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Jean Ray Laury in the 1960s: Foremother of a Quilt Revival

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Jean Ray Laury, a designer and author since the early 1960s, contributed to the creation and evolution of the current quilt revival which involves twenty million people in the U.S. and many more world wide. Laury's work and writings questioned the assumed relationship between gender and art and valorized everyday life. She offered alternatives to mass consumption and commercialization, and legitimized women's creative choices through an art form considered both quintessentially female and American.

Using Laury's books, articles, three online interviews with her, and personal correspondence, I contextualize her accomplishments and examine her impact using theories about gender and art, everyday life sociology, and cultural studies.

Jean Ray Laury's work helped women change their view of a traditional women's art form. Most attempts by female art historians to reevaluate the relationship between gender and art have been to change the view of the art world regarding women's work with canvas or needle as being art; Laury's efforts focused on encouraging quilters to see themselves as artists. I thank Jean Ray Laury for her ongoing commitment to quilt scholarship. She was more than generous with her time and quite patient with my many questions.

Laury combined her training in art and career as a writer and designer with her personal life, which mirrored the mother, wife, and

homemaker roles of the women for whom she wrote. She was in the perfect position to act as an interpreter between the worlds of fine arts and home decoration.

Biography

Laury's career followed a pathway forged by women earlier in the 20th century who used their professional art training to become quilt designers and authors of magazine articles and books about quilting. However, she was one of the first to do so in nearly 30 years. Laury was born in 1928 in Doon, Iowa, where she was exposed to quilting as a major activity for women, yet never learned to quilt herself. She began quilting as part of her Master's degree project in design at Stanford University in 1956. Her first quilt was entered in the 1958 Eastern States Exposition at Storrowton Village in Springfield, Massachusetts. Although it did not win any prizes, it attracted the attention of Roxa Wright, one of the jurors and creative editor at *House Beautiful* magazine. Through her, Laury got commissions for designing quilts for magazine projects. Later, she followed Wright to *Woman's Day*, and expanded the scope of her work to writing articles and teaching quilt classes.

Her first and second books, *Applique Stitchery* (1966) and *Quilts and Coverlets* (1970), both framed needlework as a conscious effort against standardization. Within a mobile, isolated, and mass produced society, her writings and designs sought to preserve individuality of expression. She encouraged "making things that delight the eye and convey the spirit of our times"[1] as part of recognizing a renewed sense of valuing handcrafted articles in the 1960s when people's homes were saturated with machine made objects. As Laury said, "Perhaps the greatest reward of stitchery lies in its very personal nature. Our homes are so full of manufactured items that we need and enjoy handmade things more than ever."[2] Yet, she also understood that simply returning to traditional quilt patterns and their aesthetics was not enough. Traditional patterns not only did not fit modern sensibilities of design and home furnishings, but replicating patterns continued the mass production sense into home production. In her books, Laury emphasized the ability as well as need of women to individualize their homes and make them less a product of

mass production. She evoked the cultural values of quilts as a means of personal expression, "a lovely, fragile and personal kind of silent, visual communication from one generation to others."[3] Such a view combined the value of the individual, the traditional view of women as the carrier of culture and family tradition, and the importance of artistic production as a means of connection and communication.

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan documented manufacturers' recognition of the "growing need of American women to do creative work—the major unfulfilled need of the modern housewife."[4] While Friedan accepted the heavy handed effort of industry to fulfill that need through commercialization, Laury saw commercial ventures like prepackaged kits as a springboard to individual creativity. Her assumption of universal creativity was a powerful antidote to manufacturers who both validated and demeaned creativity by pushing the "creativity" of purchasing goods so that, for instance, changing beds could be practical and "as creatively challenging as setting a table or painting a picture."[5]

Laury's books were expressly positioned to recognize contemporary quilting and encourage women to try contemporary design. Of particular note is her near complete reliance on newly made, uniquely designed quilts to illustrate her books. This mirrors a declining use of historic placement to validate quiltmaking in magazine articles from 1940 to 1970. For example, with only two exceptions, the quilts Laury used to illustrate *Quilts and Coverlets* were all made in the 1960s. Most of the book is devoted to design and novel uses of the three traditional quilt techniques of applique, piecing, and quilting. She incorporated new methods such as channel quilting, and the use of innovative fabrics like tie-dye, batik, and "found" fabrics like lace and doilies.

By the late 1960s, Laury was a professional designer, author, and artist, raising a family. As part of various California art communities, she was able to translate countercultural trends as they affected middle class America with enough "edge" to appeal to women's aesthetic yearnings. While Laury identified with the counterculture, she was older than the students who formed the counterculture of the 1960s.

Laury did not counter the ideal of a traditional family with bread winner father, stay-at-home wife, and kids who were the woman's responsibility to raise. Through the 1960s, this continued to be a dominant

domestic arrangement, and such women constituted Laury's primary market for books, magazine articles, and designs. Artistic expression and countercultural sympathies had to be expressed within this context.

Charles Reich speaks of the need for a role model for the new consciousness of the counterculture for middle class Americans in his book *The Greening of America (1970).*[6] Laury, by identifying herself as an average mother and housewife, though as far from average as Betty Friedan and other leaders were, offered her own path to creativity and artmaking as a model for others to follow.

