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Artistic Creation: Amish Quilts and Abstract Art

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This paper examines the way in which artistic value is assigned to objects, specifically focusing on Amish quilts made between the years 1890 and 1940. Created as utilitarian objects and made almost exclusively by women, they are now viewed as artistic creations and have been compared with abstract paintings of the twentieth century, to which they are visually similar.

This paper compares the two and finds that while Amish quilts and abstract art share many aesthetic similarities and some similarities in philosophical origin, the significant differences in the processes of creation lead to another interesting question. That is the question of how artistic value should be judged, and whether using the criteria traditionally applied to "high art" as the standard for judgement may unfairly ignore many valuable aspects of "folk art," quilts and objects created in entirely different ways.

Introduction

Quilts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have become popular collector's items today. They provide us with a link to our past, while offering interesting clues about our ancestors who created them. Sometimes, they are just beautiful to look at, and we like the feel of them in our hands. Maybe much of the appeal is due to the fact that, while quilting is a craft that originated abroad, it found its home in the United

States. Quilts occupy a place in America's identity, as they are a tactile record of people, places, and circumstances that occurred throughout the country's history. And they are almost exclusively reflective of the female experience along this timeline, as the majority of quiltmakers, historically, were women. Their value is not limited to the social information they reveal, however; but also encompasses the artistry they display.

It has been suggested that quilts, visually, provide a continuous example of an American aesthetic sensibility. In the words of art critic Robert Hughes, quiltmaking "is a particularly, if not uniquely, American form, an art based on strict modular arrangements, intricate geometry, luscious colors–and salvage, not wasting, 'making do.' "[1] These characteristics, in his opinion, represent an American aesthetic. It has also been suggested that perhaps the ubiquitous presence of quilts throughout American history, coupled with the fact that their creators were almost exclusively female, has worked against the recognition of their artistic value.[2]

But what determines the value of an object, artistic or otherwise, and how is that value assigned? The purpose of this paper is to explore this question, specifically as it relates to a small group of objects, quilts made by women of Amish communities, between the years of 1890 and 1940. Aesthetic characteristics of an object play a large role in the determination of artistic merit, but, as demonstrated by Amish quilts, objects can convey much information about their creators, their processes of creation, and about the historical time frame in which they were created. This information can in turn provide insight that may enhance our understanding and appreciation of, not just the object of art, but of the creative process itself.

Amish quilts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are distinctive for many reasons–their extremely sophisticated level of craftsmanship; their bold, colorfully and graphically strong designs; their unique color arrangements, employing almost exclusively fabric of solid color; and their expressions of simplicity and strength. Robert Hughes has described the artistic value of these quilts (specifically those made in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania) in the following glowing terms: "Lancaster quilts are masterpieces of design. The pure geometric forms and unexpected sumptuous color combinations come together in works of extraordinary power and vitality."[3] In addition to their aesthetic worth,

however, Amish quilts are valuable for the role that they played in Amish society and what they represent about the women who crafted them.

The remainder of this paper explores the value of Amish quilts (c. 1890 to 1940), both in an artistic, as well as social context, as they are deserving of attention in both areas. The final products resultant of the act of quiltmaking are artistic creations worthy of aesthetic examination, and the process by which they were created was vital to the Amish community and their active application of spiritual belief to everyday life. The resultant quilts are symbolic of the Amish culture.

Since the 1970's, collections of Amish quilts have been amassed and displayed, and the monetary value of the quilts has risen dramatically. Much of this rise in popularity has been a result of the modern abstract art movement of the twentieth century and the visual similarities Amish quilts share with the abstract paintings of this time. Perhaps the ubiquity of the quilts throughout American history even served as an influence (conscious or not) for some abstract painters. While much has been written regarding the visual similarities between Amish quilts and abstract painting, this paper explores some philosophical similarities shared by their creators, as well as the differences that exist between them. In addition, an examination is made of what value lies in Amish quilts beyond the aesthetic similarities to other forms of abstract art.

Quilts Throughout History

Although quiltmaking occurred in Europe prior to settlement of the United States, it was never practiced with the widespread popularity that occurred in America. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, trade with the Indies provided American settlers exposure to quilts made with the brilliantly colored, painted, and embroidered cottons of India. This exposure may have fueled the interest in quilting, as did the availability of the fabrics. Piecing of quilts tops with many different types of material allowed for incorporation of small bits of expensive fabric from the Indies, thereby stretching its use.[4] Piecing tops with multiple fabrics also allowed for the thrifty use of scraps leftover from clothing. Frugality may have been a force that contributed to the increasingly elaborate piecing of quilt tops.

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While quilting has gone through many phases and transformations over the past two centuries, the general composition of a quilt has remained the same - three layers of material held together by a quilting stitch. Quilt tops were frequently pieced from multiple selections of fabric, often for the purpose of creating geometric (or pictorial) designs. Small blocks would be created, then joined to form the whole of the large quilt top. Often the design of a block would be repeated, and the joining of the repetitive blocks would create a larger form. As indicated by quilt historian Jonathan Holstein, "the great development of quilt design, especially that type which uses repetitive figures building to an overall effect, was distinctly American."[5] The piecing together of material may be random or may be very deliberate and precise, resulting in a representation or design of the maker's choosing. It is in the piecing of the top layer that many design variations can take place, as is seen in Amish, as well as non-Amish quilts.

While quilts have been ubiquitous in American history, little attention was paid to their artistic merit in the early to middle part of the twentieth century. This began to change in 1971 when Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof curated, for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, a show of nineteenth and early twentieth century American quilts. The explosion of abstract art that had occurred throughout the century and the introduction of op art during this period provided a new lens through which to view the artistry of American quilts. Holstein and van der Hoof recognized the visual impact of many quilts made in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and amassed a large collection.

