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Paradoxical objects: quilts in American culture

Janneken Smucker

- 1 According to a 2014 survey, the United States is home to 16.4 million quilters and a quilt industry valued at \$3.76 billion.¹ As in the past two centuries, quiltmaking remains a canvas for artistic expression, as well as a craft requiring much skill and technical ability. Today's quilters, like their predecessors, revel in the charm of this seemingly old-fashioned craft, but now do so utilizing long-arm sewing machines, fabric die cutters, and YouTube tutorials. They make quilts at home – for use both on beds and walls – just as they participate in all facets of the giant quilt industry – attending trade shows, following quilt celebrities on social media, adding to their fabric stashes, and buying new gadgets. Some contemporary quilters aim for “scrappy” quilts that evoke a make-do attitude, despite the longstanding demographic reality that quilters tend to be affluent. Today's quilters include artists who produce distinct and challenging pieces, as well as hobbyists who veer toward fad and convention. Many quilters turn to community as a time-tested reason to quilt, yet make individualistic quilts based on personal expression.
- 2 These trends are not new. Quiltmaking in the United States has long been characterized by cultural tensions: art, yet craft; old-fashioned, yet modern; domestically produced, yet dependent on industrialization; evoking thrift, yet rooted in abundance; avant-garde, yet conventional; community oriented, yet reflecting individual creativity. As in previous generations, today's quilters continue to push the boundaries of the medium, blurring the lines that define these paradoxes.
- 3 Luke Haynes' *American Gothic* explores many of these contradictions. The painterly quality of his portrait, as well as the title and the composition itself, evoke American Regionalism, yet the hand-craftedness of the intricately pieced background situates the work within traditional quiltmaking. Haynes recycles old clothes, nostalgically drawing on an imagined past in which quilters “made do” with what was on hand, although he typically shops at thrift stores where old clothes are abundant. Quilts such as this

one allow us to explore potent human motivations to create – novelty, progress, nostalgia, individualism, and collectivity.

Art/Craft

- 4 A primary paradox of quilting centers on its place within the well-guarded division between art and craft. Debates about hierarchical categories tend not to result in definitive labels, as quilts exist at an unstable juncture between art, design, and craft.² Yet, at various points in the past century, quilts' exclusion or inclusion from the "art" category has told us as much about the larger contexts of art and craft within society as about the specific role of quilts.
- 5 Since the nineteenth century, women have treated their quilting as art, drawing inspiration from other media and publically displaying their quilts at a variety of fairs and fundraisers.³ Yet, rarely did Americans consider quilts within an art context, until the Aesthetic movement, Arts and Crafts movement, and Modernism began to influence American decorative arts at the turn of the twentieth century. Professionally-trained female artists and designers, graduates of new art schools, began creating Modernist quilt designs. American antiques' collectors started to make connections between historic quilts and modernist art, while modernist artists looked to American folk arts as a heritage and inspiration for their contemporary work.⁴
- 6 When New York art enthusiasts "discovered" quilts in the late 1960s and 1970s, comparing them to abstract works of art and hanging them on walls, quilts found firmer footing in debates about the hierarchy of art and craft.⁵ As definitions of contemporary fine art expanded to include Pop, fiber, and conceptual art, quilts fit into this conversation too. Some contemporary artists began to embrace quilting as their primary medium, creating the studio art quilt.⁶
- 7 Yet, the tension between art and craft persisted. As some curators and collectors advocated for the appreciation of quilts on the level of fine art, those guarding that division held firm. In 1975 Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman's widow Annalee contrasted her late husband's paintings with quilts, stating that his intention was to explore the "subtle relationships between stripes and ground," while a quilter was merely "carrying out a simple pattern."⁷ Over a decade later, art critic Robert Hughes observed of Amish quilts that, "seen out of their original context of use, hanging on a wall, they make it very plain how absurd the once jealously guarded hierarchical distinctions between 'folk' and 'high' art can be."⁸ As Hughes' assessment makes clear, in order to consider traditional quilts made for beds as art, we must first decontextualize them. Or, as scholar Susan Bernick has observed: "A quilt is an art object when it stands up like a man."⁹
- 8 Indeed, the classification of quilts as art or craft has been a gendered issue. In the 1970s, as male collectors and curators hung quilts on walls and wrote about quilts' visual power, feminist scholars sought to re-contextualize them, reminding us that they were products of women's nimble fingers, intimately tied to their diverse worlds, and not solely great objects of design.¹⁰ By examining quilts within their various contexts, we can move beyond this simple dichotomy between art and craft and seek greater understanding of these objects from a multiplicity of perspectives.

