

Uncoverings

1987

Volume 8 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte & Laurel Horton

Competing Cultural Values at The Great American Quilt Festival

Jane Przybysz

In the summer of 1985, I received a flyer in the mail announcing The Great American Quilt Festival—officially billed as “a Museum of American Folk Art event presented by 3M/Scotchgard (registered mark)brand products in honor of the Statue of Liberty Centennial.”¹ Actually the flyer was an entry form for the quilt contest being held in conjunction with the festival. Sums of \$20,000 and \$7,500, respectively, were offered for the first and second prize-winning quilts. Explaining the unusually large cash award offered for the prize-winning quilt, Museum of American Folk Art Director Robert Bishop said, “. . . people with art education. . . see making a quilt the same as making a work of art. They expect top prices for their art. That’s why our top prize is \$20,000.”² In 1986, \$20,000 was actually 20% less than the median annual household income; but it was twice the median wage earnings for all working women.³ Understandably, many women receiving notice of this contest would have eagerly read on.

Contest rules specified that all entries had to “conform to the theme ‘Liberty, Freedom, and the Heritage of America in honor of the Statue of Liberty Centennial.’”⁴ Considering that no women were invited to attend the official ceremony at which the Statue of Liberty was unveiled and that, while men sat at Miss Liberty’s feet congratulating themselves on having successfully mounted this female symbol of liberty, Susan B. Anthony and sister suffragettes were in a boat circling Bedloe’s Island shouting from a megaphone that if you’d let Miss Liberty down off her pedestal, she wouldn’t have the right to vote

in France or America, there was more than a little irony in asking women to make a quilt along the lines of this theme.⁵ And even if she happened not to be aware of these historical facts, any woman trying to support herself and/or her family would know from experience what newspapers are reporting—that working women are still only making sixty-one cents for every man's dollar and that the government continues to be slow in responding to working women's need for affordable, quality daycare facilities. Such women would be likely to think twice before devoting the time it takes to make a quilt to celebrate Liberty, Freedom, and the Heritage of America in honor of the Statue of Liberty Centennial.

Also, the idea of requiring an artist to conform to a theme seemed problematic. While it is difficult to imagine, say, the Museum of Modern Art sponsoring an abstract expressionist painting contest, it is even more difficult imagining such painters being required to conform to a theme, much less a blatantly patriotic theme. Although there are many theories about what the artist's role in society is, should, or might be, one does not generally think of artists being defined by their ability to make art which conforms to specific themes promoted by cultural institutions and multinational corporations—unless, of course, they are avowedly commercial artists.

In addition to requiring a theme, contest rules specified that “quilts must be from an original design or a totally original use/interpretation of traditional patterns.” Since no two quilts are ever exactly alike, all quilts are—in some sense—“original.” But this rule declared that being original only with regard to choice of fabric texture, fabric color, and three-dimensional quilting design was somehow not original enough. Overlooking what makes quilts different from paintings—the inherently sculptural and sensual nature of the medium—this rule was privileging originality in the visual surface design of the quilt.

Quilts also had to be the work of one person only; they had to measure 72 x 72 inches; and all quilting, and any applique or embroidery had to be done by hand. This emphasis on the work being a solo effort and on it being made in the shape of a square seemed to indicate—as did the size of the cash award—that the Museum and 3M were trying to encourage and promote a notion of quilts as art made

by artists, not as bedcovers made by quilters. But to do all the work herself, by hand, a quilter would necessarily have to devote three months to a year working full-time to complete the project. Could the relatively few quilters who make a living as artists afford to spend that much time and energy on a quilt that was so theme- and size-specific? If the quilt happened not to win, what would she do with it? The size would make it unsuitable as a bedcover and how many people have furnishings to match or wall space large enough to accommodate a 72"x 72" patriotic quilt? Of course, there is always the chance she might find a corporation, museum, or governmental agency to buy the quilt, but would they pay anywhere close to \$20,000, considering that a high quality antique quilt can still be purchased for \$1,500? Thus, while seeming to address the quilter as artist, these rules did not reflect an understanding of the economic realities quilters face in trying to make a living from their art.

And if, on the one hand, these rules did not take into consideration the potential concerns of professional quilters, they also ignored the plain fact that most non-professional quilters still seem to make quilts to use and display on beds. And many of them quilt their tops with family, friends, or in the context of local guilds. So one has to wonder: What kind of quilter did the Museum and 3M expect would enter their contest?

