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Innovation Among Southern California Quilters: An Anthropological Perspective

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This paper will discuss changes in quilting in a modern urban setting. I used a comparative anthropological approach to view quilting within the context of other worldwide ethnic arts. Quilting is a traditional art form that, like other aspects of culture, is subject to change. Changes have occurred not only in technology, but also in communication, professionalization, and individual reasons for quilting. I will also examine art revivals and how innovation affects and may help perpetuate them.

By examining a small part of a culture, it is possible to see changes that may be reflections of changes in the overall culture. Anthropologists theorize that art forms such as quilting are particularly sensitive to such changes. Through the study of two different quilt groups, we can see what changes have occurred and what caused them.

Anthropological literature concerning art contains few studies of the modernization of folk art. William Bascom has pointed out that the arts are a focal point for the study of change, internal innovations and individual creativity.¹ Art, on a cross-cultural level, is defined as "any embellishment of ordinary living that is achieved with competence and has describable form."² It is not the purpose of this paper to distinguish between "art" and "craft." That difference is not recognized in many other cultures and is important here only if made by the quilters themselves. H.G. Barnett, in his extensive study *Innovation*, defines innovation as "any thought, behavior or thing that is new because it is qualitatively different from existing norms."³ This em-

phasis on qualitative, rather than quantitative features lets us see both recombinations of existing parts and additions of new things as innovative. An example of the recombinative style of innovation is a quilt where the quilting, setting, and block patterns are derived from three different quilts. Innovation is often perceived as "good" in our society. In this paper innovation, or the lack of it, is an observation, not a value judgement.

The two groups of quilters included in this study were chosen for their anticipated contrast. The Salvation Army Day Home League of Santa Ana, California, consists of six quilters, with quilting experience of fifteen to over seventy years. They are part of a larger Salvation Army church group who work on crafts projects for a Christmas boutique and as gifts for nursing home residents. This group was the only one of its kind identified at the beginning of the study. The Day Home League was chosen as a base group from which to judge how much change has occurred. Of course, changes have occurred within this group also; however, they were as close to a traditional quilting group as could be located.

The second group is the South Bay Quilt Guild of Torrance, California. It has slightly over one hundred members, ranging in age from the mid-twenties to over seventy-five. Several other guilds existed in the vicinity, but were unavailable for this research because new members, including researchers, were not allowed. Fieldwork was conducted from January to August 1985 at regular meetings of each group and through personal interviews and questionnaires completed by members of each group.

I studied differences in training, professionalism, communication, technology, and personal reasons for quilting. One theory on change and innovation suggests that groups whose members have varied backgrounds and/or increased forms of communication bring together different influences and viewpoints, thereby encouraging innovation.⁴ I compared regional origins, age, education, paid employment, and modes of communication.

Since World War II, there has been massive population growth in the Los Angeles area. From primarily agricultural land, the area has become heavily urbanized with large suburban housing areas within a seventy-five mile radius of downtown Los Angeles. Both of the quilt

groups are in the suburbs, and have memberships which reflect the impact of migration into this area.

In the Day Home League, one of the six members is a native Californian, three are from the midwest, and one each is from the northeast and south. They all have lived in California for at least ten years. In the South Bay Quilt Guild (SBQG), a quarter of the members were born in California, and almost all of those are in the youngest (26–50) age group. Of the non-native Californians, the geographic origins are similar to the Day Home League by percentage (42 per cent from the midwest, 14 per cent from the west, 16 per cent from the east, 19 per cent from the south). Thus the membership of both groups is composed of people from throughout the United States, but predominantly from the midwest. Therefore, regional origins are not an area of difference between the groups.

The members of the Salvation Army Day Home League (DHL) ranged in age from seventy-four to ninety-three years of age at the time of the study. The SBQG age range was late twenties to over seventy-five. (Table 1) Life histories of quiltmakers imply that quilting was traditionally taught to adolescents and young adults.⁵ However, these groups are not represented in the Guild's membership. Women seem to join the Guild after they are already established on their life paths of family and/or career. Guild members' ages cover a span of over fifty years while the DHL span is less than twenty. However, the age ranges alone do not appear to account for the differences between the groups.

Ages	0–25	26–50	51–75	76+	Unknown
SADHL	0	0	1	5	0
SBQG	0	28	26	3	3

Three members of the Guild overlap in age with the DHL group. The pattern of education, employment, years of experience quilting, and methods of learning quilting of these three are the same as other Guild members and dramatically different from that of the Day Home League quilters.

