



“Workt by Hand”

Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts

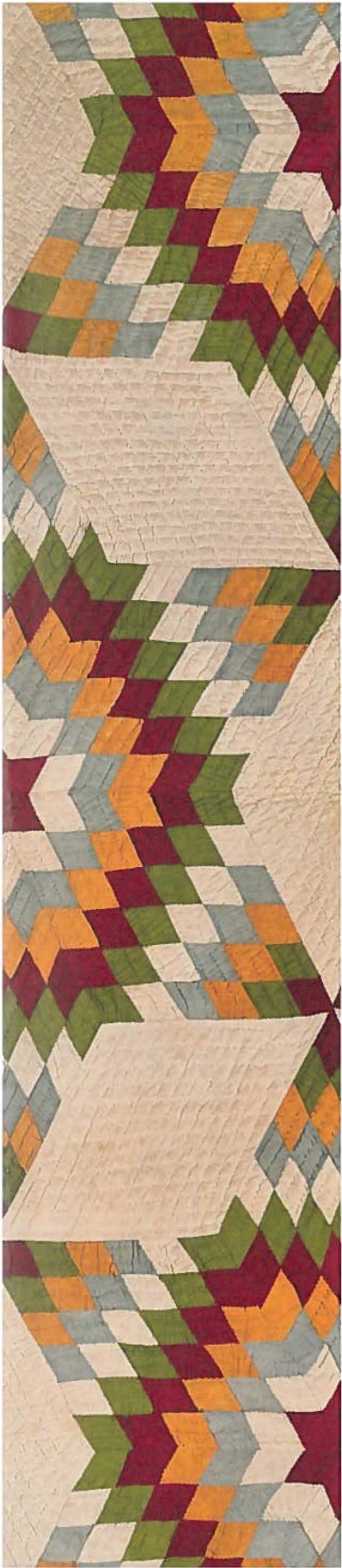


*Edited by
Catherine Morris*

“Workt_{by} Hand”

Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts

Brooklyn Museum



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Roundtable Discussion

Moderated by Catherine Morris

INTRODUCTION

The idea to convene this roundtable discussion grew from a desire to include a variety of voices from the different communities committed to the study and elucidation of quilt history and craft materials, both historically and within contemporary culture. As I am a curator decidedly lacking expertise in the field of historical quilts, both as fine art objects and important examples of material culture, my organizing this publication and the exhibition it accompanies became an exploration, not only into how to frame a historical exhibition within the context of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, but also into finding expert contributors who could contextualize from within the field the wonderful quilts in the Brooklyn Museum collection.

Toward that end, I invited a range of participants, from art historians to social or material cultural historians to practicing quilters, to discuss four questions developed in an effort to touch upon the broader themes that make a show about historical quilts a significant undertaking for the Center.

This roundtable discussion took place electronically over the course of four weeks in the early fall of 2012. At the beginning of each week a new question was introduced, each touching upon the specific interests and expertise of a different contributor. Aside from minor editing undertaken for clarity, the following transcript presents the dialogue as it unfolded.

Catherine Morris:

I'd like to start our discussion by asking each of you to briefly describe what it was that drew you to the study of quilts and craft media and to ask how your professional identity and point of view shape your approach and differentiate your engagement with the material.

fig. 5

Crazy Quilt (detail), 1884. Silk, velvet,
77¹⁵/₁₆ x 77³/₁₆ in. (198 x 196 cm).
Gift of Peter Taylor Sharp, 45.82.1

Janneken Smucker:

I made my first quilt as a teenager, using one of those popular guidebooks for making a sampler quilt. My mom had the book because she had made one quilt in the early 1980s using it as her guide. Her mother, on the other hand, was a prolific quilt-maker, who for decades met weekly with the sewing group at the First Mennonite Church of Sugarcreek, Ohio. And her mother—my great-grandmother—whom I never knew, was a professional quilt-maker, who used blue pencil and cardboard templates to mark intricate feathers on quilt tops for customers both inside and outside the Amish-Mennonite communities of eastern Ohio.

I knew nothing about the great quilt revival I was a part of; I was just a teenager trying to ward off summer boredom, who loved design and knew how to use a sewing machine. As a beginning quilt-maker, I drew inspiration from patterns, both for the patchwork and for the quilting designs that my foremothers used. Once I had pieced my first quilt, my mother and grandmother helped me quilt it around my grandmother's big quilt frame, set up in our dining room. After this first quilt, I was hooked, and I continued piecing quilts and hand-quilting them throughout college and the years after—even convincing college friends to pick up a quilting needle and help me out (although, like many a persnickety quilter before me, I occasionally had to pull out a few contributed stitches that weren't up to my high standards). At college, I studied History and Women's Studies, and slowly I began to think of quilts within these contexts.

When I first heard about the Quilt Studies graduate program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I thought it seemed like too narrow a subject to pursue. But I kept thinking about it, and kept making quilts, and before long I decided it was time for me to go back to school to study my hobby within an academic framework. The International Quilt Study Center (IQSC) already had a significant collection of Amish quilts in 2001 when I enrolled, and given my cultural background, this became a natural fit for me. I used my familiarity with and insider access to Mennonite and Amish cultures to explore what these quilts have meant within those groups.

As a quilt-maker, I intimately understood how the objects are made. I think this led me toward material culture study, which emphasizes the object as a starting point. Since then, however, I've begun to ask questions that place quilts within larger contexts of consumer culture, religion, industrialization, and globalization, looking well beyond their tactile and aesthetic qualities that first drew me in. I now bring the questions of a cultural historian to bear on both the objects themselves and the people who have loved them.

Barbara Brackman:

I made my first quilt in 1966, inspired by the trends that became the second quilt revival. I was in college, majoring in art, fascinated by fabric and pattern, looking for a return to handmade, authentic crafts over the mass-produced material culture of my parents' generation that I couldn't relate to. Quilts were everywhere in antique shops and thrift stores, and I began collecting them as well as making them. Like many artists of earlier generations I tried hard to capture the graphics, color, composition, and honesty of folk arts in my own work.

I'd seen Carrie Hall's book *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* and was amazed to find all the blocks in her book in the drawers in the back of my art history classroom at the University of Kansas. She had donated the blocks to the art museum in the 1930s. I determined to make a quilt in every pattern, or to at least index every pattern.

By the time I was in graduate school, majoring in special education and behavioral psychology, I realized that by applying the same kinds of observational standards to quilt patterns, one could classify them in some kind of mathematical order. The women's movement in the 1970s brought me to looking at the quilters' stories as well as at the objects they made. I've always been an amateur historian with a wide range of interests and a really good visual memory.

Maria Elena Buszek:

I'm not a quilt-maker per se (although I have made several—including the baby blankets in which I brought both my daughters home from the hospital), so my "introduction" response to Catherine pertains to my research on craft history.

18 My own interest in craft scholarship emerged from a collision course with the fiber community shortly after arriving as a young art history professor at the Kansas City Art Institute. At that point, the city was the regular host of the biennial Surface Design Association conference, and I had been commissioned by a craft journal to write a long-form review of the several exhibitions organized in the city for the occasion. Since I felt that the most exciting student work I had encountered at my new job was coming out of the fiber program, I immediately signed on—only to discover the yawning gap that separated the work of my very conceptually oriented fiber students and what the SDA was exhibiting as “exemplary” fiber art, mostly in the form of technically focused work (which several of my students derisively referred to as being made by the “quilting grannies” who dominate the SDA’s constituencies). I had absolutely no idea what to say about exhibitions in which, quite literally, squares of silk and bolts of fabric were pinned to the walls in order for audiences to “ooh” and “aah” over the resist-dye and industrial weaving processes by which they were made.

