

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE CURRENT METHODOLOGY OF PRESENTING
AND EDUCATING ABOUT QUILTS MADE IN NORTH AMERICA

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Art History Research Paper
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It is the purpose of this paper to present an argument against the current methodology of promoting and teaching an understanding of historic quilts made in North America. As is the case with many other Americans, I too had grandmothers, great grandmothers and other family members who created quilts for use and show in their domestic and social environments. In part, it is from this personal history that my interest in quilts finds its power. More important and germane to writing here are both my own activities as an artist making blankets and the force of esthetic beauty many quilts have impacted on me. Out of personal involvement with the quilt format, and from researching quilts for the past two years, I have concluded that the current methods for presenting and educating the public about quilts is a framework which substitutes a new set of perceptual understandings for quilts in place of accuracy and honesty toward the true character and nature of the quilt object. This new perceptual understanding, being created and existing outside the intended use and perceptual framework quilts were made for, operates artificially in place of actual and precise presentation of the quilt object.

Before describing my perceptions of the current methodology, it is important to comment on the feasibility of using quilts preserved or actually entombed in museums or the pages of a book. This is significant in providing validity to the idea that there is nothing which mandates a quilt be placed in a museum or book for appreciation and understanding. While placing quilts in museums and books may be an adequate vehicle for convincing the public that quilts can be art, these two systems, seemingly applied arbitrarily to anything deemed even slightly worthwhile or

significant, are not capable of providing the perceptual experience necessary to understanding the quilt object. It is my feeling that unless a quilt is beyond repair and has deteriorated past its use, it is as viable as an object of utility today as it was when created. The utility of a quilt has not diminished with the passing of time. The quilt is not an obsolete object, no longer fit for its intended purpose. People still sleep and they still sleep on beds; the appropriateness of the quilt for this situation remains.

Currently, the two dominant systems responsible for the exhibition, storage, presentation and general dissemination of education and information on quilts are museums and books. It is my view that in both museums and books the conditions of their presentations is contradictory to the true character of the quilt object and these two systems effectively eliminate the possibility of any clear and complete understanding of the quilt as an object of utility.

Although the range in size and quality of museums varies greatly, all are essentially concerned with the preservation (entombment), presentation and education about the objects they possess. While museums focus on the actual objects, books have typically two means at their disposal for presenting and educating about the quilt; words and photographs. While likely having noble intentions, museums and books do have faults and from this carry a certain harm, not only to the quilt object itself but also less quantifiable to the public for which these systems exist. By their characteristic definitions, museums and books are not capable of accurately educating about and promoting the true character of quilts.

To clarify my argument against the current methodology, a description of my perceptions of the major characteristics of museums and books, when

concerning themselves with quilts, is necessary. Within these descriptions, criticisms will also be included. Museums will first be considered with books following. This is an obvious hierarchy derived from the situation of museums possessing actual quilts and books, due to their form, are necessarily once removed from the quilt object.

Usually in a specific location, museums require patrons to leave home to discover their contents. This point may at first appear inane, but because quilts are intended for domestic locations and use, the concern with leaving home to view quilts is here relevant. The travel to museums can often consist of covering great distances. Regardless of whether a patron must travel hundreds of miles or a few, there is a price exacted in that journey both financially and physically. For some, this travel may serve as a hindrance in participating in the museum experience at all.

Arriving at the museum, the patron normally finds an admission fee required for entrance. This fee provides partial funding for all facets of the museum, not just support for the objects of patronage. Also, this admission fee is more broadly based than its financial commitment make it appear. To be a patron in the first place a certain, albeit diverse, amount of education and socio-economic status is required. This status and education allow the patron to move within the cultural/social infrastructure in which the museum exists, and within the halls of the museum itself. Although probably unintentional, the financial and educational factors surrounding museums discriminate on potential patrons. With quilts this is relevant. It is unlikely that the makers of many of the quilts, now seen in museums and books, could have afforded the cost or possessed the education that would have allowed them to even enter a museum. In addition, there are still many people in this society which do

not have the economic or educational status that would allow them entrance into this somewhat elite and exclusive environment. The constraints of money and education placed artificially on the viewing and experiencing of quilts, are, in my opinion, gravely outside of the character and nature of quilts.

