

Rethinking Quilt Projects:

A Folklorist's Perspective

by Laurel Horton

As more scholars in different disciplines take up the study of quilts, there will inevitably be differing points of view as to what aspects of quilts should be studied, how this should be accomplished, who should do it, how data should be collected, interpreted, stored. Some debate on these and other scholarship issues has already ensued. Of considerable current interest has been the issue of methodology in state quilt surveys. Some professional folklorists have expressed concern that these surveys, conducted largely by amateur scholars, may be flawed in the ways they amass and record data; that, indeed, their goals and methods are such that the quilt information collected may be of little, or impaired value as research data. Laurel Horton, noted folklorist and experienced quilt scholar, discusses in this article the methods and goals of the folklorist in relation to the study of quilts.

—Editors' Note

Folklorists study traditional behaviors in the context in which they are performed. A 1984 publication of the American Folklore Society defines the related terms "folklore/folklife" as "song and story, speech and movement, custom and belief, craft and ritual—expressive and instrumental activities of all kinds learned and communicated directly or face-to-face in groups ranging from nations, regions and states through communities, neighborhoods, occupations, and families."¹

When folklorists look at objects of material culture such as quilts, they are interested not only in the object itself, but in the circumstances in which the object was designed, created, and used. "Since objects and actions commonly 'speak' louder than words, folklorists look at material culture as communication and learning."

The primary tools that folklorists use in their study are the oral interview and observation. They try to understand the objects, behaviors, and events they study from the point of view of the participants. Since folklorists excel at examining active, functioning traditions as practiced by living individuals and groups, it is no accident that most folklorists' studies of quilting have focused on individual quiltmakers and quilting groups.

The best research by folklorists goes beyond a series of interviews with a single quiltmaker. Joyce Ice's extensive fieldwork with quilting groups in Delaware County, New York, is an excellent example of how a sensitive researcher can identify and describe the complexities of local traditions.³ And when folklorist Clover Williams conducted research within the Bloomington, Indiana, Quilters Guild, she was attempting a study of the group as a whole. Instead, she wanted to learn

how quiltmakers themselves define "tradition" in their quilting. Her findings indicate that "tradition" is a fluid term for these quilters which functions differently depending upon the context.⁴

Folklorists are at their best when they can examine living traditions and relate them to a well-documented historical record. But what happens when the historical evidence is insufficient or untrustworthy? My own experience serves as an example.

In 1975 I was a graduate student in the Folklore Curriculum at the University of North Carolina. Several books on quilts had recently appeared and were mentioned by my instructors. I found the photographs fascinating and decided to write a term paper on quilts for my Symbolic Anthropology class. At the end of the semester I decided to write my thesis on quilts in the part of North Carolina which had been settled by Germans and Ulster Scots from Pennsylvania.

In preparation for my fieldwork I read everything that was available on quilts, and that's when I started running into problems. The books available at that time each focused on limited numbers of quilts gathered in a variety of unsystematic ways. For a student trying to identify regional variations and patterns of diffusion, the task was difficult. Especially misleading were the descriptions of southern quilts as "artistic expressions little handicapped by economic considerations" exemplifying "the traditional cultured leisure of the Old South."⁵ I was new to quilts, but I knew that this oversimplification ignored a lot of southern quilts.

Besides the difficulty of locating trustworthy historical information on quilts, I also realized how difficult it is to examine large numbers of quilts in an area. I found that museums at that time generally knew very little about the quilts in their collections. Individual owners generally knew more, but identifying them and scheduling appointments was extremely labor-intensive.

Among the earliest areas of study for folklorists examining material folk culture was architecture. Researchers could enumerate and map double-crib barns or hall-and-parlor houses by driving rural roads and select case studies for more detailed investigation and measurement. I thought of those fortunate researchers as I drove rural roads wishing I had x-ray vision to discern quilts hidden from view in those same houses.

When The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc. announced its practice of holding quilt days and inviting owners to bring in their quilts to be recorded and photographed, I realized that this was an important new strategy for identifying regional trends in historic quilts. Quilt Days allow a research team to document and photograph more quilts in a few hours than could be done in

weeks visiting the owners in their homes. Such Quilt Days have been adopted by every state and many regional quilt projects since. The collected data of the quilt projects could allow researchers to map the presence or apparent absence of particular quilt styles, techniques, and patterns over time and space, which would enhance our understanding of regional and national quilting traditions.