I was, however, quite taken by an exhibition organized by the quilt-maker Jan Myers-Newbury, entitled *Fabric Constructions*. I felt that the contributors’ work—perhaps inevitably—spoke not only to the technical traditions and ideals of the art form, but also to its historically narrative character. Whether literally depicting stories with appliquéd and silk-screened figurative elements, or referencing quilt-making history with meticulously pieced-and-stitched abstractions, the exhibition represented to me both a summary of and starting point for the conceptual underpinnings of many of my students’ work and revealed to me the potential of studying contemporary craft.

Beverly Gordon:

It’s hard to answer what it was that drew me to the study of quilts and craft media, since it’s the kind of thing that kept happening to me, one thing seamlessly leading to the next and pulling me in deeper. My mother did some knitting and sewing, and I wasn’t that drawn into her way of doing any of that, though I know having some familiarity with yarn and cloth was important to me. (I loved playing with fabric,

buttons, etc., and I remember fiber artist Robert Hillestad talking about how formative his childhood play with the ragbag was for him.) The most tangible thing I can point to at the beginning was my introduction to weaving in the mid-1960s. I had a weaving teacher in high school who was a real touchstone in my life. She was a gentle person who had been in the Dutch resistance movement, and her aesthetic sensibility was beautifully honed. I learned to weave from her, and I think it was her strong, gentle essence that really drew me in. I didn’t go back to weaving for several years, until after college, and then I took classes at a Boston Y and saved up until I could buy a loom. Curiously, I was never a great weaver—I would often tangle my warps, etc., and seemed to have too many technical problems to feel at one with it. But I was still passionate about it, and it took me places: to Shaker Village Work Group (a camp held in historical Shaker buildings), where I taught weaving, and then to Hancock Shaker Village, where I taught, did Shaker-style weaving, and eventually got to research Shaker textiles. In that time I also wrote my first book, *Shaker Textile Arts*. I found I loved learning about the meanings of cloth and doing the research, too, and that I was very good at research and writing. Eventually it took me away from making cloth, and into a career as a historian of textiles. I wrote a book on felt-making because I saw that as an up-and-coming thing, and I felt confident about writing. It came out in 1980—the same year as the Shaker textiles book, and long, long before the general interest in felt-making. Sadly, it went too early out of print. I was always interested in the interfaces between the making process of an object and its history and ethnography.

I never did much quilting myself, although I loved figuring out the patterns for pieced quilts and learning all about quilts: first studying traditional patterns, and then being an active observer of the burgeoning art-quilt movement. Among the first historical quilts I looked at very closely were two Shaker crazy quilts. Thirty years later this led to a project on crazy quilts at IQSC in Nebraska—crazy quilts as “fairyland.” Those quilts hold my attention because they have it all—sensual fabric, surface design, color, the history of manufacturing, romance, and on and on.

I do count myself as a participant in the craft revival of the 1960s and ’70s. I had early encounters with Lenore Tawney and her

work, when it was first shown as art, and was an early visitor to Julie: Artisans' Gallery in New York, which showed artwear for the first time. I was a subscriber to *Fiberarts* from the first issue. I was a member of the Handweavers Guild of America, Inc., and got a taste in the early '70s of the tension between those who approached it as craft and those who wanted to go further to use the medium in wholly new ways. I leaned to the new, but also cared about the old, just not in the older way that felt fuddy-duddy to me. I've often been ambivalent about that, since in the '60s we were fighting so much against the image of craft/fiber as being old-fashioned and were quite defensive about it. I understand the tension of seeing the SDA folks vs. the art folks—not that they are all separate, but I deeply understand those two audiences. It's interesting to watch how this changes and breaks down with a new generation of fiber art/craft makers, often DIYers who just don't carry the same issues.

TOPIC ONE: THAT '70s MOMENT



Catherine Morris:

Since our exhibition is devoted to traditional quilts from the Brooklyn Museum collection, it may seem strange to begin by talking about the 1970s. However, the intention of *Workt by Hand* is to explore the changing reception of historical quilts and the involvement of feminist scholarship in shaping the current field. And the 1970s mark not only the beginning of feminist theorization and interest in craft but also the moment when several other key events instigated a reconsideration of quilts—the most famous of these being the Whitney Museum's 1971 exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, curated by Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, which presented historical quilts as formal objects akin to modernist paintings.

fig. 6

Anna Williams (American, 1927–2010).
Quilt (detail), 1995. Baton Rouge,
 Louisiana. Cotton, synthetics, 76 1/4 x
 61 1/2 in. (193.7 x 156.2 cm). Gift in
 memory of Horace H. Solomon, 2011.18

20 Janneken, in your article on the consumption and collecting of Amish quilts, you lay this out succinctly, writing:

*Eventually referred to as a “quilt revival”—but simply tagged a “Craze for Quilts” in a 1972 Life magazine article—this newfound interest in quilts stemmed from feminism’s interest in traditional women’s arts, the back-to-the-land movement, the patriotic stirrings of the upcoming American bicentennial and a landmark museum exhibition that elevated quilts to the status of art. These overlapping influences together sowed the seeds of what would eventually result in a multimillion-dollar industry of creating, buying, collecting, exhibiting, and preserving quilts.*¹

Could you elaborate a little on how you see these various strands of resurgent interest framing the debate in the 1970s, and whether and how they continue to influence the current field?

Beverly Gordon:

You mention the Holstein/van der Hoof Whitney Museum exhibition, and I agree it was significant, but what I really count as the feminist moment was the critique of it that appeared in Patricia Mainardi’s 1973 *Feminist Art Journal* article, “Quilts: The Great American Art.” Mainardi spoke to the issue of quilts only being looked at on the wall, as abstract paintings would be, effectively erasing their real history in a female, domestic world. I later also looked at the proxemics of this in an article in *The Material Culture of Gender, The Gender of Material Culture*—I argued that when quilts are looked at on a wall, one has to stand back, take them in from a public distance, whereas if these traditional quilts were seen on a bed, one would look down at them from a more intimate distance (all this based on Edward Hall’s proxemic distance categories), which engenders a much more emotional connection.

But back to your question. The feminist interest in traditional women’s work was very important in the ’70s, and Mainardi’s piece helped give voice to it. There was a major sense of discovering our foremothers, reclaiming our place, reclaiming our voice, legitimizing what had been invisible or laughed at. (Other works, such as *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and*

Ideology [1981], addressed this reclaiming a bit later.) I think that reclaiming was the chord that ran deepest, certainly inspiring those who went on to make art quilts and break the mold of bedcovers or repeat patterns. The sense of self-empowerment affected so many things—including what one could make, how one could express oneself. Much of that is taken for granted today, but it was definitely world-changing at the time.

The back-to-the-land movement, which went hand in hand with the counterculture and hippie culture, reinforced an interest in hands-on and do-it-yourself work. However, it was all so intertwined with the reclaiming of what was not allowed by mainstream patriarchal (“straight”) culture that I really think it was the effect more than the cause. My own memory of the back-to-the-land movement is that it was reflected not so much in finished quilts as in embroidery, especially of denim—i.e., self-adornment—and in macramé and crochet. There was enthusiasm for weaving, too, but if one tracks the books written then, I think quilts came a little later.

The United States Bicentennial spurred some feeling about homey things, but I think it was a quicker flash in the pan, and my memory of Bicentennial quilts centers on pieces that incorporated flag images, or even used flag fabric or bunting. It strikes me as having been commercial in a way, and I think it had no lasting impact.

In fact, it’s hard to separate all of these strands. Let’s not forget, too, the intensity of the Vietnam War as an impetus for change on all levels, and the need to recast the past and make a new, different kind of future (“We’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden”²). Also, the non-Western world was opening up, as evidenced by, for instance, increasing ease of travel and the new independence of African countries. We looked at craft through a more global lens.

What continues? I would say the feminist reframing remains, and it’s what allows the quilt revival to be so important. Not that people, including quilters, are necessarily looking at this in feminist terms, but the reframing changed assumptions and allowed new ideas, which have now become the norm—

1. Janneken Smucker, “Destination Amish Quilt Country: The Consumption of Quilts in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 80, no. 2 (2006). Accessed on 8/15/12 at http://udel.academia.edu/JannekenSmucker/Papers/108327/Destination_Amish_Quilt_Country_The_Consumption_of_Quilts_in_Lancaster_County_Pennsylvania.

2. Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock,” *Ladies of the Canyon*, 1970.

even things we take for granted, such as women being “allowed” to travel to quilt shows and to spend money on fabric stashes.

The art world might have started to look at quilts differently, but the prejudice against soft media and fiber art still remains to some extent. Yes, there was hoopla when the Gee’s Bend quilts were discovered, but they were still judged in terms of abstract art and as the work of exoticized people; their historical context was, by virtue of singling out the women of Gee’s Bend as unique, also largely erased.

And what is the debate now? For or against the importance of quilts? For a certain type of quilt? Quilt as craft vs. art? Maybe defining these terms would help further our discussion.

Janneken Smucker:

This ’70s moment really stretches back into the 1960s, as Barbara’s personal history demonstrates: “Quilts were everywhere in antique shops and thrift stores,” she writes. And while the Whitney Museum’s exhibition rightly deserves credit as a landmark event, the stirrings that made it possible began years prior to the exhibition’s opening. Outside the realms of craft and fiber art, expanding definitions of “art” itself—pop art, minimalism, performance art, and a whole variety of conceptual works—paved the way for museums to host exhibitions that challenged what art looked like and felt like. And some of these exhibitions embraced textiles and craft in a way that may have directly inspired the Whitney’s staff to be receptive to Gail van der Hoof and Jonathan Holstein’s proposal for *Abstract Design in American Quilts*.

As I recount in my forthcoming book,³ the Museum of Modern Art showed fiber art in the context of “high art” in its 1969 exhibition *Wall Hangings*, which explicitly interpreted woven fiber pieces as art rather than craft. And at least three museums hosted quilt exhibitions in the years leading up to *Abstract Design*. New York’s Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Arts and Design) hosted *Fabric Collage* in 1965, showing historical American quilts alongside fiber art by contemporary artists and appliques by San Blas Indians. Also in 1965, the Newark Museum

3. Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).



mounted *Optical Quilts*, drawn from its collection of historical quilts. And in 1970 the Rhode Island School of Design’s Museum of Art hosted *Mountain Artisans*, an exhibition of quilts made by the West Virginia cooperative that collaborated with fashion designer Dorothy Weatherford to make quilts to appeal to a consumer market, a project promoted by Sharon Percy Rockefeller.⁴ In addition to these exhibitions, quilts received prominent attention when they appeared on the pages of *Vogue* in February 1970, covering the ceilings, floors, tables, doors, and beds of Gloria Vanderbilt’s Upper East Side home.⁵

When the Whitney agreed to host *Abstract Design*, quilts were certainly not an entirely new addition to the worlds of art, fashion, or consumer culture. What set the Whitney exhibition apart from these other quilt events, however, was the degree to which the media paid attention. The press in New York went nuts over the show. And once the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) launched its traveling version of the exhibition (*American Pieced Quilts*), national periodicals including *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Reader’s Digest* also jumped on the quilt bandwagon, as did regional newspapers near exhibition venues across the country.⁶ More than anything, *Abstract Design* made quilts part of a national conversation.

4. Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

5. “Cooper’s Bedroom,” *Vogue* (February 1970).

6. “The Joy of Quilting,” *Newsweek* (January 10, 1972); “Craze for Quilts,” *Life* (May 5, 1972); “Comeback of the Quilt,” *Reader’s Digest* (March 1973).

fig. 7

Horst P. Horst. *Gloria Vanderbilt’s Upper East Side home*. *Vogue*, February 1970, p. 20. © Vogue Magazine/Condé Nast

22 Beverly is exactly right that the most significant response to this exhibition was from feminists. First Mainardi's powerful critique, but soon women across the country began projects as a direct counter to *Abstract Design*. In the Bay Area, Julie Silber, Pat Ferrero, and Linda Reuther—who had also begun collecting quilts in the mid-1960s—developed the exhibition *Quilts in Women's Lives* at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1976, eventually building on it for the 1981 landmark exhibition *American Quilts: A Handmade Legacy* at the Oakland Museum.⁷ In these exhibitions, they presented quilts as part of the life cycle of American women, along with primary sources documenting women's lives, such as diaries and letters. Similarly, after visiting *Abstract Design* at the Whitney, Norma Bradley Buford and Patricia Cooper conceived their own project, interviewing women who had stitched quilts in the Southwest and sharing their stories in their 1977 book, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art*.⁸ These projects and many others demonstrated that quilts were indeed beautiful, but that one could appreciate them as so much more than aestheticized objects, hung on white walls like paintings.

I think the sentiments that spurred the quilt revival of the 1970s that continue to resonate the strongest today are the elements of DIY that have resurfaced through the current craft revival. Once again, people are very interested in making things at home as a response to overbearing aspects of mass consumer culture, even if today they learn their craft-making skills by watching online tutorials.

Beverly Gordon:

I appreciate Janneken's very complete response, citing much more of the relevant literature and events. I concur with all she says, and indeed, it was the *Woven Forms* and especially *Wall Hangings* exhibitions that excited me so much personally and introduced me to Lenore Tawney. The one thing I would add is that we really cannot see this story of quilts in isolation from the rest of fiber work. For reasons I am still puzzled by, quilters and quilt enthusiasts are often discussed in isolation from those who work with fiber in other ways. My plea is that as we respond to this story, we never treat quilts outside their broader context.

7. L. Thomas Frye, ed., *American Quilts: A Handmade Legacy* (exh. cat.; Oakland, Calif.: Oakland Museum, 1981).

8. Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buford, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

Maria Elena Buszek:

Karin E. Peterson has published several pieces (including in my anthology *Extra/Ordinary*) about the history and criticism surrounding the Whitney's Holstein/van der Hoof exhibition, in particular Jonathan Holstein's very conscious, strategic efforts to effectively "scrub" the quilts' histories of makers and culture in the way he sold the exhibition idea to the Whitney by presenting them as abstractions—in direct relation to Abstract Expressionist painting and modernist theory. And I feel that—like much artistic creation and criticism since modernism's decline in influence—a lot of what contemporary quilt-makers are trying to revive are precisely these stories and contexts in response to such erasures.

Indeed, perhaps the most obvious, even ubiquitous example of this can be found in the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, which—whether the contributions are by amateurs or well-known artists—really both embraces this notion of quilts' historical, domestic contexts and draws attention to their erasure, on many politicized levels. In this case, a specifically queer spin is put on the activist underpinnings of some of the best contemporary reclamations of quilt-making. What the AIDS Memorial Quilt also does is offer us an interesting (and admittedly rare) example of contemporary quilt-making that transcends the segregation of the craft process from the "serious" concerns of the art world.

TOPIC TWO: VALUE AND LABOR

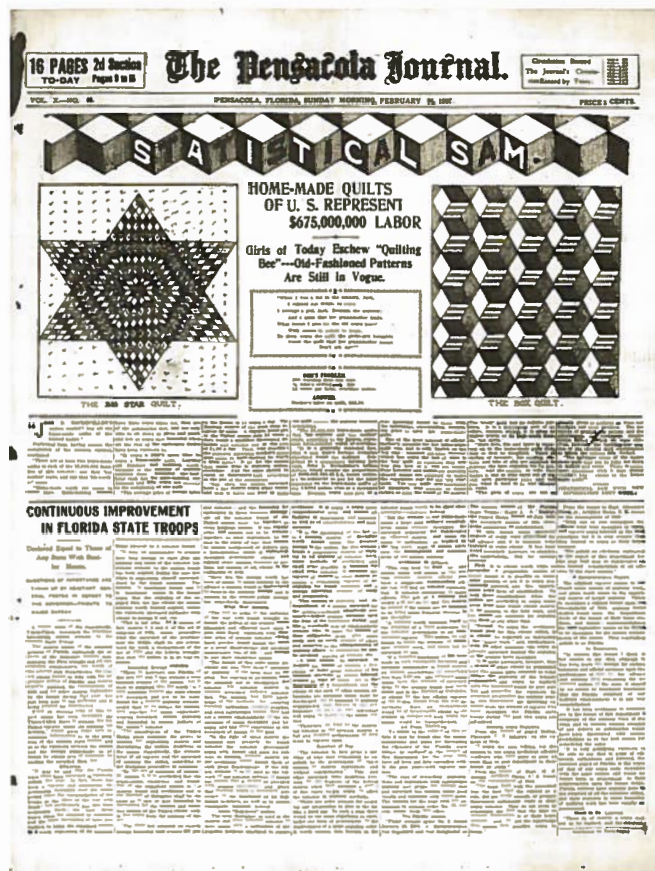


fig. 8

"Home-Made Quilts of U.S. Represent \$675,000,000 Labor." *The Pensacola Journal*, February 24, 1907. Library of Congress, Chronicling America, Washington, D.C.