They believed these quilts to be representative of American sensibility in art throughout the century. The pieced quilt tops were not unlike many of the abstract paintings created by twentieth century artists and shared many geometric design elements. Holstein explains his and van der Hoof's initial interest in collecting quilts, "Certain quilts, when we saw them for the first time, gave us the immediate pleasurable sensations we experienced when we saw certain great works of art."[6]

Holstein and van der Hoof, who had backgrounds in and familiarity with the traditional art world, assembled a collection of quilts focused mainly on aesthetic appeal. At the time they were amassing their collec-

tion, quilts were generally not assigned value based on design elements but on historical importance, usually to illustrate a history of Americana.[7] Holstein and van der Hoof approached their collection from a different standpoint, and, once it was completed and refined, set about to exhibit their collection at a major art museum.

They purposefully strove to have their collection exhibited at a New York City museum of "high art," rather than one that typically dealt with folk art. As a result, their collection was exhibited at the Whitney in 1971. Prior to this time, the Whitney had not exhibited any medium other than painting and sculpture. On an interesting note, Jonathan Holstein was acquainted with American abstract painter Barnett Newman (1905–1970), who understood his desires in pursuing the exhibit. Newman died prior to the exhibit opening, and Holstein dedicated the exhibition and catalogue to him.[8] The exhibition, entitled *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, was, at that time, the best attended exhibition held by the Whitney Museum.[9] It was the critical recognition of abstract paintings by artists such as Newman, Mark Rothko (1903–1970), and Josef Albers (1888–1976) that paved the way for the recognition of the abstract quilt designs.[10] Included in the exhibit of sixty quilts were two quilts created in Amish communities.

Amish History

In order to understand the significance of Amish quilts, it is necessary to understand the history and philosophy of the Amish people. The Amish are a branch of a larger religious movement known as Anabaptism, from whom the religious orders of Mennonites and Hutterites are also descended. Anabaptism originated as an outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe. Anabaptists differed from other Protestants in their belief in adult baptism, and a split from the Protestant church occurred in 1536 under the leadership of Menno Simmons (from whose name the title Mennonites is derived). The Mennonite church spread geographically through Southern Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. In the 1690s, Joseph Amman, a Swiss, led a break from the Mennonite church and founded the Amish order.[11]

The Amish migrated to the Palatinate region of Germany, and in

1727, they migrated to the United States, settling in Berks and Lancaster counties of Pennsylvania (total migration population, approximately 500). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the entire U.S. population of Amish (approximately 1200) resided in Lancaster, Berks, Somerset, Chester, and Mifflin counties of Pennsylvania. By the late 1800s, Amish communities were established in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. This paper is concerned with Amish quilts made between the years of 1890 and 1940, and it is interesting to note the size of the population producing these quilts. In 1890, the Amish population in the U.S. numbered approximately 3,700, female population approximately 1,800, and by 1940, these numbers had grown to approximately 25,800 and 12,900, respectively.[12]

Amish Philosophy

The Amish philosophy is Biblically based and strongly emphasizes the values of simplicity, humility, practicality, and non-resistance. The Amish believe not only in the importance of intellectual acceptance of these values, but also in their day-to-day application. Incorporation of spiritual beliefs into an everyday lifestyle is paramount to their social philosophy. They hold the view that strict observance of their established rules of spiritual conformity will lead to harmony and balance within their community.[13]

While all Amish communities share the same spiritual beliefs, it is within individual church congregations that the strictest degree of conformity is practiced. This conformity both actively encourages the value of humility, by diminishing the importance of the individual, while also strengthening the social bonds of a community (by creating shared or common identifiers). The code defining the rules of social order, the Ordnung, is passed from one generation to the next through oral tradition and may vary slightly among communities.

The Ordnung strictly governs daily life and stresses conformity, for example, in defining acceptable manner of dress, including what colors may be worn. Often such rules serve to encourage the harmony within a particular church community, as opposed to the Amish group as a whole. Symbols may be arbitrarily chosen for the purpose of creating an

identifier of a particular church parish. (For example, each member of an entire church community may use a single color of window shade).[14]

The Amish belief in the value of practicality affects their view of "art" and its creation. They do not believe objects should be created for the sole purpose of aesthetic pleasure. [15] In addition to violating their belief in practicality, such creation could lead to pridefulness and a lack of humility. Instead, the Amish believe that beauty should not be separated from function, rather, objects should serve utilitarian purposes while also being creative expressions. An object should be useful and serve the soul at the same time. Quilts are but one example of the melding of the artistic with the functional and an expression of the integration of spiritual beliefs into daily life.

Within this way of life and belief system emphasizing conformity and humility, some of the most visually striking quilts of the twentieth century were made. While created for utilitarian purposes, the aesthetics of the quilt were not ignored. Some quilts were made for specific purposes (for example, as wedding gifts), and, while utilitarian objects, these quilts would be brought out and used only to observe special occasions.[16] Often quilts were the only tangible evidence of women's labor, the only concrete thing that could be passed on to another generation.[17] Certainly these factors affected the creation of some of the quilts.

However, to say that utility and creativity were the only factors involved in the creation of a quilt is not correct. There are very important social aspects to the quiltmaking process that cannot be ignored. It is this author's opinion that these social factors are just as important, if not more important, than the aesthetics or utility derived from the finished products. In fact, some of the social factors helped to contribute to the striking features of many of the quilts.

