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## Methodology and Meaning: Strategies for Quilt Study

by Patricia J. Keller

*As quilt scholars expand their understanding of the field, identifying mythologies surrounding quilts and quiltmaking and scrutinizing methods now applied to quilt study, they will increasingly seek information and methodologies developed within other areas of humanistic research. Additionally, the richness of quilts as a source of cultural information will continue to draw scholars from related academic disciplines to quilt research, and they will bring methodologies now little-employed in quilt study with them. One well-suited to this study, and certain to be more applied, is the interdisciplinary approach of material culture studies, which employs analytical models drawn from a variety of academic perspectives to gain insight into the products of human workmanship. In this article Patricia Keller, a material culture scholar, discusses such an approach and its implications for the field. This methodology was employed in the development of *The Lancaster Quilt Harvest*, a regional Pennsylvania quilt documentation project directed by Ms. Keller and sponsored by the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County. In an upcoming issue of *The Quilt Journal* she will discuss the application of this theoretical model to the Lancaster project, and its preliminary results.*

—Editors' Note

In the explanatory *Mission Statement* heralding its late-1992 premier issue, *The Quilt Journal* observed that late 20th century "quilt scholarship in all areas, domestic and international, is in its infancy"<sup>1</sup> and called for an interdisciplinary approach to future quilt study within the context of an international scholarly community. The commentary observed that "the number of professionally trained scholars working in the field is very small," crediting this shortage in part to the "... ferment, controversy, (and) freshness" of the contemporary quilt field,

which, *The Quilt Journal* added, "... has kept from joining it people trained in art history, museology and aesthetics, who... as scholars in the decorative arts... would bring to it a needed perspective and professionalism." Rather than avoiding intellectual ferment, controversy, and freshness, academically trained scholars in America have more probably failed to embrace quilt study for more pertinent reasons. This article discusses some of the factors contributing to the relative scarcity of American academicians currently involved with emerging quilt scholarship and offers a cross-functional analytical model quilt scholars may wish to consider for future studies.

Utilizing Leslie A. White's three main subdivisions of human culture — material, social and mental — it can be argued that material culture as a field of humanistic study has received less systematic attention than the other two divisions of culture.<sup>3</sup> A relative latecomer among analytic methodologies, artifact study has only recently been incorporated on a limited basis by a growing number of cultural historians. Speaking for the field, educator Thomas Schlereth recounted the particular benefits brought by application of material culture study to historic reconstruction:

*Material culture data provides us with one abundant source for gaining historical insight into the lives of those who left no other record... perhaps the historian's best approach to "anonymous history." Such a cultural history. ... is particularly attentive to the historical experiences of Americans who were nonliterate, or literate but who did not leave behind any writing, or, for various reasons, who have not figured prominently*

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nently in traditional political or economic narratives written by historians.'

Certainly cultural hegemony based upon gender inequality accounts for the poverty of period documentation concerning the substance of women's lives in America during centuries past. It must also be factored among the reasons the feminine experience in America has not figured prominently in *traditional* historical narratives, non-traditional material culture studies notwithstanding. Because gender is a "fundamental organizing category of experience" and because the male perspective has dominated academic fields, shaping both paradigms and methods, the emerging study of women's material culture from a feminist perspective promises to "deconstruct predominantly male cultural paradigms"<sup>6</sup> and reconstruct models attentive to women's presence and agency in the American past.

Other political issues have played a causal role in the general scarcity of academically disciplined scholars focusing upon American quilts and quilting traditions. Aesthetically and historically, the products of women's handcraft have been subjected to a peculiar political "double-whammy" which has stigmatized this class of artifact and those who study (and create) them.' Products of a collaborative and traditional women's craft, customarily intended for an audience of intimates, quilts continue to be categorized as artistically and culturally inferior to the virtuosic, innovative and public creative works which comprise the male-dominated fine and decorative arts. Only since the 1970s have American quilts achieved a measure of aesthetic appreciation among museum curators and art historians, following the landmark 1971 Whitney installation, "Abstract Design in American Quilts."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, then and now the celebrity of American historic quilts has been gained and promoted through the visual filters and critical judgments of 20th century modernists, whose restricted ideas about these textiles point to an imposed aesthetic more revealing of our own time and cultural values than those of the makers'.

