

Uncoverings 1997

Volume 18 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Virginia Gunn



Quilt Ownership and Sentimental Attachments: The Structure of Memory

Catherine A. Cerny

This paper examined owners' sentiments toward their quilts as expressed through memories and sensibilities. The questionnaire reflected the researcher's position that such designations of significance when applied to family quilts acknowledged an owner's understanding of American quilts and preference for a favorite quilt. Evidence suggested that these sentiments, shaped by knowledge of women's presence in family, contributed to owners' experiences of heritage and affiliation. Such familial connectedness was established, in large part, through recognition of a quilt's physical form. Specific features, such as workmanship and fabric, stood out as especially salient in representing women's creativity and generation and thereby better delineated a connection with the past.

Today, only a small percentage of quilts made over the last two hundred years have survived. Many of these quilts are valued as family heirlooms. An owner's knowledge about the quiltmaker and the circumstances of the quilt's making, however, may be fragmentary. Even when the quiltmaker's name is known, detailed written accounts of the woman's life and family experiences may never have been recorded, let alone handed down through the generations of a quilt's ownership. Often an owner's knowledge has survived only as personal remembrances passed on as brief anecdotes from generation to generation. While the memories may no longer be accurate recollections of past events or personalities, they embody sentiments that have become important to successive generations of owners. This paper examines quilt owners' sentiments toward family quilts.¹ Evidence suggests that these sentiments, shaped

by knowledge of women's presence in family, contribute to the experience of heritage and affiliation. Such familial connectedness is established, in large part, through recognition of a quilt's physicality. The concept of physicality gives priority to the perception of an object as a tangible, concrete form, both anticipating and underscoring its significance in articulating feelings and desires for individuals.² In the case of quilts, it appears that characteristic physical features stand out as especially salient in representing women's creativity and generation.

Contemporary research has drawn upon extant textiles to illustrate the customary practices and values of women's daily life.³ Quilts, like other fiber arts, offer insight into women's domestic worlds and the expression of femininity.⁴ As seen with recent state-wide documentation projects, quilts have prompted historians to explore quiltmakers' lives and the social experiences that circumscribed quilting endeavors.⁵ Often, oral histories highlight a dimension of women's experience sustained through family and community affiliations.⁶ We see women, albeit within the routine, mundane tasks of daily life, taking initiative in their quilting to nurture familial and community alliances and achieve recognition.⁷ The images of empowered women evoked by historic quilts lay the foundation for a more recent negotiation of feminine values among late twentieth-century quiltmakers.

Modern quilt culture is both grounded by the ideological foundations of these traditions and stimulated by the infusion of new ideas, techniques, meanings, and opportunities of a dynamic society. A dialogue with the past is important to contemporary expression. Today, vocabularies of tradition and innovation are simultaneous; an exhibition of historic quilts occurs in tandem with the display of recently completed quilted garments, and handpiecing and quilting seen in a double-wedding ring quilt is taught along with the use of hand-dyed fabrics in a machine-pieced and quilted study in color gradations. Such juxtapositions of tradition and innovation demonstrate an on-going negotiation between the values evoked through past practices and the circumstances of contemporary life. In studies of late twentieth-century quilt guilds, Clover Williams demonstrated that quilters could clearly relate the concept of tradition to contemporary quilting.⁸ My own research suggested that knowledge of quilt traditions enabled quiltmakers

to achieve expression that elaborates on familial roles and community identities.⁹ Kristin Langellier found that quilting empowered a feminine identity that “refashions, but does not reject, dominant meanings for femininity” in light of “the changing roles of women in society and the changing culture of quilting.”¹⁰

Over the last ten years, statewide documentation projects have brought the people who do not make quilts into discussions of the quilt’s significance. The extra attention given to a family quilt by quilt experts during the documentation process may cause the quilt owner to reconsider a quilt’s significance beyond its presence as an artifact of family history. As with quilting, collecting quilts juxtaposes the past knowledge with contemporary circumstance. On the one hand, meaning is shaped by a persistent folklore that draws upon the circumstances of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century quiltmakers. The early literature of quilting interplays themes of economic hardships, women’s commitment to family, and quilting as an emotional and creative outlet. For example, Florence Peto in the introduction to her work on historic quilts related:

quilts were born of urgent necessity, to fulfill a basic need . . . added to the utilitarian purpose of the quilt was the desperate need women felt to keep their hands busy during so called leisure hours, for feminine minds and hearts were occupied with stern and sorrowful things. . . . Still, their patchwork contrived to be gay.¹¹