In all areas, the DHL is more homogeneous than the Guild. Only one DHL member had formal education beyond high school. All were widowed and were either retired or had always been homemakers. They all had at least fifteen years experience quilting and were mainly self-taught or learned from family members. While only one DHL member had used more than one method of learning quilting, Guild members averaged 1.75 ways.

Table 2
Method of instruction

How learned	SBQG (by age group)				SADHL
	26-50	51-75	76+	Unknown	
self taught	15	11	1	1	4
classes	15	17	3	2	0
how-to books	10	12	2	0	1
family	3	7	1	1	2
friend	4	0	0	0	0
total response/ # of people	47/28	47/26	7/3	4/3	7/6

Guild members demonstrate a dramatic shift to learning quilting from classes and how-to books rather than from family or being self-taught. (Table 2) This does not mean that the personal, direct touch has been lost in teaching quilting, but that informal methods have been replaced by formal methods, and family members have been replaced by professionals as teachers.

However, almost two-thirds of both Guild and DHL respondents noted family influence in their decision to begin quilting. One SBQG member recalled:

My grandma taught me to quilt in self-defense to keep me out of her sewing box when I was around five or six. I still have the sewing basket she gave me for my birthday that year. I can also remember sitting under or behind the Christmas tree making that year's gifts. Another memory is sewing or embroidering or quilting or knitting instead of my homework. Now I have a little son, and I've quilted in front of him daily from the beginning of his days. I hope the colors and patterns and textures will inspire his little imagination in the future. In fact, the only solid item he eats is batting. He hates real food.

B., a DHL member, began quilting when she was 28. As she recalled:

My mother was a seamstress and all three of my sisters could sew beautifully, but I never learned. My mother-in-law taught me and I've been quilting ever since. She decided all three daughters-in-law should learn how to quilt, so she brought out her quilting frame, set it up with a quilt and sat us daughters-in-law down to quilt.

# of shows	SBQG (by age group)			Unknown	SADHL
	26-50	51-75	76+		
0	0	5	0	0	6
1-3	12	7	0	1	0
4-6	12	10	3	2	0
7+	4	3	0	0	0

A second theory in innovation states that change is more likely to occur when there are advocates for change.⁶ Teachers, how-to books, quilt magazines, and quilt shows all display new ideas and methods. DHL members did not subscribe to any quilt magazines, nor did they attend or have any interest in attending any of the numerous quilt shows held yearly in their area.

The Guild has institutionalized its communication network through its newsletter, which serves as a forum for informing members of classes, quilt shows, and exhibits. They have a "Show and Tell" session and guest speakers as regularly scheduled parts of each meeting, sponsor small sewing circles where members can work and talk together, and run a small lending library of quilt-related books. The Guild sponsors an annual quilt show, a yearly fashion show, and sponsors bus trips to other quilt shows several times a year. The Guild also belongs to the Southern California Council of Quilt Guilds, a forum for communication among representatives of fourteen member guilds encompassing almost twenty-four hundred quilters. (It has since grown to thirty-one guilds representing about thirty-six hundred quilters.) H.G. Barnett notes that the complexity of individual knowledge is more important than group complexity for innovation.⁷

The proliferation of different methods for acquiring knowledge encourages Guild members to obtain a wide breadth of knowledge.

Quilt shows are an integral part of being a quilter for SBQG members. Fifty-five of sixty had attended at least one show in the last year, while no Day Home League members had done so. (Table 3) Most Guild members attended an average of three to six shows a year. Quilt shows are seen as a major source of information and as an affirmation of the worth of what Guild members are doing. (Table 4) As one member said, "I like seeing an assortment of ideas and colors. It's always inspiring, and I go home recharged."

In all, Guild members seek, and the Guild strives to provide, greater channels of communication for accumulating knowledge. In contrast, the Day Home League quilters are without a large knowledge base for change because they have few channels through which to be exposed to new ideas, nor do they perceive a need for them.