The Ordnung dictated some parameters for quiltmaking, but it was not as defined as might be expected, and it varied among communities based on the relative conservatism of individual church districts.[18] In spite of the similarities among the quilts created by the Amish, individual quiltmakers were able to express their creativity through color placement and subtle design variations. A large number of very different-looking quilts were created, perhaps indicating that the human creative spirit will find a release regardless of the confinement placed upon it. In the

opinion of Robert Bishop, "one can look at Amish quilts, in part, as an unconscious expression of the need for individual achievement, for differentiation."[19]

It has been suggested that the color combinations express some of the philosophies of the culture in which they were created. For example, many of the quilts, particularly those from Lancaster County, one of the strictest of the communities, use very sober, saturated colors. These tones seem to be appropriate choices of a community that so highly values stability, harmony, and practicality.[20] These quilts are thought to reflect the tension created by such a society. [21]

The quilts also express the complex interaction the Amish society has with the non-Amish world in both their intentional avoidance of it and its influence on their culture. This can be seen in the initial choice of patterns made by the earliest quiltmakers, in direct opposition to what was popular with the rest of American women, and in the subsequent influence and acceptance of non-Amish patterns apparent in later quilts.

Amish Quilts

Quiltmaking appears to have become popular with the Amish sometime during the late nineteenth century, and does not appear to have been practiced prior to the Amish migration to the United States. The earliest records documenting the presence of quilts among the Amish are from the 1830s and 1840s, but quiltmaking does not appear to have become significantly popular among the Amish until after the 1880s.[22] The majority of Amish quilts were made between the years of 1880 and 1960, with the most aesthetically striking and distinctive made prior to 1940.[23]

The emergence of quiltmaking may have been partially due to the advance of technology, felt even within the technology-resistant Amish culture. During the late 1800s, home-based production of textiles decreased and the Amish began to rely on commercially produced textiles (fabrics). The spinning wheel and flax hatchel became outdated. Sewing machines and quilting frames became the new textile tools.[24] This is indicative of the social role of quiltmaking within the Amish culture, a role that had been previously held by homemade textile production. When technology made this obsolete, quiltmaking filled the void.

During the time period of 1880 to 1940, Amish quilts were made out of the same fabrics that were used for Amish clothes–cottons and wools. Initially, the only colors available for quiltmaking were the deep, rich colors used for clothing. In some of the communities, additional colors were introduced when they were included in packages prepared by salespeople. In the spirit of frugality and of a desire to not be wasteful, these fabrics were used in quiltmaking, as they were not permitted for use in clothing.[25] In this manner, a wider variety of colors was introduced into Amish quilts, and, as in all cases, acceptance of specific colors varied based on the conservatism of individual church congregations. In almost all communities, prints of any kind were forbidden, which is why it is extremely rare to see them in Amish quilts.

Fabric availability and use is one area in which the social constraints of the society may have contributed to the aesthetic value of the quilts. Often fabric for a quilt was chosen, based not on aesthetics, but on the most efficient use of remnants. Consequently, in many cases, several shades of a particular color may have been used for a single element of a quilt. (For example, three different shades of mauve to make a stripe, or several different shades of black to make a background.)[26] While not intentional, this often led to a more visually interesting quilt than one in which perfectly matching shades were used.

This interesting effect resultant of the dependence upon availability and efficient use of material is similar to the role played by chance in the works of some artists of the Dada and Surrealist movements. The removal of design control from the hands of the artist through a random and arbitrary nature of construction is thought to have resulted in works valuable for their aesthetics and their commentary on social culture. [27]

Also, the choices made by the Amish involving color were not governed by a sense of "matching" complementary colors; rather, the choices were intuitive. In the Amish society, where simplicity and conformity were highly valued, indoctrination of color awareness did not occur. There was no need among the Amish to color-coordinate one's clothing or home accessories, so the quiltmakers did not have the usual inhibitions regarding color placement. The intuitive, primal color choices made by those early quiltmakers are one of the most striking elements of the quilts.

Based on surviving examples, it appears that the earliest Amish quilts were whole cloth quilts. This was a conscious choice made by the Amish in an effort to separate themselves from the rest of modern society, in which whole cloth quilts were considered to be outdated. While the rest of the non-Amish world was trending toward highly elaborate, showy quilts with tops comprised of many pieces, the choice of the Amish to make plain, whole cloth quilts served to fulfill their desire to remain separate from "worldly" ways and to avoid pride and frivolity.[28] By the turn of the century, the Amish had moved to creating pieced quilts, but used very simple, powerful geometric designs, again, as a sort of rebellion against popular culture.

The Amish also resisted the use of applique, in accordance with their general prohibition against representational figures (for example photography), believing them to be too showy or prideful. They also may have considered covering one fabric with another wasteful. If applique work was incorporated, it was done in a way to prevent pridefulness, for example, leaving the edges of appliqued fabric raw to detract from the finished look.[29]

It is interesting to note, that for all the care taken to create very plain pieced tops, the actual quilting done by the Amish was extremely elaborate (see Figure 1). The designs were often intricate and detailed, in representative shapes such as swags, leaves, rose petals, baskets, urns, sprays, and feathers. This fine stitching provided a way of incorporating elaborate designs without violating the need for simplicity. Once again, social customs served to create an interesting facet to the quilts. The fine, detailed hand quilting is a counterpoint to the large, geometric designs, adding to the quilts' beauty and appeal.