On the other hand, meaning is shaped by the owner’s perspective on life. An owner’s priorities may cause him/her to emphasize those qualities about the quiltmaker which the owner most values in him/herself. For example, through her own struggles as wife and mother, a woman may empathize with the assumed experiences of an ancestor. Limited knowledge of the quiltmaker juxtaposed to romanticized views of the past, its hardships, and women’s part in addressing and overcoming the hardships, may contribute to an overstated view of the woman’s fortitude. While contemporary quilt research attempts to overcome these romanticized views, the meanings ascribed to a quilt by its owner remain powerful cultural images of femininity.¹²

One may more fully understand the implications of this meaning if one acknowledges the importance of materialism in contem-

porary postmodern culture. In talking about late twentieth-century society, anthropologist Daniel Miller noted that consumption translates the manufactured object from an alienable to an inalienable condition.¹³ Consumption lends familiarity to the mass-manufactured object as it is transformed from a symbol of estrangement to one of congruity. For the consumer, meanings associated with the manufactured object no longer derive from its production, as prevalent before industrialization, but through the object's use and its intimate association with particular individual(s) or social group(s) or with a relationship between individual and social group.¹⁴ Quilts represent a particular form of consumption, first, through their fabrication from mass-manufactured fabrics and, second, as handmade alternatives to the mass-manufactured bedcovers. A quilt's significance evolves under the quiltmaker's direction through the process of quilting, as it is passed down through generations of a family, and with use by the present owner.

In expanding his argument, Miller reasoned that material objects, by virtue of their concrete nature, can never possess the entirely arbitrary and abstract capability of language. Because their physicality acts as a bridge between the mental and physical worlds and between consciousness and the unconscious, consumer objects today provide the principal means for articulating feelings and desires.¹⁵ The physical character of quilts appears to play an integral part in the formulation of associated meanings. Popular twentieth-century quilt literature alludes to a relationship between the perception of quilts and women's life history. Through an elaborate play of tropes, references to the hands and hearts, for example, characterize a woman's perspective in telling about her story. References to the quilt's warmth locate her affections in personal relationships and social connectedness.¹⁶ In these examples tropes, or figures of speech, refer to "the use of a word or expression in a different sense from that which properly belongs to it for giving life and emphasis to an idea."¹⁷ In the transposition of words or expressions, the referential value of language yields a more profound understanding of expression. The role of unconscious knowledge in shaping human emotions becomes more apparent. The presence of tropes within a text can potentially substantiate the nature of individual and/or collective sentiments in qualifying the significance of material objects. Thus, I follow-up on initial findings about

the family quilts by acknowledging the presence of trope and exploring the conjunction of the owners' cognizance of the quilt's physicality and their distinctive memories and thoughts.

Methods

Interviews from participants in the Rhode Island Quilt Documentation Project suggested that owners' knowledge about the histories of their quilts was limited and related to themes of family, community, and nation.¹⁸ Particular recollections about the quiltmaker or circumstance of quilting, however, raised questions about the nature of owners' sentiments. I reviewed responses to interviews taken during the Rhode Island Quilt Documentation Project and developed questions to address the significance of quilt ownership and the importance of extant family quilts in identifying with past generations. The questionnaire included both structured and open-ended questions. Structured questions considered the sex, age, and marital status of quilt owners, ethnic and New England ancestry, and number and sources of quilts owned by the family (including respondent and his/her spouse). Open-ended questions asked owners to verbalize their thoughts about the special nature of quilts (i.e., American quilts, family quilts, favorite quilt) and to reminisce about a favorite quilt (i.e., exploring the design, making, and use of quilt, memories of the quiltmaker and past owners, and family stories and traditions about the quilt). In addition, owners were asked to trace an ownership "genealogy" of their favorite quilt. Finally, owners were asked to elaborate on their own experiences as quiltmakers and about others in the family who were quiltmakers. I mailed two hundred and seventy-seven questionnaires to individuals who brought family quilts for documentation during the Rhode Island Quilt Documentation Project. I sent a second questionnaire packet to those who did not respond within six months. I received a total of 143 questionnaires, a return rate of 51.6%, from June 1995 to August 1996.

