

Her Life in Quilts:

A Review of Quilters' Biographies

by Laurel Horton

Laurel Horton notes in the beginning of her article below a search for identities in quilt research, a desire to tie quilts to personalities, to their makers. This interest has resulted in a number of one-woman exhibitions and in books, such as are discussed by Ms. Horton, featuring the life and quilts of individual quiltmakers. Some impetus for this approach has come from a perceived depersonalization of quilts through exhibitions and books which stress their aesthetics and include their "social" histories only as a part of their provenances. Implicit in the urge to show the maker with her quilts is a desire to maintain or re-establish a connection between artifact and creator and to keep quilt scholarship and public presentation from passing into what are seen as the drier hands of the academic or museum establishments. Additionally, we have seen during this era a growing interest in the less heroic or outsized events and people in the historical record, the daily rounds of lives in a culture, the common, recurring happenings which describe existence for most of us. The creators of the quilts which have survived, where they can be discovered, have become as important for some as the objects created. Ironically, this is in part a result of the intense study of quilt aesthetics, which focuses attention on the objects rather than the creators, but by implication, because of the inclusion of their work in aesthetics-oriented exhibitions in "art" museums and "art"-style picture books, identifies the makers as "artists." This gives legitimacy to a study of their lives in the context of their creative endeavors, the same sort of artists' biographies written endlessly about creators of painting and sculpture. Because the writing and publishing of such books answers a number of emotional and scholarly agendas in the quilt world, we are bound to see many more of them. Laurel Horton here looks at a number of such one-person accounts and their implications for our understanding of quilt history.

—Editors' Note

One of the many directions explored by quilt scholars of the last decade has been the documentation of the lives of individual quiltmakers. Balanced and supported by quilt studies on a larger scale, quilters' biographies contribute important case histories which give the past a human face and help us remember that quilts did not spring, full grown, from museum walls.

Women's studies scholars frequently lament the comparative lack of historical documents which depict the lives of women, especially documents written by women about themselves. The rarity of women's diaries, letters, and memoirs makes each such discovery and its content all the more precious.

Legacy: The Story of Talula Bottoms and Her Quilts (Nashville:

Rutledge Hill, 1988) and Pioneer Quiltmaker: The Story of Dorinda Moody Slade 1808-1895 (Tucson: Sanpete Publications, 1990) detail the lives of exceptional and prolific 19th century quiltmakers. At the same time, they demonstrate both the possibilities and the complexities of compiling such works.

Nancilu Burdick, the author of Legacy, researched the life and quilts of her grandmother, who lived from 1862 to 1946. Burdick began to discover the scope of Talula Bottoms' quiltmaking output while sorting inherited family papers in 1980. In addition to letters, old photographs, and an incomplete novel, the papers included a handwritten memoir by Talula Bottoms in 1943. That discovery led Burdick on a quest to locate some of the quilts, perhaps as many as 200, made by her grandmother and now owned by descendants in many states, and to begin the process of "getting to know" her grandmother.

Quilt researchers Bets Ramsey and Sally Garoutte encouraged Burdick to present an early version of Talula Bottoms' life at the American Quilt Study Group Seminar in 1984. That paper, published in Uncoverings 1984, led to the publication of Legacy and introduced Talula Bottoms to an audience beyond her descendants.

Carolyn O'Bagy Davis traces her interest in Dorinda Moody Slade to a brief biographical caption in a 1984 quilt exhibition catalog. Davis, not related to the quiltmaker, began a project to locate and organize information about the life and quilts of this remarkable woman. Although Dorinda Slade left no writing in her own hand, a granddaughter had compiled material on her life; and that provided important data. Davis' research was helped by the conversion of Dorinda Moody Slade and her family to the Mormon faith, as the Church of Latter Day Saints fosters the preservation of genealogical materials.

Both Legacy and Pioneer Quiltmaker demonstrate what a combination of persistent research and luck can accomplish. The majority of 19th century quiltmakers, exceptional or not, are survived by the scantiest paper trails and oral accounts. Even with their wealth of available documents, Burdick and Davis spent years tracking down elusive quilts and sorting out basic facts.