After the earliest whole cloth quilts, the next step in the design process was the creation of medallion style quilts, as is seen in the Center Diamond pattern which is strongly identified with the Amish of Lancaster County. Some of the earliest patterns used by Amish quiltmakers were the Center Square, the Nine Patch (with variations), Irish Chain, and simple triangles. As quiltmaking progressed, the designs were modified and each individual quiltmaker interpreted the designs differently through color placement and subtle changes to the designs themselves. Amish quiltmaking did not occur in complete isolation from non-Amish

Figure 1: Plain Quilt, 75 x 75.5 inches, probably Mifflin County, PA, c. 1915. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1997.007.0799.

society, and through the progression of time, non-Amish influences can be seen, as more patterns and quilting designs are incorporated into the Amish quiltmaking process.

Many of the design elements of Amish quilts are perhaps symbolic of cultural aspects of the societies in which they were created. One key characteristic distinguishing Amish from non-Amish quilts is the presence of multiple borders. Some scholars have suggested that these borders are representative of the Ordnung which so firmly restricts the life of the Amish.[30] The quilt pattern "Sunshine and Shadow" (also known as "Trip Around the World"), which was very popular with Amish quiltmakers,

usually has rows of light-colored squares followed by rows of dark-colored ones. Some quilt historians have thought this to be representative of the realities of Amish life. In the words of Robert Bishop, "This quilt is a concrete embodiment of the polarization inherent in Amish society–the dualities of light and dark, good and evil, the worldly and the spiritual."[31]

According to Amish women from Lancaster County, often a quilt design would be chosen by a mother with the purpose of following family tradition. Consequently, a particular pattern would be passed down and seen predominantly in one family for successive generations.[32] This is indicative of the Amish need for conformity within family units.

Finally, design and color choice within individual quilts can be representative of the differences between individual Amish communities. Design differences are seen between quilts made by members of Lancaster County communities and those made by members of Mifflin County communities. Further differences can be seen in quilts created by members of Amish communities in the Midwest. These differences can provide information about the social differences that existed among the communities.

For example, Midwestern quilts often had an overall lighter, brighter color palette, and incorporated busier, more intricately pieced patterns. In addition, they often displayed less elaborate quilting than their Pennsylvania counterparts. These characteristics are consistent with the fact that Lancaster County Amish communities were stricter and more conservative than other Amish communities. While the Lancaster quiltmakers used fewer pieces to create simpler designs (in accordance with their stricter interpretation of the need for simplicity), they performed much finer, elaborate quilting stitches. This is evidenced both by the overall quality of their workmanship, and by the fact that Lancaster County quilts generally contain large borders, allowing room for this exquisite quilting.[33]

In addition to being more conservative than other Amish communities, the Lancaster County Amish were more economically secure than some of their counterparts. This allowed for the purchase of fabric specifically for quiltmaking (as opposed to using clothing remnants and

scraps only), which made the designs incorporating very large pieces and large borders possible.

One other notable difference between Pennsylvania and Midwestern Amish quilts is the evidence of influence by non-Amish culture. The migration of Amish from the east to the Midwest demanded more interaction with the non-Amish world, and as a result, Midwestern Amish quilts show a greater influence of patterns and colors which were not traditionally used by the Amish in Lancaster County. In summary, variation of design in quilts made in individual Amish communities is representative of societal differences between the communities including dissimilar economic conditions, varying levels of church conservatism, and the degree of interaction with the outside world.[34] Specific design elements of the quilts provided for enhanced uniformity both of individual congregations and family units.[35]

Significance of Amish Quilts

The worth of Amish quilts encompasses far more than pure aesthetics. Quilts possess value for the role they have historically played in the lives of their creators, and Amish quilts appear to have significant social importance. While providing examples of the integration of art into everyday life, the quilts also provide an insight into the social framework in which they were made and in which they played an important role. Separation of the aesthetic beauty from the social factors seems impossible, as the former would not exist without the latter.

The creation of Amish quilts was shaped by many social dynamics that were directly related to the system of spiritual belief integrated into the Amish way of life. The quilts visually demonstrate, through their excellent craftsmanship, the strong work ethic of the Amish and their belief in doing a job well. The aesthetic beauty of the quilts is a testament to the marriage of art and utility, a major tenet of the Amish belief system.

In addition to the visual appeal of the final product, the actual process of quiltmaking reinforces many of the principles of Amish beliefs. In the words of Rachel Pellman, who has written several books about the Amish and their quilts, "when one views Amish quilts strictly as art

objects, they are only beautiful. When one understands the community from which the quilts come, they become more than striking art pieces. Quilts communicate some of the wholeness of life."[36]

Visually, Amish quilts convey information about the society in which they were created. The colors in Amish quilts were derived from the colors of Amish clothing, as often the same materials were used in both. Clothing color is a conscious choice made by the church, as a means of enforcing their belief in conformity. It provides a visible barrier to the outside world and provides a visible link within their society, enhancing cohesion of community. This cohesion of community is evident in the quilts, as they are easily distinguished and identified by geographic church group. [37]

It is interesting that, despite this characteristic of uniformity, individual quilts are still unique to each other, even though they share the same basic elements. This may be an indication of the way in which human creativity can find a way to express itself even within a relatively rigid framework. Another symbolic aspect of the quilts is their "minimalist" design quality, which reflects the conservative Christian values of the Amish and symbolizes their attempt to reject all parts of the "modern" world.[38]

Often the quilting process (putting in the quilting stitches, as opposed to piecing the top) was a cooperative activity, completed by many women, and the process of quilting as a group was an important social custom, allowing for the strengthening of community ties. Quilting parties were important because they intertwined "the pleasures of friendship and a sense of community with the principles of work and mutual support which are so important in Amish culture," writes Eve Granick.[39] Shared quilting activity provided a time for social interaction and an increased sense of community, without violating the restrictions against idleness. The quilting parties provided a time for women to share important information. For example, a mother and daughter working on a wedding quilt would be able to discuss the daughter's upcoming role as wife and mother and what her new responsibilities would be.