And as if the conventions of art history weren't daunting enough, the conceptual deficiencies of even the most recent American quilt scholarship confront the trained academician approaching quilt study with additional deterrents — however willing s/he may be to risk professional and intellectual association with the products of women's craft. While contemporary quilt scholars have made significant strides in gathering quantifiable data concerning quilts and quilting in the American past, the mere gathering and publication of quantitative masses of information about artifacts does not constitute interpretive study.' The central weakness of contemporary quilt scholarship lies in its failure to analyze the subject material rigorously, to place the material in its social, historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts, and to subject the data to analysis within one or more conceptual frameworks.

With some important exceptions, contemporary American quilt study seems to be mired in what material culture scholar

E. McClung Fleming has termed the "operation of *identification*," the first of four fundamental steps necessary to assure comprehensive analysis of artifacts.<sup>10</sup> Students of the product and process of quilting need to move beyond this *information level* of quilt study to the *conceptual* level leading to cultural analysis and interpretation of meaning. All too frequently contemporary quilt studies offer repetitive physical descriptions and incomplete analyses of objects and events, often coupled with cursory biographical information about the quiltmaker or recipient. Typically, neither the description, incomplete analyses, nor the biography, though faithfully noted and recorded, are coherently related through any conceptual framework to the larger context of cultural system and process, leaving questions of significance and meaning unexplored. While detailed physical description, biography, and analysis of individual artifacts and events are *components* of a comprehensive approach to material culture study, they will actually better serve as the fundamental building blocks upon which more advanced — and *meaningful* — cultural analysis and interpretation will be based.

Contemporary American quilt scholars attempting to penetrate the "glass ceiling" separating description from understanding are hindered by a field-wide scarcity of formal academic training in applicable interpretive and analytical methodologies. Quilt historian Jonathan Holstein has categorized many of the leading researchers and scholars currently working in quilt studies as "amateurs," a term he employs to describe persons who do not enjoy the benefits of scholarly training, many of whom do not "live by their scholarship."<sup>11</sup>

An interrelated and more insidious factor limiting the scope and depth of American contemporary quilt analysis and interpretation may be traced to unintentional bias resulting from individual and collective problems of objectivity. Holstein has noted that in addition to their amateur academic status, the statistical majority of contemporary quilt scholars is female.<sup>12</sup> The reluctance or failure of these amateur female scholars to advance quilt scholarship to new levels of conceptual understanding may be a protective, adaptive strategy designed to limit self-awareness and thereby maintain the alignment of individual belief and value systems with those of American society in general. Self-awareness frequently leads to growth and change: both are disruptive and painful processes whether experienced on an individual or societal level. In their enduring celebration of quilts' familiar and comfortable relationships with the cultures of patriarchy and domesticity, contemporary quilt scholars often perpetuate an unbalanced cultural mythology which not surprisingly affirms its proponents' personal values and life choices while validating and conforming to the traditional framework provided by the dominant patriarchal social order. By protecting and upholding the cultural *status quo* through strategic omission, contemporary quilt scholars remain blinded to potentially disturbing historical and political interpretations

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of the social processes and functions associated with — perhaps surrounding — quilts and quiltmaking.

Material culture study attempts to explain the complex network of interrelated meanings embodied within objects, including "why things were made, why they took the forms they did, and what social, functional, aesthetic or symbolic needs they serve..."<sup>13</sup> Since meaning is socially and culturally determined, artifacts must be studied within the framework of culture and society. A thoroughly integrated view of the diverse aspects of American culture contributing to the evolution of artifact form and multilayered functions is best gained through an interdisciplinary, or cross-functional, curriculum joining the synchronic methodology (what else was happening in the culture at this time) of the social scientist with the diachronic methodology (what was happening in this culture across time periods) of the art historian. Such a holistic approach for the study of quilts and quiltmaking will seek out the "intersecting lines of thought" shared among the fields of social history, cultural history, women's studies, folklore, literature, sociology, psychology, economics, philosophy, theology, art history, anthropology, proxemics, and the histories of business, industry and technology. By developing, adopting or adapting models of artifact analysis from related academic disciplines, quilt scholars will have the means to approach and analyze these rich primary documents and develop a theoretical understanding of the ways in which quilts — and the human behaviors associated with them — explicitly implement, express and document continuity and change within a particular cultural system, a "mind," a way of life."