The structure of the museum, with its unique physical plant, protection/alarm systems, accompanying guards and other visitors, also affects a viewers perception of the quilt. None of these aspects of the museum, forgiving the admiring viewer, are accurate to the environment for which a quilt was created and intended. As a result, any true and complete understanding of a quilt in this environment becomes impossible.

The museum is designed to house objects, no longer intended to be used, and having been built for this purpose, may or may not consider the human element in relationship to the quilt. This is important since part of the nature of a quilt is dependent upon human interaction. Also, unless indoctrinated into the urban condition, most museums are built to a scale quite apart from the human factor.

Other viewers may not be detrimental to viewing a quilt, but certainly unwarranted and unwanted criticisms and comments do not enhance the experience of seeing a quilt in a museum. Furthering the distractions are the guards, (often a leering and discomfoting presence), the glass covering frequently placed over quilts (providing blinding reflections and separation), and the information cards accompanying the quilts on display.

When placed on a wall, behind glass where a quilt cannot be touched and used the time character of a quilt is denied and any subsequent understanding of the quilt's nature is made incomplete. Quilts are objects of utility. Broadly, this may be the common bond among all quilts. Being

utilitarian, quilts were created and intended for domestic use, and as already stated are as viable for that use today as when they were created. Quilts are objects created from and evolved out of the forces of necessity. Created and having existed in a domestic environment, quite distinct from the experience provided by a museum or book, quilts were lived with, slept under and were most frequently seen on a bed. Placing a quilt vertically behind glass or in a location or condition where it cannot be used is an affront to the true character of the quilt object. If a person cannot physically interact with a quilt, it becomes impossible to know what that quilt feels like. What good is a quilt which cannot fulfill its intended purpose? When a quilt is not allowed to bring warmth, to alter and transform the home and add life and brilliance to daily existence, a quilt is effectively destroyed. Presented and preserved in a museum a quilt is not longer a vital, living object to be utilized and understood through that use. The quilt, placed in a museum or book, is an object sentenced to an existence which does not and cannot allow it to be fully perceived. The preservation of the quilt is at the expense of the quilt's true utilitarian character. Since utility is the very force behind a quilt's existence, to destroy that utility is tragic. In my opinion, this destruction is far worse than the natural course of a quilt's organic destruction through use. Presented in a museum a quilt becomes an artifact and is perceived as that. Furthermore, the museum alters the intended location of a quilt and from this changes its status from an object of the home into an elite treasure existing outside of daily experience.

This desperate need to preserve the quilt is, I believe, rooted in what I see as an overwhelming fear of death. The converse of this is that this all represents a fear of living. This is, ultimately, where the

cultural harm of placing quilts in museums and books occurs.

Before discussing books specifically, a few comments on the information cards or plaques, normally found with quilts in museums are needed. This provided information usually contains the quilt's pattern name, (there are many names for the same pattern), possibly the name of the maker (often unknown), the place of origin of the quilt, materials and date (usually circa). Also on this card may be a short description of some type, specific to the quilt presented. All of this is good, however trivial it may appear. What is unfortunate, is that little is ever said in-depth about the lives of the makers. Who were these people? What were they like? What was the source of their creative energies? What was occurring around the quiltmakers and their families during a quilt's creation and use? Rarely, if ever, are these things described on the information card. If it is the purpose of the museum to educate and use of these cards serves as part of the tools of that education, it seems more information could be provided. When it is not, another aspect of that quilt is unnecessarily missing.

Books, while they are capable of providing more in-depth detail on the aforementioned questions, are inherently once removed from the actual quilt object. Consequently, books begin with a disadvantage in their attempt to communicate accurately and completely concerning the character and nature of quilts. Perhaps if the physical nature of the book weren't as distinct from a quilt's physical qualities, the communication about quilts might occur with accuracy. As it is not, it is my feeling that a great deal of what a quilt is about is lost when placed in the pages of a book.

