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Pre-1940 Quilt Tops: Their Status and Fate in Western New York State

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In 1989, the New York Quilt Project, sponsored by the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City, conducted forty-five public "Quilt Days" in thirty-five counties.[1] The project documented nearly 6,000 quilts. At seven locations in western New York state, project participants examined and photographed a total of 1,713 quilts and conducted oral interviews of the owners.

The express advertising for these Quilt Days did not request unfinished quilt tops or indicate in any manner that they would be welcome for documentation. Still, 151, or slightly over eight percent of documented items in the western New York region were quilt tops.

The term "unfinished top" refers to any pieced or appliqued fabric which was created as the primary, or topmost layer of a quilt. As such, it lacks one or more of the components needed for completion: borders, batting for filler, backing (lining), the actual "quilting" or "tying" to join the layers, and binding for the edges.

Western New York state is a largely rural, agricultural area. Buffalo and Rochester are its two large cities. Driving just twenty minutes from the heart of either city will deliver the traveler into farming country which extends south and west to the Pennsylvania border. The northern boundaries are Lakes Erie and Ontario, and Canada. The "Finger Lakes" region of wine-producing fame stretches to the east. The area is dotted with several small cities and many lesser hamlets tucked into valleys between the rolling hills. These

rural areas produced the majority of pre-1940 quilts and tops brought to western New York Quilt Days.

Generally, the inhabitants who have peopled this region for two hundred years have been and are culturally distant from their commerce-oriented relatives in the eastern metropolitan areas. The southern tier of counties is included in the geographical region known as "Appalachia," recognized as an economically distressed area by the federal government. The styles and fabrics of the majority of early quilts from the area reflect necessity, not indulgence in a superficial pastime.

Random comments from participants at Quilt Days suggested that had they known "just tops" were acceptable they would have brought those they had at home, indicating that tops exist in some quantity in the region.

What is happening to these unfinished tops? Are they viewed with the same degree of value as their completed counterparts? My mother's attic contained tops whose makers were long forgotten. They were stored in boxes which contained discarded clothing and rags torn for rugs which had never been made. They seemed to be considered of little value. Finished quilts were on the family beds. I had seen neighbors and acquaintances use tops as "frost covers" for gardens, dog beds, and table cloths. A magazine photograph suggested that one might use a quilt top to make a charming shower curtain.[2]

Knowing of my interest in quilting and its history, top owners frequently asked me about quilting sources for their older tops, or where they might sell them. Many told me of tops they had finished themselves or had hired others to complete for them. I decided to try and determine the status of quilt tops made before 1940 in this geographic region. I feel that it is important to record contemporary information; it will be the history we reflect upon many years from now.

Barbara Brackman and Jeannette Lasansky have addressed the advisability of finishing older quilt tops, both reaching the conclusion that the process may rob the top of historic, aesthetic, and monetary value.[3] My research, however, indicates that the average top owner is either ignorant of these informed opinions or, if aware,

disregards the opinions of experts and wishes to have a completed quilt. I wished to explore further these value differences.

The Museum of American Folk Art allowed me to use its findings and facilities so that I could contact a number of top owners to ascertain the status of and the owners' feelings about their quilt tops. I developed questionnaires for these contacts, and also placed ads in local newspapers, inviting top owners to responds. The information supplied by twenty owners is included in the survey. Questionnaires were also designed for several groups which might be expected to have knowledge of or come into contact with older quilt tops. By this method I surveyed ten quilt collectors and owners of "time-span" quilts (those begun by one needleworker in the past and finished in the present by another), six quilt shop owners, thirteen quilters or groups who quilted for others, eight antique dealers, two auctioneering firms, and eleven area museum and historical society curators. Some oral interviews supplemented the written data. I also communicated with several experts in the quilt field, asking their opinions of the value of unfinished tops and the advisability of completion by contemporary needleworkers.

Top Owners

Most of the tops noted in my research material were documented at Quilt Days, thus assuring the pre-1940 dating. I inspected a number of the others to verify that dating criteria was met, and the remainder were of known lineage by their owners. Twenty top owners reported a total ownership of 110 unfinished pre-1940 quilt tops. Although this would indicate an average of five-and-a-half tops each, one woman, Corinne Sweeney, reported sixty-five tops in her possession. Ms. Sweeney's collection consists of pieced tops, her favorites, and, by a large margin, the most typical of tops found at Quilt Days in the area. Ms. Sweeney has been collecting for about twenty years; she chose to acquire tops rather than finished quilts because of space limitation. Several years ago she attended a large quilt seminar in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she set up a booth offering some of her unfinished tops for sale. At a nearby stand Nancy Donahue, a

quilting book author, was selling her books and kits. She bought several of Ms. Sweeney's tops to take back to California with her, as she indicated tops are in limited supply there. Ms. Sweeney sees fewer tops for sale at flea markets and yard sales than in the past, although she recently purchased two tops for a total of thirty dollars.[4]

Only four of the twenty owners surveyed had purchased tops; the remainder inherited them from family members. Since I have not seen a number of these tops, I have not attempted to analyze the total sample according to the age of the articles, except for specifying items made before 1940 for the present research. Other than Ms. Sweeney's collection, the remaining forty-five tops include thirty-six pieced, five appliqued, one combination, and three embroidered tops. Seventy-five percent of all the tops were believed by their owners to be in either excellent or good condition. Over one-quarter of the owners responding thought that the tops needed borders added, however.

