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Quilts as Material History: Identifying Research Models

Elizabeth Richards, Sherri Martin-Scott,
and Kerry Maguire

Material culture is “the study through artifacts (and other pertinent historical evidence) of the belief systems—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society across time.”¹ The term material culture is from Leslie A. White’s division of culture into three subdivisions: material, social, and mental.² In Canada, the term material history is used more commonly than material culture. Both terms are used in the study of artifacts, primarily by historians, especially those working in or associated with museums. According to Gregg Finley “material history refers to both the artifacts under investigation and the disciplinary basis of the investigation.”³

Quilts are artifacts. They were created by a variety of people in many geographical locations and cultures. The lives of the creators are reflected through the history, material, construction, function, provenance, and value of quilts.

E. McClung Fleming writes that “there is an obvious, natural, universal fascination with the things [humanity] has made.”⁴ When studying a quilt or any artifact in a systematic manner one becomes literate in the nonverbal language that it speaks. One learns to recognize or to read the “clues” that might indicate all of the significant details about this object. Ideally, the examination will not only help to develop a fuller understanding of the value of the artifact,

but to gain "an historical perspective on the everyday lives of ordinary people."⁵

Although this is often the goal of quilt research, the studies are frequently pursued in a less than systematic manner. The focus is more often directed toward findings and interpretation than methodology and data collection. Many questions about the research process are left unanswered in quilt literature: what research methodology, if any, guided the scholars? What kind of information was important? How was information analyzed? The use of a conscious methodology in the documentation process gives validity to research on quilts as part of material history.

Social historians have developed research models for the study of artifacts (material culture/history) which are easily applied to quilt research.⁶ In this paper, several research models appropriate for quilt research will be described. Research literature on quilts from North and South Carolina will be examined to determine if similar methodologies have been used. When the process used in a single quilt research study is clearly identified, comparison among different research studies can be made more easily.

Research on quilting is a relatively new area of study: most of the work has been done within the last decade or two. A wealth of information has been published on quilting in North America since 1970: museum catalogs, general references on quilt history, magazines and books emphasizing practical knowledge and production, and publications resulting from surveys of extant quilts from various geographical regions. Literature examined for the present study was limited to material published on quilts of North and South Carolina due to the quantity and availability of the published material.

Fleming's Model for the Study of Artifacts

Recognizing a need for a more systematic approach to the study of material culture, Fleming developed a model which both unites and organizes many possible approaches.⁷ Although the model was developed in the context of research into early American decorative arts, it can be adapted by researchers in many fields, including quilt

Artifact Properties	Operations to Perform			
	Identifi- cation	Evaluation	Cultural Analysis	Interpre- tation
History				
Material				
Construction				
Design				
Function				

Table 1. Concepts from Fleming's Model for Artifact Study

researchers. The model was developed to study a single artifact; comparisons to other artifacts could then be made.

Fleming describes his model as composed of “two conceptual tools”: 1) five basic properties inherent to all artifacts, and 2) four operations which are performed to thoroughly study an artifact. A schematic diagram of Fleming’s model is illustrated in Table 1. The five properties are:

1. History: When was the artifact made? By whom? Why? Has the ownership, condition, or function of the artifact changed?
2. Material: What is the object made of?
3. Construction: How is the object made? What are the construction techniques? How are the parts organized?
4. Design: What is the structure, form, and style of the artifact? Is there ornamentation or iconography?
5. Function: What are the intended and unintended uses of the object?

The five properties of the artifact are repeatedly addressed as the researcher proceeds through the four operations: identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation.

Identification: Identification of the object involves classification of the object; there are many systems of classification for quilts. The system chosen will in part depend on the nature of the research. Identification also involves authentication. The information about the five properties must be accurate in order to determine that the artifact is indeed genuine.

Evaluation: The properties of an artifact are evaluated in terms of the standards or value system of the researcher's own culture. Fleming identifies two types of evaluating: "subjective, which depends on the observer's own taste and discrimination, and objective, which involves factual evaluation of the artifact by comparing its properties in quantifiable terms to other objects of its kind."⁸

Cultural Analysis: The functions performed by the artifact in its own culture differ from the other artifact properties of material, construction, and design. "Function involves both the concrete and abstract aspects of the artifacts, the reasons for its initial manufacture, its various intended uses, and its unintended roles."⁹

Interpretation: This operation examines the relationship of the artifact to our present-day culture. Any interpretation of the significance of an artifact will vary depending upon the interpreter and the audience for whom the interpretation is intended.

Fleming's theoretical model is thoroughly developed and can be applied to a wide range of artifacts. An excellent example of using this methodology in a quilt documentation is demonstrated by Ricky Clark.¹⁰ She applied Fleming's methodology in a detailed examination of a mid-nineteenth-century signature quilt from Ohio. However, several material culture researchers have identified aspects of the Fleming model which render it awkward and unnecessarily complicated to use.