Jean Ray Laury has been recognized for outstanding achievement within the world of quilting, but rarely outside of it. She is noted for her teaching ability, originality, and humor. She received a Silver Star Award for lifetime achievement at the 1997 International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas. The award recognizes a person "whose work has had a lasting impact on the development of quilting in the 20th century and on the extension of quilting and its further development into the 21st century."[7] She was inducted into the Quilters Hall of Fame in 1982, and has exhibited at the Museum of American Crafts in New York, the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco, the Fresno Art Museum, and California State University, Fresno. Laury wrote *Ho For California: Pioneer Women and Their Quilts*, the official book of the California Heritage Quilt Project. Her writing has continued to take the quilt world in new directions with her most recent books, *The Photo Transfer Book* and *The Fabric Stamping Handbook.*[8]

Laury uses a tongue-in-cheek approach to reveal the pleasures of finding everyday inconsistencies in human behavior. "Disliking pretentiousness, I don't take myself or my work over seriously. However, some of life's greatest truths are revealed through humor. . . . Fabric is a favorite medium for me, and quilting has consumed much of my work for more than thirty years."[9]

In her current work she sees quilts as a way to make political statements, using a comic strip format because "nobody turns away from comic strip format, everybody feels 'I can get this.' So they'll read what I have to say, and I can comment on things that I think are important to me or important to people in general, in a way I couldn't verbally."[10] Her Senator Van Dalsem Quilt, also known as the "Barefoot and Pregnant"

quilt was made into a poster for Planned Parenthood and also was judged one of the 100 best quilts of the twentieth century.[11] It exemplifies her approach of using humor to make a political statement.

The rest of this article will focus on five areas where Laury's work touched issues of the 1960s and 1970s. The first two look at how her work made gender a consideration factor in art and questioned the secondary placement of traditional art forms. The next two will look at how her work tied art and social concerns together by revaluing the quotidian and questioning the value of commodification and consumption that America had so completely embraced after World War II. The last area is what Laury herself considered to be her greatest legacy: empowering women to value their work and themselves by focusing on the process of making art and on the artist more than the product.

Gender and Art

Art offers a particularly useful view of what is occurring in a given culture at a specific time because it encapsulates many themes of the larger culture in a succinct manner.[12] Part of the impact of the "second wave" of the women's movement that began in the 1960s was the reevaluation of the relationship of gender and art. This reevaluation took four distinct directions. The first was to rediscover women artists who had made major contributions to the development of Western art but were not recognized by art historians. To read standard art history textbooks like Janson's *History of Art*, one would never know of influential artists, like Artemisia Gentilleschi, Angelica Kaufman, and Rosa Bonheur, let alone more recent artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Mary Cassatt.[13] A second theme examined how women were represented in art–why there were so many female nudes and so few male ones, why women were so frequently portrayed as madonnas or whores, and why women were reduced to their sexuality alone or portrayed as objects.[14]

The third was to change the form of art criticism to also consider how gender, class, race, and society have interacted to help or hinder women.[15] The fourth area examined how theories of art that naturalized biological differences between men and women saw not only women as secondary to men, but women's cultural production as craft vs. art and

thus also secondary.[16] Laury's work particularly advanced the third and fourth aspects.

One of the reconceptions of art that derived from this reevaluation was that art is neither pure, neutral, nor separate from the rest of society, but reflects and reproduces gender and class power structures. Feminist researchers have looked at how the definitions of art, artist, and woman sustain power systems, and how the identification of women's art as merely domestic and decorative serves to dismiss its importance as serious art.

Barry and Flitterman-Lewis[17] see traditional female art, like quilting, as a form of cultural resistance because it helps dissolve the modernist high/low art distinction. By demonstrating existing creativity in an undervalued art form, such art encourages women to see themselves as creators as well. Laury has emphasized that throughout her career.

By the early 1970s, quilts were being used as a rallying point within the women's movement to question hierarchies of art forms separating painting, sculpture, and architecture from "lesser" art forms like textiles, furniture, or silverwork and closely interconnected to gender hierarchies. An example of the new way of examining women's art was put forth by art historian and critic Patricia Mainardi.[18] She stated that women's needlework is so important that it should occupy the same place in Women's Studies that African art occupies in African Studies.

Another central issue for the women's movement was women's roles, especially concerning childbearing and childrearing. These themes have long been perceived as compatible with textile work, as Elizabeth Barber notes in her book *Women's Work: the First 20,000 Years*.[19] Women's cultural production has its own aesthetic values that differ from other art forms. It also combines the use of the creative imagination with the emotional work of tying family and friends together. Because of its association with the private sphere of family rather than the public sphere of work, needlework reinforces the secondary status of women in the production/reproduction hierarchy.[20] Laury, however, noted the positive way quilts functioned to communicate between generations of women when few other means were available. Quilts constitute a form of personal aesthetic and social statement and a way of creating generational con-

tinuity. The idea of creating historical female continuity was significant for the Women's Movement of the 1960s. Furthermore, examining the values women placed on quilting was a way of recognizing the physical and emotional labor of creating a family and reproducing society. These values included different aesthetic rules and judgments of creativity from canonical art, the social embeddedness of quilts, and their use as an expression of creativity when other forms were inaccessible.

In the early 1970s, collectors like Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof put quilts on an equal footing with painting by emphasizing the formal aesthetic traits of quilts and ignoring their emotional qualities. Jean Ray Laury instead advocated the integration of emotions and art. Her focus on the process at least as much as the product, was her attempt to integrate the values of the high art world with the traditional values of quilting without treating quilting as simply another medium available to the artist.

Feminist art historians such as Janet Wolff,[21] criticize work such as quilting because it is "naively essentialist" and too easily marginalized. She seeks a women's art form that cannot be discarded as simply feminine, nor does she value work that seems to merely celebrate traditional feminine values. When Wolff bypasses women's traditional arts in order to find a place for women's "voices," she also ignores how women have already used textiles and their surrounding "art world" to voice their concerns, visions, and aesthetics. This has occurred in samplers reflecting mourning, friendship quilts, and in quilt patterns such as Whig Rose, WCTU, and Coxey's Army, named for political and social events.