Only one top of the total 110 was used or displayed by its owner. The remaining 109 tops are stored in various places: Ms. Sweeney's in pillowcases, eighteen in boxes, eight in chests, six on closet shelves, three in drawers, and ten in attics.

The makers of twenty-eight of the tops are known, and the approximate dates of construction are known for twenty. Only six of the total 110 tops have this information attached in any manner to the quilt top. Four of the owners thought this was a good idea and indicated they would consider labeling their tops in the near future.

Three top owners are happy with some of their tops, a total of seven, unfinished. The majority, however, would prefer to have completed quilts. Of these, half do not know or are unable to find someone who offers this service. Five would do it themselves when they found time, seven thought they would have Amish quilters do the work, and three believed they knew of groups or guilds which quilt for others. Several mentioned that they needed to wait until funds were available before they could have the work done.

Half would choose the lining fabric and batting themselves. The remainder would leave the choices to the quilter. Fourteen top owners favored one hundred percent cotton or muslin for the lining

fabrics, the rest indicated no choice. Bonded polyester batting was preferred in nearly every case, with four leaning toward cotton, one preferring a sheet blanket, and one owner considering wool. Half would leave quilting pattern choices to the quilter, while half would research books and periodicals or purchase patterns from quilt shops.

Ten of the respondents believe that unfinished tops have some historical value, but only if the maker and history are known. Two think tops have no value at all, and six don't know. The majority of owners considered the monetary value of their tops to be "little" to "some," while only one thought it could be "great" because of excellent workmanship.

Most quilt top owners in western New York state believe that finished quilts are articles of value; unfinished tops are not. Only two owners had tops they considered too old or too valuable to quilt. The majority report that they are not interested in the opinion of "experts" that old tops should probably be left as is. Most had never heard of this opinion. Although half indicated that they intend to participate actively in selecting finishing options available, half will accept whatever is offered by their quilters, indicating perhaps a lack of knowledge of quilting options or insecurity about choices they might make. The attitudes and beliefs of experts will probably not influence their decisions about finishing their tops.

Owners of Time-span Quilts

The term "time-span" quilts was suggested by Marie Geary, Director of the Eastcoast Quilter's Alliance, in Westford, Massachusetts, to characterize quilts begun by a needleworker of an earlier era and completed by another at a later time. The organization sponsored an exhibit in November 1990, entitled "Quilts for Today, Tomorrow, and Always." The presentation included many time-span pieces.

Of the ten owners of thirty-six time-span quilts in my survey, all indicated that they had been dissatisfied with their possessions when they existed as tops only. The reasons given for having their tops finished varied. Mildred Kopler, age 102, commented: "I had too many kids to do it myself back then," while Wanda Roth, the owner

of several time-span quilts responded: "They were pretty as tops, but I knew they would be gorgeous quilted." Some indicated that their quilts were to be given to family members of or "passed down." One woman, Edna Myers, declared that everyone in the family thought her Grandmother's Flower Garden top, made in the 1930s, was ugly until it was finished; now all her children are lobbying to have it willed to them.

Four of the ten respondents were collectors with more than twenty quilts each in their collections, although not all were time-span items. One collector believed it imperative that the quilter of a top be given free rein in the choice of materials and techniques used in the finishing process, as she considered both needleworkers of equal importance in producing the completed quilt. Although the majority of owners seemed delighted with their finished quilts, two of the ten were somewhat disappointed. One was unhappy with the colors of borders and backing chosen by her quilter. Both, having had more than one top finished, noted that the workmanship varied widely from quilt to quilt. The quilters in both instances were Amish.