Pearce's Model for Artifact Study

In her critique of Fleming's model, Susan Pearce proposes a model which is more linear in design and execution.¹¹ She illustrates how the examination and analysis of an artifact and the collection of data are related to the material, history, environment, and significance of the object. She stresses the importance of comparison of one artifact with other artifacts of similar type so that by comparison objects fall into groups with shared characteristics. In examination of Fleming's model Pearce calls the constant interaction between the properties and operations "cumbersome" to use and questions the validity of regarding construction and design as two separate properties. She also questions Fleming's use of function in cultural analysis.¹²

*University of New Brunswick Model
for the Analysis of Artifacts*

In 1985, students in a graduate history seminar at the University of New Brunswick developed a model for artifact study.¹³ They used Fleming's model as a basis, but saw the need to simplify it and develop a methodology that eliminated, as much as possible, the development of preconceived ideas about the artifact before it was studied thoroughly on its own. This differs from Fleming's and Pearce's models in that the new model does not allow for the introduction of supplementary information or comparison with other artifacts before the artifact has been studied independently of outside information. This method might help to reduce bias and identify unique qualities of an object that might otherwise be overlooked.

Listed in order of examination, the New Brunswick model includes the artifact properties: material, construction, function, provenance, and value. Fleming's four analytical operations were omitted entirely. Material is the first property in this model to emphasize the importance of starting with analysis of the physical object itself. Construction, which includes physical description, follows material; Fleming's property of design is incorporated into construction. Like

Question Categories

	Material Construction	Function	Provenance	Value
Analysis Procedure Observable Data (examination of the single quilt)				
Comparative Data (comparisons with similar quilts)				
Supplementary Data (other information sources)				
Conclusions				

Table 2. University of New Brunswick Analysis Method

Pearce, the University of New Brunswick researchers did not see a need for separate classifications for design and construction because they are closely related. The property history was renamed provenance and placed in order after function. Finally, the property value is added. Value refers to the perceived value of the object to the society as well as its monetary and aesthetic value. The properties are ordered in the model in such a way as to indicate a shift from "the more empirical observations gained in Material and Construction to the largely interpretive property of Value."¹⁴

The analysis method was ordered so that comparative and supplementary data were added to the study after the artifact was examined on its own. The analysis procedure suggests that observable

data be collected through the ordered examination of the five properties, followed by comparative data, and finally, supplementary data. Conclusions should be made based on the data gathered and analyzed. A schematic diagram of this model is illustrated in Table 2.

Application of Material History Models in Quilt Research

The Fleming, Pearce, and the University of New Brunswick models are reflective of logical processes that researchers in material history studies have used to study material culture. It is worth noting that the systematic study of material culture is in its infancy and has largely been neglected until recently.¹⁵ An examination of the published literature was undertaken to determine whether researchers involved in studying quilts have employed similar methodologies. Research literature on nineteenth-century North and South Carolina quilts was chosen because quilts from this area have been researched extensively.

The analysis was limited to refereed journals, material history journals, and published state-wide quilt documentation projects. Museum catalogs were not included. Analysis of this published material showed that a specific methodology was seldom identified. Although careful documentation was obvious, there was not a consistent pattern in documentation procedures. Procedures used by specific researchers were not always clearly identified. The artifact properties of the University of New Brunswick model will be illustrated with examples from studies in the literature. An attempt will be made to show that the studies have limitations because a consistent methodology has not been employed. Justification for using a theoretical model will be given.

MATERIAL

When analyzing quilt studies it was noted that researchers have been careful to document materials used. Because the materials employed so definitely affect the final aesthetic appearance of a quilt there is often a careful recording of the characteristics of the textiles used

and their relationship to construction. Comparisons are often made with similar quilts. The textiles used in quilts suggest or document trade patterns and practices.

The materials used in quilts can be a major indication as to the socio-economic background of the quilter and the political conditions of the time. *North Carolina Quilts*, produced as a result of a state-wide quilt project, is a valuable source of information with regards to quilt patterns and materials.¹⁶ Joyce Newman outlines the background of North Carolina's textile economy and relates it to quilting during this period.¹⁷ A specific example of fabric production relating the concepts of material and economic value was the production of the Alamance plaids.¹⁸

Researchers studying fabric usage in quilts acknowledge the importance of the textile industry in the Carolinas. In the early part of the nineteenth century, most of the fabric desired by the inhabitants of North and South Carolina was imported. As the textile industry began to develop, the textiles produced locally were used mostly for household purposes, such as bedding, and also for clothing for slaves. Availability of fabric changed after the Civil War began. Initially the wealthy could obtain imported fabrics although they were extremely expensive. As the war progressed and the blockade of the seaports was complete, imported fabric was not available at any price.¹⁹

It is clear from this information that the use of imported fabrics in a quilt reflected the maker's socio-economic level in society. Wives of plantation owners, professionals, merchants, and public officials would have been able to plan their fabric choices carefully, whereas those who were less well off may have been limited to textiles produced locally or domestically. The studies examined relate the properties of material, construction, and provenance; function and value properties as outlined in the research model are not related to the concept of material.

