An eight-pointed star in the center of this quilt radiates outward into concentric circles, then into a series of brightly colored octagons. Light colors blend gradually into darker, complementary ones, creating the effect of rings of glowing, colored light. Measuring roughly nine by ten feet, it contains almost four thousand diamond-shaped pieces of printed cotton fabric, each about four inches long. What does the design remind you of? Traditionally called a sunburst pattern, it is like looking through a kaleidoscope because of the many colorful geometric shapes and patterns. Invented in 1816, kaleidoscopes were still incredibly popular in the United States in 1839, when this quilt was made.

Rebecca Scattergood Savery created this quilt when she was sixty-nine years old for her first granddaughter, Sarah Savery. Too large to actually wrap around a tiny baby, it was more likely intended to be an heirloom, a family possession that is admired and handed from one generation to the next. Savery was a Quaker married to the son of a successful Philadelphia cabinetmaker, William Savery. Although Quakers were taught to dress plainly and avoid “Striped or Flower’d Stuffs, or other useless & Superfluous things,” both Rebecca and William Savery created useful things with fancy decorations. We know of six quilts made by her, three with sunburst designs. For this quilt’s top layer, she used diamond-shaped paper templates to keep all the pieces the same size and evenly arranged. The quilting (stitches that join the top, filling, and bottom layers) also forms a diamond pattern, and was probably done with the help of women friends at quilting bees.

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