Who are the finishers of these early tops, and what materials and techniques do they use for completion? Five of the ten top owners hired Amish quilters, two finished their tops themselves, and three had other individuals complete their tops. Three of the thirty-six time-span quilts have cotton batting, three have sheet blankets, and the remaining thirty have polyester batts. Two owners reported that the Amish quilters they contacted refused to use cotton as batting material as they didn't like to quilt through it. When asked whether the combination of old and new materials and techniques might lower the value of the finished quilt, three owners said no; two said yes, if the tops were very old; and five didn't know. All indicated that they liked their quilts as possessions rather than as objects of potential monetary value, but one "liked to sell some so that she could buy other, more valuable ones." The time-span quilts owned by this group of respondents are displayed on guest beds, chair backs, and quilt racks, and two are hung on walls. Several have been given to daughters and sons as gifts. Only four owners indicate that they have some finished time-span quilts in storage. Based upon these responses it would seem that time-span quilts are quite acceptable

to most people; aesthetics, or the belief that an object may be appreciated for the value intrinsic in its mere existence, is not generally a consideration when the quilting of a top is considered, nor is the possible lessening of monetary value.

Quilt Shop Owners

Six quilt shop owners, who might be expected to come into contact with unfinished tops, revealed that all have received inquiries about completing older tops. Roughly two-thirds of the top owners seeking advice wish to do the work themselves, while one-third are looking for a quilting source. Five of the six shop owners make referrals, two to Amish quilters, one to a church group, and one refers customers to an individual quilter. Four of the six proprietors make recommendations about fabric and batting choices; they all recommend cotton for lining fabric but are equally divided on the question of cotton or thin polyester batting. One suggests quilting patterns compatible with the era in which the top was made, the others offer patterns for sale from which the customer may choose.

Four shop owners believe there are large numbers of pre-1940 tops in western New York based upon the number of inquiries, while two are unsure. The six reported a total of seventy-three inquiries about finishing older tops in a one-year time span. All believed that most owners placed more value on the completed quilt than on the top alone. Two believed monetary and historic value were lowered by completing old tops, two did not. Two had no opinion. Only one thought the aesthetic value of the top was diminished by the quilting and finishing, three did not, and two were unsure.

I showed the shop owners a plan I designed for a class on the finishing of old quilts. Four thought there would be great interest in such a class and would offer one if qualified instructors were available. Two were unsure if such a class would elicit enough response to include it in their class schedules.

Shop owners are in a unique position, often coming into contact with those owning older tops and seeking information. They are generally conscientious when making references and offering informa-

tion to the shop owner. They are able to make referrals to those who quilt for others, offer advice on the selection of compatible materials for the finishing of tops, and offer for sale fabric, batting, and patterns needed by those wishing to complete their quilt tops. They can and do educate the top owner about making careful choices when they prepare to finish their quilts.

Groups Who Quilt For Others

There were many references to groups of quilters in the samples of top owners, collectors, and shop owners. Finding these groups or guilds who quilted older tops for others, however, proved a difficult task. Most of them quilted only for members of their own groups and did not solicit outside work. They primarily quilt recently-made tops. Of the three groups I located who quilt older tops, two might be defined as traditional quilting groups. Both were small groups of women ranging in age from sixty-five into their eighties, and their groups originally had been church-oriented. Both groups, the Yorkshire Quilters and the Centerville Methodist women, had been quilting continuously for over twenty years: the former meeting every Tuesday at the home of one of the members, the latter only when someone requested that they finish a quilt. Both groups now complete about two tops a year, many fewer than in the past. One group estimates that eighty percent of their work is on older tops, the second group estimates twenty percent. One group no longer quilts by hand but ties the tops exclusively. The second group hand quilts, but also ties quilts occasionally. Cotton, muslin, and sometimes sheets are used as lining by one group, while the other favors polyester/cotton blends because the colors are "nicer" and the fabric is cheaper. Both groups choose polyester batting. Owners supply the fabric and batting for seventy-five percent of one group's work and about twenty percent of the other's. The group which quilts by hand attempts to match quilting styles of the past with the design and age of the top. The group which hand-quilts recently received $400 for finishing a large Dresden Plate top, but the average payment over a period of time has been $150. The group that ties quilts has

always asked $15 to $25 for tying and binding combined, but has decided recently to add $10 for the binding work.

The third "group" is a husband and wife team, Mr. and Mrs. Larry Arnold of Yorkshire, New York. They are in their early seventies and have been quilting for two years. In this time they have completed about fifty-five quilts, seven of which they believe were made prior to 1940. They always supply the lining fabric and batting, choosing polyester/cotton sheets for the former and generic batting purchased at local discount stores for filler. They do outline quilting only, no "free form." They have also tied quilts in the past. They said the payment received for quilting and binding a top varied from item to item, and volunteered no information about compensation for their services.

All three groups believed there are large numbers of unfinished tops in the area, based upon the number of requests they get for finishing services. The two church groups enjoyed working on the older tops, saying they "loved looking at the old fabrics and recalling the days when they were in style." One member remarked on how soft and pleasant the old cotton fabric was to quilt through. The two church groups do not mark the quilts with the names of the quilters; the husband-wife team attaches a commercially-made label with the words "Made Especially For You By The Arnolds."