Next came the requirement that with your entry form you had to submit a proof-of-purchase seal from any Scotchgard product, and agree that, if yours was one of the fifty-two state winners, it would be "Scotchgarded" (sprayed with a solution of trichloroethane, carbon dioxide propellant, and fluoroaliphatic resin that, when applied to fabric, repels dirt and water). And last, but not least, there was the part where you signed away your rights to your original design and/or quilt:

If my quilt is judged as a winning entry in the Great American Quilt Contest, I understand that my signature gives the Museum of American Folk Art and 3M/Scotchgard the right to use my original pattern in any advertising and/or promotional materials. I understand if my quilt is selected as a semi-finalist, I will be notified by mail where to send it for final judging. Furthermore, I understand that if my quilt is one of the first- or second-place winning quilts, the quilt becomes the property of 3M to donate to the Museum of American

Folk Art, displayed as part of the "Scotchgard Collection of Contemporary Quilts." If my quilt is one of the 52 preliminary winners, I understand my quilt will be on tour for a minimum of three years. I will regain possession of my quilt following this tour period.

From these rules, it would seem that the Museum of American Folk Art and 3M Company were seeking to attract quilters—the vast majority of whom are women—who wanted to think of themselves as artists, but were "artists" who didn't mind being told what to make their art about, "artists" who didn't mind being told how to make their art, "artists" who were willing to purchase and use certain products to have their work considered art, "artists" who would allow their work to be Scotchgarded (something no reputable conservator would allow), and "artists" who—unconcerned with the reality of needing to earn a living—would happily sign away rights to their designs and let the Museum and 3M use their art—free of charge—for a minimum of three years.

Months later, the following announcement appeared in the November/December 1985 *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*: "The plan to Scotchgard all of the winning quilts has been scotched. The 3M Company thoughtfully waived that requirement."⁶ Apparently, either so few women had entered or so many women had complained that contest rules were being amended. This was the first public indication that there were quilters (besides myself) whose idea of quilts, quilters, and quilting practice did not entirely fit with that being promoted by the Museum and 3M.

As the Festival time approached, I visited the Museum of American Folk Art to see "Liberties With Liberty," an exhibition funded by Xerox Corporation that the Museum had planned in conjunction with the Festival. Presumably, this exhibition was to provide a historical context in which the festival as a whole and the fifty-two contest-winning quilts as "expressions of liberty" might be understood.

Taking liberties with liberty. Taking liberties with the Statue of Liberty. Taking liberties with images of women. The title of the show inspired such musings and seemed to promise that the Museum was undertaking a survey of the conscious manipulation of images of liberty and, hence, images of women. Yet it was hard to imagine the

Museum taking on so politically charged a topic, especially since the idea for the contest and festival had begun as a marketing concept designed to take advantage of—to take liberties with—the Statue of Liberty Centennial celebration and the current revival in quilting among mostly white, middle-class women.⁷

As it turned out, the exhibition was a melange of engravings, political cartoons, watercolors, needlework, ironworks, sculpture, and advertisements, all of which had but one thing in common: each supposedly depicted the continent known as America, the Colonies, or Liberty as a woman.⁸ By describing and discussing two of these works, my aim is to give the reader some idea of the nature and range of objects in the exhibition, to question how these objects were presented to the public, and offer one possible explanation as to why—contrary to the Museum's expectations—this exhibit along with the Festival did not result in a significant increase in museum membership.⁹

The needlework picture listed as "Indian Princess with Two Pilgrims," number thirty in the exhibition catalog, depicts a woman "fashionably garbed in the style of the day" in a rich pink gown, who visually dominates the picture as a whole, as well as the two Pilgrims who appear with her.¹⁰ She is shown out-of-doors, amidst an abundance of animal and vegetable life, at some distance from the house portrayed in the background. A feathered headdress is shown, not on top of the woman's head, but floating somewhat oddly behind and slightly below it. Where the headdress should logically appear, the foliage of a tree has been stitched. It thus seems as if the needleworker stitched in the foliage first, and then decided to add the headdress—perhaps as an afterthought.

The picture is dated ca. 1750, and the artist is unknown. Nancy Jo Fox, curator of the show and author of the exhibition catalog, writes that this "charming needlework picture" was "most probably the efforts of a Colonial schoolgirl," and that "the Indian Princess has lost much of the ethnic character of her mother, the Indian Queen."¹¹ Since much of the work of artists who have not received formal training in the western art tradition appears "naive" or childlike in light of that tradition, why Fox attributes the picture to the work of a girl is not clear. Also, while the figure of the Indian Princess does

appear in other media of the time, she is usually accompanied by a number of emblems besides the headdress that identify her as such: tomahawk, rattlesnakes and wild animals. In this case, no other emblems appear, and there is nothing in her clothing or about her skin color that clearly mark her as an Indian Princess. She might just as easily be interpreted as a well-to-do girl or woman "playing Indian woman," appropriating an emblem of the Indian woman for herself. If one considers the political and economic decision-making power wielded by women in some American Indian tribes, and then imagines a girl (or woman?) perhaps depicting herself "playing Indian woman," the possible meanings or implications of this needlework picture are intriguing. At the very least, the work would seem to raise questions about how Colonial girls and women perceived and related to Indian women.