Table 4
Reasons given for attending shows (SBQG)

	# times mentioned
see new ideas for patterns and colors	26
see others' work	16
merchant malls/quilt shops	13
aesthetics: appreciation of creativity, beauty of work and quality quilting	10
to see quilts	7
inspiration	4

Culture Change

There are many theories on what happens within a culture when it changes rapidly. Many of these postulated changes have been noted in other societies, and I found a number of them among quilters. Roy Sieber theorizes that a broadened range of standards becomes acceptable while a culture is in transition. This broadened choice changes the commitment to traditional styles and motifs while lowering critical standards.⁸

This can certainly be seen with SBQG quilters. Although the acme of quilting for most is still a traditional, hand-quilted bedquilt,

conformity has been replaced by variety. The group as a whole is more widely accepting of innovations such as machine quilting, novel patterns and material use, and non-traditional quilts such as wallhangings and miniatures.

	SBQG (by age group)				total	SADHL
	26-50	51-75	76+	unknown		
crib	23	23	1	2	49	5
full	23	24	3	3	53	6
wallhangings	17	15	1	3	37	1
clothing	15	15	2	1	33	0
other	7	5	1	0	13	0

Bedcoverings continue to be the most popular quilted object made. (Table 5) Full-size quilts are slightly more popular than crib quilts in both groups. While only one member of DHL had made a wallhanging, over half of SBQG members had made wallhangings (37 of 60) or clothing (33 of 60). Another twenty-five percent of the Guild members had made other miscellaneous items. Crib quilts and wallhangings were popular as presents and as items which could be finished quickly. Speed of completion also allowed greater experimentation with patterns and color. Small quilts give a quilter a sense of accomplishment without a vast expenditure of time. Wallhangings are the type of quilt made most often by the youngest age group of the Guild, where seventeen of twenty-six work outside the home, nine full-time. (Table 6) In contrast, only eleven Guild members in the 51-75 age group are employed, four as full-time workers.

Besides a broadened range of objects made, variations in materials, workmanship, and technology have also expanded within the Guild. While DHL members use only full-sized frames, SBQG members use frames, hoops, and pin basting. Tying is an acceptable short cut in both groups, but only SBQG members consider using machine quilting and "in the ditch" quilting, which is quilting in the seam line instead of one-quarter inch away.

Salvation Army quilters have expanded their material usage to

Table 6
Type of project done most often

	SBQG (by age group)				total	SADHL
	26-50	51-75	76+	unknown		
crib	7	7	1	0	15	0
full	8	11	1	1	21	4
wallhangings	11	2	0	1	14	0
clothing	4	1	1	0	6	0
other	2	0	0	0	2	0
no response	0	5	0	1	6	2

include polyester batting, double-knit and polyester blend fabrics, and bedsheets as quilt backings. Double-knit fabrics and bedsheets are less acceptable to Guild members. For Guild quilters, clothing and wallhangings may include almost any historic or ethnic textile. These include "found" objects and leftovers such as ribbons, lace, old buttons, Hmong embroidery, Cuna molas, or kimono fragments. Bedcoverings evidence a conservative trend towards using only 100 per cent cotton fabric, although polyester batting is the norm. This conservation seems to be based on a search for "heirloom" quality and is also part of the 1980s trend toward using only natural fibers.

Changes in the intended destination for an object greatly influence changes in ethnic arts worldwide. Items aimed for the tourist or export market are often made in miniature using standard or simplified patterns or shapes. Such changes are not seen in objects made for indigenous use. The market has had its influence on quilters also, although they have remained consumers rather than producers.

Wallhangings are examples of change through miniaturization. Other examples of change through miniaturization can be seen in southwestern Indian pottery, baskets, and rugs, African woodcarving, and Amazon Basin Indian pottery.⁹ The influence towards miniaturization in other ethnic arts usually has been related to changes in purpose from utilitarian objects to tourist souvenirs. Miniaturization not only speeds completion but reduces objects to a size suitable for packing in a suitcase. Miniaturization also reflects a change in application from a useful object, such as a water jug, to a decorative

piece. Wallhangings, miniature quilts, and clothing demonstrate this change in purpose and an emphasis on reduced construction time.

Standard patchwork and quilting patterns have existed since the nineteenth century. Pattern marketing is one of the most common areas of market influence. Standard design books and classes for log cabin, curved piecing, and Seminole patchwork produce quilts of similar design. **Dresden Plate, Double Wedding Ring, and Grandmother's Flower Garden** quilts from the 1930s are similar because of the wide distribution of standardized patterns. Many of today's patterns use "fast piecing" methods for traditional patterns. It is the method, not the pattern that differentiates them from patterns of the 1930s.