CONSTRUCTION

The method used to produce a quilt is one way of classifying a given quilt. A physical description of the appearance helps to formulate

the qualitative (intuitive) judgment of the piece and to make comparisons with other similar quilts. The appearance is affected by the construction techniques and is evidence of changes in style and popularity of design and fabrics utilized. A question often asked when studying construction is if the design has been copied or adapted from previous patterns.

Studies examined noted construction and related this concept to materials, provenance, and function. Value is seldom related to the concept of function except for examples of intricate appliqué quilts. These quilts were valued then as they are today for the time-consuming needlework skills shown.

The quilt documentation survey completed by the North Carolina Quilt Project contains valuable information with regard to the construction of quilts during the nineteenth century. The two most prevalent modes of construction were appliqué and patchwork or piecing. A classification based on construction techniques categorizes the quilts documented. The categories include appliqué chintzes, "garden variety" appliqué patterns, pieced quilts, and crazy quilts. The study includes a thorough examination of each of these categories based on the quilts documented throughout North Carolina. Laurel Horton discusses similar types of design and construction techniques in her article "Quiltmaking Traditions in South Carolina" based on a 1983 South Carolina quilt survey.²⁰

Pattern or design is part of the concept of construction in the New Brunswick study model. "Roses Real and Imaginary: Nineteenth Century Botanical Quilts of the Mid-South," by Bets Ramsey deals specifically with pattern choice and inspiration.²¹ It describes how farming, gardening, and quiltmaking made up a large part of the lives of southern women, and it is not surprising that the floral appliqué patterns are commonly found in quilts of these areas. Mention is made of botanically inspired designs in North and South Carolina quilts in this article and in Erma Kirkpatrick's essay on floral appliqué which comments on the large number of tulip and rose designs seen in the North Carolina survey.²² The emphasis on pattern, design, and construction is often the only focus discussed in publications emphasizing aesthetics of historic quilts.

FUNCTION

The purpose of the concept of function is to determine the artifact's use and the implications which were intentional or unintentional through that use. A number of questions regarding function arise when employing the research model. Was the quilt's function affected by the design, textiles utilized, or construction methods employed? Does the function tell the researcher/viewer something about the maker/owner? Has the function of the quilt changed in contemporary society?

Quilts were made for a variety of purposes. Most studies of quilts emphasize three main purposes: artistic expression, utilitarian functions, and the commemoration of significant events in the makers' lives. Many utilitarian quilts have been used until the quilts no longer exist and this makes research on this type of quilt problematic. One of the limitations of data collected during state surveys may be a lack of representation of all types of quilts in the samples, as the quilts of less wealthy women, and specifically, slaves, would not have been as likely to survive. It is readily apparent from reading specific research studies that the elaborate appliqué quilts often included in museum exhibitions are representative of quilts made by wealthy women in the early nineteenth century in North and South Carolina. However, utilitarian quilts made later in the century and in the twentieth century are seldom illustrated or mentioned.

The literature indicates that quilts were sometimes associated with special events, for example, functioning as part of a bride's trousseau or as a gift to a new baby. At the beginning of the Civil War, women spent many hours making special quilts for men going off to war. The author of "South Carolina Quilts and the Civil War" describes two quilts made for young men before the war began.²³ One of them was a friendship quilt, made up of blocks appliquéd by different people in a show of friendship and support. Horton questions the practicality of the quilt due to its more delicate nature.

Upon examination of a quilt, the concept of function may become apparent through the relationships of material and construction to function. Identification of the type of quilt and comparative knowledge of similar types of quilts makes judgement regarding function more sound.

PROVENANCE

An important part of the study of an artifact is the determination of the geographic place and the time of origin. Who was the maker? Who was the original owner? What does the quilt tell us about the maker's and owner's lives? Who were subsequent owners of the quilt? The North Carolina Quilt Project, begun in 1985, was an ambitious attempt to document and record the history of as many quilts as possible in North Carolina. Seventy-five quilt documentation days were held in different areas of the state in a period of fourteen months; over ten thousand quilts were recorded. Trained volunteers and staff members recorded information about the owners, makers, and the history of quilts and their physical characteristics. This emphasis on material, construction, and provenance is typical of regional state quilt surveys.