This paper focuses on owners' responses about the special nature of quilts (specified as American, family, and favorite) and genealogies of favorite quilts. I examined the content of responses to each open-ended question for common and unique patterns in the

quilt owner's thinking. Overall, the responses to the open-ended questions were brief, usually one to three lines in length, once transcribed. Owners responded more frequently to initial questions (i.e., What is special about ?) and with declining frequency to later questions. Few owners responded to all questions. The overlap of questions as they addressed the special nature of quilts and as they focused on an owner's favorite quilt were intended to explore the limits of an owner's knowledge of and feelings toward favorite quilts. Repetition of responses and/or absence of comments to questions was anticipated and suggested that conscious knowledge had been tapped. Either owners had no further information to provide in response to the question or they lacked the motivation to locate the information or elaborate about the quilt's history.

Most memories were abbreviated and concise. When the quilt-maker was as removed from the owner as a grandmother or great grandmother, the owner had little or no direct contact with the woman. In some cases, the owners were children when they knew the quiltmakers. The owners who were able to generate memories might have relied on anecdotes or portrayals passed down by relatives through word-of-mouth over one or more generation(s). In addition, the characterization of a quiltmaker or event never known or experienced was more likely to be an approximation of the reality. Such inaccuracies were not a concern. Rather, I wanted to trace owners' subjective attitudes, irrespective of a factual basis in personal experience.

Quilt Owners, Ownership, and Genealogy

Information on owner demographics, family ancestry, and quilt ownership is summarized in tables 1, 2, and 3. The majority of owners were married (57 percent of the respondents) women (88 percent), between fifty-six and seventy-five years old (59 percent), born in Rhode Island (62 percent), and having English, Irish, Scottish, and/or Welsh heritage (78 percent). Respondents owned from one to ten quilts (77 percent). Most of the family quilts were from the respondent's side of the family, either inherited (62 percent of respondents) or given (36 percent).¹⁹ The remainder were made by

the respondent (45 percent), found (21 percent), or purchased (19 percent). About one-quarter of the inherited quilts came from the spouse's family. With women the principal individuals who responded first to the documentation project and then to the questionnaire, they may be seen as assuming the role of caretaker for a quilt received from the husband's family.

Using the ownership history and checking this information against responses to other questions, I reconstructed how the quilt had been acquired by families over the generations. The most prevalent pattern was for a quilt to be passed down from one female relative to another. Most owners received the favorite quilt from a mother (forty-four respondents), aunt (sixteen), grandmother (fourteen), great aunt (five), or great aunt/grandmother (one). In turn, this ancestor received the quilt from her mother (twenty-eight), grandmother (nine), aunt (six), or great grandmother (four). On occasion a male relative, godparent, or family friend might be included in the sequence. Only eight respondents received the quilt directly from a father or stepfather, and five received the quilt from another male relative. Only four respondents indicated any prior male ownership of the quilt beyond the present owner's receipt of quilt. In a few instances, owners indicated the generation through reference to family, friends, and cousin; gender could not be defined.

The original quiltmaker, depending on the quilt's age, was usually a mother (ten respondents), aunt (six), grandmother (twenty-five), great aunt (seven), great grandmother (sixteen), great great-grandmother (six), or one of these (i.e., respondent did not know specifically - nine). In a few instances, quilts were found in a family home upon the death of a relative, were purchased or won as part of a raffle, or were gifts from a friend or groups of friends. Once a quilt became part of the family's quilt collection, however, it appeared that the quilt stayed within the family, usually inherited/received as a gift by a female. Distinctions between maternal and paternal relatives could not be made with consistency.

According to the questionnaire responses, current owners planned to give the favorite quilt to their children (fifty-five respondents). Forty of the owners planned to give the quilt to a female relative (thirty-three to a daughter, six to a granddaughter, one to a niece) and fourteen to a male relative (son, stepson, adopted son,

brother, nephew, grandson). They viewed the person receiving the quilt as someone who had demonstrated an interest in the quilt, would take appropriate care of it, and was not an "obsessive cleaner." This commitment to preserving quilts might be shown by a person's collecting antiques, interest in family heirlooms/history, and preoccupation with other needlecrafts. Nine respondents were considering donation to a museum, and two were interested in selling the quilt. Forty-one owners did not respond to the question. It appeared that many families continued to value the quilt as a marker of family history by keeping the quilt within the family.

The above evidence from the "quilt genealogies" suggests a tendency for family quilts to be passed on from one female to another within either the immediate or extended family. Deviations did occur with some frequency and might be due to a woman remaining single or dying without children. A close relative would then receive the quilt. Quilts were made for sons or other male relatives. One owner noted that the quilt was inherited through the male line of the family. A closer examination of owners' feelings toward quilts, however, pointed out the centrality of women in understanding owners' sentiments.