Catherine Morris:

We liked the idea of using the word *workt* in our title, not only because it incorporates traditional language associated with quilts that still feels quite contemporary, but also because it points to the issue of hidden labor, and both the uncalculated—indeed incalculable—value of that handworked material and the hidden, or at least historically undocumented, creators whose names, stories, and motivations have become detached from these labors of love. Beverly, in discussing how quilts function as embodied objects, you necessarily talk about how they are valued, writing:

*Quilts were closely associated with the traditional roles of women as maintainers of the home and family. They functioned as a kind of currency in an informal, female-centered economy based on kinship, mutual support, and the transformation of ordinary materials into objects of significance and value.*⁹

Can you discuss how you think about what we might call affective or culturally symbolic value in relation to the more formal economic and commodity value?

Barbara Brackman:

It may be that the most obvious symbolic value in a patchwork quilt is the often overheard comment: "What a lot of work—I wouldn't have the patience for that." As a quilt-maker and an observer of the "work," I would have to say that many people haven't the patience to sit still. The women in my sewing group (a persistent social system) are always looking for the never-ending handwork project—something that requires a good deal of time with a rewarding finish on the far horizon.

Beverly Gordon:

Barbara addresses the "how much time did that take?" question. It isn't true only for quilts; when I was demonstrating weaving it was the one predictable question I got from all kinds of people—kids, men, and women alike. Perhaps less from other makers, who understood the appeal and didn't calculate time in that way.

Since the Industrial Revolution we have become culturally programmed to think about time as money—how much is an hour of my time worth? If we start adding up the time it takes

9. Beverly Gordon and Laurel Horton, "Turn-of-the-Century Quilts: Embodied Objects in a Web of Relationships," in *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750–1950*, Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds. (Farnham, U.K., and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), p. 95.

- 24 to make a quilt or for any other major project, we start looking at it as impractical; our hourly wage for the time put in may be very small indeed, and it can't be "worthwhile." In this way of thinking (which is pervasive in our culture, and even those of us who resist it fall prey to it sometimes), the product is indeed a commodity. The maker can't be seen as very important, since she generally can't sell her quilts for what would be a high wage return.

I hesitate to refer to "traditional quilts," because "tradition" is such a contested word—whose tradition, from what time period, etc. To the general public the concept of tradition implies that something is frozen, which definitely does not apply, and there were many subtraditions in the history of American quilting. So I will talk about the pre-art quilt era, which is what I understand this exhibition will deal with. (That would encompass everything from eighteenth-century whole-cloth quilts on up.) In that time, handmade quilts were valued in very different terms. They were multivalent, and any given quilt might hold myriad meanings:

1. They were an expression of the quilt-maker's skill—both her design skill and, especially in earlier periods, her sewing skills. This could in some cases translate into her desirability as an elite, refined young lady (e.g., in early nineteenth-century whitework quilts) or as a wife. When looked at by her peers, other women who might or might not be able to make quilts themselves but could evaluate them, it might translate into someone who was admired as a role model, or someone to look to for technical help. She might be seen as a teacher for younger women, capable of taking on apprentices, effectively.
2. They were an expression of love. If, as was often the case, the quilt was either given to someone in the family or worked on with a loved one or close friend, the many hours put into the quilt as well as the quilt itself functioned as a manifestation of a personal bond. If it was made with personalized symbolism or initials—or even fabric associated with a particular person—that love was expressed with even greater particularity.
3. They were a vehicle of communication among friends and could be part of an animated, dynamic women's community.

This relates to both my first and second points, of course, but since women got together to quilt, to share and exchange fabric, to work on blocks, to plan and execute presentation quilts, etc., their work time was a time to share personal stories, to help one another out, and to communicate in the shared language of quilting.

4. They could serve as a kind of archive, or memory bank, when the fabrics used came from other people or had been used in the home or elsewhere in their lives. Even the quilts of Gee's Bend, sometimes made from scraps from the factories where the women worked, filled this function. In the crazy-quilt era, when silk badges were printed for every kind of event (convention, Sunday school picnic, etc.), the quilts could be a literal repository of places the quilter or her family or community had been. In later times, these quilts can also be used as historical documents. Signature quilts can help a historian piece together who belonged to a community at a given time.

5. They could be a political expression or a fund-raising mechanism for causes the women believed in. This was less common, but there are certainly some antislavery quilts, temperance quilts, etc. Maybe individuals made only parts of these—they were often put together from individual blocks—but they still did so with purpose and intention. Many nineteenth-century quilts were raffled off to raise money, particularly at the fund-raising fairs during the Civil War. And perhaps I can put the charitable impulse in this category as well—women gave quilts to others and still do, often those in need and without.

6. They could be an expression of formal obligation in a community—a quilt made to give to a minister, for example—or they could be used to mark a more individual rite of passage, such as a wedding or an ordination. This overlaps with points 2 and 3 a great deal.

7. Their aesthetic meaning must not be overlooked. As all quilt-makers know, there is tremendous satisfaction in the making process—the laying out of fabric, the sensual engagement with its texture, color, etc.—and working on such a project brings one into a state of flow that is very valuable to individual well-being. Then there is the satisfaction of contemplating it and interacting with it later, which can lead to an enormous sense of pride. I think

of aesthetic meaning in terms of all the senses—visual but definitely tactile and kinesthetic as well. Just the sheer pleasure in handling fabrics is something people rhapsodize about, both in the past and today. The quilt's aesthetic meaning isn't limited to its maker, of course, but extends to others who interact with it.

8. For quilt-makers, quilts often provided a way of engaging intellectually with either a self-contained problem or the culture at large—telling narrative stories, perhaps, or symbolic ones (e.g., by using a quilt pattern such as the Drunkard's Path), or learning the latest way to do something, such as preparing a stencil for a quilt. Figuring out patterns is an intellectual challenge, a puzzle. The open-ended nature of the process makes this endlessly fascinating.

Janneken Smucker:

Beverly has identified many of the important ways in which quilts and quilt-making were symbolically valuable to their makers and owners. Her list does a remarkable job of explaining why quilts do indeed matter.

Another sort of value relates closely to the Industrial Revolution, the very factor that caused humans to equate value with both time and money. As early as the Civil War, women were associating quilts with a simpler, preindustrial time during which women creatively made goods at home. At sanitary fairs and at the colonial kitchens of late nineteenth-century world's fairs, women presented quilt-making as an old-fashioned activity. Yet these very same years were the heyday of American quilt-making, perhaps in part because the activity was a way for women to ward off the pressures of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. Already in these early years of what later became known as the Colonial Revival, Americans (mistakenly) understood quilts as a prime form of colonial women's ingenuity. And as such, women regarded quilt-making as a nostalgic activity and quilts garnered value as symbols of this preindustrial past.