In contrast, Jean Ray Laury sought to acknowledge and appreciate the ways women's cultural production exemplified the multiple meanings and interpretations they have within American culture. She rejected a fixed cultural and aesthetic meaning for quilts and quilting, and encouraged a dynamic personal reinterpretation of cultural values instead. An example of that idea is Laury's own evolution concerning the traditional Sunbonnet Sue design. In her 1970 book, she deplored the lack of originality of using traditional designs such as Sue. Laury rejected hackneyed patterns such as "the rows upon rows of obese, sunbonnet girls in pale green and lavender"[22] in a call for creativity and originality. In the 1980s,

she used Sue to represent all quilters in a series of books. She confronted quilters' established ideas of traditional vs. art quilts, advocating instead their complementary rather than oppositional roles.[23]

Besides distinctions in mediums and use value, Laury sought to equalize the way women, and through them, society, valued work that is not monetarily recompensed.

> . . . (T)he big things that (women) do in their lives, like homemaking and childrearing are not associated with an income. So they don't tend to equate the time and energy they spend, they don't equate that with money. And therefore, when they go off in another direction and they produce work and want to sell it, that part is difficult. And it means you're saying "I'm worth something" and that's difficult for many women, because they've not been told that. And in fact, many of them have been told the opposite for many years.[24]

Indeed, Laury's writings are an early critique of many of the themes explored in the 1970s and 1980s by feminist writers rethinking the relationship between gender and art. Laury sought to transform existing ideas which devalued needlework, based the value of a work on its monetary value, separated intellectual from emotional responses, and disconnected art from the rest of life, as if it was a separate sphere.

Art Hierarchies

Traditional art historians have set Western art media in an overall hierarchical order, or else placed them in binary comparisons. Painting and sculpture as high arts, for example, rank higher than needlework and ceramics as crafts. Art has been divided into art vs. craft, fine art vs. folk art, and public art vs. private art. In addition, art has been a site for defining divisions of men's and women's work by production vs. reproduction, culture vs. nature, and supposedly gender neutral vs. specific feminine art forms.[25]

The separation of art and craft coincides historically with the development of the ideology of femininity.[26] This ideology justified the separate and secondary social roles of women as an inherent part of their

nature rather than a status derived from social circumstances. Seeing it as an inborn trait meant it could not be changed. While the idea that women are by their very nature less intelligent, ambitious, or mentally fit than men seems ludicrous to most Americans today, such ideas were common in the U.S. through the 1960s and are still salient in much of the world. Women's work is also considered secondary even though the work may be similar to men's work because it is done in the home and for the family instead of as a business for the market.[27] Thus art and craft are not only distinguished by methods, practices, and objects but also by the location or space in which they are produced and consumed. This hierarchical division of public and private spheres is derived from the physical separation of production at offices and factories from reproduction in the home. It does not stem from any quality inherent in the object produced or the gender of the maker.

Feminist consciousness in the early 1970s led to questions about the gendered nature of the art/craft division intending to abolish this dichotomy.[28] Gisela Ecker notes the deep embeddedness of patriarchal bias in art when describing art historians' reaction to "wool rather than marble."[29] Women's use of fiber techniques to create art became a pointed protest against the lesser status assigned women's art forms. At the same time, using a different art medium has been criticized for creating a pink ghetto for women artists.[30] Fiber arts became part of the ongoing debate in art on whether the best way to achieve equality for women was through a separate (but equal) art world, or by striving for acceptance in the established art world which was defined by and run by men.

Laury was an early critic of the position which ceded women's traditional arts to a secondary status. Passion and great visual aspects that exemplify the basic principles of art were what made a great quilt to Laury. She combined traditional elements of quilts with personal statements. By promoting the equality of mediums in art, ("I don't see a big difference between fabric on the wall and paint on the wall,")[31] she sought to expand women's vision of their work in order to see it as art. In this way, she was part of a renewed interest in the textile arts and an expansion of accepted art mediums.

As the line between high and popular culture blurred, the division between high art and domestic art mediums (such as oil paint vs. textiles)

also became less distinct. The movement to equalize mediums that began in the 1950s intensified with the spread of countercultural norms in the 1960s.[32]

Among the authors who wrote about quilting for the general public in the 1960s, Laury did the most to push quilting beyond the confines of home decorating. Because the home was the center of the private sphere associated with women, it also was their domain to furnish and decorate. She minimized the distance between fine and decorative arts by finding the difference in the artist's intention rather than the materials used. Quilts constituted an example of the connection between aesthetics and domestic production where women could expand from a commonly accepted goal of creating home furnishings to creating works of art that could also decorate the home. Laury consciously promoted this in her books, but as an academically trained artist, she also found textiles to be a way to combine art and family for herself in the early 1950s as in the quilt she made for her son as part of her masters' project. She explained how quilts have the potential to bridge the gulf between art and craft, decorative and fine art to a non-art audience,[33] as other writers at the time were doing in art-oriented magazines like *School Arts* and *Craft Horizon*. She used her work as an example of how women could use quilting to be artists as well as housewives.