Significance to Owners

I employed semiotic theory to distinguish the physical nature of the quilt from its subjective associations. The initial content analysis identified terminology used to characterize the physical form and to conceptualize recollections of and/or sensibilities toward quilts. Subsequent groupings of the responses, through clustering of related terms, facilitated the identification of overriding themes mediating owner's perceptions.

Semiotic theory suggests that objects can be interpreted like the words of spoken or written language. Both words and quilts function as signs. A sign is the union of a concrete object (i.e., sound, physical form) and an abstract idea (i.e., meaning, sentiment). This union is considered arbitrary; nothing about the nature of the signifier (concrete object) motivates the signified (abstract idea).²⁰ Miller, however, observed that objects are distinctive from language. In this case, the primacy of an object's physicality may contribute

to constituting a person's attitudes toward that object. The object and its features activate feelings and emotions by visually bridging conscious and unconscious dimensions of understanding.²¹ Unlike language, objects are more likely to possess iconic features. Correspondingly, the resemblance between object form and idea contributes to a perceiver's understanding of its significance. On the one hand, the object's creator may intentionally shape the object's physicality to direct expression and establish a bond with the eventual user. On the other hand, the user may call upon the resemblance to attribute significance.

The importance of iconic features in the perception of meanings associated with quilts is suggested by the prevalence of certain metaphors in the popular discourse. That a quilt is comprised of fabric scraps pieced into an identifiable pattern and quilted together to form a warm bedcover finds a parallel in a woman's efforts to locate the people in her life and demonstrates a connectedness to family and community. The metaphor that relates the act of making a quilt to a woman's telling her story has been expanded in feminist literature with a parallel drawn between quiltmaking and writing.²² The extent to which a quilt owner is cognizant of this sentiment toward quilts can be explored more fully.

By identifying similarities between dissimilar phenomena, metaphor describes the specific character or attribute of one phenomenon through reference to that of the second. Metaphors are seen as contributing to a person's structuring of personal experience. Hayden White, historian, stated:

The important point is that in metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche alike language provides us with models of the *direction* that thought itself might take in its effort to provide meaning to areas of experience not already regarded as being cognitively secured by either common sense, tradition, or science.²³

What is interesting in this analysis of owners' reactions to the special nature of quilts is not only the presence or absence of tropes in their statements about American quilts, but the attention owners extended to particular features of quilts and attributes of quiltmaking when characterizing the special nature of family and favorite quilts. By addressing the physicality of the quilt from the perspective of personal sentiments, I am proposing that one can discern the con-

junction between literal and figurative meanings and gain perspective on why quilts have become such a popular symbol of American life.

American Quilts

An owner's use of metaphor in characterizing the special nature of quilts appears to be shaped by the degree of immediacy of the quilt to personal experience. The concept of "American quilts" can be understood in the abstract and implicates the quilt owner's consideration of all the American quilts s/he has viewed, an identification of commonalties that bind these quilts together as a group, and an integration of prevalent social attitudes about the character of American quilting with personal experience. In this instance, owners' feelings toward American quilts may reflect the influence of a collective conscience, as opposed to direct observation.

The presence of metaphors in formulating owners' sentiments towards quilts was only evidenced in their comments about the special nature of American quilts. While few owners explicitly incorporated tropic references in their comments, others implied these understandings as they recorded their sentiments. Comments could be ordered according to three themes: personhood, American tradition, and family heritage. Uniting these themes were references to women, as regards to individual empowerment, social values, and familial generation. Elements of one or more of these themes might be apparent in any owner's statement.

First, owners associated American quilts with notion of personhood, using statements such as, "Each one has its very own personality." Personality points to a person's uniqueness or individuality. Correspondingly, cognizance on individuality seems informed by the object's physical integrity. In quilting the quiltmaker shapes the physical form. This correspondence between the distinctive physical features of a quilt and individuality of the quiltmaker could be observed in the responses. Owners appreciated American quilts, "their beauty, practicality, imagination and the skill of the quilters combining the 3" and "the unique designs and personalization by chosen fabrics." Whether explicitly stated or implied, the owner recognized that the quiltmaker had made decisions concerning the artistic quality of the quilt and realized her goals through application of skill and workmanship.

More prevalent among the owners' responses was an association of American quilts with cultural legacy. Quilts were equated as "our past," "a tradition," or "heritage." Quilts also represented an appreciation of American "history." One owner noted:

The early quilts are my favorites, reflecting as they usually do, the history of a new country just beginning to grow. Those of more modern design, also imaginative and certainly more colorful will no doubt earn their place in history."