A quilt is a pliable, kinetic object. It can bring warmth and protection with an intimacy and physical directness unique to bedcovers. A book

cannot communicate the feelings and understanding that happens when a quilt is used. The substitution of words and photographs is incomplete, peripheral, and subsequently is, in my opinion, inaccurate.

With photographs, in books depicting quilts, a number of problems exist in their ability to communicate and actually clarify what a quilt is. Photographs are two-dimensional images, attempting to describe a much larger three-dimensional object. This cannot be done accurately. The photograph is no replacement for the quilt; it must always remain a photograph. The photograph's size will always be smaller (unless there are plans for quilt sized books), the weight, texture and thickness will always be missing from a photograph. The colors of the quilt will only be approximate, never exact. The photograph cannot cover the body like a quilt. Except for a resemblance of pattern it is fair to say that a photograph contains none of the characteristics of the actual quilt being depicted. The photograph is an illusion of the quilt and is an unsatisfactory substitute for an actual quilt.

In books (and museums) the structure for ordering the progression of quilts is a linear historical perspective. There is, I suppose, nothing terribly wrong with our calendar or a historical framework, however a single date does not tell of the duration of creation. Neither can a date or the language of history adequately explain the quilt's creation, the quality and source of materials or the circumstances of a quilt's use. The date and language must remain peripheral. The vicarious experience provided by dates and language is incapable of providing the kind and quality of understanding achieved through the contact of using a quilt.

So that quilts may be understood and fully appreciated there exists possible solutions and these solutions entail suggestions for change. The

most direct, involved and complete process of understanding a quilt has to derive from actually creating quilts and then using them. Although impractical for most, the process of creation, completion, and use of a quilt is certainly the most in-depth and accurate method toward their complete understanding. Advocating support of making quilts is not, to be sure, advice to begin copying quilts of the past, but is rather a promotion of taking the tradition and continuing its evolution and development through creativity and invention.

Certainly creating new quilts out of their long tradition is something very few would be inclined to do. The understanding that comes with creation will remain limited to the makers of quilts. Nonetheless, the potential for a much greater understanding of the quilt object exists beyond the confines of a museum or in the pages of a book. If people cannot make their bedcovers, they should at least be able to live with those presently out of use or with those currently being created with quality, compassion and respect for tradition. By employing quilts physically, people could again become aware of the beauty, power and magic that can only be understood through use. In use, day-to-day, a quilt is perceived through time. As it ages, it changes and becomes a part of a person's life. In this way a quilt can be slowly appreciated and understood. Quilts are objects created over a rather lengthy amount of time. In living with a quilt, the time spent with that quilt can align itself with the time spent on its creation. Finally, by using a quilt, the quilt has the opportunity to be worn out, used up and can die, completing its life cycle. The quilt, by being used, is allowed to manifest its organic nature and express fully its connection to life and death in a complete, whole way. When the life and death of a quilt is denied, there

is in that a strong comment on our own denial of life and death and the fear we have of that mortality.

In this paper I have presented my perceptions and criticisms of the current methodology used in promoting and educating on historic quilts made in North America. This has been done to provide an argument against these current methods and to allow for suggestions and solutions of change for a better more complete understanding of quilts.

Being placed in museums and books attests, I think, to the value this society places on the quilt object. Having been given special status, quilts are placed in those structures designed and designated for special things. Unfortunately, with quilts, museums and books do not and can not present the quilt object with complete accuracy and understanding and as a result the quilt becomes permanently altered and is artificially perceived.

In the guise of preservation; in an attempt to prevent the death of the quilt, both museums and books have destroyed the only life ever given to a quilt. The life of use. Taken from their intended realm and taken out of use, a quilt dies. Being dead, a quilt has little to offer; it has no life.

8. M.F.A. CANDIDATES CLEARANCE FOR SPECIALIZATION WRITTEN RESEARCH PAPER

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