In *Applique Stitchery* (1966), Laury pushed quilting as an art form, defining art not through the materials used but through the perspective and expressive abilities of the individual. She suggested fabric as a perfect medium because women were already familiar with it, and almost everyone knew how to use a needle and thread.[34] She predicted that stitchery would become a medium used much more frequently by serious artists beyond its then current use in the home.[35]

During the 20th century, women have used quilting as both an art medium and as a sort of "paint-by-number" rote construction method. These divisions within quilting are a continuum rather than a dichotomy, but Laury uses them to point out the distinctions between women's textile based cultural productions, like quilts, and mediums like painting, sculpture, and woodwork, which were associated with men. Laury is quite conscious of this gender distinction:

> I know when I used to do a lot of magazine design work, if they wanted a quilt and they wanted something done in wood that went together, I always said yes to the wood immediately and then thought about the quilt. Because I knew that the wood would pay three times as much as the quilt. And that was because the woodworking was regarded as a male area.[36]

Feminists have continuously asked why women have a near universal secondary status. Woman's biological difference from man has been the basis for defining her as "other," and closer to nature. As nature is secondary to culture,[37] this biological difference supports the view of woman as secondary to man. Sherry Ortner argues that women are in an in between status because of their association with childbearing and rearing.[38] Levi-Strauss's analysis shows a higher evaluation of objects, practices, and people as they become further removed from nature.[39] This carries into other forms such as cooks/chefs and crafter/artist. Besides this cultural valuation, Laury associates women's difficulties valuing their own work to being accustomed to unpaid labor in the home. "Women don't associate their time with money."[40]

Laury was completely aware of the many facets that have caused artwork like quilts to be considered secondary to hegemonic art forms. Having her quilts published in magazines added value to the work over how the quilts would have been appreciated had she been making them for her family. Consequently, she thought that making patterns and writing offered more income possibilities than actually making quilts.[41] The payments she received for her design and writing for magazines in the 1950s and 1960s also helped validate the worth of what she was doing to her family, her readers, and herself. Her quote concerning women's not associating their time with money clearly illustrates the time consciousness so often seen in writings about women's cultural production. Women felt keenly that they must manage time as wisely as they managed family expenses. Laury used the money from small design jobs to pay for household help to enable her to spend more time on her quilting. She balanced the value of time spent on mundane household tasks against creative work, which was both valued for the income and the intrinsic reward of being creative. Also implied is that a small amount of

income producing work paid for a significantly greater number of hours of household help.

Unlike other writers of the day, her approach was not cookbook style, but encouraged individual innovation and design based on everyday experiences and objects. Her books were written to appeal to both beginning and more advanced quilters. She also provided a range of inspiration for those without any art or design background and a path for them to grow to be able to try more advanced ideas that required either experience or art training.

Everyday Life

Beginning in the 1950s, artists developed a new interest in objects of commercial, popular culture. Pop Art, whose most familiar examples are Roy Lichtenstein's comic book art and Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans, was unlike previous 20th century art movements because it did not deplore the commercial, "low-brow" side of contemporary culture, but saw it as a visual source.[42] Pop Artists were almost exclusively men, perhaps because of the difficulty even men had at being taken seriously for such art. Women, who always had more difficulty being seriously considered as artists, may have found the level of criticism insurmountable. By seeing art in everyday objects, and thus dissolving the separation of art and life, pop art changed America,[43] and belayed canonical definitions of art that view art as separate from everyday reality, even when everyday objects and experiences were used as inspiration. Such art played with accepted concepts of aesthetic distancing, the proper subjects and materials for art, and sought a discomforting disjuncture with our usual perceptions.

The unexamined nature of everyday life became a resource for art, as it would become a resource for sociologists in the late 1960s. In *The History of Art*, a textbook that has been one of the most widely used in art history classes for decades, H.W. Janson contrasted how artists and the general public perceived everyday objects. His approach described the use of optical illusions that became so important for Op Art in the 1960s. Op Artists, like Victor Vasarely, used eye dazzling colors and graphics to

make two-dimensional paintings appear three-dimensional. As Janson notes,

> When we use our eyes in everyday life, we take it for granted that the world around us is as we perceive it. Only when we find a discrepancy, when "our eyes deceive us," do we become aware of the complexities of the process, although most of us do not know how to analyze these.[44]

Similarly, a subfield of symbolic interactionist sociology called the "sociologies of everyday life" was first described by Jack Douglas in 1980. The central tenet of everyday life sociology is to respect the integrity of the phenomena being studied by studying people in their natural context in the everyday social world, rather than in a laboratory setting.[45] Everyday life sociology uses participant observation as its primary method. Douglas noted that it focuses on "the observation of the concrete, natural (or un-controlled) events of everyday life as the starting point of scientific studies, rather than abstract speculations about culture or social structure."[46] The 1960s focused on popular, lived culture, on immediacy and experience rather than rationality and distance.[47] Everyday life also meant focusing on personal relationships and immediate surroundings, which made the family and home-life, the "sphere" of women, an area of interest for academics and popular culture as well.

Jean Ray Laury connected the concerns of everyday life with "humble" materials and the "simplicity, honesty, and direct freshness" found in Early American quilts and coverlets.[48] In *Applique Stitchery* (1966), she encouraged readers to consider applique a "charming, personal, and vital art form, using the humble materials of everyday to offer unpretentious works of real value and deep meaning."[49]

She encouraged her readers to use everyday items like needle and thread because they were accessible, familiar parts of everyday life. Everyday life also became a source for what to portray in one's art. "Ideas may be found in familiar everyday surroundings; they are simply there waiting to be discovered . . . ideas must come from your own experiences and responses."[50] Laury's emphasis on known subjects and methods brought the concept of art within the reach of the average woman. As needle

Figure 1. Sketch from *Applique Stitchery* showing tools and toys similar to Tom's Quilt. Courtesy Jean Ray Laury.

and thread are intimately associated with women regardless of race or class, so are the common inspirational sources of children, kitchens and gardens. In a reachable format, Laury encouraged the first steps towards a political consciousness about women's lives by valuing taken-for-granted and disparaged everyday activities.