In this study, however, quilt owners looked upon American quilts as yielding knowledge about women's place in American history. Although mainly confined to the domestic setting, they were believed to be no less telling about the times. One owner elaborated on this point, using a telling metaphor:

They are living museums—of the fabrics of households through a century or more—best dresses, curtains, tablecloths, bits of material from the collections of friends. They reveal much about the pride and problems of 19th century America. They were beautiful and useful, traits which should qualify them as art.

At the same time, owners alluded to the socio-economic circumstances that challenged lives of women and their families. Quilts attested to women's resolution and creativity in addressing economic hardships. The use of enterprise was seen in the use of fabric scraps from left-over yardage and worn garments. One respondent noted, for example, "They were made from clothing scraps or sewing remnants. Frugality however did not preempt beauty. The women, even if not formally educated, were really talented and creative" (see figure 1). Likewise owners recognized ancestors speaking out against social inequities. One owner acknowledged the use of quilts as expressions of political preference:

I'm fascinated by the names of the patchwork blocks. For instance, the pattern called Ducks Foot in the Mud on Long Island was known as Hand of Friendship in Philadelphia and Bears Paw everywhere else. Also, women, who were not allowed to vote gave political names to various blocks, i.e., Clay's Choice, Lincoln's Platform, Little Giant, Old Tippicanoe, etc.

Figure 1. The cotton, handquilted Basket quilt was made for the owner in 1953 by her grandmother. The quilt has been documented by the Rhode Island Quilt Documentation Project (#854). Photograph by Linda Welters.

From these comments, one can see how owners believed that quilts provided a way for women to relate to the challenges of modern society through recognition of past struggles and victories. Quilts promoted owners' distinctive understanding of women's place in history, through empathy with past generations.

Finally, owners associated American quilts with the individuals

and events that constituted family ancestry. Owners noted that quilts “tell a story” and they sum up “family history and tradition.” Yet, as seen above, some owners examined the circumstance of this meaning more closely. Comments about American quilts lent insight into situations of family life. An owner elaborated:

Patterns represented homes that were in their past, as they had to travel to new places to find work, or safety when persecuted. Fabrics recalled family members who had died, children would question usually at bedtime, “Tell about Uncle Whoever, and when he wore this?” or “Tell about Aunt Whoever and the time you all went Where-ever.”

By preserving for subsequent generations memories of events, kinship, and participants, quilts highlighted the centrality of women in sustaining family heritage and values.

Cutting across each of the above parameters, owners expressed a connectedness with people, especially the quiltmaker, women, and family. Equated as tradition, quilts provided the opportunity for owners to consider the present in light of affinities with the past. These memories revealed “a very real connection with our past.” One owner’s empathy with the humanity of the quiltmaker was implied through comments on the woman’s quilting: “They invoke in me a feeling of stability, patience and making do with materials in hand—not wasting anything. Also the need for creativity and beauty in our lives.” A similar feeling might be embodied through possession of the quilt: “I don’t know much about quilts. I inherited mine from my grandmother (paternal) and so it’s very precious to me. It was made by her relatives in the Civil War days, with pieces of their fabric.” The emotion itself might be difficult to bring to full consciousness and verbalize.

An owner’s cognizance of fabrics, block patterns and names, or the evaluation of workmanship and beauty suggests that the physical elements of the quilt may function as mimetic devices. They aid owners in remembering a connection with the quiltmaker or past owner. That this physicality is readily experienced manifests the immediacy of the relationship. The majority of owners acknowledged the physicality of the quilt when characterizing the special nature of American quilts. While a few respondents referred to quilts in general terms (i.e., “historic quilts,” “old quilts”), most pointed to specific components (i.e., fabrics, patterns, design elements, and

workmanship) either to locate essential artistic features or lend focus to their sentiments. Fabric was cited in general terms as "materials," "fabric," "textiles," or "prints." Owners' qualification of fabric, however, lent more insight into the nature of their sentiments, including references to "left-over materials," "scraps," "sewing remnants," "used pieces of material," "pieces of clothing," and "fabrics from households." Owners experienced American quilts both visually and tactually. A number of owners referred to the designs, patterns, and colors of quilts in general; one elaborated on the "names of the patchwork blocks." Workmanship was seen as handcrafted (i.e., "made by hand," "handstitching," "handmade"). A few owners mentioned their warmth, albeit as function (i.e., "necessary for winter warmth") or as experienced (i.e., "warmth without weight").