There is also some question as to how this work qualifies as the work of a folk or popular artist, which in turn raises issues regarding the meaning and use of the terms "folk" and "popular."¹² The piece is executed with wool and silk threads on linen, and betrays some knowledge of high fashion and of the convention of perspective in art. Can we assume that the girl or woman who made this picture—who had access to what were conceivably scarce and expensive materials in 1750, who had time to stitch a decorative picture, and thus was probably of a class of people who had paintings from which to learn things like perspective—was simply one of the "folk"? What is gained and what is lost if we fail to distinguish, in cases where the distinction is possible to make, the work of relatively privileged women from that of women who had no servants to nurse the children and cook the meals? Certainly it is easier to imagine a wealthy woman having time to "play" at being an Indian woman than it is to conceive of a poor woman eking out time between working the fields and tending to the immediate needs of a farm family to express her "patriotism" by creating a needlework portrait of an Indian Princess. Thus it would seem that, by not making this distinction, we risk undermining our ability to pose possible meanings of any given work of art.

The point of this lengthy discussion of the "Indian Princess" is that the way the work is interpreted for the viewer leaves many questions about the specific visual content of the piece—its contra-

dictions and implications—unaddressed. As “folk art,” the work can be characterized as “charming,” and left at that. End of analysis. After all, that’s how most people are accustomed to thinking of “folk art”—as something quaint and charming. Unfortunately, such adjectives do little to further our understanding of what a work like the “Indian Princess” might have meant to the woman who made it or the people who viewed it. More often than not, adjectives like “quaint” and “charming” succeed only in evoking a nostalgia for a simpler life at a simpler time that was never simple.

The second work in the show I would like to discuss appears as number ninety-two in the book documenting the exhibition and is a 1982 greeting card designed by Hudson Talbott for Bloomingdales, showing the Statue of Liberty as “a conscientious housewife in a white ruffled apron . . . carefully removing a juicy pie from her oven, while being avidly watched by New York Skyscrapers, hungry for Mom’s apple pie.”¹³ Unlike the needlework picture—which was one of a handful of works in the exhibition showing how women have depicted liberty and/or images of women—this piece was one of many works in the show exemplifying how men have exoticized women as Indian Queens, romanticized them as Goddesses of Liberty, or trivialized them as Mom and apple pie as a means of selling everything from greeting cards, cigars, and carriages to ideas of free trade, liberty, and America. In addition to the fact that the card depicts the World Trade Towers, and the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings as peeping Toms, peering in through an apartment window at Mom and apple pie as the objects of male desire, the idea that the work of a commercial artist, hired by Bloomingdales to make cards for sale, should be grouped together with a needlework picture made by a woman for her home is disturbing. And again, the idea that the spirit of “the people” or “the folk” is represented in this work seems problematic. Can what Bloomingdales commissions and sells as greeting cards be said to represent the spirit of “the people”?

In her discussion of these works in the exhibition catalog, Mary Jo Fox—like most museum curators—seems to adopt what Pierre Bourdieu describes in his book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, as an “aesthetic disposition.” An “aesthetic disposition,” he explains, is a way of seeing cultural objects that denies

their very different social functions and, instead, directs attention to questions of form, technique, and visual styles.¹⁴ While not actually denying the different social functions of the objects in this exhibition, Fox would characterize this show as “a celebration of the changing images of the female symbol of America through the eyes of the folk and popular artist,” and focus mainly on tracking the changing formal qualities of the representations of the female symbol of America.¹⁵ But by not specifying who—male or female, rich or poor—was doing the changing, at what time, and in what particular context, she blurs rather than clarifies the very different social functions of the objects in the exhibition, and effectively skirts many of the socio-political issues the exhibition raises.

Towards the end of her introductory essay in *Liberties with Liberty*, Fox does lament what she terms the “unharnessed commercial spirit” that results in “tasteless kitsch” so unlike the “folk art of considerable charm . . . inspired by honest patriotism and the ‘loving hands of home.’”¹⁶ But in what category does the Talbot greeting card fit? Is the card an example of “tasteful” kitsch that is the product of a “harnessed” commercial spirit? If so, in what sense does Bloomington harness its commercialism? And who finds it tasteful? The same male gaze that would find the scantily clad “Pin-up as Liberty” that is also in the exhibition “tasteful”? Is it surprising that women might not be enthusiastic about supporting a cultural institution that presents a pin-up poster which objectifies women as sexual objects and a greeting card which trivializes women’s role as mothers in the same context as a needlework picture created by a girl or woman for her home?

