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## Quilt Scholarship: The Quilt World and the Academic World

by Lorre M. Weidlich

*The study of quilts has attracted a wide variety of students of very different backgrounds and with very different goals. Some have academic credentials, some do not. Ms. Weidlich here examines two contrasting groups who have studied and written extensively about quilts and quilting, comparing their methods, purposes and worldviews, and suggesting some reasons for their differences.*

—Editors' Note

In November, 1980, the American Quilt Study Group held its first meeting in Mill Valley, California. The following year, the papers presented at that meeting were published as *Uncoverings 1980.1*

In 1974, the *Folklore Feminists Communication* devoted an issue to quilt research, including a bibliography of quilt literature compiled by two folklore graduate students. Several years later, two other folklore graduate students published a seminal paper on quilting in *Southwest Folklore*. Three of these folklorists went on to write dissertations on various aspects of quilting.<sup>1</sup>

What do these two clusters of quilt-research activity have in common? The answer is, nothing. Not only is there no overlap between the people involved, the contexts out of which these activities grew are entirely different.

### Different Roots

To determine the context in which "quilt scholarship," as exemplified by the American Quilt Study Group, developed, let's look at the credentials of the authors of papers published in the first volume of *Uncoverings*. Ten authors were included in the 1980 volume: one Ph.D., four M.A.'s, one M.S., and four B.A.'s. Three are affiliated with museums; the Ph.D. was director of a folklore archive. Authors' academic

fields are not specified, except one who is described as having post graduate studies in textiles; the Ph.D., because of his affiliations (English department and folklore archive) can safely be assumed to have a degree in one of those subjects. Five are described as having published in or edited various popular periodicals such as *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*, *Nimble Needle Treasures*, *Craft Horizons*, and *Quilt Journal*. Other descriptions include "a quiltmaker since college years," "quiltings designer and consultant," "has exhibited her textile art widely," and "charter member of the Santa Rosa Quilt Guild."<sup>3</sup>

This survey of credentials is obviously incomplete, since it seems to include primarily what each author considered relevant to establish her (or his) claim to being a quilt scholar. However, the general conclusion to be drawn from this brief summary is that the American Quilt Study Group was founded primarily by participants in what has become known as the "quilt world" along with a smattering of professionals whose fields (museum personnel, textile conservators, etc.) involve them with quilts, and only a very occasional scholar with academic training.<sup>1</sup>

Academic scholarship about quilting grew from different roots. Prior to the 1970's, there was little interest in quilting as subject matter. The rare journal article on the subject was romantic and casual, without analysis or conceptual struc-

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ture.<sup>5</sup> By the early 1970's, however, quilting was "in the air," at least partially due to the increased interest in women's folklore and art. Quilting dissertations and papers began to appear during the 1970's and '80's, produced by scholars trained in analytic methods—e.g., semiotics, structuralism, and ethnography of speaking—appropriate to uncovering the meanings inherent in quilting.

### Different Forums

The most striking thing about these two worlds is, until recent years and with notable exceptions, their almost complete separation.<sup>6</sup> Notable also is the difference in subject matter presentation, primary audiences, and critical frameworks.

While most academic scholars write or edit books, the most common presentation of research, the currency of the academic world, is the paper; these are presented at scholarly meetings, published in journals, or included in books of thematically-related papers. The thematic relationship is not necessarily the artifact or community analyzed in a particular paper. Papers about quilting may be grouped, e.g. on panels and in books devoted to women's folklore.<sup>7</sup> In the quilt world, there are more limited opportunities for presenting papers, so quilt world scholars often turn to books. As Merikay Waldvogel points out, "Since *Uncoverings* does not have color photography and AQSG does not pay for articles, AQSG authors turn to commercial publishers as an avenue to reach a much broader audience."<sup>8</sup>