Applying principles of interdisciplinary study to Fleming's second operation of *evaluation*<sup>15</sup> suggests that responsible scholars must learn to evaluate quilts not by late-20th century criteria of aesthetics and workmanship, but as artifacts functioning within the value systems of their contemporary culture. Quilt historians must work to discover the criteria by which the community of known contemporaries judged a performer (quiltmaker) and a performance (a quilt), and must assess the confluence of community and individual. By seeking out what traditions the community shared and how far the individual was allowed to go in introducing new features or items of performance, quilt scholars can illuminate both the shaping role of the cultural system and the nature and extent to which individual creativity functioned therein.<sup>17</sup>

Students of quilts and quiltmaking can carry their projects "beyond description to explanation" by "the explication of those critical links that exist between human behavior and its material products."<sup>18</sup> Fleming describes "two reciprocal methods" useful for discovering the intersections of an artifact with its culture: *product analysis* and *content analysis*.<sup>19</sup> Both equally involve probing and exposing the interrelationship of artifacts and culture either through extracting evidence from the artifact about the culture or developing an explanation of how the shaping influence of the culture made the artifact what it is.<sup>20</sup> Both analytical tools are important components of *cultural*

*analysis*, Fleming's third operative stage, which has as its purpose the identification of characteristics common to a group of objects that enable the researcher to make general inferences about the society that produced, used and retained the material. As if anticipating the mass quilt documentation efforts of recent years, Fleming identified "sampling operations" involving a body of related artifacts as one valuable form of cultural analysis which can yield significant conceptual generalizations through statistical groupings.<sup>21</sup>

*Interpretation*, considered by Fleming to be the "crown" of his analytical model, teases out the relations of the artifact to our culture, relying upon artifact identification and evaluation, as well as cultural analysis of both past and contemporary life to do so. "More specifically," writes Fleming, "interpretation focuses on the relation between some fact learned about the artifact and some key aspect of our current value system, and this relation must be sufficiently intense or rich to have self-evident meaning, significance or relevance... Interpretation will vary as the personal, class, ideological, and national interests of interpreters and their audiences vary."<sup>22</sup> Analysis of interpretive themes developed from any particular object or class of artifacts (the *interpretation of interpretation*) can provide insight into the particular values held by the interpreting audience. *Tell me what this means to you*, says the material culture scholar, *and I'll tell you who you are*.

When done well, interpretation metaphorically holds an unclouded mirror before the viewing culture's social countenance for due reflection and contemplation, enlightening people about themselves. Through systematic and rigorous application of analytical methodologies, quilt scholars can contribute meaningfully to a new, holistically balanced interpretation of women's lives and Western society, past and present. It is time to move beyond mass documentation efforts and "quilts with stories" anthologies to more comprehensive historical reconstruction and to write the histories that scholar Virginia Gunn has heralded as "the fourth era of quilt scholarship."<sup>23</sup>

*Patricia Keller received her material culture training in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture. Through that program she received an M. A. in 1984 from the University of Delaware. Her research has been particularly directed toward Pennsylvania German material culture with special emphasis on paint-decorated furniture and quilted textiles, and she has written and lectured frequently on these and other decorative arts topics. As Director/Curator of The Heritage Center of Lancaster County from 1984-1993, she organized numerous original exhibitions interpreting regional decorative arts. She served as director of The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest, a regional quilt documentation project sponsored by the Heritage Center, and continues as a volunteer curatorial research associate for that project. Currently an independent scholar, Patricia has received an E. Lyman Stewart Fellowship and will begin*