The actual number of quilting groups appears to be smaller than might be expected, and their work accounts for few recently-finished old tops. The techniques used by these groups vary widely, and the quilters appear in some instances to be unaware of or to disregard generally accepted materials and methods which would prove most compatible with older tops.

Professional Amish Quilters

Two of the southern tier counties, Chatauqua and Cattaraugus, have large, well-established Amish populations, which are engaged in farming, cheesemaking, sawing timber, building, harness-making, and other pursuits typical of their agrarian society. A third southern tier county, Allegany, has seen an influx of Amish families in the past

ten years. The women of these communities carry on quilting traditions, and have done custom quilting for others as a means of income. It is becoming increasingly difficult, however, for top owners to find women to finish their tops, whether the tops are old or contemporary. I conducted interviews with seven Amish women in the area who quilt for others. Several have greatly curtailed the practice, as they find it is more lucrative to make their own quilts for sale through quilt shops in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania area. They also produce quilts for retailers in other regions of the country. Of the seven interviewed, three now receive tops from the Lancaster area, finish them, and return them to sales outlets there. These marketing practices require the allotment of much of the women's time, leaving less for the quilting of other owners' tops. Two of the best known and most prolific needleworkers have recently stopped working on old tops because they are allergic to the dust, mildew, and mothball fumes often present in elderly fabric. It is also possible that some top owners may have difficulty finding these professional Amish quilters. "Word-of-mouth" is the primary source of information, as the women do not advertise their services.

Although I was unable to determine accurately the total of tops these women have completed, the estimates of the percentage of old tops as opposed to recently-made tops varied from ten percent to fifty percent. All indicated that the majority of old tops they had completed had been family quilts, but one told of a huge suitcase full of tops and blocks brought to her that had been purchased at an auction. The general condition of all older tops to be quilted was reported as "good," but all quilters remembered tops with weak seams that needed repair. Almost all reported instances of soiled and stained tops. These women do not make recommendations about washing tops or quilts, as they do not want to be responsible for any damage that might result. One volunteered that she might launder a customer's top if requested. She would use cold water and her wringer washing machine. One quilter almost always chooses the lining fabric and batting unless the owner has something special in mind. Fifty percent of the owners supplied the materials, often asking the quilter's preference. Two quilters specified that the owners furnish the needed elements as they were geographically unable to

visit stores that offer supplies. All seven Amish women prefer polyester/cotton blends for borders and lining and select this fabric if the choice is theirs. The women also use polyester batting almost exclusively unless the top owner insists on cotton or a sheet blanket. Two would not finish the tops if cotton was specified, and those who have used it dislike it as it "quilts hard." Two quilters want the tops marked for quilting when delivered to them for the work, five have templates and stencils from which the owner may choose, two have books and magazines, and two sometimes look at old quilts to find how they were quilted. The choice is left to the quilter approximately fifty percent of the time. Asked if they enjoyed quilting the older tops, three didn't mind if the top had been washed to remove the sizing and soften the material and if it lay flat, and one quilter said she enjoyed looking at the old fabrics. All admitted a preference for working on newer tops, usually made with polyester/cotton fabric. All seven Amish women charge for their services by counting the yards of quilting thread used in quilting the tops, asking from forty to fifty cents per yard. A small quilt or one with minimal quilting using one 250-yard spool of thread would realize $100 for the quilter. Binding the finished top is usually included in the price.

Based upon the number of requests received for the completion of antique tops, four believed they exist in large numbers in the area, but three weren't sure as each had offered her services for less than three years. None of the seven sign their names on the quilt. Four would do so if asked, and three are not sure if the practice would be appropriate.

These women, whose culture includes such a strong tradition of quilting, seem very much at ease with modern techniques and materials. Since these choices are left to them fifty percent of the time, they finish old tops with these materials which are not compatible with those of an earlier era. They believe the "English," as they call those who are not members of their sect, lack a tradition of quilting. E.S., an Amish quilter from Conewango who wishes to remain anonymous, believes contemporary women are concerned only with "choosing the pretty colors to match their houses and stitching the tops, not in the hard work of quilting itself."

Other Quilting Professionals

I located two individuals who have finished old tops for themselves and others. They indicated that they tried in every way to quilt the tops as the maker might have wished, following any faint markings on the top and researching old quilting styles for particular patterns and ages of fabric. They used period material when available, and compatible contemporary fabric and batting in all other instances. Both base their fees for quilting on the job and its difficulty, considering the following questions: Do borders need to be added? Does the top lie flat or need restructuring? How extensive is any damage that might require repair? Is the quilt to be bound by the quilter? Their services for others are limited, however. They do not sign their names as finishers of the quilt; neither has been asked to do so.

