

Quilts and Art: Value Systems in Conflict

by Lorre M. Weidlich

What's art and what isn't? And: Who's an artist and who isn't? The questions trouble all areas of creative endeavor, quilts included. In the 1970s when quilts moved to museum and gallery walls and collectors' homes, and an "art quilt" movement began, the questions became particularly significant. In this article, Lorre Weidlich explores some aspects of the issue, particularly as it relates to our perceptions of quilts made today.

—Editors' Note

Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. . . . Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world.

Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*

It has been three years since Michael James' keynote address to the American Quilters Society Quilt Show and Contest Awards Banquet, and its subsequent publication in *American Quilter*.¹ As any reader of *American Quilter*, attendee at the banquet, or follower of James' career in the quilt world knows, his comments were controversial, as they often are. A proponent of the "quilts as art" school, James' statement that "much of what's being made today and passed off as 'quilt art' is anything but" aroused the animosity of many of those listening to the speech, and led to a series of follow-up letters, pro and con, in *American Quilter*.³ The controversy over his speech, and over his previous speeches,⁴ suggests that the issue of "quilts as art" somehow taps into a level of importance for quilters much deeper than whether one individual man approves of their quilts. It reflects a conflict of values, and aspirations raised only to be frustrated.

The Developing Relationship

The history of the current quilt revival is to a large extent the history of the exploration of the question, what is the relationship between quilts and art? The quilts initially welcomed by the art world were those produced without the input or blessing of the art world, but which fit into the paradigm popular in the art world at the time. "It was not

until certain developments had taken place in cultural history that these objects (quilts) would be called back from the kitchen, workshop, and rural home for general reconsideration."⁵ Jonathan Holstein's explanation of the ways in which quilts express the design concepts of contemporary, geometrically-based art are sufficiently well known that they need no summarizing here.⁶

The art world embraced quilts. Part of the embrace, however, was a two way naiveté. Not only were the quilters who made these quilts unaware of the standards of the art world, the art world was equally unaware of the aesthetic standards of quilting. Naiveté, however, did not stop the quilt world from celebrating recognition by the art world, leading to the oft-quoted observation made by *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* "It seems to be official now-quiltmaking is indeed an art." "Official" here apparently means, acknowledged by the art world.

What quilter was going to argue with that? Quilters have always cared about aesthetics; recognition of their aesthetic achievements was welcome. During the late 1970's, when the current quilt revival was off and running, I heard numerous quilters proclaim quilting an art. Some were rural, older housewives; others were young, urban professionals. Their quilts ranged from highly traditional to extremely innovative for the time. There was no debate about which quilts were art. Everyone was learning together and the manifesto "quilts are art" was their common ground. I also heard the view expressed, "There's room for everybody."

When many people passionately pursue a creative form, and discover they have an audience for it, innovation occurs. Innovation was not new to quilting; quilters have always been innovative within their frameworks. One result of the plethora of state quilt documentation projects has been the discovery of innumerable quilts innovative by the standards of their places and times. Formally-trained artists, seeing a viable form and a supportive community, were attracted to quilting, and brought to it concepts foreign to its traditional milieu. Gradually, a new genre developed—the art quilt. The book, *The Art Quilt*, by Penny McMorris and Michael Kile, was published in 1986, but the term had been in use before then. Quilters began to talk about "the art quilt," but nobody asked—at least publicly—the obvious question: "If these quilts are art, what are the others?" Until then, quilts had been art, period. Now there

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was a dichotomy: the art quilts and the others. Presumably, "art quilts" were asking to be judged by the standards of the art world, despite the fact that the quilts proclaimed by the art world as "art" were made by women unfamiliar with, perhaps even unaware of, those definitions.

Michael James' pronouncements about what kinds of quilts constitute "art," in the context of the history of the use of the term in relation to quilts, plunge quilters into an ambiguous, consequently uncomfortable, state. Initially, quilters pursued their chosen form without concern for its label. When it was called "art," they were happy to embrace that label. Then they were told that in fact very little of it was art. They found themselves on one hand no longer artists, and on the other, not yet artists.

