


# Collecting Striped Blankets

## between *the lines*

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THE VERY WORD *blanket* conjures feelings of warmth and security—just think of Linus from the Peanuts comic strip. Add stripes and you have a piece of classic Americana, perfect for snuggling on a cold night.

It wasn't always so. In fact, stripes, popular for their bold, graphic effect, were once considered downright diabolical. According to historian Michel Pastoureau, medieval popes and kings banned wearing multicolored (that is, striped) fabrics, and the pattern became associated with criminals, jesters, sorcerers, and madmen. Eventually, stripes outgrew these connotations and were used on the uniforms of guards and servants in grand houses. Thus, they became associated with hygiene and protection—nice qualities for bedding, too.

“People respond to the simplicity of stripes,” says New York textile dealer Paula Rubenstein. “If you have a modern, streamlined interior, striped blankets are a great way to add warmth, color, and style without being fussy.”

And they aren't only for beds or the back of your sofa. Laura Fisher, of the New York City antiques store Fisher Heritage, has had clients use damaged blankets to upholster furniture

**BLANKET STATEMENTS** Hudson's Bay blankets feature broad stripes against a solid background. The more colorful Beacon blankets (second, fourth, sixth, and seventh from top) were sold in department stores during the 1940s and '50s, when nearly all sheets were white.

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or make pillows. "One decorator used Beacon blankets to upholster head and foot boards on twin beds in Aspen," she says. "Everyone wanted to copy it."

Old blankets are fairly easy to find. Most popular are probably the iconic woolen trading blankets with broad horizontal stripes, imported from England beginning in 1800 by Hudson's Bay, of Canada. American Indians would bring animal pelts to trading posts and exchange them for guns, kettles, tobacco, blankets, and other staples. Small vertical black stripes, or ticks, at one edge indicated the size of the blanket and thus the number of beaver pelts each was worth. Other companies, such as Pendleton, sprang up to trade with American Indians, and Beacon Blankets used American

**LINING UP** The origin of the multistriped homespun fringed blankets, above, remains a mystery. They date from the mid-19th century, and some dealers speculate that they were originally shawls. Blankets made on home looms during the 19th century, above right, were colored with natural dyes such as indigo. Three broad-striped Hudson's Bay blankets, right, in unusual colors are stacked with five more vividly striped early Pendleton blankets.



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Indian motifs for many of its blankets; but stripes were only a small subset of what they produced.

Unlike such industrially produced goods, the striped blankets referred to as homespun were made on farms throughout the United States, especially during the first half of the 19th century. Home looms were rarely more than three feet wide, so these blankets have one or more seams running their lengths, and therefore the stripes don't

always match up perfectly. To some, such flaws are endearing, while others find them disconcerting.

Of course, just as the stripe motif crosses cultures, striped blankets come from all over the world. Rubenstein also sells blankets from Nepal and countries in South America. "No matter where they're from or how old they are," says New York-based dealer Michele Fox, "they're very modern looking. They look great now."

**HANDWORK** Homespun striped blankets, left, were relatively easy for domestic weavers to produce. The commercially manufactured woolen blankets called doubles, right, are twice the length of standard-size blankets. Usually used in camps, they enclosed the sleeper on top and bottom, like an early version of a sleeping bag. SEE GUIDE FOR SOURCES