Quilt-making has also become a sanctioned way for women to earn money. For women in communities with few culturally approved outlets for women's work (the Amish, for example)

or with few economically viable jobs available (Appalachia in the 1930s and '60s and Gee's Bend in the 1960s and again today), the economic value of making quilts for the consumer market is indeed significant. The consumers willing to pay good money for these quilts valued the objects not just economically, but for their association with all of the many factors Beverly describes. In our contemporary era, consumers are willing to pay for an object imbued with symbolic value. And quilt-makers, in turn, are compensated, albeit poorly, for their work.

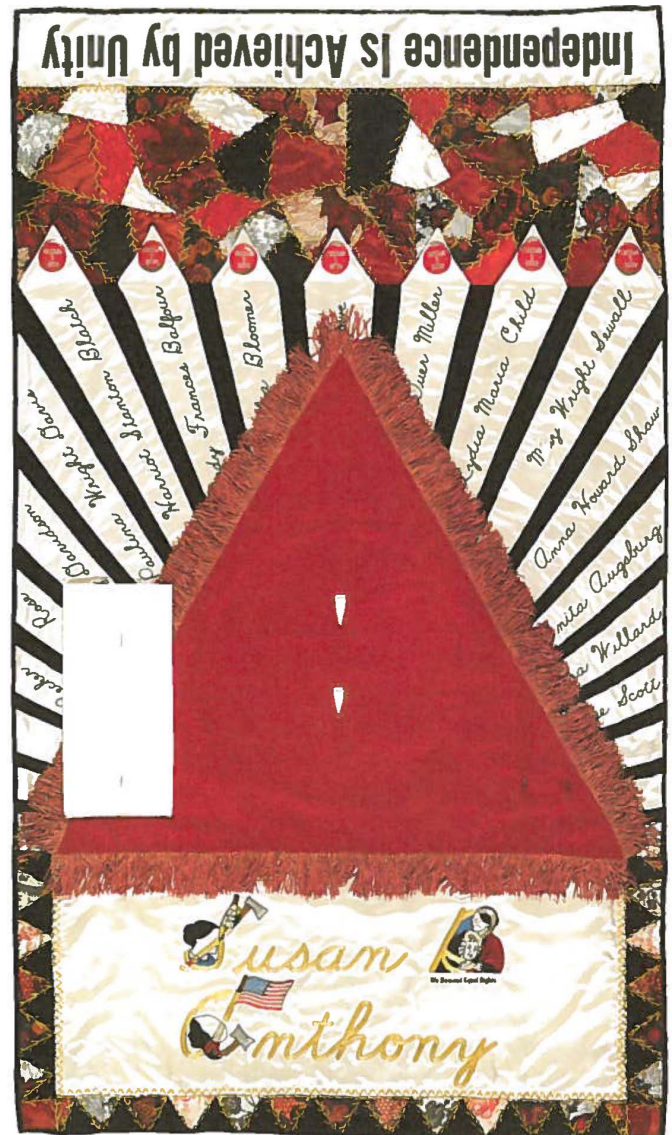
Catherine Morris:

Our earlier discussions have introduced the function of nostalgia in the popularity of quilts since the Civil War, and one result of this impulse seems to be that numerous myths have grown up around quilting. For example, collectivity and anonymity are two ideas that are commonly assumed or discussed in relation to historical quilting practices, but the ways in which historical quilts were made or authored seem to have been highly idiosyncratic. In an example close to home for us at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Susan B. Anthony's place setting in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* has a quilted runner, and legend has it that this famous suffragette gave her first political speech at a quilting bee, though that may be apocryphal.

Barbara, by way of introducing your book on myths connecting quilts and the Underground Railroad,¹⁰ you write about Betsy Ross and George Washington's cherry tree, noting:

*These popular legends capture our imaginations, becoming far more than mere falsehoods or fabrications. They are American myths, and no myth buster, no historian can stamp them out, because myths tell tales that define us as a culture.*¹¹

Can you talk a bit about how such quilting myths arise, and how they function within various quilt communities? For example, why do you think quilts have become the touchstone within material culture for finding evidence of the cultural heritage of enslaved Africans?



10. An introduction to the current terms of this discussion can be found in the online recording of Laurel Horton's talk "The Underground Railroad Quilt Controversy: Looking for the 'Truth,'" presented at the International Quilt Study Center & Museum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on March 22,

2006 (<http://www.quiltstudy.org/connections/podcasts1.html/title/-the-underground-railroad-quilt-controversy-looking-for-the-truth-laurel-horton-march-22-2006-44-minutes>), and in her essay "The Underground Railroad Quilt Code: The Experience of Belief," in Joanna E.

Evans, ed., *Uncoverings 2007*, 28 (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 2007), pp. 207–16.

11. Barbara Brackman, *Facts & Fabrications: Unraveling the History of Quilts & Slavery* (Lafayette, Calif.: C&T Publishing, 2006), p. 7.

Fig. 9

Judy Chicago (American, born 1939). *Susan B. Anthony Place Setting from The Dinner Party* (detail), 1974–79. Runner: White silk satin, cotton/linen fabric, felt, muslin, cotton twill tape, silk, synthetic gold. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago. Photo by Jook Leung Photography

Barbara Brackman:

I'll start by addressing why I think quilts have become the material-culture touchstone for the cultural heritage of enslaved Africans. First, the myth of the quilt as code for escape on the Underground Railroad continues to be vibrant because for more than twenty years it has appeared in multiple sources as being historically accurate. The myth can be traced to three published sources, each of which has built chronologically on the others. In 1990 folklorist Dr. Gladys Marie Fry published the book *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*¹² with a Log Cabin quilt captioned, "Log Cabin quilts with black fabric often served as signals on the Underground Railroad to identify safe houses." In 1993 Deborah Hopkinson published *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, children's fiction in which an enslaved child makes a quilt as a map for escape.¹³ The third is the 1999 book *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, by Jacqueline Tobin and Dr. Raymond Dobard,¹⁴ which outlined a coded series of popular patchwork patterns such as the Sailboat and the Drunkard's Path, said to give advice on escape (respectively, to travel by water or to travel in a zigzag fashion).

The endurance of the story of the coded quilt and the Underground Railroad persists in great part because these books have had many readers, while essays explaining errors in the story's logic, sources, and history have had relatively few. Jacqueline Tobin appeared on Oprah Winfrey's television show with her book; the book and its theory were also featured in *Newsweek*. At one point the Central Intelligence Agency's website featured a page using the quilt code to explain how codes have been used in the past, one of several websites giving further verisimilitude to the myth.

The quilt code myth would not be so enduring if it did not have great resonance among Americans. A myth is more than a lie, a rumor, or a historical error: a myth helps define a culture. In *Facts & Fabrications* I stated why I think this myth has such a hold on the contemporary imagination:

The story of black heroes risking their lives for freedom and white heroes risking their liberty to shelter escaping slaves

12. Gladys Marie Fry, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1990).

13. Deborah Hopkinson, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (New York: Dragonfly Books, 1993).

14. Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

has resounding appeal. As American studies professor James Horton noted, "With the Underground Railroad, you have a real Hollywood story. Everyone gets to be a hero."

The quilt code myth is a relatively new one. In 1988 I wrote an article for *Quilters Newsletter* (April 1988), "Seven Myths about Old Quilts," which did not include this story. Among the common myths I wrote about were:

The crazy quilt is the earliest type of American quilt. A poor pioneer or pilgrim (a perpetually confused chronology) struggles to keep her family warm with threadbare blankets that she patches with a triangle of print here, a rectangle there—and the crazy quilt is born. This crude patchwork evolves into her granddaughter's more complex Texas Stars and Irish Chains. Virginia Gunn, in her essay "From Myth to Maturity: the Evolution of Quilt Scholarship,"¹⁵ attributes the logic here to a high school biology-based perspective on evolution—oddly shaped paramecium preceding more complex platypuses.