Family Quilts

In contrast to American quilts, an owner's feelings toward the family and favorite quilts might be traced to personal memories or anecdotes shared by the family. The owner could pinpoint the physical nature of the quilt and highlight certain salient features. The concept of "family quilt" assumed a more tangible understanding of quilts and called upon the owner to conceptualize knowledge of all quilts owned by his/her family, integrate histories shared within the family, and typify the essence of the collection. The concept of "favorite quilt" assumed that the quilt was present as the owner considered the features and history of the quilt as it might underlie his/her relationship to the quiltmaker/previous owners. These conceptualizations of quilts did not appear to function independently of each other but were intertwined. Meanings about family and favorite quilts were framed by values exemplified through a romanticization of American quilts. Feelings of connectedness across generations, especially between the quiltmaker and the present owner, were apparent in comments about family and favorite quilts.

For the most part, owners indicated affection for family quilts. By simply noting an ancestor's making or use of the quilt, owners identified a relationship with women that extended beyond appreciation of their artistic or technical skills. A number of respondents commented: "My grandmother made it," or "They were made by my mother." One owner, who qualified her quilts as family quilts,

stated, "I just enjoy making them." In so doing, she positioned herself as part of the tradition. While owning a limited number of family quilts might limit the empathy felt across generations, owning the quilts made by several women imparted more intensity to feelings of familial connectedness. Such memories might be brief, "knowing the generations thru which they have passed," or elaborate, "As I look at these quilts on a daily basis it evokes wonderful memories of very special ladies in my life, my grandmother, her sisters, my great aunts, and thru pictures and stories my great grandmother, who died when I was 3 years old." Family quilts, also, designate continuity; one quilt owner noted, "They tell me that someone in the past made them for me to use in my future and that back then amazingly I was thought about and cared about because I belonged to them" (figure 2).

Respondents referred to quilts in general terms (above) or responded to specific physical features connected to the family, such as "fabrics recall garments worn by family in years gone by." Other characterizations of fabric suggested how the fabrics were obtained (e.g., "different materials . . . clothing I had," "fabrics . . . came from the family's life," and "scrap pcs. . . from the textile mill my great grandfather worked in"). They also focused on how they might have been used (e.g., "used pieces of materials of dresses made for us as children," "material from feed sacks," and "old clothing of velvet, satin, silk fabric") and who used the fabrics (e.g., "favorite materials/my children's cast-off clothes" and "dress material . . . my grandmother wore"). In many cases, owners were not able to elaborate about any specific circumstance. Nonetheless, the presence of fabrics in quilts had significant connotations to sentiments of family and kinship.

How an owner drew upon the physicality of the quilt suggested the diverse ways in which individuals experienced affection for their families. References to fabrics used in quilting located an owner's sentiments in the routine activities of family life: "Special because my Aunt made them. I remember her putting the pieces together when I was 8 years old and some of the material was from dresses my Mom made for me." Although fabrics and signatures became vehicles for involving others both literally and figuratively in a woman's quilting, it was her labor and skill that transformed the cloth into a bedcover. References to workmanship, design decisions, or time spent in making the quilt underscored the

accomplishment of quiltmakers: "The delicately fine workmanship, realizing quilts were made by the hands of some of my family, and how many hours it took them to do it." Similar appreciation of the quilt in terms of "fancy embroidery" and "some hand painted designs" extended recognition to the quiltmaker.

Names and dates incorporated on a quilt's surface confirmed the physical existence of an extended family at some point in the past and implied heritage: "The quilt that came to me from my grandmother was made for her when she was married by her relatives—names are on the quilt—so they are also my relatives."

In Rhode Island, the connection of family with American history has been important. During documentation interviews of the statewide project, many owners could trace their ancestry to Colonial times.²⁴ In their responses to this questionnaire, some owners related the concept of state history to the significance of family quilts: "They reflect early Rhode Island history when we were an agricultural state. Our people depended on the land and many of the designs reflected this." Quilts exemplified the extent that the family was bound to the community. One owner reflected on this heritage: "It has historic value and our family was involved in it from the beginning and it is dated." Quilts did more than verify family heritage, however; they embodied history and the family's connection to state and nation.