The “aesthetic disposition” that seemed to characterize the organization and presentation of objects in the “Liberties with Liberty” exhibition became visible as an ordering principle in the Festival lecture series, quilt displays, and the book the Museum of American Folk Art published documenting the festival and contest. The lecture series opened with an hour and a half lecture by quilt collector and art historian Jonathan Holstein discussing the history of quilts in terms of design motifs, genres, and styles, and closed with a symposium entitled “Quilts in Women’s Lives,” featuring six women quilt scholars and/or quilters (Sandi Fox, Dr. Gladys-Marie Fry, Erma Kirkpa-

trick, Penny McMorris, Ruth Roberson, and Dr. Judith Reiter Weissman), each of whom was allotted only twenty minutes to discuss when, how, and where quilts have functioned in women's lives.¹⁷ That the women on the panel were not allowed to present their material in the kind of depth that an hour and a half or even an hour time slot would have permitted, undermined the effectiveness of their presentations and seemed to trivialize the nature of their subject matter.

Upon entering Pier 92, located at 52nd Street and the Hudson River, where the bulk of festival was staged, again an "aesthetic disposition" was clearly at work both in the way the various quilt displays had been arranged in space and in the way they were presented to festival goers. At the front of the exhibition hall, spanning the width of the hall in relatively spacious quarters were the two antique quilt exhibitions—"Made in the U.S.A." and "Continuity and Change"—curated by the Museum of American Folk Art. The brief texts presented for the viewer on placards alongside the exhibits drew attention to the quilts' aesthetic qualities, regional characteristics and/or their value as documents of American history. When appropriate—as with the Amish quilts—the aesthetic qualities of the quilts were explained as reflecting or being representative of larger cultural aesthetics. But never was any mention made of the different social and economic conditions under which women lived at particular times in particular cultures or how quilts might have functioned in their lives.

There were nine other quilt exhibitions at the festival—"Small Sensations" funded by Judi Boisson Quilts, Inc., of Southampton, New York, Westport, Connecticut, and New York City; "The Quilts Fantastic;" "Laura Ashley Quilts;" "So Proudly We Hail," conceived and coordinated by Donna Wilder of Fairfield Processing; "From Sea to Shining Sea" organized by The National Needlework Association; an exhibition of Hawaiian quilts; "The Lone Star" exhibit of quilts organized by the American/International Quilt Association; the "Teachers' Quilts;" and the exhibition of the contest-winning quilts. It is instructive to examine the hierarchy of organizations and people made visible in how these exhibits were arranged in festival space. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will discuss only one of these

exhibitions—that of the Festival Contest-winning quilts.

If you read the festival space from front to back and left to right, the contest-winning quilts were given the least visibility of all quilt exhibits at the Festival. All were displayed in the far right aisle, with the forty-nine state winners' quilts hung at the rear of the aisle and the two grand prize-winning quilts—separated from the others—in the front half of the right aisle. It is not clear who, if anyone, actually curated this exhibit. But whoever did or didn't, neglected to include the name each quilter had given her work on the label listing her name and the state she came from. This was the case for all but the two grand prize-winning quilts. It is important to note that in exhibits of antique quilts where the maker of the quilt is often anonymous and certainly dead, at least the generic names of the quilt patterns are listed on exhibition labels, whereas here the quilters were known, alive and well, but the names they gave their quilts—names that in some cases would have clarified what “patriotism” meant to them—were not listed.

Because of its power to extend the Great American Quilt Festival in time and space, and thereby shape how people in the future think about the meaning of this festival and the meaning of the contest-winning quilts, it is perhaps most important to look at the book published by E. P. Dutton in association with the Museum: *All Flags Flying: Patriotic Quilts As Expressions of Liberty*. The book consists mostly of photographs of quilts. The first half of the book presents photos of antique and more contemporary quilts as “precedents” for the fifty-one prize-winning “expressions of liberty” that appear in the second half of the book.

In order to create precedents for the “expressions of liberty,” the book groups together any quilt that depicts an American flag or a bird resembling an eagle, and any quilt containing commercially manufactured commemorative handkerchiefs or scraps of commemorative fabric and calls it “patriotic.” So that for the sake of defining a genre of quilts—the patriotic quilt—the book collapses all differences between quilts seeming to commemorate someone's death, quilts that may have been made for loved ones who happened to have served in the armed forces, quilts made to record and preserve the signatures of particular people, quilts made as going away presents for friends, quilts

made to protest the governmental policies of its times, and quilts made for reasons we'll never know.

