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The Contemporary American Quilter: A Portrait

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This paper is based on a survey of quilters from around the United States; all kinds of quilters—from beginners, who have just completed one quilt, to those who have been quilting for over 30 years. Many respondents to this survey are famous in the quilt world. They are authors, teachers, and artists.

Completed a year ago, the survey was not taken with the intention of presenting a research paper. Instead, as a somewhat frustrated anthropologist who happens to own a fabric store, I wanted to find out who these people are who are buying all this fabric. What do they do with it? Why is it so important to them? You'll see that this is not really a market survey. I didn't ask what their income is, where they live, their husband's occupation, or if they were self-supporting. I wasn't particularly interested in knowing what they would buy the most of, but I have an incurable desire to know more about the people in the world I live and work in. I consider myself first an anthropologist, then a business woman, and this survey is a reflection of that.

I have used the survey technique extensively in my work because, although it doesn't always give the complete picture, or sometimes not even the correct picture, it is great for evaluating hypotheses and turning up ideas and issues that may not have otherwise been considered.

A survey often has problems in getting respondents. But this survey was the most unusual I've ever done, in that I gave out 100 surveys and received 129 back. People took the survey home, xeroxed it and passed it on to their quilting friends. Because of this I had several false starts in the analysis. I would be in the middle of tabulation and in would come another half dozen surveys. I reread my survey over and over trying to discover what there was about it that made the respondents want to fill it out, because that discovery would be truly marketable. I've come to the conclusion that it must be the quilters themselves;

their inherent need to make a statement, to be heard, to give something that tells about their lives and who they are.

Because I have good access to the quilters of California, most of the respondents are from the West Coast. However, since it was also distributed at the AQSG Seminar and Houston Quilt Market, it includes respondents from almost every state.

Who are these quilters? Well, they are all women. This may not be quite true, but Michael James and Jeffrey Gutcheon aside, there are very few men who are quilting today. So, our quiltmaker is a woman, most likely to be about 43 years of age. We had no respondents under 20 years old and only 4% under 25, so it appears that—and this correlates with the reasons women give for quilting—the desire to quilt has a direct relationship to giving something of yourself to the people you love (most likely your family and children), to establishing a household, traditions, and a future, all things most women today do after 25.

This idea is validated by the fact that 77 percent of our quilters are married, only 9 percent divorced, statistically substantially different from the general population which is approximately 69.2 percent married and 20 percent divorced. There were 14 percent who were either single or widowed.

Seventy-two percent of these women have children. The majority have two, but a couple of respondents had six or seven children.

So far, 77 percent married and 72 percent with children. The survey confirmed exactly what I thought: most quilters are housewives who make quilts for their children and families. After all, they are the ones who have the time. They make their Christmas and birthday gifts as well. Probably they have more time than money. I used to be in that situation myself, so I could understand it.

But lo and behold when all the figures were in, the “housewives” theory fell by the wayside. Only 22 percent turned out to be solely housewives and 78 percent were either professionals, working, or students. In fact, there were more women working in professions, 32 percent, than housewives. Needless to say, with this information I lost my standard excuse for not getting my latest quilt completed.

The profession that comprised the majority of women, with 14 percent, was teaching. Next came nursing. Both are occupations that require giving of oneself to others—occupations that suffer the phenomenon that has come to be known as burnout. The survey doesn't account for the role quilting plays in relation to the demands of these professions, but there is strong indication that women quilt

for relaxation and in this sense may be a response to the pressures on teachers and nurses.

Other occupations represented included doctors, lawyers, scientists, musicians, artists, bureaucrats, investors, writers, and even a masseuse and a bartender.

How did we get started quilting? Most of us, 42 percent, took classes and learned to quilt, but almost as many, 37 percent, taught themselves. Although there are some, 8 percent, who have been quilting for 30 years or more, most of us began to quilt at age 31 and have been quilting for 7 years or less. As for learning to quilt at mother's or grandmother's knee, only 19 percent of us learned to quilt from a relative or friend. There is a reason for that. Twenty-nine percent of us have no relatives who quilt, and although 44 percent of our grandmothers quilted, only about 29 percent of our mothers quilted.