Homespun cotton was a common quilt backing. Despite the rarity of homespun cotton (cotton is hard to spin by hand) and the evidence of factory-produced domestic cloth as the common coarse quilt backing of the early nineteenth century, this myth persists. It echoes the crazy-quilt myth above in its reliance on the basic concept of pioneer hardship and scarcity, which underlies many of the myths. Patchwork as a reflection of fabric scarcity was countered by Rachel Maines in her essay "Paradigms of Scarcity and Abundance: The Quilt as an Artifact of the Industrial Revolution,"¹⁶ and patchwork as a reflection of poverty is refuted in Gloria Seaman Allen's "Bed Coverings: Kent County, Maryland, 1710–1820." Both authors argue that patchwork requires a surplus of fabric and is therefore only practical at a certain socioeconomic level.

Scrap quilts were made out of necessity. This myth ignores the historical retail market in scraps and factory cutaways, paralleling other myths equating patchwork and poverty. As I wrote in the *Quilters Newsletter* article:

Most myths about American quilts have a common thread relating to the hardships our ancestors endured in settling this country...

15. Virginia Gunn, "From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship," in Laurel Horton, ed., *Uncoverings 1992*, 13 (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1992), pp. 192–205.

16. Rachel Maines, "Paradigms of Scarcity and Abundance: The Quilt as an Artifact of the Industrial Revolution," in Jeannette Lasansky, ed., *In the Heart of Pennsylvania: Symposium Papers* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Oral Traditions Project of the Union County Historical Society, 1986), pp. 84–89.

- 28 *Myths persist because they reinforce our national pride in the tenacity and bravery of our ancestors, from pilgrim to pioneer to Depression-era survivor. They serve as examples to give us direction during wars, social change, and economic crises, and they help us define ourselves as a community at a time when we fear our culture is being undermined.*¹⁷

Janneken Smucker:

Barbara has referenced some of my favorite articles in quilt history, ones I turn to again and again as I try to articulate quilts' symbolic function within our culture. I find it remarkable how early the great myths of American quilt-making emerged, and how solidly they have become cemented in our collective imagination.

Already during the Civil War, Americans had begun to consider quilts as old-fashioned objects of an earlier era, a vital part of colonial women's domestic production. Studies of probate inventories and other estate records, on the other hand, suggest that quilts were not a regular part of colonial life, and when they were, they were owned by elite families and stitched from expensive imported fabrics.¹⁸ But the myth of colonial quilts persists, because it resonates with our perceptions of frugal and ingenious foremothers. We want these women to have stitched together bedcovers out of scraps of recycled cloth in order to keep their families warm, because that story says a lot about Americans and their ability to persevere through self-sufficiency.

Beverly Gordon:

I am finding this discussion of myth to be an exciting one. I completely agree that myth transcends inaccuracy, speaking to a kind of longing for a certain story, as Barbara's examples make clear. This brings us back to the nostalgia issue addressed in Catherine's question.

Nostalgia is generally reserved for something that never really was—a memory of something seen in a very rosy glow, part of our longing for a non-nuanced reality. Quilts, and indeed many kinds of textiles, are particularly associated with nostalgia. No doubt there are multiple reasons for this, among them the romanticizing of the quilter—often

imagined as a mother, stitching away, providing an image of love and nurture, taking care of the family with her needle. This is reflected in the mythic language that appeared throughout the Colonial Revival; for example, in the poetry of Edgar Guest, as seen in his "When Mother's Sewing Buttons On," where everything is literally set aglow with the aura of the sewing woman:

*When mother's sewing buttons on
Their little garments, one by one,
I settle down contented there
And watch her in her rocking chair.
She's at the task she likes the best...*

*There's something in her patient eyes,
As in and out her needle flies,
Which seems to tell the joy she takes
In every little stitch she makes.
An hour of peace has settled down;
Hushed is the clamor of the town;
And even I am different then,
For I forsake the ways of men
And see about the garments there
Bright visions of a happy pair...*

*I chuckle as I watch her sew,
For joy has set the room aglow,
And in the picture I can see
The strength which means so much to me.
The scene is good to look upon
When mother's sewing buttons on.*¹⁹

Many quilting myths started in the Colonial Revival era, which itself began about the time of the Civil War (1861–65). Humorous reenactments called "New England Quilting Bees," highlighting activities popular in the nonindustrialized, "backward" days of yore, were staged at the 1860s sanitary fairs and other events, including the Centennial Exposition in 1876. Over time, these performances were sacralized, no longer understood as satire, to the point that by the turn of the twentieth century, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) were presenting similar reenactments as an almost holy rite. The people doing the reenacting matter, of course; the DAR were mythologizing their

17. Barbara Brackman, "Seven Myths about Old Quilts," *Quilters Newsletter*, 19, no. 4 (April 1988), pp. 40–42, 57.

18. Studies include Susan Margaret Prendergast, "Fabric Furnishings Used in Philadelphia Homes, 1700–1775"

(master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1977); Sally Garoutte, "Early Colonial Quilts in a Bedding Context," in Sally Garoutte, ed., *Uncoverings 1980*, 1 (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1980), pp. 18–27; Gloria Seaman Allen, "Bed Coverings: Kent County, Maryland, 1710–1820," in Sally Garoutte,

ed., *Uncoverings 1985*, 6 (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), pp. 9–31; Patricia J. Keller, "The Quilts of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania: Production, Context, and Meaning, 1750–1884" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 2007).

19. Edgar A. Guest, "When Mother's Sewing Buttons On," in *When Day is Done* (Chicago: The Reilly and Lee Co., 1921), pp. 100–101.

own foremothers. But it was also a reflection of a very different point in time. When we weren't far removed from the grind of sewing for survival and satisfying daily needs, there could be humor in it and, it seems to me, a sense of superiority about our advancement over people of the past. With succeeding generations, this sense of safety shifted, as the industrialized world we lived in made our operating assumptions, our sense of self, very different. And class was no doubt a part of it, too: the people who were most nostalgic were also the most comfortable in their social position, far removed from the issue of labor.

In terms of the Betsy Ross myth mentioned earlier (another Colonial Revival invention), there is an interesting thesis by Michael Frisch that I reference in my book *Textiles: The Whole Story* (2011).²⁰ Frisch compares Ross to the Virgin Mary, who, blessed by the father (George Washington), gave birth to the iconic cloth. The flag wasn't quite strong enough to shape the symbol on its own, Frisch said, but when bonded with the woman it had unique power. This relates to the much broader understanding that, across cultures, making cloth is symbolically linked with making life—it is a generative activity, making something out of nothing. Quilt-making has many layers of complexity, and even if one starts with machine-made fabrics, one is making something whole out of little fragments. It is making meaning, making whole. I believe this is another reason that nostalgia and myths are so powerful. When we look back on our history, whether personal or a shared political one, we want it to have been filled with heroic people who made things whole. Women were quite complicit in creating myths about their foremothers, so they could feel there was a heroic, distaff side of history. Alice Morse Earle, author of *Home Life in Colonial Days* and a good historian in many ways, helped create some of these Colonial Revival myths.

During the interwar era, when there were quilt entrepreneurs selling patterns, kits, supplies, and even quilting itself, these myths were particularly powerful, ennobling what women using pre-made patterns were doing.

20. Beverly Gordon, *Textiles: The Whole Story: Uses, Meanings, Significance* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011).



Barbara Brackman:

Thinking more about the “function of nostalgia in the popularity of quilts since the Civil War,” I wanted to note that this function precedes the Civil War. We are familiar with the popular Knickerbocker kitchens and New England kitchens in the Civil War fund-raising fairs for the Sanitary Commission, in which costumed reenactors cooked over an open hearth and entertained observers with quilting and spinning. But the concept of quilting parties as “old-fashioned,” nostalgic, and a dying art can be traced to an earlier generation.

fig. 10

W. E. James (American). *Untitled*, 1864.
Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, N.Y.

fig. 11

W. E. James (American). *Untitled*, 1864.
Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, N.Y.

30 In a letter written on December 30, 1859, Mary Trussell of New London, New Hampshire, told her friend Delia Page about a ladies' meeting she had attended, where they were entertained with "a very good dialogue. It was of old times. They had an old-fashioned quilting party." An even earlier use of the term "old-fashioned quilting party" appeared in an 1830 newspaper article: "Reader—were you ever at a Quilting Party—an old-fashioned quilting party... as the thing is now nearly obsolete, you may never have the satisfaction." A description of the "simple pastimes of our ancestors" follows, and the piece's lengthy introduction speaks of "the times of old—the good old days of frankness and honesty... the freedom, the generosity, and the bravery of New England." And there is a nice summary of the uses of nostalgia.

