprised of printed feed sack patterns that were used to make housewares and clothing. In a 1932 edition of the W.L.M. Company of St. Louis magazine, A "Grandmother Clark's Accurately Cut Out Fibre Diagrams," which included a 4-inch circular cardboard disk template to be used for a "Yo-Yo, Puff or Bed of Roses Quilt." was included, echoing the popularity of the craft at the time.

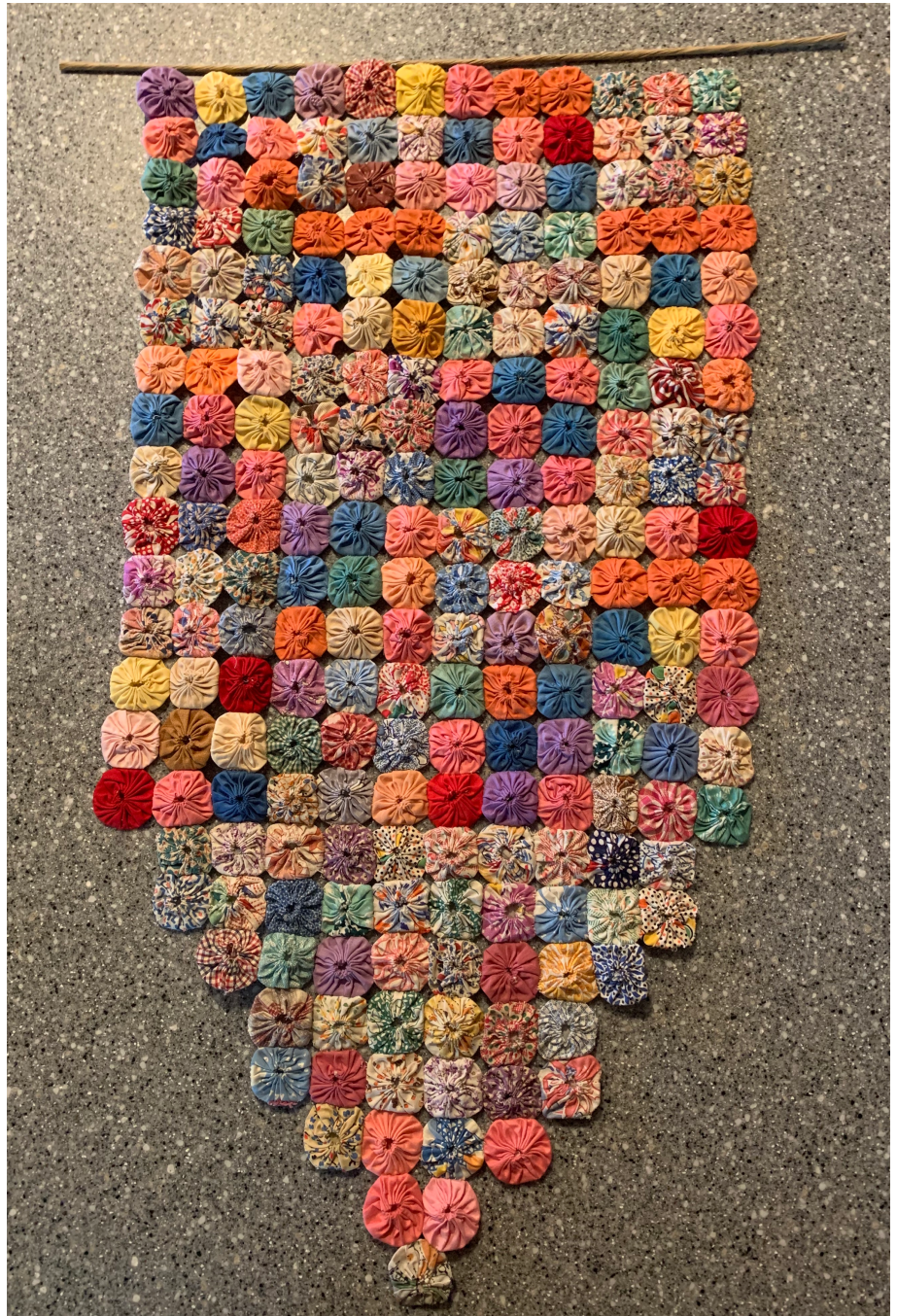
## -WHY- (THE CONCLUSION)

Going into this research, I was set on figuring out why anyone would make a quilt like this since it provides very little usefulness. Since there is no backing or batting, and usually has open pieces between the yo-yos, it wouldn't supply much warmth to a bed or a person. What I came to find is yes, these quilts are useless, but they are worth making and having. It was noted in a blog post by "The Plain Needlewoman" that this is an exceedingly accessible and sustainable project. The supplies are just scraps of fabric and some thread. The nature of creating the quilt is also one that is very easy to put down and pick up again. This accessibility is what makes yo-yo's so special, a textile crafting technique available to anyone, no matter the budget or skill level.

## THE RECONSTRUCTION

I myself took on the task of reworking and finishing this project. Working with this technique has been a very humbling project. The small size of each rosette multiplies the time needed to attach all the parts together, especially when you're used to 1'x1' quilt blocks. But, working on this piece has reminded me how meditative (and frustrating) hand stitching is. I started by breaking down the original pieces into 3x3 squares of yo-yos, keeping as much of the original stitching intact as possible.

I then combined the 3x3 squares into rows by alternating the patterned squares with the solid squares. The rows were then combined accordingly and left over yo-yos were placed around the edge for decoration and to form the piece into a banner-shape. I hope to hang this on my wall and treasure the fact that even years after my great aunt and my grandmothers deaths, we could work on a project together.



## THE SOURCES

- Gunn, Virginia. “Flower Blossom, Powder Puff, Bon Bon, Yo Yo, the Roots Run Deep.” *Piecework*, September 1995.
- [https://quiltindex.org/results/?search=quilts&back=pattern-names&pattern\\_name=Yo%20Yo](https://quiltindex.org/results/?search=quilts&back=pattern-names&pattern_name=Yo%20Yo)
- Michigan State University, Institute of Museum Libraries. “Yo-Yo Quilts Dating Back to 1900,” 2003. [https://quiltindex.org/results/?search=quilts&back=pattern-names&pattern\\_name=Yo%20Yo](https://quiltindex.org/results/?search=quilts&back=pattern-names&pattern_name=Yo%20Yo).
- Mcinns, Jannette. “Yo-Yo Quilts.” Web log. *The Plain Needle Woman* (blog), November 20, 2015. <https://theplainneedlewoman.com/2015/11/20/yo-yo-quilts/>.
- Kansier, Kathy. “How to Create Yo-Yos with the BERNINA Circular Embroidery Attachment.” *WeAllSew*, BERNINA, 9 Oct. 2019, [weallsew.com/how-to-create-yo-yos-with-the-bernina-circular-embroidery-attachment/](http://weallsew.com/how-to-create-yo-yos-with-the-bernina-circular-embroidery-attachment/).
- Cury, Mitzi. “Feedsack Fabric and Yoyo Quilts 101.” *Mitzi's Miscellany*, 12 Dec. 2010, [mitziscollectibles.typepad.com/mitzismiscellany/2010/12/feedsack-fabric-and-yoyo-quilts-101-1.html](http://mitziscollectibles.typepad.com/mitzismiscellany/2010/12/feedsack-fabric-and-yoyo-quilts-101-1.html).
- Photos taken by the author, from Esty, and from Piecework Magazine.