An interesting question emerges from a reading of these two books: Did the fact that the subject was a quiltmaker influence the original writing and subsequent preservation of the documentary evidence? Talula Bottoms recounted in her memoir that as a child in conflict with a difficult stepmother, she resolved "to spend every moment of my time that I was not busy at something that was needed more ... on my quilt work." (Burdick, 43). Dorinda Slade may well have made a similar conscious decision about the importance of her quiltmaking in her life. Her granddaughter remembered that she arranged her schedule of housework and church work to keep her after-

noons free for quilting. The variety and sophistication of her early quilts, made in a remote and rugged Utah settlement, suggest strongly that quilting had a priority in her life.

Both Talula Bottoms and Dorinda Slade were also remembered for the strength of their characters, especially in the face of tragedy and loss. Were these strong women who happened to make quilts, or did their quilting help make them strong when they were faced with events they could not control? We can't answer these questions for them; but because of the dedication of their biographers, we can ponder the questions.

Luckily, several more recent biographies have been written by or with the help of the quilters themselves. Nellie Snyder Yost recorded and edited the life story of her mother, Grace Snyder, in No Time on My Hands (1963; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Consequently, we have a better understanding of the motivations of this virtuoso artist of the 1940s.

Mary Schafer and Her Quilts (East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 1990) was written by Gwen Marston and Joe Cunningham, Schafer's longtime associates. The authors successfully weave together their subject's quilts with the events of her life, which include her participation in the quilt pattern round-robins of the 1960s. While admittedly "worshipful," the authors nonetheless provide us with a meaningful biography.

Most recently, one of the most important figures of the current quilt art movement released a new book, Nancy Crow: Quilts and Influences (Paducah: American Quilter's Society, 1990). Crow's book is, as the title suggests, more about her work and the images and objects which have contributed to her vision than a standard biography. While it includes a brief "historical background" section, relatively little of her adult life outside the studio, her associations with other quilters, or her teaching is included. While I have a better understanding of the development of Nancy Crow's work, I came to it through the excellent color photographs, as was the obvious intention of the author. What is presented of her thoughts as an artist is told in the third person in the foreword, more remote and much less satisfying for me than a first-person account.

In an ideal world, a person's life would be recorded from a number of perspectives, creating a three-dimensional "hologram" when combined. Thus we would have the life story in the subject's own words, another account by a close relative or disciple, and yet another by an unrelated outsider. Each alone would be incomplete, but together they would provide a multifaceted portrait. Too, with time, interpretive attitudes change so significantly that retrospective biographies may provide a better sense of the context and significance of a subject's life and work than a single contemporary account.

Some important documentation of the lives of early 20th

century quilters, designers, and collectors was conducted and shared through informal newsletters in the 1960s and 1970s. Joyce Gross, whose Quilters' Journal developed from such a newsletter, is responsible for much of our knowledge of many of these pioneers, including Lenice Ingram Bacon, Betty Harriman, Bertha Stenge, Florence Peto, Carrie Hall, Dr. Jeannette Dean Throckmorton, and Marguerite Ickis. Gross pooled the knowledge of many active contributors in a plain but accessible format. The importance of publications like Quilters' Journal, which was published from 1977 to 1987, to the development of quilt study is largely unrecognized.

Joyce Gross's article "Four Twentieth Century Quilters" in Uncoverings 1980 contributed biographical summaries to the first annual volume of the research papers of the American Quilt Study Group. Through the years the lives of other notable individuals have appeared in Uncoverings, including "The Marketing of Anne Orr's Quilts" by Merikay Waldvogel in 1990, and "Mary A. McElwain: Quilter and Quilt Businesswoman" by Pat L. Nickols in 1991. Such biographical studies provide glimpses into a quilt-centered era we are only beginning to understand. Many more biographies remain to be researched and written before we can comprehend the events of our own century.

What does all of this past work suggest to us about recording the work of our own era? While current quilt magazines and books frequently include brief biographical sketches of contemporary quilters, whether famous or not, these are generally of only a page or two in length. We can hope that more of today's artists and quilters will consciously document their lives and works as Nancy Crow has done.

We have a larger range of documentary forms—color photography, magazines, videotape—now than a century ago. However, written documents such as letters and journals, and oral materials such as interviews with family and associates, still form much of the potential raw material for documenting a life.

What becomes obvious from reading about the lives of earlier quilters is that they valued their work and took steps to preserve it for posterity. They correctly surmised that future generations—ours—would appreciate what they had done. Today's scholars can work with today's quilters to help them compile and preserve the materials which will interest the participants in the quilt revivals of the 21st century.

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