The fact that these books are reviewed in such publications as *Quilters Newsletter Magazine* makes their primary audience apparent; few books by quilt world scholars have been reviewed by academic journals. *The Quilts of Tennessee: Images of Domestic Life Prior to 1930* is one exception: its review, in *Southern Folklore*, contained the following excerpts: "Its problems lie in two major areas: 1) the conceptualization of the project, and 2) the analysis and interpretation of the findings. To begin with, the notion of a statewide survey itself is problematic ... The arbitrary cut-off date of 1930 is also problematic ... Discussions are not developed and thus are not very convincing ... there is no drawing together of these bits of information into a coherent conceptual framework ... Even more disturbing, however, are the comments that reveal a lack of understanding of folk art."<sup>9</sup> Compare this to the *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* review of the same book, which concluded, "This fine survey edition should be in every quilt library."<sup>10</sup> Obviously, the audiences of these two publications, as well as the reviewers, have significantly different critical perspectives.

Kristin Langellier confronts the issue of audience directly when she describes her experience of writing for *Uncoverings*: "...writing for *Uncoverings* is tricky for me. My last abstract was ranked both first and last (yes!) among the submissions because it used very academic (and theoretical) language. I revised it considerably for publication, which I was amenable to doing. But I think that the question of "who's the

audience of *Uncoverings*" is raised by your questions. On the other hand, there are different constraints in writing for academic and "general" audiences, but there's also how much disciplinary-specific language and concepts we can use writing about quilting." Both she and folklorist Joyce Ice describe the research in *Uncoverings* as "uneven." Quilt world scholar Pat Nichols, on the other hand, says about the papers in *Uncoverings*, "most have been excellent" and Waldvogel comments "The editors have kept consistently high standards for AQSG authors, and I can count on the material being accurate ... My only concern is that the standards may be so high that they intimidate new authors." The same difference in critical perspectives is apparent here.

### Different Worldviews

The difference between these two groups of scholars transcends a disagreement over critical evaluations of the same scholarship, and suggests, in fact, differing worldviews. Those who move in the quilt world refer to themselves as "quilt scholars" or "quilt historians." Merikay Waldvogel states, "Yes, I do define myself as a "quilt scholar" although my undergraduate degree is in French and my masters is in Linguistics with a specialty in teaching English as a Second Language." Pat Nichols says, "I define myself as a quilter and quilt historian." Academic scholars, on the other hand, tend to define themselves by their training. Kristin Langellier, despite having published several articles in *Uncoverings*, says, "No, I do not define myself as a "quilt scholar" because I have other scholarly interests ... I define myself as a scholar of communication and performance studies, with a strong interest in women's studies." "No, (quilting) is not my only scholarly interest and for this reason, I don't define myself as a quilt scholar," states Joyce Ice. "I think it's a rather limited description. (Are there also 'basket scholars' and 'rug scholars?') I define myself variously as a folklorist, anthropologist, and museum person."

The fact that quilt scholars define themselves by their subject matter, without or despite academic training, while academically-trained scholars refer to their training, again suggests the different world which these two groups of scholars address. "Quilt scholar" is a meaningless label in the academic world, as Ice's comments quoted above make clear, while it is respected in the quilt world, a forum unconcerned with academic credentials.

Their views of what is needed in quilt scholarship also differ according to the world they inhabit. Waldvogel sees the biggest need as "integrating quilt research into the academic world" and states "I even think there is enough material available right now for a semester-long course on quilt history. For such a course, a textbook on quilt history should be compiled." This quilt world concern with documentation, the collection and compilation of factual material, contrasts with the academician's concern with theory. Langellier says, "what concerns me most about the scholarship as a whole is what I see as a lack of theoretical and

critical perspectives on quilting ... Often I find the research interesting but unconnected to larger questions about quilting or women's culture. Why is a particular piece of documentary work significant, for example? How does it relate to previous research? How does it contribute not just to a particular knowledge base but also to theoretical understandings of quilting?...I think, in other words, that the research has developed to a point where such theoretical and critical work is possible, necessary, and potentially exciting."