Figure 2. Tom's Quilt. Courtesy Jean Ray Laury and Quilters Hall of Fame.

Laury's first quilt provides a way to examine her aesthetic, which values everyday life as a design source and subject. This quilt was made in 1956 both as a gift for her son and as a project for her Masters degree in design (see Figures 1 and 2). It was a remarkable quilt for the time, and is clearly indicative of her art education and artistic development.

Her inspiration for the quilt was a quilt made by a Civil War soldier. He made it of scraps of shirts and uniforms that seemed to show everything he valued in his life: family, farm, children, and orchards. To Laury, this embodied what a quilt should be: portraying meaningful places, people, and events in the maker's life, that were both emotional and aesthetic. "Remembering how simply he had accomplished this colorful, wonderful quilt, I don't think I've ever seen another quilt that was as moving as that one was."[51]

Laury filled her own quilt with images of children's toys, foods, plants, animals, and common household objects. Many of the objects, such as toothbrush and toothpaste, electrical plug and outlet, measuring spoons, telephone poles, egg beaters, and salt and pepper shakers, are objects seen on quilts made 15 to 20 years later, but none before. Though everyday items had appeared in embroidered kitchen towels, Laury's modern technological objects introduced a different level of "taken-for-granted" consciousness. Laury's choice of objects was oriented towards her son's individual interests, plus things that seem to describe more generic children's interests in games, desserts, candy, bugs, the sun, moon and stars. Everyday objects, because of their perceived importance to a child, became resources for creativity for the stitcher. She emphasized a mindfulness to taken-for-granted "everyday objects which may seem hum-drum and ordinary to adults"[52] to open the mind to creativity and design possibilities. Roxa Wright described the quilt in the introduction to Laury's 1970 book as "a delightful, completely unorthodox quilt depicting all the things that interested and excited her children . . . the first contemporary quilt I had ever seen that really came off successfully; yet it was far simpler and more direct in stitchery than the many fine traditional quilts in the exhibition."[53] The bold, deceptively simplistic designs in Laury's quilt more eloquently expressed modern art's sensibilities and way of approaching the everyday than quilts following more elaborate decorative formats.

The attention Laury gave everyday images blended multiple dimensions of her work. Attuning her design to her child's interests brought a greater communication and linkage to her son, while using the everyday world as a resource also provided links to creativity and aesthetics, linking emotions and intellect, art and craft, artist and mother. The quilt

demonstrates the simultaneous universality and uniqueness of common objects, as well as the uniqueness and universality of childhood and mother/child relationships. By doing so, the viewer receives the multidimensional linking of thought and feeling, sacred and profane, individual and institutions that Laury found in her art. Laury seems to value motherhood as a role that Jean Bethke Elshtain describes as a "complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic, and emotional."[54] Without reverting to essentialism, Laury used the positive meanings associated with motherhood, which her readers knew so well, to expand quilts' value from the individual to valuing women's work, and its products as art rather than craft.

Her quilt "captures" and represents mundane, common things, which are often ephemeral. Caterpillars become butterflies, toothpaste gets used up, ice cream melts and is eaten. Children themselves are ephemeral. They change and eventually grow up. Traditional still lifes have long focused on the ephemeral: objects like leaves, flowers, fruit, and wild game that die and decay. At the same time, their beauty and replaceability become timeless in another way. Laury uses the ephemeral to illuminate the small miracles of everyday life. She delves deeply in her examination of the personal, emotional, and creative, where the wholly idiosyncratic connects to the universal. As she says,

> I am neither a deep thinker nor a profound one, I make no attempt to be profound in my work. I can offer only a personal response, and if that response arrives at something basic, it will evoke a response in someone else. There are two essential lessons to be learned in approaching stitchery as an art form. The first is to learn to see. The second is to learn to care. Learning to see requires looking with expectancy. Nothing is insignificant.[55]

Unlike traditional high art that gains part of its definition and value by the fact that it has no practical use, women's domestic art forms seek to combine aesthetics and practicality. They use the random incidental occurrences of everyday life to shape and give meaning to the work. Examples of incidental occurrences would be altering a design to use materials at hand, or to change fabrics part way through a quilt because

the quilter ran out of a particular fabric. Rather than emphasizing only the final end product, this view also values the process, and by valuing the making also values the maker. Focusing on process encourages discoveries about self, one's personal aesthetic and ways that the most idiosyncratic of events connect with the universal and everyday life connects to the sacred.

Consumption and Commodification

Traditional art's value comes from its embeddedness, its ties to personal and local history, and the way it embraces use value and rejects commodification and the hierarchy of the marketplace. It is the antithesis of the impartial rational aesthetic gaze. Domestic art, such as quilts, remains part of its maker's world, unlike high art forms such as painting, sculpture, and architecture, which become commodities. By not becoming commodities, domestic art implicitly criticizes commodity culture.

Popular culture has become an important site to examine the links between the personal and political[56] which are found in women's relationships to everyday life, the household, and the economy. In light of the huge postwar growth in mass consumerism, quilting is one way to examine everyday resistance and the negotiation of new views of domestic production. Consumer capitalism imposes structure on everyday life by taking over parts of it formerly done in the home, for example, when women buy bread, clothes, and curtains rather than make them.