Catherine Morris:

As Beverly and Barbara point out, women have been closely associated with quilting myths throughout the genre's long history, both as subjects and as active participants in shaping American culture. In fact, we organized an exhibition at the Sackler Center in 2010, *Healing the Wounds of War: The Brooklyn Sanitary Fair of 1864*, that highlighted these events' simultaneous production of handmade crafts, national identity, and engaged citizenship. In light of this, I'm curious as to the ways in which feminist engagement with quilts and quilt history has affected the myths that have been built up around them. I would imagine that it has played a part in debunking some myths, while creating some of its own along the way.

Barbara Brackman:

It may be that the new myth of the quilt code and the Underground Railroad has been affected by feminism in that it portrays women (quilt-makers) in the active role of escapees—clever in their deceptions, knowledgeable about local geography, and accomplished in their communication—rather than as passive slaves waiting for the free white culture to pass them along from station to station.

Beverly Gordon:

And it's not just the escapees who are clever in this scenario; the women who hung quilts on the line and may even have

been such domestic souls that they rarely left the homestead were still knowledgeable about the code and brave enough to be part of an underground network.

Janneken Smucker:

When I look back on Patricia Mainardi's manifesto on the greatness of American quilts, I wonder if she and other feminists essentialized quilts as a female art in some ways, perhaps strengthening the myth of quilts as solely a female form of expression and empowerment, grounded in what early historians regarded as the domestic or women's sphere. This early feminist celebration of women's needlework fully domesticated the craft of quilt-making, rather than acknowledging the role of professionals, of commerce, and of industrialization.

Less frequently acknowledged, too, is that men quilt. This is not just a contemporary phenomenon reflected by blogs such as *The Manquilter* and *That Man Quilts*, or exhibitions by Luke Haynes and Michael James, or media figures such as Mark Lipinski or Ricky Tims. More and more evidence suggests that men have long made quilts—as professional tailors making quilts for an elite consumer market, as soldiers rehabilitating or keeping busy when stationed far from home, or simply as men, such as Joe Hedley (1750–1830) or Ernest Haight (1899–1986), who were drawn to the craft of quilt-making for a variety of reasons.²¹

Barbara Brackman:

Janneken brings up an excellent point about the mythologizing of the process—particularly the domestic production of quilts being regarded as a work of necessity or love, with no mention of the very large commercial component and the likely involvement of male artisans.

Our default thinking when we see a quilt is "one woman, one work of art." We are repeatedly surprised to learn that quilts and handmade bedcovers have been produced in workshop-like situations. One surprising example is the workshop of Achsah Goodwin Wilkins of Baltimore (fl. c. 1815–20). We have a hard time incorporating the story of Wilkins and her factory into our mythology about quilts.

21. Joe Cunningham, *Men and the Art of Quiltmaking* (Paducah, Ky.: American Quilter's Society, 2010).

TOPIC FOUR: THE CONTEMPORARY ATTRACTION TO HISTORICAL QUILTS



Catherine Morris:

Thinking about the particular communities that are interested in quilts but are invested in different, often divergent, aspects of them, and then going through the kinds of nostalgic or ideological attachments that are encouraged by the various myths we discussed, raises a complex question: what is it about the history of quilts that continues to attract contemporary artists, exhibition curators, and scholars? Maria, in the introductory essay to your anthology on craft and contemporary art, you elaborate on some of the challenges of locating artists within a craft vs. high-art dichotomy, and also of identifying what the use of various materials or traditions means within a given practice. In another art-historical repetition of the nostalgia idea, you link the British Arts and Crafts movement and its embrace of craft to a nostalgic moment and then go on to mention a current-day “pastoral fetish” among young artists. In both of these instances you note a sort of mash-up between craft and high art evident in these historical moments. Regarding the contemporary impulse, you wrote:

[The] “pastoral” perspective of craft traditions, taken up in defiance of our exponentially more high-tech world, has led to romantic associations with media such as clay, fiber, glass and wood by both the artists and the collectors drawn to them. But these associations have given way to a dilemma for emerging artists working in craft media today: the craft world that

fig. 12

Ben Venom (American, born 1978). *I Go Where Eagles Dare*, 2012. Handmade quilt, heavy metal T-shirts, fabric, batting, thread, 108 x 60 in. (274.3 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist

*embraces and promotes these media is nearly as exclusive in its insistence upon maintaining the romance of these media as the so-called art world is in its romance with the conceptual.*²²

For contemporary artists turning to quilt history in particular, what do you see as the spark or source of the romance?

Maria Elena Buszek:

If I were to choose one point of origin for the “romance” with which many emerging artists approach quilt-making today, it is this rich history of storytelling with which we associate quilts, as well as the breadth of forms those stories take. To artists like Allison “Notion Nanny” Smith, quilt-making is a medium for bringing together members of a community to, essentially, think and speak together. And others, like Bean Gilsdorf and Wendy Huhn, make visible (often hilariously) the unspoken, repressed domestic narratives for which quilt-making stands in. But, in all cases, quilt-making provides a history, process, and even excuse for storytelling that I think many artists, especially feminist artists, find compelling.

However, I’d like to clarify that in *Extra/Ordinary*, I was actually locating the “pastoral fetish” (a concept derived from the work of Glenn Adamson) in the history of studio craft—it is an idea that I feel most emerging contemporary artists tend to reject. In this model of art-making essentially derived from a modernist ideal, many craft practitioners look at their work from a fine-art “studio” model, rather than a traditional “workshop” model, and view their endeavors as having an individualistic, expressive origin. Inspired by a modernist belief in the primacy and transparency of an artist’s medium, conventional studio craft artists focus upon the unique material properties and, often, technical and utilitarian history of their medium. This purist sensibility in craft often gives way to the desire to return to a less complicated, thoroughly romantic (and often plain incorrect) construction of craft’s past: picture a Japanese ceramist slaving over a wood-fired kiln, or (for our purposes) any of the myths of the resourceful, bygone quilter, making her own homespun cotton.

While I think that in contemporary quilt-making some pastoral myths discussed here certainly persist—the allure of the slave-map and Betsy-Ross-as-Virgin-Mary stories is simply too

22. Maria Elena Buszek, ed., *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.



enticing, especially to artists drawn to quilts' social history and cultural relevance—many emerging artists actually seek to dismantle the dominant pastoral appeal of craft, mostly by making work that draws attention to the post-Industrial Revolution technologies that have facilitated quilt-making since the eighteenth century, the communal rather than individual nature of quilts' making, and the irony of the leisure time and material resources actually needed to participate in this supposedly poor woman's art. I'm thinking here of Huhn's very funny, autobiographical quilts about the women in her family, which suggest a post-World War II America in which the medium of quilt-making itself is used to reflect the works' broader narratives, about how the era's "modern technological wonders," supposedly improving middle- and upper-class women's lives, really just reinforced a highly constricting return to Victorian womanhood.