We should not assume that only two needleworkers are involved in the process of making a quilt. Mary Schafer is recognized and admired for her thoughtful and dedicated work in completing the tops of Betty Harriman.[5] However, she had the actual quilting done by professional Amish quilters whose names have not been recorded.[6]

I found no top owners who had used commercial quilting services advertised in magazines with national distribution, nor were any considering doing so.

Antique Dealers

Although the total number of antique dealers in the western New York area is unknown, I would guess, based upon information from telephone directories of several localities, data from dealers, and personal observation, that the total includes approximately 200 active establishments. I sent questionnaires to thirty dealers throughout the area, including both urban and rural locations, asking several questions about old quilt tops. While only eight of the thirty dealers returned completed surveys, those responding represent a variety of localities and sizes, the largest selling 120 quilts and tops a

year, the smallest about eight. Seven of the eight dealers sold a combined total of 216 quilt items in the period of one year, of which thirty-nine, or just over twenty percent, were unfinished tops reportedly made before 1940.

When I questioned where they discovered the tops, and provided a choice of private homes, auctions, other dealers, or "pickers," seven responded that private homes accounted for most of their finds, while one dealer bought mostly at auctions. Four believed the demand for tops had increased in the past five years, four believed it was stable. Only three indicated that average prices for tops had increased in the past five years. The prices these dealers received for unfinished tops ranged from $15 to $100. The median low was $35; the median high $44. Over fifty-six percent of the tops were sold to individuals or collectors, while dealers purchased the remaining forty-four percent. One small dealer believed local people bought all her tops and quilts to have and keep as heirlooms. Six, however, estimated that between fifty and a hundred percent of their tops and quilts leave the western New York area. These six also believe sixty to a hundred percent of them will be resold. Four of the eight proprietors think the demand for tops will continue to grow, one thought it would decline, and one assumed it would remain stable. One dealer, Avis Wilmost, of Wiscogen Antiques, Portageville, New York, is keeping her quilts as a collection for the present time. Twenty percent of these are unfinished tops. She once sold two early tops to a dealer friend in Syracuse, who said she wanted to keep them for her home. About three months later she received a call from a woman in Connecticut who wanted the provenance on one of those tops. Since then she has not sold another quilt or top, nor has she kept that "friend!"

Although dealers seem reluctant to respond to the questions of quilt historians, the insight they can provide into the origins of their quilts and tops and the prices they receive are important indicators of movement and value that might be further pursued by those interested in the information. Dealers also have an opportunity, if they choose to pursue it, to make inquiries of the original owner about the known history of a quilt or top offered for sale. One admits that a solidly documented quilt is likely to realize a higher price in his

retail shop, but he does not frequently question sellers about quilt or top origins.

Auctioneers

There are nearly a hundred auctioneers in the region conducting sales with varying regularity. Many of these specialize in commercial, real estate, livestock, and automobile marketing. I interviewed two who do a large estate and household business and who are typical of those in that classification. The first is Harris Wilcox, Inc., of Bergen, New York, the largest auction firm in the state excluding New York City, employing five full-time auctioneers. The second, R.G. Mason Auctions, Fillmore, New York, specializes in the good old country-type sales known and loved by all. The two companies conducted a total of 224 household auctions during 1989. One auctioneer reported that at least one quilt, top, or quilt-related item was found at ninety percent of the sales. Both auctioneers believed that about eighty percent sold were completed quilts, and twenty percent unquilted tops. When the sale is initially discussed with the owner, the best quilts are sometimes kept by the family or estate and are not sold at the auction, especially if they're known to be of family origin. Tops are seldom kept by the owner and are usually included in the sale. The condition of both quilts and tops ranges from "very rough" to mint.

Both auctioneers said the price of quilts and tops has risen dramatically in the past five years, one stating it had doubled and often tripled. Both said an unfinished top would usually bring between $75 to $100, although it could fluctuate from as low as $5 to as high as $1,000. One indicated that collectors were their best customers; the other believed that both collectors and dealers were primary purchasers. Both thought that most of the quilts and tops bought by dealers (up to sixty percent) were removed the western New York area for sale elsewhere. One pointed out that both the New York State Auctioneers Association, Inc., and the National Auctioneers Association, Inc., are taking an interest in the growing quilt mar-

ket; they have sponsored informational programs for their members offering basic data about quilt construction, age, and so on.

Auctioneers have a unique view of the quilt market; they are able to observe the movement of tops and quilts from attic to new owner, discerning price fluctuations, popularity of particular patterns, and density of the items in certain area. They believe the prices at auction will continue to rise.

