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Archiving and the American Quilt:

A Position Paper

John L. Oldani

For decades, the oral tradition, representing everything from the spoken word through the gesture and folk handicraft, had been curiously neglected by scholars as unworthy of serious consideration because of the frivolous nature of the study or the lack of relations to the human condition. Folklore, it was often held, was nothing more than "old stories" or superstitions, or even, "dirty jokes." In comparatively recent times, the recognition of the importance of studying the lore of a group, through extensive fieldwork, and within context, has become academically important and even, ashamedly, "in." Symbolistically, it is held that the oral traditions, as means of transmitting culture, reveal much of a person and his culture; absurdly, it is believed that such a study is a clear way to "collect jokes" without working. The latter point of view has led to much that is gross in the field; the former, if understood properly, gives strong merit to the study as worthy culture reflection.

The folk art or folk handicraft that is quilting represents a microcosm of this briefly described academic problem within folklore. But, different from the whole world of folklore, quilting has some special considerations, which are not often made or understood, and the products of its analysis are very often ephemeral, vulgar, and certainly gross. To be sure, quilting may be ideal folklore in its learned methodology, its anonymous authorship of patterns, its different versions for techniques and naming, and the traditional and formalized way it is internalized. Yet, quilting, because of its purpose, its appeal, its

beauty, has often fallen into the hands of would-be folklorists/scholars who, daily, produce the "definitive" work on the subject. A real phenomenon in interest in quilts has become a national mania and frenzy. Most often, capitalism has intruded, and the resultant stories, in themselves, become a part of urban folklore, if not part of supernatural legends!

This unfortunate effect has little direction, little purpose and little leadership. What is needed are clear methodology, proper training in the field, archiving techniques, the perception of the quilt in context, a real understanding of the "maker" in relation to the handmade object, and an analysis of the collection as historically and sociologically important. It is in this connection with folklore that quilting can be seen as a direct microcosm of the problems of acceptance which the field of folklore as had. But just as folklore has achieved some direction and added immensely to the study of people, so, too, quilting, if studied properly, can produce effective results as part of the study of folk art and handicrafts while reflecting on the artist within context.

In the following discussion, it will be shown how one approach has been taken as a solution to the problem, the purposes of this approach, the larger perspective involved in the study, and possible indeces for the future study of the quilt. By such a discussion, it is hoped that at least one part of a folklife study can be steered properly into a directed study, worthy of research before it becomes a "needle hysteria."

In 1974, the Folklore Archive at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville began the first Quilt Archive in the United States, which was devoted entirely to the study of the quilt in America and based in an academic setting. The purposes for such an undertaking are many and varied. Basically, the quilt, historically and folkloristically, is the ideal handicraft. Moreover, the American woman, almost exclusively, made and designed quilts as part of her unrecognized genius. Also, the study and collection had never been done formally and an established Archive would be a perfect place in which to house, catalogue, cross-index, and verify much of the classifications which are in quilting. What the Archive does, simply, is celebrate an American folk art!

Initially, since the Archive operates without a budget, letters were sent to several informants in southern Illinois, known for their quilting and previously identified on other fieldwork trips. These letters outlined the plans for the Archive and the purpose for collecting things related to quilting. The idea grew with no publicity, but with the crusading spirit of a few quilting women who deeply believed in their work and purposes for doing it. Soon, actual quilt blocks were sent to the Archive from all

parts of the U.S. Each was made from a pattern familiar to or loved by the quilter, with no specifications as to size or quilting, since there was no wish to stifle creativity, the life spirit of folklore. Each was catalogued as to the name of the block, which represents folk naming and folk vocabulary, the quilter who made it, which represents the quilt in context, and the city and state where the quilter lives, which repesents comparative folklore. If for instance, a block from one part of the country is identical to a block from another part, but each has a different name, the example becomes doubly important.

With many of the submissions of blocks there was information about the quilting technique itself. The maker often mentioned her techniques, where she learned to quilt, in what atmosphere she quilted, what quilting "does" for her, the why of her obsession, her traditional approach today, and often her reaction to another form of quilting. Many times, the informant would be pursued for additional information to be included in the larger Archive. All of the information was placed in an informant file which was easily cross-indexed for other purposes, such as ethnicity or rural vs. urban lore.