An excellent example of how quilt history can be used in the study of social history is reported by Ellen Eanes.²⁴ The accidental discovery of nine quilts led the researcher to build a historical network that described the relationships among the various makers and their families. The network is fairly complex. The research also caused the author to become interested in the history of this county and the lives of the people in it.

An earlier study by Laurel Horton looked at the provenance and design of antebellum quilts from Rowan County, North Carolina.²⁵ She examined the influence of ethnic background and family ancestry on the design and construction of selected quilts. The analysis in this detailed study was based on intuitive and knowledgeable judgments rather than a formal material history methodology. It would be worthwhile for this type of study to be repeated using data from the state survey but employing the University of New Brunswick research model. Comparisons would be made more easily within this framework and the relationships among the various concepts could be seen more easily. By working through the model the concept of value could be emphasized and related to provenance.

Many research studies document the fact that quilts were often passed down through generations. Oral histories were often used to determine the original maker and the way a quilt had been passed on through generations. The trail of ownership can tell a great deal about the lives of people in these times.

The concept of provenance at first seems straightforward and factual. However, as one analyzes the research on specific quilt types or the intergenerational ownership of quilts one can conclude that there is a great deal of interpretation based on knowledgeable examination and study when discussing the history of given quilts. It is difficult to make comparisons among quilt studies when authors employ intuitive judgment as their methodology. If similar theoretical models are not used the validity of comparisons is questionable.

VALUE

The final property to be examined is the way in which the research literature reflects the value of quilts and quilting. The concept of value implies interpretation of empirical data. The specific concept of value is mentioned only briefly or is non-existent in most studies examined. Readers must draw their own conclusions regarding value based on intuition and implied relationships to material, construction, function, and provenance.

Obviously, quilts must have been important in the lives of the people of North and South Carolina because of the time-consuming nature of the craft. They were important in a utilitarian sense in that they were used for warmth and shelter. They were also very important in an aesthetic or artistic sense. The care that went into their construction and the selection of fabrics and pattern for a quilt indicate that the quilters found it to be an enjoyable task. The social values of quilting are often cited in the studies.

Like other heirlooms quilts were passed through generations, indicating that many quilts had great value to the families and descendants of the maker. The success of state documentation projects such as the one undertaken in North Carolina demonstrates that these quilts from the past are valued today. The wealth of information obtained through oral histories in research studies attests to the fact that quilt owners were willing participants in these studies because they valued their quilts.

One aspect of value of quilts in contemporary society is demonstrated by the amount and attention given to quilt research. Probably more than any other household items, including needlecrafted

textiles such as coverlets or samplers, quilts have been studied from a variety of viewpoints. Of major significance is the interest in women's contribution to material culture, an area of history which until recently has been overlooked.

Conclusions

The information collected by quilt researchers can be organized according to principles outlined in the various material culture models. The concepts from the various models are illustrated, but not specifically identified as being a part of a research methodology. Material and construction of quilts are very well documented, and often are of primary interest. Function, provenance (history), and value are frequently examined as well. However, the researchers themselves are clearly not following a specific research model.

It is possible that some researchers in material culture studies disregard the scientific process as they may feel it limits the interpretive quality of the field. After all, it may not be possible to prove many of the things one learns from artifacts; one often has to be satisfied with making knowledgeable conclusions based on the information at hand. Presentation of information in a more orderly fashion would aid in effective analysis, interpretation, comparison, and discussion of information.

One of the interesting aspects of the study of quilts is that the craft is done by a wide range of people and in a variety of cultures. Quiltmaking is not limited to a specific class or group but reflects the lives of many. In this way quiltmaking is a very valuable tool for researchers. This multicultural quality also differentiates quiltmaking from many other folk arts that are part of specific ethnic traditions.

Another factor related to the uniqueness of quilting as a source for material culture, is that in most situations, quilting is primarily a female experience. In this way quilts are a valuable source of historical information for scholars in the field of women's history. Historians in this field are limited by a lack of documentary evidence that relates to women. Quilts, along with other artifacts produced by women, provide evidence that can be used to piece together a long-

ignored part of history. The study of quilts and quiltmaking can make a significant contribution to this data base.

Quilts are often inherited through the family of the maker. The genealogy that the study of quilts reveals is invaluable, as it allows the researcher to learn about the lives of several generations as well as the role that the quilt played in the family.

The development of a model or adaptation of an existing model which could be related specifically to the study of quilts would be beneficial. The literature reviewed shows that artifact documentation, including the examination of supplementary information such as formal documents, letters, and oral histories, are the primary methods used to gather information about quilts. The standardization and refinement of a stated methodology would aid the field as a whole and, more specifically, would give a formal, if academic, validity to the study of these very special artifacts.

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