Policies of Museums and Historical Societies

Museums in the western New York area vary in size and sophistication, from the large, prestigious institutions in Buffalo and Rochester to historical societies quartered in old homes in small villages. Their collections are diverse not only in the numbers of quilts and tops, but in the practices and thinking of their curators and staff. I surveyed eleven museums and historical societies in the area. The institutions reported a total of 672 quilts, of which 87 are unfinished tops. The largest collection included 150 articles, about 30 of which are tops. The smallest collection contained four quilts and three tops. Seven of the eleven have displayed tops in concert with completed quilts in exhibition. Two have never displayed tops along wit quilts, and two had mounted no quilt presentations. When asked if the viewing public seemed as interested in the unfinished works as in their quilted counterparts, six curators thought yes, two said no, and three were unsure.

Three institutions reported having known provenance for most of their quilts and tops. Three had some, three had very little, two had none. Three large traditional city museums indicated that they actively seek unfinished tops; the others did not. Five had at some time received requests about finishing, storing, or preserving quilts and tops, four reported no such requests, and one did not respond to the question. The eleventh, a smaller museum, refers finishing requests to an Amish family. Asked if their institution takes a position on the advisability of finishing old tops, three emphatically said "Yes, we do not advise it." Eight, however, said their establishments had no fixed policy or opinion. Queried as to whether a time-span

quilt would have less monetary worth than one quilted at the time the top was made, four responded yes, six offered no opinion, but one thought it might be increased if the work were properly done. Historical value was believed to be diminished by contemporary quilting practices by five curators, three thought not, and three had no opinion.

The Genesee Country Museum, a restored village in Mumford, New York, offers living and working exhibitions in the manner of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, and has a collection of seventy-five items, about eleven of them unquilted tops. Their quilters, called "professional interpreters," practice the art of quilting daily in a period setting. They are making reproductions of some of the village's older quilts. Old donated blocks also have been assembled into tops, and two finished quilts have resulted from this work.

The respondents were asked if their institutions recommended particular procedures for the preservation of venerable old quilts and tops. One museum director overseeing a collection of twenty-five quilts offered no information and asked the author for suggestions. One did not respond to the question. The other nine, however, subscribed to at least one of the following precepts of current thinking on textile preservation: acid free tissue or muslin as wrapping and folding agents, low lighting for exhibition, rolling the items on muslin-covered tubes, and vacuum cleaning and hand-washing techniques. All nine recommended a maximum hanging time of three to four months, with one suggesting frequent top to bottom reversal as a technique for reducing the stress of gravity on the fabric.

While we often think of museums and historical societies as exemplary custodians of early objects and purveyors of historical knowledge, there appears to be some discrepancy in the offerings of both among the institutions surveyed. While some institutions seem to carefully provide a suitable habitat for their quilt items, the entire list of conservation policies mentioned above is practiced by few. Experts have deemed the finishing of old tops unwise as historical value may be lost, yet eight institutions do not have a policy in place concerning the practice. The lack of provenance of many quilts and tops in their collections by several institutions indicates that the accuracy of identification is suspect, and might suggest that those

interested in quilt care and history would be well advised to supplement knowledge obtained from these sources with additional study and research.

Summary of Survey Results

Although the statistics alone might offer interesting and informative data, there are additional conclusions which can be drawn from the information collected in the study. It is apparent that quiltmaking has long been a popular pursuit in western New York, and that in addition to completed quilts, many unfinished works also remain in the area at the present time. Owners who have had their tops completed give great value and care to the finished product. The majority of these owners indicate that their time-span quilts were completed from tops known to have family origin. The methods of finishing vary widely from intentionally compatible with the period of the top to whatever is easiest, cheapest, and quickest. Most top owners and owners of time-span quilts believe that the finished quilt is an article of value, and that an unfinished quilt is not. Only two of twenty owners of unquilted items had tops they considered too old or too valuable to quilt. Time-span quilt owners display and use their treasures. Unfinished tops are relegated to nooks and crannies of attics and closets.

Shop owners generally give sound and accepted advice when questioned about the completing of old quilts. Some would be amenable to providing classes on quilting old tops and other acceptable finishing choices if knowledgeable teachers were available.

Groups willing to work on older tops are difficult to locate in the area surveyed, and Amish women indicate a growing reluctance to work for others. Both groups and individuals often employ a minimum of traditional workmanship and materials, and they prefer modern methods and fabrics. Antique dealers believe quilt-related objects to be stable in price, while auctioneers find a rising monetary value on these items in their sales arenas. Both agree that a very large number of quilts and tops are leaving the western New York area. They are being distributed in one manner or another from coast

to coast. Prices for tops seem very low, compared to those for finished quilts. Although most museum collections contain tops, the majority do not actively seek them, and opinions on the advisability of completing tops and the methods of conservation vary from one institution to another.