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doctoral studies in American Civilization within the History  
Department of the University of Delaware in the fall of 1993.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "The Quilt Journal: Mission Statement." *The Quilt Journal: An International Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1992) p. 1. Considering the intensity of human energy invested in contemporary quilt research and scholarship this author believes "latency" describes better than "infancy" the field's current developmental stage.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Leslie A. White, *The Science of Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp. 364-65. Quoted in E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model." *Winterthur Portfolio* 9, edited by Ian M. G. Quimby (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974) p. 153.
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980) p. 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1985) pp. 1-2.
- <sup>6</sup> Green and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, p. 1.
- <sup>7</sup> The landmark 1992 conference, *Directions in Quilt Scholarship: Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt*, in Louisville, Kentucky, included an important presentation by internationally noted quilt historian Jonathan Holstein focusing upon "Problems in Quilt Scholarship," the title of his paper. Many concerns regarding the present state of quilt scholarship were first publicly identified through this venue, including some discussed in greater depth in the present article. In his Louisville presentation, Holstein commendably identified the *amateur* status of many of the leading researchers and scholars working today in quilt study, noting that the résumés of many of his colleagues in this field lack applicable advanced academic training. But within the context of this overriding concern, Holstein did little more than affirm the *status quo* ghettoization of women's lives, art, and craft, when he observed, "Quilts have been seen as a female field and a female pursuit, and, therefore, probably a dead-end for male scholars." This particular comment reveals an insidious and culturally pervasive attitude relating scholarship with gender. In relation to curatorial scholarship, it appears Holstein may have unconsciously equated *amateur* with *female*, and *scholarship* with *male*. All things considered, Holstein might better have noted that 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>8</sup> Whitney Museum of American Art. *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. Catalogue of an exhibition held July 1 to October 5, 1971, in the galleries of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; October 20 to November 21, 1971, in the galleries of the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York; January 11 to February 6, 1972, in the galleries of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; and February 23 to April 2, 1972, in the galleries of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. 16 pages including illustrations.  
The exhibition was reinstalled in the galleries of the Louisville Museum of History and Science, Louisville, Kentucky, from November 22, 1991, to March 31, 1992, with an accompanying publication: *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*. Catalogue of an exhibition held November 22, 1991, to March 31, 1992. Text by Jonathan Holstein. Louisville, Ky: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1991. 230 pages including illustrations.
- <sup>9</sup> Folklorist Henry Glassie might well have been reflecting on the seductive scholarship of many late 20th-century mass quilt documentation projects when he wrote:  
*Some modern thinkers hope that by describing all of the physical world, by measuring all the houses, tabulating all the census data, recording all the texts, filming all the gestures, [documenting all the quilts? — author's note] they will eventually outline the metaphysical...such a materialistic positivism will never answer our central questions — matters of meanings and values. Studying only externalities yields classified lists of facts, lacking purpose, lacking meaning; and enumeration of appearance; blackened pages, absurdity.*  
—from "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies," *Prospects* 3 (1977) p. 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Fleming, "Artifact Study," pp. 154-56. In his important model developed

for the study of American decorative arts, material culture scholar E. McClung Fleming set forward the need to apply

...two conceptual tools — a fivefold classification of the basic properties of an artifact and a set of four operations to be performed on these properties...The five basic properties provide a formula for including and interrelating all the significant facts about an artifact... (and) are its history, material, construction, design and function...The four operations to be performed on the five properties yield answers to most of the important questions we want to ask about an artifact. These operations are identification (including classification, authentication, and description), which results in a body of distinctive facts about the artifact; evaluation, which results in a set of judgments about the artifact, usually based on comparisons with other examples of its kind, cultural analysis, which examines the various interrelationships of an artifact and its contemporary culture; and interpretation, which suggest the meaning and significance of the artifact in relation to aspects of our own culture. Each of these operations may involve each of the five properties of the artifact, and each successive operation is dependent upon those preceding it. Identification is the foundation for everything that follows; interpretation is the crown.

Contemporary quilt scholarship is still uneven in its ability to master the identification, or description level of artifact study, even though identification has been the focus of most mass documentation projects. Most current strategies of classification are unsystematic, with significant areas lacking a common appropriate nomenclature. Adoption of a more uniform and exact classification scheme should be considered a major item of unfinished business in the development of a rigorous discipline of quilt study. (It may be noted that Fleming made the same complaint in 1974 concerning the state of material culture study.)

<sup>11</sup> Holstein, "Directions in Quilt Scholarship" Conference, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> George A. Kubler, "Time's Perfection and Colonial Art," in *Spanish, French and English Traditions in the Colonial Silver of North America* (Winterthur, Del.: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1969) pp. 8-9. George Kubler describes two types of "intersecting lines of thought" connecting expressive products of one cultural subsystem and similar patterns in other subsystems:

*There are real intersections, as when economic history and silversmithing connect in the use of coin silver. But there are also virtual intersections which exist only in the beholder's mind...They exist as possibilities, and it is in them that we can hope to discover some latent system of relations far more instructive than those revealed by the study of real problems.*

Fleming notes that Kubler's virtual intersections consist of noncausal, unprovable but possible correspondences and conformities between artifacts and cultural constructs. (Fleming, "Artifact Study," p. 159)

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of "mind" and meaning, see Henry Glassie, "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies" *Prospects* 3 (1977): pp. 1-49.

<sup>16</sup> Fleming, "Artifact Study," pp. 154, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, "Creativity, Individuality, and the Traditional Singer," in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* III, no. 1 (April, 1970) pp. 5-34.

<sup>18</sup> Fleming, "Artifact Study," p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Lecture presented by Virginia Gunn at the 1992 conference, "Directions in Quilt Scholarship: Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt." (February 7, 1992; Louisville, Kentucky)