Maori and Eskimo carving designed for the western market, Guatemalan weaving used for purses, and Cuna blouses (molas) separated into discrete panels for use as wallhangings reflect the influence of new markets and a change in purpose. Mass marketing demands have fueled design simplification, standardization, and miniaturization in ethnic arts.

Among Guild quilters, the change in perception of quilts from utilitarian bedcoverings to purely decorative art demonstrates a similar change in purpose. DHL quilters demonstrate simplification in cases in which the process of making a quilt has been reduced to the almost final stage of the quilting itself. DHL quilters have not experimented with quilted clothing or other small items. Time is not a consideration in choice of form. As one DHL quilter said, "We have to do something, so we might as well do this." Since they begin with a completed, marked top, the choice of form is not theirs, but their preference is for a traditional, useful, full-size quilt.

Guild quilters are concerned with saving time and efficiently using available time. This fuels their methodology of simplification, standardization, and miniaturization. Guild quilters use fast piecing methods, "in the ditch" and machine quilting, and concentrate on smaller pieces like clothing, crib quilts, and wallhangings.

Alan Merriam theorizes that some types of art are more susceptible to change than others.¹⁰ In the Guild, quilted clothing is a new form of quilting without pre-set standards. The most experimentation occurs in clothing, while bedquilts follow more traditional lines.

Having an area where new ideas may be tested with little influence from past traditions allows for changes which may eventually expand to traditional forms.

Another change in purpose seen in quilting is in quilts made as art rather than for utility. The most common forms of this are wallhangings and miniatures. Quilts are a recognized medium for contemporary artists, and quilts compete in the art market with other art forms such as painting and sculpture. No members of DHL utilize their quilting this way. The one person in South Bay Quilter's Guild who is approaching this position is trained in art. Mentally aligning quilting with other fine arts encourages Guild quilters to emphasize creativity and individuality. Guild members are aware of "art quilts" through books, magazines, and exhibits. Art quilts are not an influence for DHL quilters.

Guild members have remained consumers rather than producers. Sixteen of the sixty respondents consider themselves professionals in sewing as teachers, seamstresses, and quilt shop owners, but not as quilt designers or quilters. Only one member quilts professionally. No DHL quilter considers herself a professional.

There are several levels of participation which may lead to professional involvement. One is exhibiting one's work, which thirty-two Guild members had done. Twelve of these had won prizes. Two DHL members had exhibited work, though none had won prizes. A second level is selling one's individual work, which twelve Guild members and two DHL members had done. The strongest correlation between self-defined professionalism and other activities occurs with having one's work published. Eight Guild members have had work published, six of whom consider themselves professionals. No DHL members have had their work published.

South Bay Guild quilts are made for use and appreciation primarily by family, friends, and other quilters. The Guild embodies many traditional values of quilting while incorporating innovative methods of training, organization, and technology use. Innovation is a major factor in the continuing viability of quilting for new Guild quilters.

DHL quilters mainly quilt tops for people who own them but do not wish to quilt them. For the most part, a top is quilted for an anonymous person who is paying for the work to be done, or it is made

for the Christmas boutique to go to an unknown buyer. The quilters may never know who gets their quilts, let alone whether their work is appreciated.

The Day Home League emphasizes friendship and service as major reasons for membership. The weekly meetings are an important social activity in the women's week. Social interaction is the primary reason for belonging to the Day Home League, but not the prime reason for being a quilter. DHL quilters are motivated by the pleasure of creating something useful and aesthetically pleasing. By doing so, the women demonstrate that they are still contributing members of society.

An incident which occurred during the research period exemplifies the feeling of the DHL quilters about their work. A new quilter joined the group; her work was not considered acceptable by the other quilters. The DHL quilters gently forced her out of the quilting area and into another activity. In subsequent questioning, the quilters commented that this had happened before. Follow-up research sheds further light on the DHL quilters' motivation. As some quilters left, new quilters joined the group. Their quilting was considered inferior by some members studied for this paper, who then left the quilting group but continued to attend the Day Home League.

Revivals

The popularity of quilting in the 1970s and 1980s follows a pattern of quilting revivals in the United States; 1970 is used as a convenient beginning of the current revival. All of the Day Home League quilters began quilting before this time (from 1908 to the early 1960s). The woman quilting longest in the same age group (75+) in the South Bay Quilt Guild had begun quilting in 1978. Of the sixty respondents, only nine had begun quilting before 1970.