Other Opinions

Discussing the argument of "to finish or not to finish" is important in a consideration of the fate of unquilted tops in western New York or elsewhere. The question addresses a concept of value, one of the paramount elements in determining the destiny of any possession. Another important concept is provenance, or the origin and history of the object. These two factors influence top owners in deciding the future of their property.

The appearance of Barbara Brackman's article generated discussion on the subject in every quarter of the quilt world. Prudent quilters doing this work put away their needles, and some top owners felt guilty about what they had done or were preparing to do. It remains an electric, emotional subject. In a subsequent issue of *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, Brackman offered basic methods for those who wished to continue with the process and suggestions for those who chose to keep the tops aesthetically pure but still desired to display or use them.[7] Brackman also teaches a class on quilting old tops. She admits the title of the class is deceptive as she tries seriously to discourage the quilting of tops older than sixty years. She offers alternative methods of finishing the tops; one of which involves backing with wide muslin, tying loosely with cotton thread every twelve inches or so, and basting the edges of the muslin over the top. A hanging sleeve may be attached if desired. The process is completely reversible, assuring no permanent alteration. She also feels it is important to avoid judging an owner who still wishes to proceed with quilting. She believes classes which offer information on completion or alternative techniques would be well received.[8]

Jeannette Lasansky addresses the dilemma firmly. She is not in favor of finishing unquilted tops except perhaps family quilts, and

then only when materials approximating the older ones can be found, the uses for the completed quilt are known, and the fabric condition of the older top is carefully considered. She believes that a sense of continuity within a family might be validated by the finishing process.

Patsy Orlofsky, author and executive director of the Textile Conservation Workshop, Inc., expresses her views:

> It may still hold true, however, with purists, top level collectors, and knowledgeable curators, that twentieth century additions to nineteenth and eighteenth century quilts will muffle identity and decrease value. Also, as we now approach the turn of a new century, the twentieth century has to be looked with a more premeditated, ethnographic eye. Early twentieth century quilts are now almost one hundred years old; we are generally more reticent with earlier treasures.
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> Having said this, I do agree that part of the intrinsic pleasure of the quiltmaking tradition is the organic nature of one generation building on the work of another. It is a spontaneous custom that cannot and should not be "authorized" by those of us who simply write about the history of traditions.[9]

Helene von Rosenstiel, noted costume and textile conservator, offers the following opinion:

> My attitude is: if it is in private hands, we have a responsibility to advise them on the pros and cons of their intended actions, help choose the safest techniques based on condition and age, and encourage careful use and cleaning in the future. Then they are responsible for their decision. They usually have great pleasure from working on, using, and/or sharing their possessions with others. That too has merit.[10]

Merikay Waldvogel chooses not to quilt her own antique tops; she teaches and lectures and finds them useful when she gives talks about dating quilts. She adopts a moderate position:

> A lot of information can be gained from looking at the back of a quilt top, but I don't think that should stop a quiltowner from finishing the quilt if he/she wants to keep it as a family memento. No one should feel guilt about caring for a quilt top. Caring can come in many forms. I agree some quilts and quilt tops deserve special care, but those are really quite few.[11]

Elizabeth Mulholland organized a show and workshop several years ago for the DeWitt Historical Society in Ithaca, New York. She offers a somewhat different perspective:

> I believe most makers would like to think that their top would be finished; it would be part of the continuum that we think is the wonderful part of quilting. I believe, however, that it is important to distinguish which tops should be preserved unsullied for their historical value. Most owners believe they alone decide a quilt's fate—yet they are always wanting opinions and information. It's not hard to decide that a particular quilt top is so beautiful or historically valuable that it should be part of the public domain. But to convince the owner! And then there's the problem of what to do with such a quilt: will the local museum properly care for it? Show it?

Ms. Mulholland believes a top must be sound, and the finished quilt worthy of the time spent quilting.

> If I put all the time into a quilt I would want it to express my own ideas and my own time as well as the (top)maker's. The critical point in finishing a two-period quilt is the skill of the quilter-designer in integrating the old and the new into a beautiful whole. It would be important to put information on the quilt back about names, dates, and towns of the quilt maker and quilter.[12]

The experts I surveyed continue to believe in the intrinsic value of the unfinished top, although most appreciate the heartfelt desire of top owners for a finished product.

Mary Schafer offers an example of how emotions often influence actions when determining the fate of an old top, and gives insight into why many might throw caution to the winds.