### Two Paths to Empowerment

Patricia Keller, in her article "Methodology and Meaning: Strategies for Quilt Study"<sup>11</sup> discusses the possible problems involved in scholars devoting themselves to the study of a (primarily) female expressive form. Revising remarks of Jonathan Holstein, she states, "quilt scholarship has been seen as a dead-end for *all* scholars for political reasons originating from a cultural perception equating *female* with *inferior*."<sup>12</sup>

Curiously, the women who do research on quilting, whether quilt scholar or academically-trained scholar, are uniform in their disagreement that quilt research is a "dead end." Langellier says, "I have just been promoted to Professor and my quilting research was part, although not all, of my publication record." "The popularity of quilts, and books about them" explains Joyce Ice, "has allowed me to pursue research for a museum exhibition and an accompanying publication, funded by grants from NEA and the New York Council on the Arts, and has also given me the opportunity to consult on other projects involving quilting and/or women's traditional arts. Because I have situated my research in a women's studies/feminist theory framework, I have not encountered any major difficulties."<sup>13</sup> Of the quilt world side, Pat Nichols says, "Negative impact...not enough hours in the day...Friends are often surprised by what I do, my activities need to be explained and defined but I have never felt they feel it trivial or unimportant." Waldvogel points out the tremendous success she has had with her work: "my quilt research has received much more attention than my linguistics work ... My reputation grew because I was in print...From that first positive experience, I went on to write more articles and books."

It would appear that, within their respective forums, neither quilt world scholars nor academically-trained scholars have been held back by their choice of subject matter. Both of these parallel routes seem to have led to empowerment for the women pursuing them, leading me to cite the model which I believe puts both in perspective.<sup>14</sup>

Anthropologist Michelle Z. Rosaldo, after examining the universal structural inequality between the sexes and determining that the male consistently has inhabited the public sphere and the female the domestic one, suggests that there are two ways for women to gain power: move into the male dominated public sphere, or establish a female public sphere. In Rosaldo's words, "(Women's) position is raised when they

can challenge those claims to (male) authority, either by taking on men's roles or by establishing social ties, by creating a sense of rank, order, and value in a world in which women prevail. One possibility for women, then, is to enter the men's world or to create a public world of their own."<sup>15</sup> Compare Rosaldo's description of a women's public sphere to the comments of Merikay Waldvogel: I have often wondered at the success I have found in the quilt world... I think it is because this field had no rules governing it. Without any rules in place, women felt free to step into it and find their place. Today there are hundreds of quilting instructors, judges, writers, editors, curators, collectors, business owners, inventors, etc."

Waldvogel's description confirms that quilt scholarship is one role in a complex women's sphere providing multiple opportunities for empowerment for the women who inhabit it, no less than the pursuit of a career in the (formerly male-dominated) academic world empowers the women who choose that route and accept the standards of that world. This suggests that the function of quilt scholarship within the quilt world is expressive. Self-definitions like "quilt scholar," meaningless to academicians, provide a recognizable and respected role for women who so define themselves within the quilt world. Likewise, the concern with what Langellier refers to as "the documentary impulse that animates much of the (quilt world) research" becomes understandable as the attempt to construct a history which legitimizes and reinforces a particular worldview. Ultimately, it is an examination not so much of the content of quilt world scholarship as of its existence and the value system that informs it that will teach us most about the meaning that underlies the world of quilting today.

*Dr. Lorre Weidlich has both academic and "quilt world" credentials. She has a B. A. from the University of Michigan and an M. A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, all in Folklore. Her 1986 dissertation was the first devoted to the current quilt revival and its associated culture. She is also a quilter and designer, quilt teacher and lecturer, exhibition -organizer, etc. Her writing on quilts has been published in both academic and popular publications. Her anomalous relationship to the quilt and the academic worlds gives her a vantage point from which to practice the meta-scholarship presented in this article. Since finishing graduate school, she has pursued a non-academic path, but is moving back into the world of scholarship, with an emphasis on research on quilts and quilt culture.*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Sally Garoutte, ed., *Uncoverings 1980* (Mill Valley, California: American Quilt Study Group, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Folklore *Feminists Communication*, 3 (Spring, 1974), includes Susan Roach and Lorre M. Weidlich, "Quilt Making in America: A Selected Bibliography," pp. 17-28. Joyce Ice and Judy Shulimson, "Beyond the Domestic: Women's Traditional Arts and the Creation of Community," in *Southwest Folklore* 3, no. 4, pp. 37-44. Joyce Ice, *Quilting and the Pattern of Relationships in Community Life*, dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1984. Lorre Weidlich, *Quilting Transformed: An Anthropological Approach to the Quilt Revival*.