The quilting parties also provided a means to connect generations, as elderly women who were unable to perform more physically demanding tasks were able to contribute their skills and wisdom during the

quiltmaking process, thus making valuable societal contributions, despite their physical limitations. Young children could also be involved, and quiltmaking proved to be an integrative, inter-generational task.[40] Quiltmaking also provided a means of showing affection in a community that typically values restraint of such displays. The time and effort that went into producing a quilt as a wedding gift for a son or daughter, for example, provided evidence of the depths of one's affection in a manner acceptable in such a society.[41]

It is the opinion of this author that it is impossible to separate the significance of the social and spiritual aspects influencing the creation of quilts from the beauty and artistry of the final product. Without the many spiritually derived, social components influencing the quiltmaking process, the final products would have been very different. In fact, a great decline in the artistry of Amish quilts occurred after the 1940s, and many of the factors contributing to this decline are resultant of the change in some of the Amish societal dynamics.

After this time the Amish began to make quilts for sale, in addition to making them for use within their own community. They became much more focused on creating quilts that would please the non-Amish consumer, and the intuitive color combinations that were so striking in the earlier quilts were lost. Rachel Pellman, who worked in a fabric shop in Lancaster from 1980 to 1993, noted that it was not unusual for an Amish woman purchasing fabric to inquire as to what was most popular at the moment.[42] Rather than creating intuitively, the quiltmakers were attempting to cater to "popular" taste.

The level of workmanship, particularly in terms of the elaborate quilting stitches, also declined in the latter part of the twentieth century, due in part to the availability of synthetic fibers, specifically polyester batting, which did not demand the same degree of quilting as did batting made of wool and/or cotton. Also important was the shift in focus of the creative process. Can something made for sale embody the same spirit as something painstakingly crafted to express affection for a loved one? And when the focus of the time spent quilting as a communal effort shifts from social to financial importance, there is an effect on the time that will be spent. It is not feasible to spend the same quantity of time producing a work that will be sold for profit as it is to spend time in which the process

of creating is just as important as the final product. The purity of creation was lost, and the aesthetic appeal of the quilts declined as a result.

The environment that allowed for the creation of many striking quilts existed in large part due to the Amish beliefs in humility, simplicity, and practicality. A limited color palette was available, no representational imagery was permitted, excellent craftsmanship was expected. With the parameters defined for them, the Amish quiltmakers were able to channel their creativity into a very defined type of production. Many abstract painters of the twentieth century strove to construct for themselves similar environments in which to create that which they considered "pure" art. Many of these artists created their paintings as a way to express emotion or evoke feelings at a sensory level.

Comparison with Abstract Painting

There have been many comparisons made between the appearance of Amish quilts and abstract paintings, as the visual similarities are obvious.[43] Figure 2 is an example of a Log Cabin quilt that exhibits a visual similarity to Piet Mondrian's *Composition 1916*, seen in Figure 3. Other examples include the Center Square quilt (Figure 4) and Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square: Apparition* (Figure 5); *New Harmony* by Paul Klee (Figure 6) and the One-Patch quilt (Figure 7); and Frank Stella's *Fez* (Figure 8) viewed alongside the Amish quilts of Stripes (Figure 9). The intersecting circular element of the Double Wedding Ring pattern (Plate 2) is visually similar to another Stella work, *Lac Laronge III*.

Note not only the visual similarities of these two groups, but also their underlying philosophical similarities. The abstract painters produced their works as a result of highly intellectualized thought, while the Amish quiltmakers intuitively produced works derived both in design and creation from their basic spiritual beliefs. While the starting points for the creation of Amish quilts and abstract paintings could not be farther apart, both bodies of work share some similarities in the underlying philosophies that contributed to their creation and, in turn, this may account for their visual similarities.

Despite the aesthetic similarities, is the comparison between traditional "high" art (i.e. painting) and folk art, such as Amish quilts, a

fair one? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in one's view of art. Historically, some of the differences between folk art and high art have been related to the creative process. Generally, folk art was made, not for consumption by people outside of the producing community, but for the community itself, often for utilitarian purposes, as with Amish quilts. The production of high art seemingly had motives relating to things outside of the artist's community, whether it was recognition of the artist, financial profit, or advancement of ideals and philosophy.

But while the motives for creation may have been very different, were the creative processes so different? Architect and Bauhaus[44] founder Walter Gropius (1883–1969) wrote in a 1919 manifesto regarding the distinctions between art and "craft,"

> such distinctions are 'arrogant' . . . There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman . . . The artist is an exalted craftsman. In rare moments of inspiration, moments beyond the control of his will, the grace of heaven may cause his work to blossom into art. But proficiency in his craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies a source of creative imagination.[45]

Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholoy-Nagy (1895–1946), also very influential in the Bauhaus, commented on the role of the environment in the creation process, "Art has an educational and formative ideological function, since not only the conscious but also the subconscious mind absorbs the social atmosphere which can be translated into art."[46]

Is artistic inspiration limited only to those that create "art" within the parameters that have been defined and accepted by society? Not insignificantly, traditionally these parameters have been defined and set by men, while, historically, creation of "high" art has been dominated by men and creation of folk art has been largely the purview of women.[47] It may be easy to overlook the value and significance of creations that are not seen through the lens of accepted artistic merit, and this author believes this to be the case with Amish quilts (actually quilts in general) until the late twentieth century.