It appears now that only two categories of quilts fit the art world idea of art: Quilts can be uninformed by art world aesthetics but accidentally fit those aesthetic parameters and hence be proclaimed art. Or, they can develop highly sophisticated (self-conscious, self-aware, reflective) aesthetics and so attain the status of art according to the standards of the art world. All the quilts in between are not, by art world standards, art. They are no longer craft-accidentally-proclaimed-art nor consciously-attempted-art-that-succeeded. The first category, of course, ignores the idea of quilts as quilts, as having their own aesthetic standards. The second is more complex because it fuses quilts-as-quilts with art-as-art, aware of both the properties of the quilt and the aesthetics of the art world. In a sense, recognition by the art world largely destroyed the kind of art that the art world recognized. After the Whitney exhibit, women could be dead folk artists or living fine artists, but that category in between—living popular artists—is left in limbo. Quilters had, in effect, been welcomed into the Garden of Eden by Jonathan Holstein, and then ejected from it by Michael James. The striking thing about quilters' brief sojourn in paradise is that both of the gatekeepers were male.

A Question of Definition

Definition is the core of the issue. Definitions are, by their very nature, arbitrary. A part of life, of reality, of nature, of human experience, is artificially separated from the whole of life, reality, nature, or experience, and given a name. This leads, of course, to endless debate about just where to draw the line between the part and the whole. "Art" is obviously an example of such a definition. Crucial to the issue is, who controls the definition? Those who control the definition control the category, because the awarding of the label itself bestows a certain value. As Howard Becker points out in *Art Worlds*:

... The title "art" is a resource that is at once indispensable and unnecessary to the producers of the works in question. It is indispensable because, if you believe art is better, more beautiful, and more expressive than nonart, if you therefore intend to make art and want what you make recognized as art so that you can demand the resources and advantages available to art—then you cannot fulfill your plan if the current aesthetic system and those who explicate and apply it deny you the title. It is unnecessary

because even if these people do tell you that what you are doing is not art, you can usually do the same work under a different name and with the support of a different cooperative world.⁸

Quilters, of course, have done and continue to do the same work regardless of the name, but after the proclamation, "quilts are art," their perspective on what they did changed considerably. Unfortunately, it also, on some level, put a woman's expressive form under the control of a male system of definitions.

Definition of art has always been outside women's control. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock trace the historical relationships between definitions of art and women's pursuit of art. The most striking example of the relationship between the two is revealed by their analysis of history painting—historical, mythological and religious painting based on human figures, popular from the Renaissance to the mid-19th century. To successfully create such paintings, it was necessary to master the depiction of the human figure and hence to study anatomy. Women, however, were excluded from the study of the nude, and hence from doing history painting. They turned instead to landscapes, portraits, and still lifes—all defined as "inferior" forms.⁹ Parker and Pollock's conclusion?

Control over access to the nude was but an extension of the exercise of power over what meanings were constructed by an art based on the human body... (Women had) no power to determine the language of high art. They were therefore excluded from both the tools and the power to give meanings of their own to themselves and their culture.¹⁰

Like female artists throughout the history of art, modern quilters have found themselves excluded from the category "art" because of the way it is defined. Some quilters say, yes, I do or attempt to do what Michael James describes; the majority seem to be saying, I don't fit his definition, but I still consider myself an artist. What is it about his definition that women find violating?

Women's Values, Men's Definitions

One of the groundbreaking works in the field of women's psychology was Carol Gilligan's 1982 book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. In it, Gilligan pointed out that the male model of psychological development had long been considered the norm. Insofar as women deviated from that model, they, rather than the model, were considered problematic.¹¹ Gilligan, through extensive interviewing, examined the differences between male and female values and concepts of relationship.

The central images in her analysis are those of hierarchy and network or web. Analyzing the moral understanding of a pre-adolescent boy, she finds a "hierarchical ordering, with its imagery of winning and losing"¹² paralleled, in the moral understanding of a same-aged girl, by "a network of connection, a web of relationships that is sustained by a process of communication."¹³ She explores, in these terms, male/female differences in concepts of self-definition, autonomy and intimacy, separation and connection, and vio-

lence. The differing male/female values uncovered by Gilligan¹⁴ suggest that definitions of art may differ along the same lines.