Old-Fashioned/Modern

- 9 A belief in the old-fashionedness of quilts – the idea that quilts hark back to a previous way of life – has persisted in the United States, despite the continual modernization of the craft. In the colonial era, generally only wealthier Americans owned quilts because textiles were expensive to import from Europe. The industrial advances of the 1820s-40s democratized quilting by increasing availability while decreasing the price of cotton fabric. Yet, since the 1840s, some Americans have looked nostalgically at quilts as old-fashioned relics from a bygone era, even as they used new materials, patterns, and technologies to continue making them.¹¹
- 10 Quilts evoked a strong connection to an imagined past throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries as part of the “colonial revival,” which celebrated all things old-fashioned, tied either through myth or reality to the seemingly simpler days before industrialization and urbanization. Colonial revivalists reinterpreted quilt patterns popular from earlier generations, dressed up in colonial garb, had quilting parties, and paired modernized nineteenth-century style quilts with colonial-inspired bedroom sets.¹²
- 11 Despite these connections with an imagined past, quiltmakers – and quilt industry promoters – have also embraced modern aspects of quilting. With new technologies, fashions, and methods – including the sewing machine, quilt kits, and today’s ubiquitous rotary cutter – quilts could evoke all that was good about the past despite their modern execution.¹³
- 12 Although quilting quietly persisted during the post World War 2 era, another revival took place beginning in the 1970s, continuing unabated into the twenty-first century. Today’s quilt culture has maintained the nostalgic view of quilting, while also reinvigorating quilting through new technologies, as well as through increased access to tools, patterns, fabrics, and instructions via the Internet. In this era, the American quilt also became less distinctly American, as globalization furthered international exchange and American-style quilting travelled back across the Atlantic, as well as to Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere.¹⁴

Domestic/Industrial

- 13 Another persistent myth conceives quilts purely as a form of women’s domestic production. Marie Webster – a quilt designer and author of the 1915 book, *Quilts, Their Story and How to Make Them* – praised the quilting skills of colonial era women, even though few women of this era domestically produced quilts because of the high price of imported textiles.¹⁵
- 14 In the 1970s, feminist interpretations continued to highlight quilting as a form of women’s domesticity that essentialized it as female, calling it “indisputably women’s art.”¹⁶ Feminists claimed women’s needle arts as the precursors to emerging forms of feminist art practice. Leading feminist artists, including Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, and Miriam Shapiro integrated needlework techniques and quilt-related forms in their work as part of an effort to reconsider the rigid division between fine and applied arts, which often fell along gendered lines.¹⁷ But in this focus on quilts as women’s artistic heritage, they ignored quilting’s close ties to industrialization and commerce.

- 15 Beginning with New England factories, quilting became as much a product of industrialization as domesticity, due to factory-produced fabric, machine-spun thread, machine-made needles and pins, aniline dyes, and eventually, the sewing machine.¹⁸ Along with the materials and machinery to produce quilts, industrialization created the infrastructure to publish patterns, widely distribute supplies, and support quilt businesses big and small, making quilting an accessible, democratic art.¹⁹
- 16 Women quilting at home have indeed made the vast majority of quilts since the nineteenth century, but they often turn to the outside world for inspiration. Today, quilt celebrities motivate grassroots quiltmakers' creativity. The same phenomenon occurred in the early twentieth century when quilt celebrities real – such as Marie Webster, Ann Orr, and Ruby Short McKim – and imaginary – including the fictional Nancy Page and Nancy Cabot – offered quilt patterns and advice in ladies' magazines and syndicated newspaper columns.²⁰ Quilt celebrity may have even older precedent; scholars now surmise that some of the ornate blocks from high style mid-nineteenth-century Baltimore Album quilts were commercially produced by at least one Baltimore designer, who likely sold the designs.²¹