Regarding Amish quilts, Robert Hughes notes " . . . seen out of their original context of use, hanging on a wall, they make it very plain how

Figure 2: Log Cabin Quilt, 55.5 x 39 inches, Midwest, c. 1930–50. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2000.007.0022.

Figure 3: Piet Mondrian, *Composition 1916*, 1916, Oil on canvas with wood strip at bottom edge, 119 x 75.1 cm (46 ⅞ x 29 ⅝ inches), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 49.1229. © Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International, Warrenton, VA.

Figure 4: Center Square Quilt, 73.5 x 74.5 inches, probably Lancaster County, PA, c. 1910–30. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2000.003.0103.

absurd the once jealously guarded hierarchical distinctions between 'folk' and 'high' art can be." [48] Certainly, many of the same criteria can be used to judge the aesthetic impact of both paintings and quilts: originality of concept, power of expression, interest and balance of color, line, pattern, texture, scale, cohesion, and integrity of overall work.[49]

Once the visual comparison between quilts and abstract paintings has been established, it is interesting to compare their philosophical similarities. Quilt historian Robert Shaw notes "Amish quilts proceed

Figure 5: Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Apparition*, 1959, Oil on Masonite, 120.6 x 120.6 cm (47 ½ x 47 ½ inches), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 61.1590. ©The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

from the place modern artists seek to find."[50] Many abstract painters of the twentieth century strove to create works expressing complete aesthetic purity and wanted to eliminate any extraneous factors that would detract from the purity of what they experienced through their senses. This is quite similar to the intuitive creation of abstract designs and color placement of Amish women creating quilts.

Figure 6: Paul Klee, *New Harmony (Neue Harmonie)*, 1936, Oil on Canvas, 93.6 x 66.3 cm (36 7/8 x 26 1/8 inches), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 71.1960. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Figure 7: One Patch Quilt, 33 x 32 inches, Mrs. Jacob Schlabach, probably Kalona, IA, c. 1920–40. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2000.007.0031.

Many ideals are shared by abstract painters and Amish quiltmakers. Simplicity was valued by both, as was the intuitive creative process. The earliest forms of both mediums occurred as a reaction against the modern world–in the case of the abstract painters, against the materialism of the nineteenth century. In both cases, deliberation was taken to create works that went against the popular designs that preceded them. Both groups placed a high value on harmony and balance, and both believed in the homogeneity of life, art, and the universe, as in the case of the artists

Figure 8: Frank Stella, *Fez*, 1964, Fluorescent Alkyd on Canvas, unframed: 77 x 77 inches (195.58 x 195.58 cm); framed: 78 ¼ x 78 ½ inches (198.755 x 199.39 cm) © 2005 Frank Stella/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy of Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1964.

of De Stijl, a Dutch group whose works emphasized geometric shapes and pure colors.[51]

Many of the pioneer artists in the movement of abstract art [Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Malevich Kasimir (1878–1935), and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)] believed that the ideal order of abstract or non-objective art was linked to a coming social utopian order and that artists had been summoned to help reconstruct humanity's life and world. Mondrian, in particular, thought that the abstractionist's ultimate goal was the

Figure 9: Stripes Quilt, 37 x 45 inches, Kansas, c. 1910–20. Collection of Michael Oruch. Courtesy of Eve Wheatcroft Granick.

expression of pure reality. He believed that in the new social utopia, art would not exist as a separate thing but would be totally integrated into utilitarian objects and everyday life. What he foresaw, in his own words, was,

> . . . the end of art as a thing separated from our surrounding environ-

> ment . . . By the unification of architecture, sculpture, and painting, a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as "applied" art, but being purely constructive will aid in the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty.[52]

The communal spirit of creation that was present within the Amish community was one that honored the principle of humility, while strengthening ties among its members. The quilts were not "signed" by their creators, as traditional works of art are, and it is difficult today for historians to identify the individual makers of surviving quilts. Alsatian artist Jean (Hans) Arp (1886–1966), who was prominently involved with the Dada movement, believed that artists should work together, rather than individually, in a desire to reject egotism, which he felt hampered the creative process. He believed that the desire to produce "masterpieces" discouraged cooperation and that, "works of concrete art should not be signed by the artists . . . Artists should work in communities as they did in the Middle Ages."[53]

It is necessary to also note the many differences between abstract painters and Amish quiltmakers. The abstract painters reached the point of abstraction through a highly intellectualized process, often as a result of working through many other stages during their careers. This is in direct opposition to the Amish quiltmakers who proceeded only as a matter of social conformity, without consciously exploring and choosing a method of expression. Some abstract artists, such as Malevich, rejected the idea of art being utilitarian. His goal was expression only. Additionally, the abstract, non-representational, geometric art of many of the abstract painters lacked the sense of the artist's hand or "touch." This was simply not the case with Amish quilts, which shared the flat, geometric design, but were often vehicles to display the artists' painstaking care in making.

So while Amish quilts and abstract paintings share many visual traits (flatness, monumentality of scale, use of repeating patterns or geometric form, intense, saturated colors)[54] and underlying philosophical origins (simplicity, harmony, intuitive creation, reaction against previous modernism), they are very different entities. They are both works of art, pro-

viding aesthetic stimulation, but both provide their own unique messages regarding their creators and creative processes.

What the comparison with abstract painting has allowed, in the case of Amish quilts, is the culturally accepted artistic lens through which to view the quilts. However, there is much more to the quilts, which need to be evaluated on their own merits, not merely as a comparison to a completely different medium. To assign their value based only on such a comparison to abstract painting ignores the other aspects of their creation that gives them such significance.