Two examples demonstrate what I find so disturbing here. The caption to quilt number ten reads:

Applique and embroidered cotton quilt, made by L. W., dated 1844, Pennsylvania. 75" x 67". The bold blue eagles hold arrows that look more like knitting needles and stiff olive branches with no olives. Although it was a feminine fashion at the time to inscribe one's name and date in mirror writing, it does seem idiosyncratic, to say the least, that the maker of this quilt went to the trouble to letter each of the five banners with *E Pluribus Unum* in reverse. She also added some rather young and gleeful birds, hearts, and new moons, and filled all the blank spaces with stars, in this case having nothing to do with the number of states in the Union.¹⁸

The author of this caption never considered that 1) the quilter may have intentionally stitched knitting needles in place of arrows; 2) the quilter may have placed the eagles in a sea of eight-point, not traditionally "American" five-point stars, having nothing to do with the number of states in the union as a way of decontextualizing and recontextualizing the American eagle; 3) the quilter may have used the mirror writing—not idiosyncratically, but consciously—as means of engaging the viewer as an active participant in the creative process, since to read the lettering, the viewer would have to hold the quilt up to the mirror and simultaneously see herself performing this action; or 4) the quilter might have used the mirror writing to cleverly refer to herself as the person who—*E Pluribus Unum*—out of many pieces of fabric, makes one quilt. If, unlike the caption writer—who implies that what we see in this quilt is the result of incompetent needlework and idiosyncrasy, we imagine that what we see is what the quilter intended, this quilt resonates with possible meanings—some potentially unpatriotic—that the caption, as written, overlooks. By replacing arrows with knitting needles, it is possible that this quilter was suggesting that Americans consider amending one of their national emblems.¹⁹

The caption to quilt number 27 reads:

Pieced cotton quilt, Ocean Waves, 1876, New York State. 80"x68". At first glance it is hard to determine that this attractive

quilt of traditional design has a patriotic theme. Only with a close look can the Centennial prints dated 1776–1876 be detected.²⁰

Below the photo of the whole quilt is an enlarged detail intended to show us the Centennial print. Even in the detail, the print is only barely visible. There is, however, a scrap of fabric with moon crescents very clearly printed on its surface. Should we perhaps invent another genre of quilts—the astrological quilt—and group together any quilt showing moons, stars, or the sun?

The point I'm trying to make is that one cannot attribute a particular meaning to a cultural object by calling attention to one image that appears on the object. If Picasso were to construct a collage that included a flag, or a piece of commercially produced commemorative fabric, no one would automatically conclude that Picasso had made a "patriotic" collage. Anyone trying to interpret the work would consider how the flag or piece of fabric was contextualized in the work as a whole, as well as for what or whom Picasso made the collage.

Reading the quilt contest rules, seeing the "Liberties with Liberty," exhibition, seeing how quilts were presented in the festival space, and reading *All Flags Flying: American Patriotic Quilts As Expressions of Liberty*—all left one with the impression that the Great American Quilt Festival was less about quilts or the Statue of Liberty and more about how 3M and the Museum used quilts and a somewhat confused image of the quilter as artist/patriotic homemaker to sell Scotchgard products, and to sell a way of thinking about cultural objects that obscures more than it clarifies what they might have meant to the people who made and used them. By sponsoring the festival, the Museum and 3M were also able to promote images of themselves as guardians of American culture and values.

But what did this festival mean to the people who attended, and especially to the women who had entered the contest? The day before the festival officially opened, there was a press luncheon. The contest winners who, on short notice, had been able to make the luncheon had been asked to stand by their quilts in case anyone had questions. That's where I found them.

Georgia Winner: Barbara Thurman Butler

A former high school art teacher who is presently a full-time mother, Barbara Butler said that even before she heard about the contest, she'd been thinking of making a quilt about the Statue of Liberty, because it was seeing quilts at the time of the 1976 Bicentennial that first inspired her to quilt. Since her quilt was fairly literal in its representation of the Statue of Liberty surrounded by immigrants, presided over by the Manhattan skyline silhouetted against an American flag, she did not try to explain what it meant. She did say that the really special thing about making this quilt was hearing the stories it evoked in other people, stories of people emigrating. Then she pointed out that the initials embroidered in the stars of the flag are of presidents who passed important immigration laws.

She "has no idea" what she's going to do with this quilt when she gets it back since she "has no place for it." She said she'll probably pack it away with the other Statue of Liberty memorabilia she's been collecting. Then maybe ten years from now her kids will *really* appreciate it.

Apart from the joy she derives from the pride her children take in saying, "My mom did this," Butler said she quilts to relax and stay sane. She said she needs something to say, "This is me, this is my thing and something that doesn't have to be redone tomorrow." Most things women do, she claimed, don't have lasting value. But a quilt, she said, "lasts and no matter what it looks like, it always means something to the person who made it and the person who receives it."²¹

As she was assuring me that she doesn't make quilts to sell and has no plans to do so, another state winner approached with a copy of *All Flags Flying* and asked Butler to autograph the photo of her quilt.

Texas Winner: Anita Murphy

Anita Murphy introduced herself as the founder of the Golden Triangle Quilt Guild in Beaumont, Texas, and as one of nine women who founded the Texas Heritage Quilt Society, an organization dedicated to the documentation and conservation of quilts in Texas. "It's amazing," she said, "how many women don't know their grandmother's names and how many stories you get from quilt owners about family feuds over quilts. Many people won't let you document their

quilt unless you promise not to publish who actually has it in their possession.”