Thrift/Abundance

- 17 American quilts have come to embody the idea of creatively making something out of nothing by piecing together scraps of fabric. Scholars call this notion of quilts as products of thrift the “scrap bag myth,” which posits that women in early America lovingly reached into their scrap bags and recycled worn garments and home furnishings into quilts to keep their families warm.²² Although some quilts reveal inspired reuse, the vast majority of extant 18th- and 19th-century quilts consisted of new, rather than used, fabrics. Quilting exploded with the abundance of the industrial revolution and emerging mass market, as women purchased fabric expressly for making quilts or had excess left after making clothes.²³
- 18 Colonial Revival authors celebrated the scrap bag's role. In 1915, Marie Webster speculated that, to make quilts to keep colonists warm in cold winters, “every scrap and remnant of woolen material left from the manufacture of garments was saved. To supplement these, the best parts of worn-out garments were carefully cut out, and made into quilt pieces.”²⁴ In 1929 Ruth Finley declared: “In mansion house and frontier cabin, from the Cavaliers of Jamestown to the Puritans of Plymouth, scraps of linen, cotton, silk and wool were jealously saved and pieced into patchwork quilts.”²⁵
- 19 Based on extant quilts from early America, these early quilt scholars actually imagined quilts' frugal origins. But when the Great Depression hit, it increasingly did make good sense for women to reuse old clothing in quilts. A significant number of twentieth-century quilts reveal such frugality, although their recognition as designed objects is very recent, as quilt collectors and curators had long focused on “best” quilts rather than scrappier ones. The much-lauded traveling exhibition, *Quilts of Gee's Bend* (2002–2006), showcased utilitarian scrap quilts made by African American quilters from an isolated Alabama enclave.²⁶ More recently, collector Roderick Kiracofe's *Unconventional and Unexpected: American Quilts Under the Radar, 1950–2000*, featured eccentric scrap quilts demonstrating that thrift and reuse were frequent aspects of 20th-century quilting.²⁷ The playful, improvisational designs, along with bold,

graphic use of unexpected fabrics, have made these quilts appealing as both abstract art and as symbols of women's creative ingenuity, bridging the art and craft divide

Avant-garde/Conventional

- 20 Many quiltmakers have been content to make quilts that looked like their neighbors', imitate ones featured in magazines, or use commercially published kits or patterns. For this reason, quiltmakers stitched thousands of red and green applique quilts in the 1850s-60s, crazy quilts during the 1870s-90s, and Grandmother's Flower Garden quilts in the 1920s-30s. Yet, amid these conventions, masterful, imaginative quiltmakers have used cloth as a canvas to create distinct works of art.
- 21 Lucinda Honstain's *Reconciliation Quilt* from 1867 uses appliqué to sculpt a narrative of both everyday life and fantastical whimsy during and after the Civil War in Brooklyn. In her 40 blocks, Honstain depicts exotic creatures including camel, elephant, and walrus, along with a dry-goods salesman, free and enslaved African Americans, and French-inspired Zouave soldiers dressed in flashy red pants and blue jackets.²⁸ Amid the profusion of cut silks and velvets of the crazy quilt era, in the 1880s and '90s Harriet Powers – an impoverished African American quiltmaker who grew up enslaved – created her renowned quilts depicting Bible stories, and sold the first for \$5 to a white patron.²⁹ Bold designers submitted quilts to the 1933 Sears Roebuck & Company National Quilt Contest in conjunction with Chicago's Century of Progress World's Fair. Among the 24,000 entrants, some drew on modernist design, including Chicago's art deco architecture and the streamlined aesthetic of the 1930s, to create atypical quilts. For example, Emma Mae Leonhard created a quilt presenting the changes in women's fashions between 1833 and 1933, interspersing art deco architecture and stylized patriotic symbols.³⁰
- 22 Some quilt styles were quite common within their communities of origin, but considered outstanding examples of design when viewed by outsiders. During the first half of the twentieth century, Old Order Amish women in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, made hundreds of Center Diamond quilts in myriad variations based on color; subtle differences in quilting motifs; and the varying use of borders, corner squares, and frames. These quilts share visual similarities to Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series, exploring the relationship of color within a rigid geometric formula. Similarly, many poor, rural women made many improvisational quilts, conventional within their communities, but now considered great works of graphic art.