Patterns for quilts are gradually added to the Archive so that it can serve as an ideal depository for those wishing to perpetuate the art of quilting and needing a pattern which they formerly had, but had misplaced, or had seen somewhere else. Historically, the patterns themselves are important in their reflection of the times in which they were conceived. Often some historical event catalyzed the mind of the woman, like Clay's Choice, or Watergate, or Cleveland's Favorite, or Whig Rose. Often, too, newspapers printed patterns for quilts in their weekly editions. Such patterns were often devised by women with homey pseudonyms; some were variations on popular patterns; but all kept the tradition of quilting alive. The Nancy Cabot and Kansas City Star patterns, as examples of the latter, are important as primary sources for the Archive to have. Again, they are often used as comparative folklore if in nothing more than comparing the different approaches to quilting, then and now.

The Archive has also collected slides of quilts from all parts of the country. Since a full-sized quilt is valuable, with special needs for storing, and therefore almost impossible to place, the slides serve as concrete representations of the variety in quilting. More importantly, they can be used by scholars in the field more easily, handily, and efficiently, to compare, to observe stitches per inch, to compare setting, and even to understand color sense and textile formula.

The quilt can also contribute much to the traditional folk celebration

and the study thereof by exhibitions, workshops, and symposia. To this end, the Archive, annually, since 1977, has produced a quilt show, non-juried, to emphasize the importance of the collection, the quilts, and the need for a proper recognition in the study of them. At the most recent show, more than 400 quilts, from all parts of the U.S were displayed — a certain testimony to the popularity and renaissance of the art form.

Recently, the Archive has begun applying the quilt art form to the quilter as contextual. In which settings did the quilt itself begin to form? Where did the quilter learn her skills? Whom does she teach? Why are her patterns selected as they are? What is discussed at her quilting parties? Why the quilting club? It is the strong belief of the Archive that the folk object cannot be known apart from its maker. By analyzing the interviews, this approach can be utilized. Furthermore, much folklore can be added to the larger Archive in the vocabularly, superstitions, legends and jokes collected as part of the whole area of quilting. To be sure, the latter exists within the whole world of folklife. And, also, the place of the woman in American folklore is often clearer through an analysis of her exclusive art.

As an example of some of the holdings, the following is a partial list of quilt patterns which the Archive holds in trust:

Jane Alan Patterns
American Needlework Patterns
Aunt Kate's Quilt Bee, 1964-1977
Aunt Martha's Quilt Books
Aunt Martha's Quilt Patterns (through 9,998)
Nancy Cabot Books, 1 through 50
Nancy Cabot Quilt Patterns, A-Z
Country Gentlewoman (through 11212)
Mrs. Danner's Quilt Patterns (A-Z)
Detroit News Quilt Patterns
Farm Journal Quilt Patterns
Betty Flack Quilt Patterns
Glover Quilt Patterns
Halls Quilt Patterns
Hearth and Home Quilt Patterns
Ruby Hinson Quilt Patterns
Home Arts Quilt Patterns
Kansas City Star Quilt Patterns
Ladies Art Company, Quilt Patterns
McKim Quilt Patterns

Marvel Art Company, Quilt Patterns
Mountain Mist, Quilt Patterns
Paragon Quilt Patterns
Progressive Farmer Patterns
Rainbow Block Company
Stearns and Foster Company, Quilt Patterns
Laura Wheeler Quilt Patterns through 7500
Workbasket Quilts

The above are available to interested laymen and scholars who are researching in the area, whether it be textiles, folk naming, or the quilt itself.

The Quilt Archive at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville is a concrete attempt to institutionalize the quilt. It collects and classifies patterns by name, type and age; it documents quilt blocks by name, maker, city and state; it cross-indexes materials related to the maker of the quilt: the materials of her craft; it presents slides as documents for comparative folklore. Sociologically, the Archive speaks to the American woman's place in folklore and folklife. Contextually, it places disparate elements of a folklore in a centralized depository, subtracting that which is popular and vulgar, and adding that which is a vital part of a folk tradition. In this real, humble beginning, it is congruent with the purposes of the study of folklore itself, and it freezes a classification before it is lost forever.