She lamented the fact that “plenty of people have no one. . . . A lot of older women call up to say they’re afraid their quilts will get bundled up and sent to Goodwill.” She said her organization aims to protect these women from antique dealers who might try to catch an old woman down on her luck and buy the quilt for pennies. She added that the Society has made it a policy that no Society member may accept a quilt for themselves from these desperate women who call in. Quilts can only be accepted for the Society’s archives.²²

As we stood there talking, another state winner walked up to us and asked Murphy to sign a piece of fabric that would later become part of a quilt. Murphy whipped out some pieces of fabric herself. She, too, was making an autograph quilt and was collecting signatures. Even I was included in this ritual.

The two quilters then started to complain to one another about not being given complimentary copies of *All Flags Flying*. Considering they’d signed away all photographic rights to their quilts, they thought they should at least get a free copy of the book.

Later I learned that each quilter was to be given five complimentary copies of the book several months after the Festival, when a second shipment of them had arrived. Only two thousand copies of the book had been printed in time for the Festival, and the Museum wanted to be able to sell, not give these away.²³ So apparently there had been some misunderstanding or breakdown in communication between the Museum and the quilters.

Vermont Winner: Ione Bissonnette

Like Butler, Ione Bissonnette said she’d been planning this quilt before she knew of the contest. A full-time nurse, she claimed that she entered the contest because she figured that if she did, she could call herself a quilter. When I asked about the meaning of her quilt—since it in no way seemed to refer to a patriotic theme—she commented about the prescribed theme being “corny” and leading to some corny quilts. But to her mind, there are two kinds of patriotism: the rah-rah, artificial-sounding one and the one she expresses in which liberty is about seeking a solution to the threat of nuclear war and ecological

disaster. When I told her that I would not have guessed her intent from just looking at her quilt, she said, "It's too bad that 3M didn't put the quilt's title or the personal statement I wrote to accompany the quilt in the exhibition." She explained that the title of her piece was "Peace Piece: Can Liberty Exist Without A Planet?" "The central female figure is making an Indian mudra gesture of supplication, while the birds in the air scream cries of warning and the fish silently flee an impending nuclear disaster."

When asked why she quilts, Bissonnette replied, "It's my sanity and insanity. . . . It's very centering. . . . It's something that no one else can control in your life. Plus, it's a form of expression that's accessible."

No, she doesn't make quilts to sell because, she claimed, "Your consciousness is different when you make a quilt to sell. Maybe that's why there's something magical about the objects that come out of people's lives," she says, referring to the antique quilts on sale at the festival. "Look at the old and the new Amish quilts. You'll see a different headspace in the new ones made to sell."²⁴

At this point, Mariellen Fons, Iowa state winner, came over to say that she's planning to put together a newsletter for contest winners that she will mail out annually, on February 14th, the day they all learned they were winners. Would Bissonnette be willing to send her a paragraph about herself once a year to put in the newsletter?

All of a sudden it was 6 P.M. The luncheon had started at one. The conversations I'd had with three quilters had taken all afternoon, mostly because they had been filled with stories: stories about the first quilt they ever made; stories about how the children had cut holes in quilts while "trying to copy Mom"; stories about quilts rescued at flea markets; stories about the people they'd made quilts for. I hadn't rushed anyone because I'd assumed all the contest winners would be around and visible at various times during the next four days.

But I was wrong. Except for the awards ceremony Friday morning, which I missed because it wasn't on the official calendar of events, at no other time were these quilters made visible, publicly acknowledged, or otherwise brought together.

Two days later, I noticed an incredibly animated woman going up and down the long line of women waiting to use the bathroom. She

turned out to be Ruth Carol Coombe, the Washington state winner who was also gathering signatures for a quilt she would make at a later date. When I finally got a chance to talk to her, the first thing she said was how exciting it was to have signatures from Japan, Denmark, and Australia. A full-time nurse, Coombe was very frank about why she entered this contest: "With \$20,000, I figured, hey, I can get a new bathroom." But even as a state winner, she said she knew she'd get the free round-trip plane fare to New York that was part of the preliminary winner's prize package, so she'd be able to visit her mother who lives on the east coast.

About her quilt, she said, "It's a cheap thrill . . . that's not a knock . . . it's just that it's very graphic, very bold, geometric, and graphic, mine is, and it's not from anybody to somebody . . . so some poor lady slaved away and made this thing and gave it to 3M. . . Usually it's I made this for me forever, or I made this for a niece who deserves that sort of thing."

Coombe makes quilts because "as well as enjoying the creative process and the relaxation it affords, and the whole tactile sense of color, just the whole experience, it's the fellowship—that's the whole reason for doing it, I think . . . 'cause people who quilt alone are missing a great deal."