Community/Individual

- 23 The quilting bee – remembered with nostalgia in the 1840s, imagined in art throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and reenacted by those longing for simpler times – suggests the importance of community to quiltmaking. The bee, frolic, or simply “quilting,” as such gatherings were known, was a socially productive event in which female friends and relatives joined to sit around a quilting frame and hand stitch the layers of a quilt together – a laborious process requiring countless hours when undertaken alone. Such shared work has remained common among diverse communities of quiltmakers, including the Amish, African Americans, Native Americans, and various church sewing groups. In the late twentieth century friends

gathered to quilt memorials to loved ones as part of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a grassroots project established in 1987, which now has 48,000 individual panels honoring those who have died of HIV and AIDS.³¹ This communal aspect of quilting which reinforces community ties has led to the wide adoption of quilting by various groups striving to maintain tradition amid rapid change.

- 24 Indeed, various groups have used quilts to symbolically unite community members. In the nineteenth century, churches made quilts to send with ministers when they left for another parish. Loved ones signed names to Friendship Quilts to give to those moving west or getting married. Amish mothers made quilts as “gifts from home,” presented to children when they left home to start their own families. Native American tribal members have presented Star quilts as gifts of honor. In these instances, the utility of quilts has rested in their symbolic function.³²
- 25 In contrast to these uses of quilts in maintaining community, quilting has also been a solitary act, a creative endeavor in which one person chooses fabric, selects a pattern or invents a design, and works alone. Quilters make individual decisions – both large and small – resulting in distinct quilts. For many women who had few other creative outlets, quilts were a form of self-expression. Mary Hernandez Ricard worked for 35 years, until her mid-70s, on a quilt she titled *My Crazy Dream*, suggesting its origins in her personal vision. She inscribed and dated it, embroidering an array of fantastical imagery, including exotic animals and scenes from fairy tales. Prominently, she included a *carte de visite* photograph of herself, making it clear her quilt was a form of self-representation.³³

The persistent appeal of American quilts

- 26 Why have centuries of American women – and, increasingly often, men – made quilts? Although individual motivations may be quite diverse, quilts have never been a practical means of creating a bedcover. Cutting fabric up only to stitch it back together is a laughable act, if not for the creativity required and the sense of purpose engendered. Perhaps the ultimate appeal of quilts to such a wide range of communities and individuals is as a form of self-expression, embodied both by Ricard’s *My Crazy Dream* and Luke Haynes’ *American Gothic*, each featuring the artist’s likeness. To many creative individuals quilting has been a safe and accessible outlet for this expression, as quilts’ enduring qualities as soft, tactile objects, conveying warmth and comfort help make the art – or is it craft? – appealing to anyone with available time, fabric, and sewing skills.
- 27 As the tensions explored above reveal, quilts demonstrate many contradictions that remain present within American society. Perhaps that has been why quilts receive such frequent use as a metaphor for any aspect of society that requires creativity, fortitude, and a scrap of this and a bit of that. Quilts, in all of their complexity, continue to resonate in American culture, now, perhaps, more than ever.

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Mots-clés: courtepointhe, quilt, artisanat, gender studies, colonial revival

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