Since the potential rewards for quilt projects seem so great, project organizers may have difficulty understanding why not all folklorists share their enthusiasm. Folklorist Joyce Ice, in a *Southern Folklore* review, identifies two major areas of concern: 1. conceptualization and 2. analysis and interpretation.⁶

For many project organizers the initial conception of a quilt project typically utilizes quilt days resulting in a selection of quilts for an exhibition and a book. At some later point the project is faced with the disposition of the collection materials. For a folklorist the collected slides and information form the primary goal of the project, and the exhibition and catalog are two preliminary byproducts.

Ice also questions the validity of state boundaries for a study of material folk culture, since cultural maps ignore such artificial demarcations. If a book and exhibit are envisioned as the culmination of a project, she makes an excellent point. Few of the state quilt books make an effort to include all of the geographic subregions within a state. As an organizing principle in order to collect data, however, a state project makes sense, especially since many states, like North Carolina, have state-wide quilt organizations to facilitate communication.

Because folklorists try to understand and analyze traditions in context, many folklorists are troubled by the quilt days themselves. Accustomed to interviewing owners of objects in the home context in which the objects are used, folklorists wonder at the validity of removing these objects to an unnatural arena in which they are subjected to assembly-line analysis.

Folklorists are not alone in their concerns about the quality and validity of the information gathered by quilt projects. Most projects provide some training for their volunteers, but a lack of time and experience frequently limits the quality of the interview data.

For example, in their zeal to do everything right, project volunteers have been known to tell quilt owners the "correct" name for a particular quilt pattern before ascertaining if there is a family name for the quilt. Even an offhand comment can cause a quilt owner to withhold data, thinking that the family story about the quilt must be wrong.

Not only do folklorists have concerns about quilt projects, but some quilt projects have had doubts about the participation of folklorists. I remember a project organizer reporting to me

her amazement that a folklorist helping them was unfamiliar with differences between pieced and appliqued quilts. Not realizing that much of my own knowledge of quilts was self-taught, my friend had assumed that all folklorists knew about quilts.

Some projects have been fortunate enough to have as advisors and co-workers folklorists who are indeed knowledgeable about quilts. State Folk Arts Coordinators Jenny Chinn in Kansas and Andrea Graham in Nevada have both been closely involved with their states' projects. But even folklorists who do not specialize in material culture can contribute to the ways traditional information may be gathered, stored, and interpreted.

Folklorists can be effective members of quilt project teams, along with textile specialists, museum curators, historians, community organizers, and quilters. Many quilt projects have served as training grounds for students in these fields, and folklore archives are possible repositories for quilt project data.

As American quilting emerges as a respectable and legitimate field of study, scholars trained in a variety of disciplines join those who are self-trained. Folklore, American studies, art history, textile history, speech communications, social history, cultural geography, sociology, psychology: All these approaches offer increased understanding of the complex phenomena surrounding quilts and their makers. No single discipline "owns" the subject, and only through the contributions from these and other directions can we hope to know the meanings of quilting in our lives.

Laurel Horton holds an M.A. in Folklore from the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and an M.S. in Library Science from the University of Kentucky. She serves on the Board of Directors for the American Quilt Study Group and edits Uncoverings, A QSG's annual volume of research papers. She directed the South Carolina Quilt History Project and is the author of Social Fabric: South Carolina's Traditional Quilts.

Footnotes:

¹ *Folklore/Folklife*, (Washington, D.C.: American Folklore Society, 1984), 5.

² *Folklore/Folklife*, 19.

³ Joyce Ice, "Splendid Companionship and Practical Assistance," in *Quilted Together: Women, Quilts, and Communities*, ed. Joyce Ice and Linda Norris (Delhi, NY: Delaware County Historical Society, 1989), 6-24.

⁴ Clover Williams, "Tradition and Art: Two Layers of Meaning in the Bloomington Quilters Guild," in *Uncoverings 1991* ed. Laurel Horton (San Francisco, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1992), 118-141.

⁵ Ruth E. Finley, *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (Newton Centre, MA: Charles T. Branford, 1929), 40.

⁶ Joyce Ice, review of *The Quilts of Tennessee*, by Bets Ramsey and Merikay Waldvogel, *Southern Folklore* 46 (1989): 192-94.

QUILT PROJECT INFORMATION

Memberships and Donations

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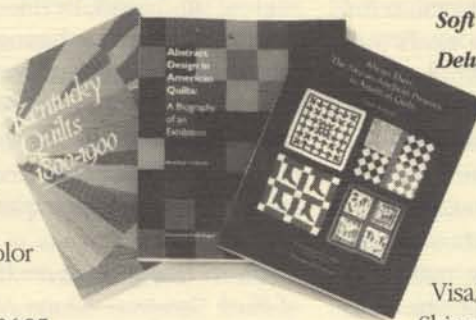
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