Cultural Studies, an interdisciplinary approach studying the texts, objects, and practices of lived cultures, approaches the everyday as the place where private and public spheres connect.[57] Cultural Studies examines the hierarchical structures of institutions like the family, school, the marketplace, religion, etc. and how they modify and are modified by individual behavior. Their goal is to find fissures and interstitial spaces in these structures and utilize them for transforming society. These studies use Gramsci's concept of culture as an area "where hegemony is constructed and can be broken and reconstructed."[58] Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist theorist in the first half of the twentieth century who examined the ways in which hegemony was naturalized and maintained through social forces.[59]

By encouraging new cultural practices and products that affect the everyday life of individuals, Laury put into practice some of the ideas Cultural Studies theorists would propose twenty-five years later. Laury saw how impersonal, mass-produced items fulfilled material needs and desires, but ignored people's need to be recognized as individuals, and to participate in their environment. As she noted,

> When nights turn chilly and you need an extra cover, a machine-made blanket will stop your shivers, but a handmade quilt satisfies something far beyond the physical need for warmth. The evident devotion displayed in these everyday articles gives them an added significance.[60]

In this way, she redefines the relationship between the public institution of commercial production and the private sphere of individual production and consumption.

Ben Agger sees the potential for creating new cultural practices and products at the level of everyday life. Out of the direct line of control of mass consumption, he sees "ample political possibilities for creating a populist culture in which cultural producers have much more control over their product, and hence their reception."[61] Agger recognizes the alternative lifeworld away from the male gaze in art and literature that feminist cultural studies opens up.[62] In effect, he echoes Laury's view from almost thirty years earlier of how quilting is tied to the everyday in ways that mass culture could never be.

Laury's designs incorporated nature through flowers, trees, fruit, vegetables, rabbits, stars, and the sun. She combined an emphasis on nature and rejecting materialism by using leftover fabric, old doilies, adding embroidery, and transforming them to make new art. Personal aesthetics countered the "spiritual and emotional emptiness"[63] of life critiqued by the 1960s counterculture through texture, color, and the personal meaning of individual swatches of fabric.

Children were another way of appreciating nature, because they were perceived as pure and uncontaminated by society.[64] Using children's drawings, the wide-eyed wonder of a child's view of butterflies, toys, and everyday objects like toothbrushes and measuring spoons brought a newfound appreciation of the mundane.[65]

One change Cultural Studies researchers have seen in the post-WWII period has been the erasure of public/private boundaries as everyday life has become more defined by aesthetics and politics.[66] During the 1950s, Americans were thrilled with the turn to a consumer economy after the deprivations of the Depression and shortages and rationing of World War II. Not until the 1960s did people begin to look at what was lost with the emphasis on purchasing goods for the home instead of making them or using heirloom family pieces. The rejection of this plenitude by the 1960s counterculture for its superficiality, uniformity, and acceptance of authority, came from a security in its existence that those who had been through the Depression and World War II would never know.[67]

Laury used quilts as an implicit critique of the limits of manufactured goods for creating a home full of warmth, as quoted above. In this way, she also questioned the 1950s "good life," based on mass consumption, reliance on experts and professional design, cookie cutter suburban sameness, and downplaying of individualism and creativity[68] by offering home production with individual design as an antidote. She offered transformation of the home as a way to transform the individual, bringing the countercultural idea of "living life to the fullest, right here, for oneself"[69] to the sewing rooms of America's middle class.

Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), recognized sewing for the home as virtually the only acceptable outlet for creativity, yet even here formulaic patterns were the norm.[70] Friedan would have classified quilting as part of the million dollar home sewing industry, thus showing women still manipulated by the market.[71] Laury's way of making art accessible to women was by encouraging them to value personal experience, taste, and emotional ties, of which the extreme cognitive distance of modern art played no part. Instead, she offered a counterculturally influenced view of individuality with personal connectivity against conformity, authority, and institutions.[72] Laury's celebration of the traditional feminine domestic arts of embroidery and quilting did not try to abolish the distinctiveness of female art forms, but rather to elevate their value.

Laury's emphasis on finding personal satisfaction in what one made, to explore what was personally important, or to make something for someone else that reflected their interests meant not only valuing the self,

but focusing on internal standards. This exemplified the highest values of the counterculture: honesty, community, and self worth.[73]

In their 1966 books, both Laury and Dolores Hinson, another influential 1960s author on quilting, deplored the lack of creativity and personal design in quilting. They saw reliance on traditional patterns as a society-wide de-emphasis on individuality. In *A Quilting Manual*, Hinson typified 1960s quilting by quoting a 1960 article on needlework (no actual reference given):

> In the last 50 years quilt-making in general has degenerated to the extent, that most women who plan a top, sew an applique patch on a square of white, embroider around the applique and join these together either with or without strips of different color. These quilts come out looking like assembly-line products like our cars or mass-produced tablecloths because almost all the women use one of four designs—'Butterflys,' 'Sunbonnet Sue,' 'Overhaul Sam,' or 'Sailboats.'[74]

While Laury recognized the value of books showing traditional quilts, she distanced her approach from them. She rejected commercialization through stamped patterns and pre-assembled kits in order to encourage personal works of creativity and innovation. Her use of everyday objects as design ideas was a conscious protest of mass consumption. She distanced her work from other forms of needlework, which she considered limited because of their commercialization through the use of stamped patterns, directions, and pre-assembled kits. Laury viewed sewing as an approachable art form, using techniques and materials women were at least nominally familiar with. Like Betty Friedan, Laury recognized home sewing as virtually the only acceptable outlet for creativity for women. Laury questioned assumptions about the overriding value of consumer goods, mass production, and reliance on experts. She encouraged women to see and use their creative energies without being intimidated by art mediums.