In this sense, she says, the Museum and 3M "missed the whole point. . . . They know nothing about quilters at all and nothing about quilting tradition. You know, it's so much sharing and giving, and they're not sharing a thing and they're giving less. They're anti-the entire reason most people quilt. . . . They aren't quilters. . . . They haven't experienced it. . . . Without that, it becomes paint-by-number kinds of stuff. . . . It just becomes something people do in garrets somewhere."²⁵

Later the same day, I was trying to find out who had designed the festival pin 3M was selling. I posed this question to Don Hollinger, a 3M executive, and he responded not with an answer, but a story of how a woman at the 1985 Houston Quilt Festival had unabashedly approached a 3M public relations representative at the 3M booth advertising the Great American Quilt Festival, to recommend that 3M produce a festival pin. Pin-swapping, she said, had become quite the rage among quilters. Hours later, a woman selling festival pins and

posters stopped me and asked, "Have you seen her, the lady with all the pins?" I hadn't, so she went on to explain to me how this pin lady was responsible for the very existence of pins at the festival. I say *pins* because, as it turned out, both 3M and the Museum each had independently produced an official Festival pin.

Shortly thereafter, I spotted her: an energetic-looking woman whose left shoulder was plastered with all different kinds of pins. I approached her, asking if she were the infamous pin lady, and laughing, she introduced herself as Barbara Gillette of Santa Monica, California. She explained how quilt guilds make up their own pins and then they give them to visiting teachers, trade them with members of other guilds, and sometimes sell them to the general public to raise money for a particular cause. "It's just sort of you get to know people," she said. "People come up and talk to you, you talk to them. You always say, have you got something to trade? I'm zoned in on everybody's shoulder . . . that's the way you do it. It's different. It doesn't cost much. You can make a little quilt and display them."²⁶

Talking with Barbara Gillette suddenly made it clear how women were using this event to achieve their own ends. The pin-swapping, the autographing of the books, the signature collecting, the newsletter—all were activities unanticipated and unplanned for by the Museum and 3M. They were all forms of what anthropologists refer to as "ritual exchange"—a means by which members of a community affirm their relationship as theoretical equals in the community.²⁷ These activities also seemed to affirm the power of relationship and relationship as power. And like quilting, each exchange created a context in which narratives might be generated: narratives that women use to frame themselves as people who are capable of making things happen; as people having the power to create and shape reality; narratives in which quilts might be the way to fund the long-awaited bathroom renovation; narratives in which—for one state winner—a "patriotic" quilt becomes "matriotic," a salute to mom for teaching you how to sew; and, most importantly, narratives in which quilting is a means of gaining some control over your life.

This is not to say, of course, that none of the quilters who entered the contest or who attended the festival were using the festival for commercial purposes—to promote themselves as quilt teachers or

professional quilters. Business cards were also among the things women exchanged at the event. And this is not to say that quilters don't value or want other people to appreciate the aesthetic aspect of what they do. It is to emphasize that—for many women who quilt—quilts are much more than aesthetic objects exhibiting certain formal characteristics and/or design motifs. It is to emphasize that being a quilter can mean, not only being an artist/"patriotic" homemaker, but claiming an identity other than "homemaker," and feeling part of a community that extends beyond the borders of these United States. It is to emphasize that quilting, more than making visually pleasing aesthetic objects for public consumption, can be both a way of centering the self and of affirming one's connection to people in the past, the present, and future.

Quilt festivals are public occasions when festival sponsors and participants negotiate and present the meaning of quilts and quilting as a cultural activity. Embedded in quilt contest rules, how quilts are displayed in festival space, the order and time allocated to events on the festival program, and materials documenting the event are ways of thinking about quilts, quilters, and quilting. In the case of the Great American Quilt Festival, festival sponsors—3M and the Museum of American Folk Art—seemed to present an idea of quilts as aesthetic objects to be hung on the wall and valued for the aesthetic qualities of their visual surface design and as documents of American history as it has been constructed by men. The image of the contemporary quilter promoted by festival sponsors seemed confused. On the one hand, she is an artist who makes art to sell; on the other hand, she is a patriotic homemaker who is a compliant consumer of 3M's products and the required festival theme. Contest rules seemed to promote a notion of quilting as something people do, working by themselves, to express their patriotism. The festival's focus on quilts as patriotic documents of American history seemed to imply that quilting is often a patriotic activity.

Through the stories they told and the forms of ritual exchange they engaged in at the festival, festival-goers seemed to articulate a different way of thinking about quilts, quilters, and quilting as a cultural activity. They seemed to value quilts not only as art, but as art connected to life, art that is to be touched as well as seen, art you

can sleep under, art that is about the power of relationship and relationship as power. Contest-winning quilters who'd made "patriotic" quilts discussed their work less in terms of patriotism and more in terms of their personal lives. The image of the quilter that festival-goers seemed to project was one of a woman seeking to exert some control over her life, who lives by an ethic of sharing and caring, and who—as a quilter—lays claim to an identity that is in some sense larger than that of the patriotic housewife. Quiltmaking, for these women, seems to function in different ways in different contexts. Quilting alone can be a form of meditation. Quilting with other people can be a way of experiencing a sense of community that transcends national borders.