Let's look at Michael James' definition of art. "The growth of the art of the quilt. . . falls on individuals with subversive natures, with idiosyncratic or even radical viewpoints . . . to push it to limits beyond the known and the familiar."¹⁵ James' definition of art and the artist is certainly not limited to him, but neither is it absolute, universal, and timeless. It emerged in the Western world roughly two centuries ago. As Parker and Pollock explain,

*The concept of the artist as a creative individual is a modern one. Before the eighteenth century, the term was applied to an artisan or craftsman, on the one hand, or, on the other, to someone who displayed taste. . . The modern definition is the culmination of a long process of economic, social and ideological transformations by which the word "artist" ceased to mean a kind of workman and came to signify a special kind of person with a whole set of distinctive characteristics: artists came to be thought of as strange, different, exotic, imaginative, eccentric, creative, unconventional, alone. A mixture of supposed genetic factors and social roles distinguish the artist from the mass of ordinary mortals, creating new myths, those of the prophet and above all the genius and new social persona, the Bohemian and the pioneer.*¹⁶

In a similar vein, Becker, discussing the "romantic myth of the artist" says, "Such a belief does not appear in all, or even most, societies; it may be unique to Western European societies, and those influenced by them, since the Renaissance."¹⁷

James' description of the artist emphasizes the idea of the solitary iconoclast who pushes the boundaries, a concept very much in line with Carol Gilligan's analysis of male self-definition through separation, as opposed to women's self-definition through connection:

*Thus the images of hierarchy and web inform different modes of assertion and response: the wish to be alone at the top and the consequent fear that others will get too close; the wish to be at the center of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge. These disparate fears of being stranded and being caught give rise to different portrayals of achievement and affiliation, leading to different modes of action and different ways of assessing the consequences of choice.*¹⁸

In short, fitting the solitary iconoclast image of the artist is an ideal way for a man to define himself, while it totally violates women's modes of self-definition. Part of the appeal to women of quilting is the fact that it provides the opportunity for connection. "It's kind of comforting that there's this long line of tradition of quilting, that somewhere I'm in there, I'm in that—I don't know if it's a line or a big pool. It's that feeling that you're part of something . . . It's wrapped up with family, with companionship, with artistic sensibilities."¹⁹

The male, Jamesian model of "quilt art" violates the very qualities that initially attracted women to quilting and reinforced their continuing pursuit of it. It feels, to a great many of them, alien. The imposition of a male model on a woman's expressive form leaves in a position of discomfort the very

people who are the life blood of that expressive form. In the art world of quilting, many of these people are the ones recognized by their peers as artists. At conflict is not simply a personal like or dislike of one kind of quilt. Many quilters say today, just as they did during the early 1970's, "There's room for everybody." Rather, the conflict is between two definitions of art, one intrinsic to the world of quilting, the other imposed from outside.

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Endnotes

¹Michael James, "Quilt Art at Century's End," in *American Quilter*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (Fall, 1992), pp. 52-74.

²*Ibid.*, p. 54.

³*American Quilter*, Vol. VIII, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 60-61 and Vol. IX, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 60-61.

⁴Lorre M. Weidlich, *Quilting Transformed: An Anthropological Approach to the Quilt Revival*, unpublished dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1986, pp. 58-63.

⁵Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt, An American Design Tradition* (Little, Brown & Co.: Boston, 1973), p. 113.

⁶Anyone unfamiliar with his analysis can find it in chapter 6, "The Skilled Hand, The Practiced Eye," of *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition*.

⁷*Quilters Newsletter*, no. 23 (September, 1971), p. 3.

⁸Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1982), p. 133.

⁹Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1981), pp. 33-35.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹¹Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1982), pp. 5-23.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Jean Baker Miller, in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), draws similar conclusions; in addition, sociolinguist Deborah Tannen analyzes speech differences between men and women which closely parallel the psychological differences uncovered by Gilligan in *You Just Don't Understand* (William Morrow and Company, Inc.: New York, 1990).

¹⁵James, op cit., p. 54.

¹⁶Parker and Pollock, op cit., p. 82.

¹⁷Becker, op cit., p. 14-15.

¹⁸Gilligan, op cit., p. 62.

¹⁹Personal interview with quilter Rebecca Salinger, February 12, 1994. See also my article, "A Folklorist's Thoughts on Quilting," in *American Quilter*, Vol. XI, no. 3 (Fall, 1995), pp. 6-63, in which I analyze quilters' verbal art to reveal its emphasis on relationship and connection. Jane Przybysz observes in "Quilts and Women's Bodies" that "some quilters have used and continue to use quilts . . . to make visible and sharable the enormous, invisible, and undervalued work of caring for and (re) producing human beings and social relations" (Katherine Young, ed., *Bodylore* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1993), pp. 172-73).