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<sup>3</sup>Garoutte, *Uncoverings* 1980. These excerpts are taken from descriptions of authors printed on the bottom of the first page of each paper.

<sup>4</sup>The quilt revival, which began largely as a response to the 1971 Whitney Museum quilt exhibit "Abstract Design in American Quilts," and was given a tremendous boost by the Bicentennial, has grown into a national and increasingly international community of people, primarily women, who either practice quilting or move in the quilting community. This latter group includes quilt store owners, entrepreneurs who manufacture quilting tools or fabric, quilt appraisers, museum personnel with a strong interest in quilts, authors of quilt-related books, and of course quilt scholars. In short, the *quilt world* includes all those who market or lecture primarily to quilters and, most significantly, identify themselves with the pursuit of quilting. At this point, the quilt community in the United States numbers several million people and has developed, as a result of over twodecades of activity, its own culture, including a world view and folklore.

<sup>5</sup>Examples of this casual treatment of quilting by scholars include Paul Brewster, "The Romance of Quilt Names," in *Hoosier Folklore* IX (April-June, 1950), pp. 59-62, and Eleanor Driscoll, "Quilts in Moore County," in *North Carolina Folklore* 4 (July, 1956), pp. 11-15.

<sup>6</sup>An analysis of author's credential for the 1991 and 1992 issues of *Uncoverings* reveals that well over half of the contributors are university professors and several are graduate students. Also, several of the most recent volumes of *Uncoverings* have received positive mention in *Southern Folklore*, and trained scholars have participated in various of the state quilt documentation projects. However, most of these scholars do not appear to be "names" in the quilt world, suggesting that they move primarily in the academic world and use AQSG as an additional forum for presenting research.

<sup>7</sup>Two examples are Susan Roach, "The Kinship Quilt: An Ethnographic Semiotic Analysis of a Quilting Bee," in *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, ed. Rosan A. Jordan and Susan J. Kalcik (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 54-64, and Linda Pershing,

"She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman": Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue," in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1993), pp. 98-125. This practice does make it difficult to locate a quilting paper without knowing the larger work in which it is contained.

<sup>8</sup>The quotations in this article are taken from the responses to questionnaires I sent to several quilt world and several academic scholars. I want to thank Merikay Waldvogel, Pat Nichols, Kristin Langellier, and Joyce Ice for their replies. The questions focused on three areas: contextualizing the scholar (self definition, range of scholarly interest, etc.); assessing which scholars, if any, had found quilt research to be a "dead end;" and determining different responses of the two groups to quilt world scholarship. Several scholars, regrettably, did not respond to my questionnaire in time for their remarks to be included in this article.

<sup>9</sup>Joyce Ice, review of *The Quilts of Tennessee: Images of Domestic Life Prior to 1930* by Bets Ramsey and Merikay Waldvogel, in *Southern Folklore* 46, no. 2 (1989), pp. 192-94. The excerpts quoted are representative of the entire review.

<sup>10</sup>Carol Crowley, review of *The Quilts of Tennessee: Images of Domestic Life Prior to 1930* by Bets Ramsey and Merikay Waldvogel, in *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, 190 (March, 1987), p. 48. The bulk of the review is devoted to a description of the book.

<sup>11</sup>Patricia Keller, "Methodology and Meaning: Strategies for Quilt Study" in *The Quilt Journal* 2, no. 1 (1993), pp. 1-4.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4. The italics are hers.

<sup>13</sup>In fact, every academically trained scholar with whose quilt research I am familiar has an appropriate academic or institutional affiliation. (I am the exception, having not pursued that career path.)

<sup>14</sup>As Keller points out in her article (p. 2), drawing again from Holstein, the majority of quilt (world) scholars are female. My observations of the academic world reveal that the same is true there.

<sup>15</sup>Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview" in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 17-42.

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