Notes and References

1. Some variation of this quotation appeared in all promotional materials sent out by the Museum of American Folk Art.
2. "He mixes folk art and big business," *Minneapolis Star & Tribune*, 4 April 1985.
3. U. S. Census Bureau statistics for 1986 indicate that the median household income was \$24, 897; the median earnings for all working women was \$10,016; and the median earnings for all working men was \$18,782.
4. All subsequent references to the contest rules are quoted from the official entry form I received in the mail. A copy of the official entry form is on record in the public relations files of the Museum of American Folk Art.
5. Barbara A. Babcock, "The Lady's In Trouble: A Feminist Re-Vision of Liberty, Her Progeny and Performances," a paper presented at the 1987 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 21–25, 1987.
6. Bonnie Leman, "The Needle's Eye," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* 177 (November/December 1985): 4.
7. Robert Bishop, "Introduction," *All Flags Flying: American Patriotic Quilts as Expressions of Liberty*, Robert Bishop and Carter Houck, eds. (New York: E. P. Dutton in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1986), 1.
8. There was one painting of a poster in the exhibit—number eighty-seven in Fox's *Liberties with Liberty*—that depicted a man dressed as the female symbol of liberty.

9. Interview with Robert Bishop, Museum of American Folk Art, New York, New York, 15 July 1987.
10. Nancy Jo Fox, "Liberties with Liberty: The Changing of an American Symbol," *Clarion* (Winter 1986): 39.
11. *Ibid.*
12. The terms "folk" and "folklore" were invented in the mid-nineteenth century by British antiquaries and German philologists to describe the people and culture of the lower classes—mostly peasants—whose expressive and material cultures were fast being transformed by the industrial revolution. While art institutions today might define "folk art" as the cultural artifacts of people who are untrained in and/or unfamiliar with the conventions of western "high art" tradition, this notion of "folk art" simply masks the fact that access to the knowledge of these conventions was and continues to be largely a matter of class. Hence, to classify all women needleworkers as "folk" and all women's needlework as "folk art" obscures the fact that women needleworkers in different classes use needlework in different ways and in different contexts. Some women needleworkers in the past may very well have been familiar with and attempted to use/manipulate the conventions of the "high art" tradition; some women may have been manipulated by these conventions. In other words, "folk art" is a politically charged term that is presented by many cultural institutions as politically neutral. It is a term that often muddies rather than clarifies the socio-historical and political dimensions of the material culture produced by people of subordinate classes, races, and gender. For further discussion of these issues see: Charles Keil, "Who Needs the Folk?" *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 15: 3 (September-December 1978): 263–69.
13. Nancy Jo Fox, *Liberties with Liberty: The Fascinating History of America's Proudest Symbol* (New York: E. P. Dutton in association with the Museum of American Folk Art), 70.
14. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 30.
15. Fox, "Liberties with Liberty: the Changing of an American Symbol," 39.
16. Fox, *Liberties with Liberty*, 16.
17. The allocation of time to different events can be seen on the official festival program of events, a copy of which is on file at the Museum of American Folk Art.

18. Bishop and Houck, *All Flags Flying*, 18.
19. I realize that the several interpretations I offer of the mirror lettering on the quilt seem farfetched. Some readers may think I'm reading too much into the work, or attributing too sophisticated an intention to the quilter. But I do this intentionally in order to model a way of thinking about quilts that is playfully bold in its attempt to imagine why a woman might have made a quilt a particular way in a specific social context. I do not offer these interpretations of the mirror writing as definitive or even likely. I simply present them as possible interpretations that I—as a quilter who thinks of quilting as a way of acting in the world—can imagine. Sally Garoutte, in editing this paper, also suggested that perhaps the author of the caption was working with a reversed photo and not the quilt itself, in which case the caption writer's comments as well as mine regarding the mirror writing would be irrelevant.
20. Bishop and Houck, 32.
21. Interview with Barbara Thurman Butler, the Great American Quilt Festival, New York, New York, 23 April 1986.
22. Interview with Anita Murphy, the Great American Quilt Festival, New York, New York, 23 April 1986.
23. Interview with Robert Bishop, Museum of American Folk Art, New York, New York, 15 July 1986.
24. Interview with Ione Bissonnette, the Great American Quilt Festival, New York, New York, 23 April 1986.
25. Interview with Ruth Carol Coombe, the Great American Quilt Festival, New York, New York, 26 April 1986.
26. Interview with Barbara Gillette, the Great American Quilt Festival, New York, New York, 27 April 1987.
27. Alessandro Falassi, "Festival: Definition and Morphology," in *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, ed. Alessandro Falassi (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 5.