When knowledge of a quilt's physicality is integrated with the memories commonly associated with the form and features, meanings are magnified in their potential to represent the episodic sequence of a person's life and relationships. Each quilt represents an episode; the collection becomes the life history. This history is not literal but plays upon the user's empathy for family life. Speaking metaphorically, one owner commented, "They taught me, unconsciously, about details of daily life that I could not find in photograph albums or even in the anecdotes of family life that were more formally transmitted."

Favorite Quilts

There were strong similarities between different owners' responses to family and favorite quilts, and there were some important distinctions. When discussing favorite quilts, most owners tended to be more detailed in their comments; connections between

Figure 2. The cotton, handquilted Dresden Plate quilt was one of several quilts made between 1931 and 1932 by the owner's great grandmother and grandmother for children in the family. The great grandmother came from Canada and stayed with the family during her daughter's difficult pregnancy. One of these children, the owner's mother and respondent to this questionnaire, kept the quilt until 1991 when she gave it to her daughter. The quilt has been documented by the Rhode Island Quilt Documentation Project (#3). Photograph by Linda Welters.

the quilt's physicality and relevance to owner were more clearly stated. Overall, meanings associated with American and family quilts lend perspective to interpretation of owners' sentiments toward favorite quilts. For example:

My great-grandmother's quilt was passed on to me as a get-well gift after surgery—given to me by my mother. It was made by her grandmother who lived with my mother's family. It is one of a pair—my aunt has the other.

By specifying the involvement of several women, the owner not only bound together four generations of women but identified members of the extended family. Perhaps the gift of the quilt at this time was meant to extend the same magical power that sustained its existence over the generations.

Owners often attributed the special nature of their favorite quilts to their link with an ancestor (e.g., "the fact that it was made by my husband's great grandmother") or a special event in the ancestor's or recipient's life (e.g., "I have a crib quilt that my grandmother made when I was born. Though small this quilt was made by a very special lady who was a big part of my daily life for my first 10 to 12 years"). Quilts bridged generations. They helped define the continuity of family heritage and celebrated the renewal of family heritage when presented at births and weddings. While one quilt can highlight a woman's action to mark family continuity, quilts as a whole also underscored the timelessness of women's experience.

Connectedness with family members emerged as a persistent theme. When characterizing the special nature of their favorite quilts, the owners generally focused on specific features. As with comments on family quilts, fabrics and their source as scraps, especially those from children's garments, were a prevailing theme. Similarly, owners noted the presence of dates, initials, or names. They referred to the quilting process through reference to the details, including embroidery, stitching, pattern names, and pieced squares. Evidence of initials on the quilt was placed in context of quiltmaker and present owner: "It was made by grandmother and aunts in 1930's. It is special because I (B.C.L.) contributed one hand-made square as a young school girl." Description of an owner's involvement in the quilting alluded to closeness among family members: "It is one of three I made myself with the help of my 4-

yr. old daughter, who drew pictures for it. It was made for another daughter, as a birth present." This closeness could extend beyond the family line and include the owner's spouse: "This quilt was made for my husband as a child by his Grandmother using some of his shirts and his Grandfather's shirts. She was deceased when we married and I feel a 'kinship' to her due to this quilt as I enjoy quilting myself."

The attention to the quiltmaker was evidenced in comments on favorite quilts. As with American and family quilts, this value might be reflected in an appreciation of a quilt's artistry or an appraisal of its workmanship. Owners noted: "How beautiful the colors go together and how perfect the hand sewn stitches are," and "fine sewing skill—such small stitches and attention to detail/neatness in construction." At the same time, owners used the favorite quilt as an opportunity to address other qualities of the quiltmaker. One owner described the woman:

my grandmother tended to value other skills—writing skills, education, etc. over any domestic competence, and I was happily surprised to discover that she had learned the discipline of quilt making. Since she made this quilt before her first marriage to a man killed in the Civil War, I believe that the quilt has a particular poignancy for me—of a somewhat romantic dream that was never fulfilled.

The genealogies of favorite quilts suggested that most of the favorite quilts had been inherited or given within the family. Initially with their making, and later as they were owned by subsequent generations, quilts were inscribed with meaning. Memories highlighted the nature of these meanings. One owner's comments might sum up the feelings others could not verbalize:

It was made purposely for me! It is here now with me to look and realize the time and effort that was taken to create this quilt to be a way to leave me an inheritance love and pride in belonging to a family. It's a comfort for me and will be for my family of the future.