Why weren't these skills passed on as they had been from previous generations? In my work I found that these skills were identified with being unable to afford store-bought bed covers and clothing. Many of us were raised by a generation of mothers who hoped to educate their daughters so that they would have husbands and incomes that would free them from the need to sew. In a sense they were successful, because no one mentioned that they sewed or quilted to save money. Yet our mothers were unaware of an even more basic need that sewing, quilting and handwork fulfill.

The view that comes down to us is that quilting has traditionally been a social experience. The image of the quilting bee is not so meaningful for those of us who quilt today, but it is still the image that non-quilters have. Recently a special reporter for a television news program called my store and wanted to do a feature on quilting. She asked if I thought there has been a renewed interest in quilting. I responded with the membership of our local guild and the number of quilt shops in this area. She wanted to come to the store and film, and her question was, "When can we come and find a quilting bee in progress?" That isn't to say we don't quilt in groups, because we do make group quilts for raffles and gifts, but 66 percent of today's quilters quilt alone most of the time. As it turns out, many, 64 percent, belong to groups and have friends who quilt, but most often when these groups meet it is more for advice, ideas and encouragement and the quilting that takes place is secondary.

Most quilters prefer to quilt in the evening watching television. Some listen to music or talk with their families. Although most of us quilt in irregular spurts, we find a dogged 23 percent who quilt every day.

Once you get hooked, it tends to become part of your life. As one woman said, "I am so anxious to devote more time to creative things that I have decided to quit work in June. I started to study music two years ago and I want to be able to quilt and sing full time." Only six percent of those who quilt said they rarely quilted, and only three percent said that it was of little importance in their lives.

Now, with a faster pace of life, and our careers and jobs outside the home, we may not have the time our grandmothers had to quilt and in California we don't have those long, cold winters that are so conducive to quilting. Nevertheless, we are certainly productive. The average total number of quilts made by each respondent was nine, and that's not all. We made an average of 24 other projects ranging from pillows to wall hangings, using every conceivable quilting technique including hand-piecing, machine piecing, hand and machine applique, embroidery, and hand and machine quilting. We employ a combination of techniques that reflect the time pressure we are under and our desire for beautiful quilts: piecing by machine for speed but not compromising the integrity of the quilt in favor of time, in that most quilts are still hand-quilted. Interestingly, although more women machine piece their quilts, more prefer hand-piecing, 36 percent versus 30 percent, and the technique that women like doing most is hand-quilting.

As noted earlier, a number of our respondents were well known or professional quilters. Those who earned any money quilting, teaching or writing only comprised about 28 percent. I think this percentage in the general population of quilters may be high because of the survey gathered in Houston where there was a high percentage of professional quilters. The majority of today's quilters do not quilt for money. However, there is a definite interest in that aspect. One respondent wrote, "I plan to quit teaching in a year or two and want to expand my quilting. I hope to earn a small income in this area." There were a number of respondents who expressed their desire to earn a living with their craft. For those who did earn money, it was about equally divided between quilting and teaching with one percent more teachers. Some six percent earned money writing about quilting, but all in all, I wouldn't recommend that anyone up and quit her job yet. The average amount of money earned by those who quilt, teach or write was \$2,197.00 in their best year. Only two respondents earned \$10,000 or more with the top figure being \$12,000.

But in the end, why do women quilt? Why do we, in this day and age when time is money and is at such a premium, when we as women are not only housewives and mothers, but career women as well, feel such

a need to tediously cut apart and put back together little scraps of fabric into intricate, complicated patterns and then hold it together with tiny, equally intricate stitches?

The reasons people give are as rich, varied, and colorful as our quilt patterns. For example, one woman began quilting after a major weight loss with the leftovers cut out from her seams.

