

The Paradox of the Sunbonnet Girl Quilt Pattern

One of the most paradoxical quilt patterns of the 20th century is the Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern. The large number of versions and variations devised of this pattern, over an extended period of time, attest to its wide popularity with quilters. Yet the Sunbonnet Girl has been subjected to the most severe criticism from art authorities. The criticism continues until today, and so does the pattern's vast popularity. This love-hate relationship of the Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern constitutes the paradox mentioned in the title of this report.

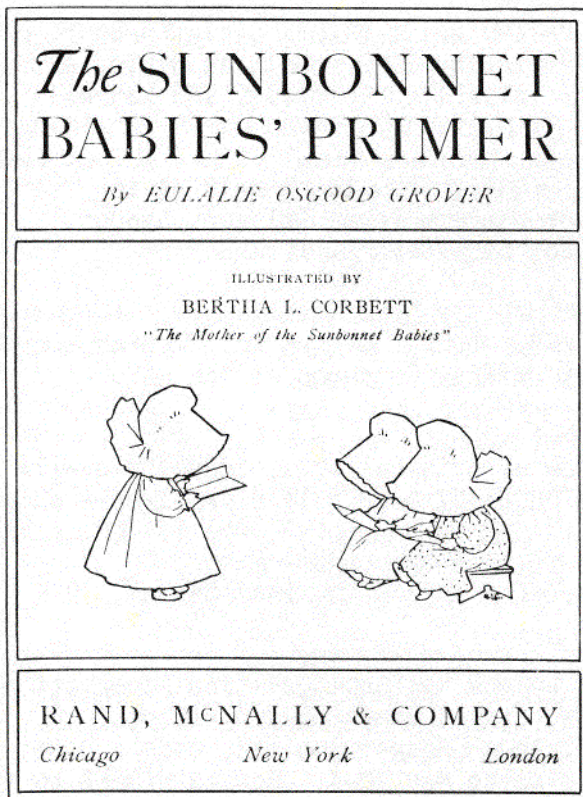
The Sunbonnet Girl's history goes back much farther in time, than does the criticism of it, which is of fairly recent vintage. The Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern is a direct descendant of the illustrations drawn by Bertha Corbett for a primary text, *THE SUNBONNET BABIES* by Eulalie Osgood Grover, ca. 1902. However, pre-Corbett Sunbonnet Girl type "no faces" designs can be found in mid to late 1800's sources. In researching American sources, Carol Crabb located examples in *PETERSON'S MAGAZINE* and *HARPER'S BAZAR*. In England, there were many examples of the

"no faces" bonneted figures to be found in the voluminous works of Kate Greenaway. In the 1960's, after studying the pervasive influence of Kate Greenaway's designs on illustrators of juvenile works, well into the 20th century, Dolores Hinson and I formulated a theory. Because of a certain commonality of factors in the designs, we believe that perhaps Greenaway's influence was evident in the Corbett designs.

Regardless to any indications of influence, Bertha Corbett must be credited with devising the Sunbonnet Babies illustrations as original works. Louise Witt wrote an interesting account of this in *ANTIQUARIAN REPORTER*, "Bertha Corbett drew her first Sunbonnet Babies in Minneapolis at the turn of the century She submitted her drawings to the publisher and educator, Dr. Edwin Grover. He, too, was fascinated with them, and suggested to his sister, Eulalie, who was writing a new primer, that she incorporated the girls in her text, She did, and the result was 1,300,000 *SUNBONNET PRIMERS*, from which all first graders in the United States learned to read until about the 1930's.

Very soon after the primer's publication, the little twin figures, Molly and May, who wore large sunbonnets, with no faces showing, were transferred into quilt patterns. One of the earliest quilt pattern versions was the embroidered series "Sunbeam Babies" by Franks Art Needlework, St. Louis, Mo., published in 1905. The Franks patterns do seem to adhere more closely to Bernhardt Wall's conception of the design. Bernhardt Wall, an illustrator and contemporary of Bertha Corbett, challenged Corbett's claim of originality for the Sunbonnet Babies. He insisted he was their original designer. The Wall and Corbett figures bore a close resemblance, but there were detectable differences in the bonnets, and in the use of vivid versus pastel colors for the clothing.

Early on, quilt pattern sources experimented with changes, and produced variances in the design. About 1910 *Ladies Art* had a single, outline embroidered short dress figure for a crib quilt. Marie Webster's Sunbonnet Lassies was an elaborate version, containing eight appliqued figures, a picket fence, quilted sunflowers and birds in flight. Butterick, ca. 1918, published short dress versions, riding on a scooter, or digging in a sandpile, etc., and called them "Bonnet Girls."



Pattern producing sources of the 1920's, such as Prairie Farmer, Needle-Art, Delineator, Woman's World, Household, Ann Orr, Boyd Mfg. Co., Royal Society, Bucilla, Herrschners, Farmer's Wife, Pictorial Review, and Valley Supply had different versions of the Sunbonnet Girl pattern in their inventories.

The height of the Sunbonnet Girl's popularity was reached during a period of general resurgence of interest in quilts -the 1930's. Embroidered, pieced, and appliqued Sunbonnet Girls, often dressed in pastel prints, were seen at state and county fairs in profusion. The design was seemingly subjected to endless interpretations by sources such as Rainbow Quilt Block Co., Aunt Martha, W.L.M Clark Co., Virginia Snow, Nancy Cabot, Progressive Farmer, Home Art Studio, Des Moines, Needlecraft Magazine, McCall's, Indiana Farmer's Guide, Vogart, Country Gentleman, Eleanor Martin, Kansas City Star, Laura Wheeler - Alice Brooks, Missouri Ruralist, etc.

In the war years and post-war years of the 1940's, publication of all quilt patterns decreased markedly from the high point of the 1930's. However, sources that continued to publish quilt patterns did offer various Sunbonnet Girl patterns. And quiltmakers continued to make quilts of the pattern.

The late '50's and '60's saw the beginning of renewed interest and publicity about quilts. And it was in this period that we hear of the criticism of the Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern from those affiliated with the art community. Museum curators, writers, critics, and others with fine arts backgrounds applied some rather harsh terms to it - "banal", "unimaginative", "repetitive", "ubiquitous", "garish", "too-popular," and "obese". This did not appear to deter quiltmakers one bit from making the quilts.

Even interest in the original Sunbonnet Girl designs on postcards grew. This, too, was surprising to some. John Kaduck, wrote in MID-AMERICA REPORTER that they "have caught ablaze in the past three years for some strange reason. They have no real historical value. There is no real imagination in their design, no real artistry and no real beauty in their colors

An exemplary present-day quilt is The Meeting of the Sunbonnet Children by Betty Hagerman of Baldwin City, Kansas. It is a sampler quilt

showing 59 versions of the sunbonnet children. The Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern has maintained its strength as a favored pattern for over three-quarters of a century. Even in the face of sharp criticism by learned authorities, its popularity has not abated. Not only that, but another element has been added to this controversial situation. Perhaps because of its longevity, or because of the many variations to which the pattern has been subjected, the Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern is now the object of serious research by several quilt historians.

So it is indeed a paradox that the little Sunbonnet Girl quilt pattern has been made in unprecedented numbers, designed in uncounted variations, scorned and derided by many, and intensely researched and studied by others. Few 20th century quilt patterns have received such concentrated attention.

-- Cuesta Benberry
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