Conclusions

This paper examined owner sentiments toward quilts, conceptualized as American quilts, family quilts, and favorite quilt. Owners' comments about American quilts drew upon persistent themes found in popular quilt literature by employing tropes to equate quilts with personhood, American tradition, and family heritage. When owners considered family and favorite quilts, memories centered on women as quiltmakers, and sensibilities focused on an appreciation of their quilts. Irrespective of the extent of their memories, owners articulated their sentiments for quiltmakers through references to specific features of the quilt. For example, comments about workmanship or artistic choices accentuated the quiltmaker's skill and creativity. Comments about use of fabrics highlighted her part in marking female generation within the family. Just as the fabrics might reveal a connection between a mother and daughter, ownership of the quilt not only positioned the current owner as part of this inheritance pattern but prompted affiliation with specific ancestors.

Furthermore, when viewed in juxtaposition with conventional patterns of inheritance (e.g., property given from father to son), the quilt underscored the role of women in advancing affiliations beyond the immediate family. The association of quilts with female heritage and familial generation became evident in the genealogies of favorite quilts. The authority of women as caretakers within the family was paralleled by the skill afforded them in making and preserving quilts.

Documentation of quilts and quiltmakers allows a unique perspective on women's history. Where complete biographies are unavailable, oral histories can augment personal documents (e.g., letters, diaries, journals) and advance knowledge of the day-to-day routine of women's lives. Interpreting these oral histories in light of owners' sentiments offers perspective on the quilt's social significance. Summary memories and sensibilities can be tapped for their semiotic implications. In this study, tropes qualify American quilts from perspectives of person, history, and generation. At the more immediate level of family and favorite quilts, recognition of the physicality of the quilt, either as a totality or through focus on specific feature(s), lends congruity to personal experience, as owners manifest their connection with the past.

From analysis of owners' comments, I suggest their sentiments reflect an understanding that quilts embody the immutability of women's familial identity and enterprise. As each successive generation of women assumes temporary guardianship of family quilts, owners can employ meanings that conjoin feminine nature and empowerment, albeit in a patriarchal society. Owners' cognizance of the unique physicality of quilts underscores the articulation of these sentiments. Their iconic identity gives form to unconscious knowledge and facilitates expression of ambiguous and/or indeterminate feelings.

Acknowledgments

Publication of this paper has been generously supported by a gift from the Natalie Youngquist Memorial Fund of the Ohio Valley Quilters' Guild.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

	No. of Respondents
Sex	
Female	126
Male	10
Not Indicated	3
Marital Status	
Married	81
Widowed	24
Never Married	12
Separated/Divorced	11
Not Indicated	11
Age	
25 or under	0
26 - 35	2
36 - 45	12
46 - 55	17
56 - 65	25
66 - 75	59
76 - 86	19
over 86	3
Not Indicated	2

Table 2. Family Ancestry

	No. of Respondents
Birth Place	
Rhode Island	88
CT/MA	28
Other US	20
Canada	2
Not Indicated	1
Ethnic Heritage²⁵	
British Isles	111
Western Europe	46
Scandinavian	9
Southern Europe	8
Eastern Europe	6
Native American	2
African American	1

Table 3. Quilt Ownership

	No. of Respondents
Number Owned	
1	22
2 - 5	60
6 - 10	28
11 - 15	13
16 - 25	6
More than 25	6
Not Indicated	4
Source²⁶	
Inherited by respondent	90
Made by respondent	64
Gift to respondent	51
Inherited by spouse	34
Found by respondent	30
Purchased by respondent	26
Gift to spouse	9
Made by spouse	8
Found by spouse	8
Purchased by spouse	2

Notes and References

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 17. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1961), 2542.
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 19. Percentages are quoted in terms of the number of respondents. Since they might own more than one quilt the number will total more than 100 percent.
 20. Winfried Noth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
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 22. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley, eds., *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994); and Elaine Showalter, "Common Threads," in *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, ed. Elaine Showalter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 145-75.
 23. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 73. According to White, metonymy and synecdoche represent secondary tropic forms, which further specify either difference or similarity in the phenomena originally identified in metaphorical terms. Metonymy reduces the whole into the parts which

comprise it. The emphasis placed on the parts in attributing meanings about the whole allows the abstract to be experienced as tangible reality. Synecdoche represents the whole as a totality that is qualitatively identical with the parts that appear to make it up. In this case, the particular functions as a microcosm of a macrocosmic totality; the particulars are elevated into universals, and parts transposed as wholes.

24. Rhode Island Quilt Documentation Project, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island.
25. A respondent's heritage might reflect one or more ethnicities.
26. Most respondents and their families own more than one quilt. These family quilts were obtained from more than one source.