Other interesting artists pair the medium with seemingly anachronistic materials or narratives that undermine our assumptions about the cozy, old-fashioned appeal of quilt-making in ways that remind us of how quilts factor

into our contemporary lives. One of my favorites is Ben Venom, who makes phenomenal quilts out of fabrics related to heavy metal music culture (concert T-shirts and denim), pieced into patterns incorporating the genre's iconic graphics (iron crosses, skulls, bats). On the one hand, his quilts are jarring because on the surface they don't align with our assumptions about quilt-making's allegedly pastoral history. On the other, they remind us that quilts have always reflected the dominant aesthetics or narratives of their day. Venom's work also slyly reminds audiences of the surprising, organic connections between quilt-piecing and the metal and punk traditions of do-it-yourself garments, where the plethora of patches, embroideries, and appliquéd fabrics that adorn the baddest denim vests or leather jackets of the baddest music fans were likely sewn on by the fans themselves. All this, in a way, reveals a kind of "romance" with the materials and processes of quilt-making—but definitely not a pastoral romance! Again, I think this reflects the overarching sensibility of the artists drawn to them today.

Beverly Gordon:

The attraction of contemporary artists to quilting is certainly tinged with the nostalgia we wrote about earlier, although I don't see it as a pastoral fetish, particularly, since there are many who appreciate just how urban some of that quilting was. I think there is still some—albeit limited—interest in a feminist history of women's work and lives. I think there is interest in different aspects of historical quilts for different people.

Some, especially those who rely on sewing machines, are simply awestruck by the handwork, patience, and skill involved. Some are interested in either historical fabrics themselves or in the design intelligence of historical quilters; I personally became entranced by the array of fabrics in late nineteenth-century crazy quilts. There were far more astonishing fabrics and colors and textures on the market then than there are now; it was an explosion of the creative side of the textile industry. The sensuous and aesthetic appeal of the quilt should not be overlooked, nor the personal histories of inherited quilts, imbued with the essence of people gone by.

fig. 13

Wendy Huhn (American, born 1953). *Bound*, 2006. Mixed-media textile, 15 x 13 in. (38.1 x 33.02 cm). © Wendy Huhn. Collection of the artist, Dexter, Ore. Photo: Dennis Galloway Photography, Eugene, Ore.

Janneken Smucker:

Quilters of the Modern Quilt Guild movement draw inspiration from historical quilts, adapting or reimagining traditional blocks and emphasizing a return to more simplified, straightforward piecing and other techniques easily executable on a home sewing machine. These “modern quilters” certainly don’t fit the studio craft mold, but they also don’t belong to the same group of hobbyist quilt-makers that have turned the ongoing quilt revival into a multimillion-dollar industry. The Guild is devoted to making “primarily functional rather than decorative quilts” and to “resist[ing] the imposition of hard and fast rules for making a quilt.” The resulting quilts “contain reinterpreted traditional blocks” and “frequently use improvisational piecing.”²³

To me, the movement is a response to the heavily commercialized world of contemporary quilt-making, with its rules and trends and prepackaged fabrics, patterns, and tools. Modern quilters are still consumers within the vast quilt industrial complex, but find influences not only in the latest fabric lines but also in modern art and architecture.

While not a founder of the movement, designer Denyse Schmidt has emerged as one of the icons of the Guild owing to her visually striking, streamlined quilt designs and vintage-inspired fabric lines. Her most recent book, *Denyse Schmidt: Modern Quilts, Traditional Inspiration: 20 New Designs with Historic Roots* (2012), turns to the same sort of graphic, historical quilts that first drew those with a “modern eye” to old bedspreads in the 1960s and ’70s.

I had the pleasure of attending a recent Quilt Alliance fundraiser at which Schmidt spoke. She recalled her initial attraction to quilt-making in terms of some of the same nostalgia (and perhaps even pastoralism) we’ve been discussing. She began quilting about the same time that she took a liking to traditional fiddle music. Her studio is located in an old New England textile factory, and she enjoys this link to the historical industry that enabled quilt-making to thrive in the nineteenth century.

Quilt exhibitions at museums have continued to be quite successful in recent years; it no longer seems radical for quilts to appear in spaces typically reserved for “fine art.” When I’ve helped museums with various aspects of quilt exhibitions, I’ve repeatedly noticed that museumgoers find quilts to be accessible and familiar, and they often want to talk about their personal connection to quilts, whether through a relative who made them, a quilt they own themselves, or a fabric that triggers a tactile memory of some other homemade, textile-related experience.

23. The Modern Quilt Guild, “About Us,” <http://themodernquiltguild.com/about-2/>, accessed September 22, 2012.

**Catherine Morris:**

The degree to which quilts in museums have become a regular and, as you note, welcome occurrence for many audiences I think also speaks to the effect that the 1970s' reframing of quilts, and feminists' simultaneous reevaluation of artistic criteria, have had on our contemporary engagement with them. The personal, the tactile, the dialogic, the communal, and this impulse toward storytelling are all part of the visitor experience with historical quilts, and come up over and over again as themes that younger artists are interested in exploring as they incorporate quilting into their practices.

Beverly Gordon:

The feminist discovery of fiber traditions in the 1960s and '70s felt very profound, paradigm-shifting, and revelatory, and that quality doesn't truly come through in this academic discussion. For many of us, it brought an expanded sense of the world that we as women lived in. Historical quilts served as the solid core of that newly discovered reality, more so perhaps than other types of fiber art. Perhaps that was related to their frequent use as bedcovers, which are inextricably linked with comfort, warmth, aesthetic display, and even love. In closing, I want to be sure we not only remember the emotional component of our relationship with quilts, but also keep it in the foreground at all times.

fig. 14
Scott Lynch (American, b. 1963).
Occupy Knitters on Liberty Place,
January 11, 2012. Collection of the artist.
© Scott Lynch

Maria Elena Buszek:

Beverly brings up a good point about the more "profound" elements of quilt history, and I'm curious whether anyone has something to say about the "craftivist" interest in fiber art, which might help bring into focus not only the activist but the collective ideas behind quilt-making's resurgence.

While of course the Occupy movement had the "Occupy knitters" — from Marsha Spencer at Zuccotti Park to the various "knit-in" groups that popped up around the country — quilting has similarly materialized in projects such as "And Sew to Bed..." by England's Craftivist Collective.

To join Beverly in closing with more food for thought, I'd like to also suggest we remember ways in which quilt-making taps into the activist sensibility of many contemporary artists.

Catherine Morris:

An acknowledgment of the significance of the quilting experience is an appropriate note on which to end. This conversation both touches upon the genre's important heritage of linking personal and cultural histories and points forward to the current engagement with the medium as a form of political action. Quilting has a long history as a space for promoting a political agenda — exemplified by the Museum's 1830s quilt covered with presidential busts — and as a tool for fund-raising and community support. From Civil War relief efforts to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, activism is a big part of the current resurgence of interest in craft techniques such as quilting. It is also one of the reasons we were interested in exploring this historical material now, within the context of a feminist art center. In thinking about feminism's part in shifting perceptions about a creative activity that might not otherwise have been considered art, we not only see these beautiful quilts in a new light, but may also come to understand the role they played in the cultural paradigm shift that Beverly highlights, which in turn made way for the fluid and shifting uses of art, craft, and activism that are still being put into practice today.

This discussion has certainly added to my understanding and appreciation of the complex history of quilts in the United States, and I thank you all for sharing your thoughts and work with us.

fig. 15
Whole-Cloth Quilt (detail), circa 1830s.
Cotton toile, 85 x 70 in. (215.9 x 177.8 cm).
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Margaret S.
Bedell, 28.111. Photo by Gavin Ashworth



THOMAS JEFFERSON
PRESIDENT FROM 1801 TO 1809



JAMES MONROE
PRESIDENT FROM 1817 TO 1821



WASHINGTON
PRESIDENT FROM 1789 TO 1797



JOHN Q. ADAMS
PRESIDENT FROM 1825 TO 1829



ANDREW JACKSON
MAGNANIMOUS IN PEACE
VICTORIOUS IN WAR

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES FROM MARCH 4 1829 TO
SUPREME COMMANDER OF THE ARMY & NAVY
ANDREW JACKSON
MAGNANIMOUS IN PEACE
VICTORIOUS IN WAR