There were a myriad reasons given, but over and over themes repeat themselves. By far the most popular reason was relaxation. This is particularly interesting to me because whenever we have a quilt, with an obvious amount of work, hanging in the store, women who don't quilt say "How could anyone have such patience!" What they don't know is that for many women quilting is time to relax and forget their worries. Woman after woman mentioned the therapeutic and meditative aspect of quilting. They said it was their mantra. They said it was their mandala. They talked about having personal time, time to withdraw from the busy world, time to think.

Another theme was quilting as a means of creative expression. Over half of the women talked about it as their reason for quilting, described it as a tantalizing, achievable goal, a creative venture. One woman wrote, "I have written a master's thesis and I'm considered a competent secretary, but my quilting seems to me to be my most significant talent."

Many said they quilt as an expression of love or friendship. At the Oakland Museum Show in 1981 we saw quilts as markers in lives events. So we, too, use quilts as gifts, journals and records of marriages, births and deaths. One woman said, "My interest in quilting began with a desire to make a quilt commemorating my wedding and heritage."

Another: "I see quilts as a permanent statement that may survive me. That was the reason for my daughter's quilt, to say, I welcome you to the world." or "I have made quilts for both my sons. My youngest is six weeks and the first thing I did was design a quilt for him so he would always know how much we love him."

One of the most touching quilts at the Oakland Museum Show was the quilt made for Eli Lilly by his relatives during his final illness. Today we still make quilts as an act of mourning. In the film, "Quilts in Women's Lives," Radka Donnell was commissioned to make a quilt from the clothes of a young girl who had died. One of the respondents to our survey enclosed a slide of a quilt she made entitled "White Light." She said, "This was made just after my youngest brother was killed in a plane crash, a very sad event in my life, and this quilt

reflects my feelings. Also, making this quilt gave me much solace at the time.”

Other themes include the balance to quiltmaking, the excitement of choosing fabrics and colors, the calm, soothing part of quilting and the satisfaction as the design emerges. One senior citizen said the decision making keeps her mind active. Then there is the challenge and the sense of accomplishment; the social aspects, friends, community and support,—so many reasons.

There are new reasons too, for quilting. Reasons our grandmothers didn't have. Many respondents, even though our average age is 43, said they saw quilting as a part of the women's movement, a feminist art form.

The most eloquent responses expressed the tie to the past, continuity of life and sense of history.

“I like the permanence of a quilt. When you work as a secretary, nothing you do has lasting value.”

“Quiltmaking ties me to my beloved grandmother. I have slept under the quilt she made for me since I was sixteen.”

“Quilts are an expression of the ways women have endured by creating something from nothing, making the practical beautiful, making the necessary enjoyable.”

“For me quilting is a way of tying the generations together.”

“I am continuing a rich heritage.”

“When I am through this will give me four quilts—one for each of my children. It's no comparison to real quilters, but they will express love and help to form the bridge between generations. Family possession serve to bring a continuity to life.”

Many said the overwhelming desire to quilt and their satisfaction was something they couldn't explain. I think there is something more. A number of respondents touch on it. One mentioned the “bond between women and the woven fiber,” another suggests that quilting is “a rich, magic craft akin to making tools and boats.” I would like to give an anthropologic view.

The evolution of the human species is distinguished by three crucial events that took place over two million years ago. The first was when the ancestor of humankind put her feet on the ground and walked in an upright position. This then left her hands free, free to develop an opposing thumb that eventually not only enabled humans to make tools but to develop an extraordinary control and ability to manipulate the material world. Thirdly, these factors combined with the development of a human brain capable of abstract thought and the

ability to dream, imagine, and envision a future.

These changes that occurred over two million years ago are the features that differentiated us from other animals. They have evolved through all this time. These uniquely human traits have formed in us a deep love and need to create with our minds and hands. We see evidence of this deep need in every culture, in an American Indian weaving a basket, the bold and intricate body painting from an African tribe, a virtuoso violinist, a clay pot from a Mexican woman's hands, and a quilt from a contemporary American quilter.