Summary

The creation of Amish quilts occurred in an environment and through a process that cannot be separated from the final product. It is the conditions of the environment and the circumstances of the processes that allow the final product to exist in the form that it does. Indeed, we have seen that the final form changed when the conditions of the environment and creative process changed, as occurred after 1940.

The spiritual beliefs of the Amish resulted in the existence of an environment that determined the approach used by the women in the creation of quilts. The basic beliefs in humility, conformity, separation from the world, and reserved displays of affection, all led to social circumstances directly responsible for the appearance of the final product: lack of preconceived ideals regarding design and color placement; creation in a "pure" environment with no motives for making a profit or furthering an ideal; intuitive creation; pure expression, often as a means of conveying affection; purposeful differentiation from the "popular"; and a thrifty use of what was available. Without the environment, which was not determined by the individual quiltmaker, the quilts produced would not have the appearance that they do.

While the philosophical ideals of the community affected the attitudes toward the creation of the quilts, they also influenced the process by which the quilts were made. The act of quiltmaking was just as important to the community as was the final product that was created. Quiltmaking was socially important for the time and space it provided for women's social interaction, for strengthening community ties, for

bridging the generations, for providing an acceptable means of expressing affection, and for providing an important outlet for women's creativity. With an absence of any of these factors, the quilts produced would have been aesthetically different.

After the 1940s, the nature of quiltmaking within the Amish community changed. Availability of synthetic materials in part contributed to this change, but the shift in social attitudes toward the process was also important. Quiltmaking became a means of making financial profit for the Amish, and, as a result, the same time was not invested in individual quilt production. No longer were the quilts created with the same painstaking care, and no longer was the design and color placement determined intuitively. The quiltmaker was now mindful of what was popular and what would be appreciated by the outside world. What had begun as a purposeful turning away from the outside had come full-circle to a production for outside consumption.

The Amish quilts discussed in this paper were created in the early part of the twentieth century, contemporaneously or many years prior to the creation of the abstract paintings to which they would later be compared. They were created by women who gave little thought to the intellectual design process of their creation; rather, these women were following the patterns of daily life that had been carefully prescribed by their highly restrictive community. Upon their creation, the women did not have any aspirations for them outside their own communities, while perhaps within their communities, hoping that the quilts, through their beauty and craftsmanship, might convey a sense of the love and care that went into their making.

Not until the 1970s did these quilts begin to be appreciated for their pure aesthetic beauty, not in small part due to the Whitney exhibition. Public interest in them has grown significantly since that time, perhaps serving to fuel the decline in creative significance of Amish quilts created since 1950. Attention to public taste contributed to a decline in artistry.

After a downturn in popularity through most of the century, quilting experienced a resurgence following the 1971 Whitney exhibit. Today many artists chose quilting as their medium of expression, and several of them cite pre-1940 Amish quilts as influences on their work. Quilt artist Michael James "spoke for many when he said that he first realized that

quilts could be art when he saw Amish work." He cites among his many influences painters, studio craft artists, artists' writing, Amish quilts, as well as other textiles.[55]

Contemporary quilt artist Stan Book began as a painter before switching to quilting as a medium. He cites Amish quilts as an important component in his study of pattern and color interaction. With his quilt designs, he attempts to incorporate Amish tradition with influences of modern artists such as Paul Cezanne (1839–1906), Klee, Albers, and Rothko.[56]

These contemporary quilt artists share much more in common with the abstract painters of the twentieth century than do the Amish quiltmakers. Contemporary quilt artists have chosen fabric as their medium of expression, and they are not working within the same type of societal and psychological boundaries as did the Amish women. They freely explore and intellectualize their creative process, as did the abstract painters of the century. While many may have consciously chosen quilting with a desire to maintain a link to their historical past, in many cases, the utilitarian aspect of quiltmaking has completely disappeared, as contemporary "art quilts" are made for aesthetic purposes only. Amish quilts share strong visual similarities with the abstract art of the century, but their creation is unique to their society.

While it is tempting to limit the critique of Amish quilts to the aesthetics which so closely resemble modern abstract painting, to do so is a disservice to them and their creators. A great deal of their significance lies in the process by which they were created, and much of their aesthetic appeal is a direct result of this. So many of the modern artists seemed to be searching for a way to create art in a pure, private, almost transcendental way. Amish quilts were created in such an environment, not because the creators manipulated such an atmosphere, but because it existed prior to the process of creation.

Amish culture had nothing to do with providing an environment which would encourage the creative process, rather just the opposite. The environment existed for the purpose of applying very strict, rigid spiritual beliefs to every area of practical life. What resulted, as a product of creation in this setting, provides us with a valuable insight into the application of beliefs within a society and, possibly, the creative nature of

humans, regardless of environment. In the opinion of this author, this is as worthy of attention as the aesthetic quality of the quilts. The fact that the quilts are products resultant of processes very different from those accepted in the world of "high" art does not decrease their significance. It adds to their interest and is, in fact, a valuable component of their existence, inseparable from their aesthetic appeal.

The visual beauty of Amish quilts and our knowledge of the environment in which they were created provide us with an opportunity to examine accepted notions regarding the creation of art. The highly intellectualized method (which has historically been male dominated) utilizing the media of paint and sculpting materials resulted in some creations (deemed artistically valuable) which are visually similar to Amish quilts. Does the process of creation determine the validity or significance of the resultant object?

In the case of early twentieth century Amish quilts, the process was integral to the appearance of the final product but also had great social and cultural significance. In both the case of Amish quilts and modern abstract art, the final products are objects which can appeal, evoke emotion, or provide pleasure to certain audiences. Our careful consideration of Amish quilts may expand our view of the "artistic" creative process and enhance our appreciation of artistic beauty, regardless of its origin.