The present quilt revival, like previous ones, has involved a search for roots, for a place in history—past and future. Some reasons given by Guild members for beginning quilting include: "I've always liked quilts and wished they were in my family's tradition. They weren't." "I love old things and quilts belong with them. Also, my grandmother was a quilter and my earliest memory of her is at the quilting frame." "It . . . makes me feel very connected to quilters in the

past.” “I’m very interested in the history of women in America.” “They give me the feeling of leaving something behind me that my grandchildren can remember me by.” “I’m leaving a bit of myself for my children.” “Quilting really gives me a sense of my roots as a woman. So much is wound up in the quilts I do and see—both of people I know and places I’ve been.”

These views are echoed in writings from past revivals. In 1894, the *Ladies Home Journal* noted: “Of late months everything which could be recognized as old-fashioned is the new fashion. . . . The decree has gone forth that a revival of patchwork quilts is at hand.¹¹ In 1931 Ruby McKim wrote in *101 Patchwork Patterns*: “Through all the changing fads . . . our quilts have always been with us. . . . They offer ties to the pioneers and salvage beauty and usefulness from coarse waste materials. This wholesome revival of quilting which is so thoroughly sweeping the country is more than a fad, it is the very soul of American art and dignity.”¹²

Charles Amsden, in discussing the revival of Navajo weaving, said the essential idea was “to temper the present with a moderate draft of the past, not an ouster of the modern and a reinstatement of old forms and methods.”¹³ Navajo rugs are recognized as a distinctly American national heritage, like Maori art in New Zealand and Cuna molas in Panama. These art forms have come to signify the nations within which the groups live to the larger world in general. In a search for a unique heritage, they offer a symbol to outside groups as well as to their own members. Similarly, quilts have been exhibited in Europe and Japan as a traditional American art form. This recognition feeds back into the revival as further impetus for its continuation.

Views of quilting have changed as the current quilting revival has gained momentum. In 1985, Bonnie Leman and Marie Shirer published results of a reader questionnaire concerning perceived differences in comparison to the 1930s revival. The readers’ views reflect changes similar to the ones found in my research. They include an emphasis on creativity, increased modes of communication, and use of time-saving methods.

One reader commented, “Whereas the last ‘boom’ in quilting was during a depression, I feel this one relies on a stable economy to insure financial freedom for people to attend classes and symposiums; to

encourage continuing sales of books, fabrics, patterns, etc., and to have money available to purchase quilts designed as bedcoverings or art objects.”¹⁴ While I did not specifically research socio-economic levels, it was apparent that most Guild members had at least average incomes; quilting was not viewed as a money-saving activity. Day Home League quilters—older and living on fixed incomes—quilted in a manner that required time, but very little money. None of them quilted at home, usually citing the clutter involved and lack of space as barriers.

What is the likely future of the current quilting revival? Voluntary associations, such as the two studied here, often share common interests not widely held in the rest of society. The groups have developed common aesthetics often unknown and unappreciated by the general public. The continuance of all revivals seems to be dependent on outside forces. By definition, the craft’s original purpose has been supplanted, or it could not have declined in the first place. Ethnic art revivals such as Pueblo pottery, Eskimo carving, and Navajo weaving are dependent upon an outside market. Quilting, while usually performed for personal reasons, is dependent on larger social and aesthetic movements. As long as the search for “roots” continues, and folk art and country decorating remain popular, the quilting revival will continue.

Summary

I began this research expecting creativity to be a dominant factor in the enjoyment of quilting by women of both groups. After some weeks it became obvious that, while DHL women had a keen appreciation for the aesthetics of their craft, innovation and creativity were not critical to their enjoyment of quilting. I had not envisioned people enjoying something because it was aesthetically pleasing without involving innovation or creativity. While social interaction is the primary reason for belonging to Day Home League, quilting specifically adds an aspect of pleasure in doing something useful and of service to others while practicing a skill at which they excel. At an age where many of their peers are in nursing homes and wholly dependent on others, quilting reinforces their self-images as contributing members of society. For Guild members, quilting fulfills multiple goals: it

is creative, relaxing, useful, and challenging. For some it is also a tie to their national and family heritage, and a link to future generations as well.

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