In 1970, Laury declared that no new influences had permeated quilt design in the twentieth century, which was why the same designs were seen over and over again.[75] Yet she recognized the dependence of many quilters on quilt patterns, hoping at least some would eventually use them

as a springboard to their own creativity. Encouraging women to regard themselves as artists, much beyond "mere" homemakers, and valuing home production questioned the push for consumption and commodification. These themes echoed the push to re-evaluate the relationship of gender and art in the 1970s and fueled a renewed appreciation of quilting which has helped perpetuate the current quilt revival.

Empowering Women

Laury herself felt that the greatest accomplishment of her career could be found in the transformation of women's views of themselves and their work. One of her most influential books was *The Creative Woman's Getting it All Together Book*, published in 1977.[76] Laury gave women permission to be creative, use their skills, and to value their own time and their own needs. She encouraged women to look at how they prioritized their time and see why they thought they had time for family, yet not for their own work.[77] Yvonne Porcella recalled a woman who had cooked and cleaned for days before leaving for a weekend workshop steeling herself for her return home, but after reading Laury's book, she had a new resolve to change her home circumstances.[78] As Laury said:

> I saw so many women in early classes who were intelligent, capable, bright women who thought they had no talent. Somewhere along the way, that had just been squashed . . . I don't think I ever just showed work and told them how to do it; it was a matter of drawing out of them what they had, not giving them whatever I had. . . .
>
> If somebody asked me what I did, I would say first of all that I was a quiltmaker and I also had these other wonderful things in my life such as home and family. . . . You know, you can be a mother and you can be a wife, you can be your relationship to other people, but at the core of all that has to be whatever you're passionate about.[79]

Laury's belief that women are more than the roles they inhabit is encouraged in her books and in her teaching. Her teaching has focused on "helping women understand that they have talents and ability and creative avenues that sometimes they're not aware of."[80] Her focus is on

the artist more than the art, seeing quilts as just another art medium. In her early writings, while the quilter is seen as a homemaker, she emphasized that original design was possible for anyone. She notes that time for quilting can be found "as you visit, while your cookies bake, when you wait in the dentist's office, ride in a car or watch TV."[81] Thus quilting can put together scraps of time and scraps of fabric to make a possible heirloom and continue the generational cycle.

Laury's ongoing writings, artwork, and teaching from the 1960s to the present have helped keep women's traditional art forms vibrant and alive. Often proclaimed the "Mother of all California quiltmakers,"[82] Laury mentored through example, encouragement, accessibility, and concrete advice. Yvonne Porcella, a noted quilt artist and writer in her own right, recalled contacting Laury for advice when she got her first magazine commission. Not only was Laury encouraging, but she gave her sound advice about contracts, copyrights, retention of ownership of her work, etc.[83]

Conclusion

Laury's legacy is found in her quilts, books, magazine articles, and the people she inspired and encouraged through her classes and workshops. As a designer and writer, she was an early example and mentor for many people who followed her as quilt professionals. She was an early proponent of the equality of mediums for artwork, and of the value and importance of traditional women's art forms. Her work during the 1960s was part of a growing trend questioning the dominance of mass production and encouraging a reevaluation of handmade objects. Her encouragement to use everyday objects as inspiration and for inclusion in quilts extended this viewpoint from Pop Art to a new medium.

Laury's work encapsulated many of the themes of how women's views of themselves and their place in the world changed in the 1960s. In the arts, by refocusing on the meaning and significance of daily life, Laury valorized family life and the use of everyday materials as art mediums. Using materials and methods such as fabric and sewing valorized traditional art forms and questioned gender based hierarchies of art vs. craft, and commercial vs. home production. Laury's use of everyday

materials, actions, and locations such as flower gardens, kitchen utensils, and children's drawings for design ideas exemplified the 1960s goal to eliminate the separation of art from life. She also subverted hierarchies that assigned lesser value to products from the private sphere of home and women than those of the public sphere of commerce, industry, and men.

More than anything, she encouraged women to discover, value, and follow their own interests, focusing on themselves rather than their roles. By encouraging women to view themselves as artists beyond being "mere" homemakers and valuing home production, she also questioned the push for consumption and commodification. These threads became part of the reevaluation of the relationship of gender and art in the 1970s. Laury's ongoing writings, artwork, and teaching from the 1960s to the present have helped keep women's traditional art forms vibrant and alive.

Notes

1. Jean Ray Laury, *Quilts and Coverlets* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1970), 5.
2. Jean Ray Laury, "Be Creative With Applique," in *Farm Journal,* May 1966, 88.
3. Laury, *Quilts and Coverlets,* 11.
4. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: Laurel Books, 1984 (1963)), 212.
5. *House Beautiful*, February 1964, 49.
6. Charles Reich, *The Greening of America*,(New York: Random House, 1970), 279.
7. C&T Publishing Website, "Meet Featured Teacher Jean Ray Laury," (http://ttsw.com/Artist/JeanRayLaury/JeanRayLaury.html, 2002), 1.
8. Elizabeth Palmer-Spilker, "Jean Ray Laury," in Merikay Waldvogel and Rosalind Webster Perry, eds., *The Quilters Hall of Fame,* (Marion, IN: Quilters Hall of Fame, Inc., 2004) 107.
9. Jean Ray Laury, Thirteen Moons Gallery website, (http://www.thirteenmoonsgallery.com/artists/laury/laury.html, 2002), 1.
10. Jean Ray Laury in Le Rowell, *Interview #73.1 Jean Ray Laury*, Quilters' Save Our Stories website, http://www.centerforthequilt.org/qsos/interviews/JRL1.htm, 2000), 5.
11. Mary Leman Austin, *The Twentieth Century's Best American Quilts: Cel-*

ebrating 100 Years of the Art of Quiltmaking, (Golden, CO: Primedia Special Interest Publications, 1999), 18.