Notes and References

1. Robert Hughes and Julie Silber, *Amish: The Art of the Quilt* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 13.
2. Robert Shaw, *The Art Quilt* (Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1997), 10, 33.
3. Hughes and Silber, 7.
4. Jonathan Holstein, *American Pieced Quilts* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 9.
5. Ibid., 11.
6. Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1991) 33.
7. Ibid., 27.
8. Ibid., 37.

9. Ibid., 54.
10. Shaw, 29.
11. This break was initiated due to a belief that the Mennonite church had become too liberal, specifically in their laxness in the practice of shunning individuals deviant from church teachings. Twenty-six congregations were in the original Amish order, twenty from the Alsace region of France, five from Germany, and one Swiss.
12. Robert Bishop and Elizabeth Safanda, *A Gallery of Amish Quilts: Design Diversity from a Plain People* (New York: E.P.Dutton & Company, 1976), 8. Eve Wheatcroft Granick, *The Amish Quilt* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1989), 18, 37–38.
13. Granick, 13. Frank Miele, "Amish Expressionism: The Kinship Between Amish Quilts and Abstract Paintings," *Art and Antiques*, Vol. 8 (1991): 62–7.
14. Granick, 73.
15. Rachel Pellman and Kenneth Pellman, *A Treasury of Amish Quilts* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 54.
16. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury,* 54.
17. Bishop and Safanda, 14.
18. Granick, 14–18. Hughes and Silber, 31–35.
19. Bishop and Safanda, 4.
20. Hughes and Silber, 33.
21. Granick, 9, "the tensions that arise out of the effort to maintain a proper balance between pride and humility, and between simplicity and more complex 'worldly' choices are well expressed in Amish quilts."
22. Ibid. Hughes and Silber, 26.
23. Granick, 9, 29. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury,* 6.
24. Granick, 46.
25. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 8.
26. Bishop and Safanda, 15.
27. Artists of the Dada and/or Surrealist movements include Francis Picabia, Morton Schamberg, Jean Arp, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Andre Breton, Andre Masson, and Joan Miro. Some of the artists of the Dada or Surrealist movements allowed chance to play a role in the creation of art. An example are the collages made by Hans Arp in which paper was cut and allowed to fall freely, then glued into place in the pattern in which it fell. One of these works is titled *Collage Made According to the Laws of Chance* (1916, Kuntsmuseum, Basle). Arp turned to this technique when, in frustration, he tore up a work he was composing by conventional means, threw it on the floor, and found the pattern to be pleasing and freeing. "If Dada was to

be considered as 'anti-art,' then this was one of the purest and most provocative of such gestures, even if the results were also of great formal and aesthetic value. By letting chance intervene so directly, the artist's role was startlingly reduced in a way that commented upon the state of the world in which fate had overtaken the determination of human plans." Matthew Gale, *Dada and Surrealism* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 63.

28. Granick, 31.
29. Ibid. Janneken Smucker, Patricia Cox Crews, and Linda Welters, *Amish Crib Quilts from the Midwest: The Sara Miller Collection* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 27.
30. Smucker, et al, 35.
31. Bishop and Safanda, 20.
32. Ibid., 15.
33. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 8, 32–33. Robert Shaw, *Quilts: A Living Tradition* (Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1995), 174.
34. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 8–9.
35. Information regarding group identity, belief systems, and degree of contact with other cultures can be found through examination of a large collection of quilts from a specific community. Linda Welters conducted a study of the Sarah Miller Collection of Amish crib quilts, housed at the International Quilt Study Center, and her results are detailed in the book, *Amish Crib Quilts From the Midwest* by Smucker, et al. Welters writes regarding her study, "symmetry, one of the underlying principles of design is applied to . . . explore how art intersects with culture," (63) and she references the work *Symmetries of Culture* by Washburn and Crowe as providing the basis for the methodology employed.
36. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 55.
37. Bishop and Safanda, 11.
38. Shaw, *Living Tradition*, 171.
39. Granick, 157.
40. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 7–8, 55. Bishop and Safanda, 15.
41. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 7.
42. Rachel Pellman, conversation and e-mail exchange with author, April 2004.
43. Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 113. Pellman and Pellman, *Treasury*, 54. Miele, 62–7. Bishop and Safanda, 7. Hughes and Silber, 14–15. Shaw, *Living Tradition*, 171.
44. The Bauhaus was, "a fusion of an arts and crafts school and a conventional

art academy, first in Weimar and after 1925 in Dessau . . . Gropius was responsible for the inclusion on the Bauhaus faculty of such major artists as Kandinsky, Klee, and Moholy-Nagy . . . [and] the school produced such students as the architect Marcel Breuer and painter Josef Albers, each of whom later taught there." Sam Hunter, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art* (New York: Prentice Hall and Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 198.

45. Shaw, *Art Quilt*, 12.
46. Dore Ashton, ed., *Artists on Art* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 68.
47. Hughes and Silber, 19.
48. Ibid., 15.
49. Shaw, *Art Quilt*, 12.
50. Shaw, *Living Tradition*, 171.
51. De Stijl was a movement in abstract art that took place in the Netherlands. Translated, it means "The Style" and was led by artists Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg. "Their aim was to reconcile the findings of Cubism with a more comprehensive machine-age aesthetic that could have meaning for all the arts, fine and applied." Hunter, et al, 159–160.
52. Hunter, et al, 162.
53. Ashton, 50.
54. Shaw, *Art Quilt*, 29.
55. Shaw, *Living Tradition*, 175, *Art Quilt*, 25.
56. Shaw, *Living Tradition*, 150, 176.