> I will go into detail about one quilt I finished and it may give an idea of my attitude about quilt tops. Over a period of perhaps two years we stopped at a local antique shop. At the beginning of the period I saw an old quilt top (Double Hour Glass) displayed prominently at the front of the shop. Subsequently, I saw it displayed further back in the store, then folded with other tops—no takers. In about two year's time I didn't see it at all. I asked about it. It was brought out of the drawer of an antique piece of furniture. I remember thinking "What will be the next happening for this top?" It was soiled but not dirty; it had been washed. The sashing was striped material—the dark lines faded out in spots or it

> was mildew, perhaps that was the reason it wasn't sold. I bought it. Fortunately I had a used man's shirt of oxford cloth, striped with somewhat the same dark lines as the original and used it as a border or part of the border piecing. It looks quite nice now and I'm glad I had it quilted.[13]

Many top owners I spoke with share Mary's feelings about their own possessions. It seems to bother them that the artwork commenced by early quilters, often their ancestors, exists in an unfinished state. Perhaps they feel that some bond among women appears to be interrupted, a statement needs completion, a link requires repair. Possibly the completion of an old quilt ties up loose ends in the mind of the owner, and helps establish a bond across the years with the original maker.

Dr. Richard Stegan, Associate Professor of Psychology at Houghton College in Houghton, New York, offers an assessment of "closure," the sometimes compelling need to complete things which are incomplete. He states that the phenomenon is not merely psychological, but actually starts as an organizational perception. In our efforts to mentally classify data and arrange our worlds, the mind tends to complete visual perceptions in relation to past experience. He offers as an example a follow-the-dot exercise we all do as children; the general form of a horse might be perceived, remembered, and mentally completed before the dots are actually connected on the page and the image is revealed. The mind automatically completes the picture with a curious need to create order in its realm.[14] In a similar manner the eye sees an unfinished quilt and the mind cries out "I could finish this quilt—I could make a completed object." Emotions and needs often enter the picture at this point, and while one might not actually "need" to complete the quilt, there is a psychological tendency to find very good reasons for doing so.

Laurel Horton, quilt researcher and folklorist, says:

> When people ask me about what to do with old tops, I first ask them questions to determine if the primary motivating factor is that it disturbs them to own something that they consider incomplete. If not, then they are often relieved to hear that they don't necessarily have to finish something. I try to separate this need from the actual desire to have and use a finished quilt instead of a top.[14]

Western New York top owners are probably no different in their

value judgments from those in other geographic areas. Valuable items are *not* sold at flea markets, yard sales, and auctions for relatively low prices. They are *not* used as tablecloths, shower curtains, dog beds, garden covers, or picnic cloths. Finished quilts are perceived to have worth; they tend to stay with a family, as part of its history. The average top owner's perception of value differs considerably from that of quilt experts. The thoughtful opinions of quilt professionals concerning the expediency of finishing old tops have had about as much effect on the average top owner as did Nancy Reagan's famous "Just say no!" slogan as a solution for the nation's drug woes.

Addressing the Dilemma

No one is suggesting that experts' tenets regarding the loss of historic worth, damage to fragile fabric, and compromise of aesthetic value be ignored or reversed. We should continue to encourage the public to consider these findings prior to finishing their tops. It seems unlikely, however, that a universal concept of value will be established, and finishing will continue to be the choice of many.

As quilt professionals, should we be more aggressive in our attempts to educate the public about the historical significance of their quilts and tops and their makers? We have noted that tops with known history fare best. Their owners seem to want them finished to have as possessions, and are probably less likely to offer them for sale at auctions or other types of sales, or use them carelessly. The numerous state documentation programs could conceivably encourage an awareness of this importance of a quilt or top in a family's chronology, and this, hopefully, will insure that these items are handed down from one generation to another.

We would be naive, however, to believe that the old axiom, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" would be a prevalent belief anytime soon. Might we research, design, and promote acceptable alternatives to the actual quilting process similar to those offered by Barbara Brackman? Should we actively encourage those who accept the responsibility of finishing by teaching classes or seminars on more "acceptable" methods of proceeding, e.g., fabric and batting choice, quilting

designs, and other related techniques? Could museums and guilds offer exhibits and shows of unfinished tops that have probably never been displayed, thus establishing these pieces as worthy of regard in their present state?

Quilts are a lot like people. Both are born from dreams of excellence, they experience mixed reviews by their begetters, exist in reasonable health for a rather predictable life span, and degenerate in various manners until they cease to exist. Old quilt tops are veritable time bombs in the attics of western New York and elsewhere. Textiles are short-lived, fragile objects; acidification, insects, vermin, and dampness are taking their toll. Some will probably remain thus, for the most part anonymous, with an unknown number being "rescued" for finishing. A great many will undoubtedly depart the area via the pipelines of auctioneers and dealers. Quilt tops are meaningful to experts and historians as they are, and important to owners who want them finished. No matter what their owners may or may not decide about their destiny, I believe that they are as worthy of study, admiration, and respect as their finished counterparts, and great effort should be expended to assure that they are held in the same measure of esteem.

Notes and References

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