12. William Bascom, "Creativity and Style in African Art," in Daniel P. Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 11.
13. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News*, 1970, Vol. LXIX); Lise Vogel, "Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness," in Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, Joanna Frueh, eds., *Feminist Art Criticism: an Anthology*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988); Janet Wolff, *Resident Alien*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
14. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin Books, 1972); Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On*, (London: Pandora Press, 1987); Mary Bos and Jill Pack, "Porn, Law, Politics," in Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On*, (London: Pandora Press, 1987); Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); Carol Duncan, "The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," in Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, Joanna Frueh, eds., *Feminist Art Criticism: an Anthology*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988).
15. Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," and Arlene Raven, "The Last Essay on Feminist Criticism," *Feminist Art Criticism: an Anthology*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988); Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1990); Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, (New York: Routledge, 1984);
16. Alessandra Comini, "Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism," in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); Moira Roth, "Visions and Re-Visions: Rosa Luxemburg and the Artist's Mother," in *Feminist Art Criticism: an Anthology*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988); Susan Seuleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
17. Barry and Flitterman-Lewis, 91.
18. Patricia Mainardi, "Great American Cover-Ups," *Art News*, Summer 1974, 31.
19. Elizabeth Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1994), 3.
20. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 5.

21. Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 82.
22. Laury, *Quilts*, 17.
23. Rowell, 6.
24. Laury in Bernard Herman, *Interview #73.2 Jean Ray Laury*, Quilters' Save Our Stories website, (http://www.centerforthequilt.org/qsos/interviews/JRL2.htm, 2000), 4.
25. Parker, 197; Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 80.
26. Parker, 5; Chadwick, 60.
27. Parker and Pollock, 70.
28. Chadwick, 332.
29. Gisela Ecker, ed., *Feminist Aesthetics*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986), 16.
30. Chadwick, 333–334.
31. Laury in Rowell, 4.
32. The forms Laury used focused "on taste, experience and emotion instead of rationality and cognition. . . . Immediacy and immersion replaced aesthetic distance" as discussed in David Chalmers, *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 95.
33. Jean Ray Laury, *Applique Stitchery*, (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1966), 132.
34. Ibid., 13.
35. Ibid., 132.
36. Laury in Herman, 3.
37. Ortner, 80.
38. Ibid., 78.
39. Parker and Pollock, 69.
40. Jean Ray Laury in Marsha MacDowell and Justine Richardson, *Quilt Treasures Interview*, (http://www.centerforthe quilt.org/treasures/jl/interview.php), streaming video.
41. Laury in MacDowell and Richardson.
42. H.W. Janson, *History of Art*, (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 541.
43. Tony Scherman, "When Pop Turned the World Upside Down," *American Heritage*, February/March 2001, 81.
44. Janson, 543–544.

45. Patricia Adler, Peter Adler, and Andrea Fontana, "Everyday Life Sociology," *American Review of Sociology*, (Annual Reviews Inc., Vol 13, 1987), 219.
46. Jack Douglas, *Introduction to the Sociologies of Everyday Life*, (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1980), 200.
47. Chalmers, 95.
48. Laury, *Applique*, 15.
49. Ibid., 11.
50. Ibid., 19.
51. Laury in Herman, 8.
52. Laury, *Applique*, 21.
53. Laury, *Quilts and Coverlets*, 170.
54. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981) 243. Josephine Donovan, an English professor and feminist theorist, valorizes the "nondominative process art of women's domestic aesthetic praxis, their use-value production." Josephine Donovan, "Everyday Use and Moments of Being," in Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 53. Donovan sees domestic art as a process of discovery, when the art creates the artist, the book writes the author, and the "existential moments of discovery" come from finding the sacred embedded in the profane. Drawing on interpretations of Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, and Alice Walker, she sees the best domestic art as allowing the random incidental occurrences of everyday life to shape the art; Donovan, 60.
55. Laury, *Applique*, 30.
56. Ben Agger, *Gender, Culture, and Power*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 71.
57. Norman Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 80.
58. David Forgacs, "National-popular: Genealogy of a Concept," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 186.
59. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 133.
60. Laury, *Quilts*, 12.
61. Agger, 128.
62. Ibid.
63. Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 22.
64. Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacy of the Sixties*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 57.

65. Charles Reich describes a way for older adults (assumably past 30) to reap the benefits of the counterculture's new world view. "For older people, the great object of the new consciousness should be the recovery of the self from the whole mass of duties, obligations, fears, external standards, necessities and endless work; a recovery of the child's knowledge of how to be happy;" Reich, 288.
66. Denzin, 168.
67. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 12.
68. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988), 26.
69. Gitlin, 213.
70. Friedan, 222–223.
71. Ibid., 17.
72. Chalmers, 96–97.
73. Reich, 229.
74. Dolores A. Hinson, *Quilting Manual*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 156–157.
75. Laury *Quilts*, 16.
76. Laury in Herman, 1.
77. Laury in MacDowell and Richardson.
78. Yvonne Porcella, Personal communication, May 31, 2002.
79. Laury in Rowell, 3.
80. Ibid., 1.
81. Laury, *Quilts*, 17.
82. Nancy Halpern, "Pioneers: Teaching the World to Quilt," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, (Vol. 33, No. 5, June 2002), 39.
83. Porcella.