

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

"Workt by Hand": Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts

March 15–September 15, 2013



“*Workt by Hand*”

Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts

About the Exhibition

“Workt by Hand”: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts features quilt masterpieces from the Brooklyn Museum’s collection that exemplify the most iconic designs and techniques from the past two centuries of quilt-making. The exhibition examines how feminist scholarship has influenced the interpretation of historical quilts, exploring issues of anonymity, authorship, and collective production, as well as the historical choice to classify quilts under the heading of craft rather than art.

The line between those categories began to blur in the mid-twentieth century, when museums started to exhibit quilts as abstract art. This shift is explored by presenting the quilts in this exhibition both vertically—as they are now frequently shown in museums and galleries—and horizontally, as they would appear on the beds for which they were often originally designed.

Why is this exhibition in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art?

The title for the exhibition helps us answer this question. “Workt” is an archaic spelling of “worked,” and the phrase “workt by hand” indicates the distinctive and personal nature of an object produced by a skilled craftsman. “Hidden labor” refers to the enormous amount of creative energy women put into their quilts, which went unrecognized by an economic system that attributed more value to men’s individual creative activities.

Quilting has traditionally been considered a women’s medium; historically, women sewed on their own or gathered together for communal quilting bees to create collective designs. These gatherings still happen today, and provide groups with the chance not only to share their skills but to share stories of their lives. Gatherings such as quilting bees have provided the opportunity for women to leave their homes and to socialize with other women. In contexts where women were not likely to hold the status of professional artists, quilting was an opportunity for creativity and visual expression.

In some communities, men have also been identified as quilters (see Resources: *Men and the Art of Quiltmaking*), but the female tradition is more widely recognized. In the mid-twentieth century, museums started exhibiting quilts as art, rather than artifacts. They were displayed on walls as unattributed works with minimal historical context, meant to be considered in relation to the work of the mostly male abstract artists popular at the time. Many feminists of the era spoke out to make sure that women quilters remained part of the conversation about their work.

Feminist interest in quilts has led to extensive research into the lives of quilters, the diversity of quilting traditions, and the symbolic roles quilts play in accounts of the past. Just as important, feminist scholars began to examine the way categories such as fine art, craft, or historical artifact affect how society values and responds to quilts and quilt-makers. Presenting the Brooklyn Museum’s collection of quilts in the Sackler Center allows us to engage in this debate and to use historical documents, photographs, and publications to examine how people have approached and appreciated quilts over the past one hundred and fifty years.

Types of Historical Quilts

Album: These quilts are made up of individual squares called blocks, each with an individual design appliquéd onto it (a process in which separate pieces of fabric are stitched onto the block). Album quilts gained popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, starting in Baltimore, which was a wealthy center of fabric production after the Civil War.



Bars: Bars quilts use simple patterns with rich, solid colors and detailed stitching and are typical of the Amish quilting style. These quilts were among the first to be reinterpreted as more than simply craft objects by art historians who linked them to the abstract and Minimalist modern art paintings being made in the mid-twentieth century.



Crazy: This quilt style uses patches of fabric sewn together without a regular, repeating pattern. The term “crazy” may relate to a pottery effect called “crazing,” where irregular crackles appear across the surface of a fired piece. Examples of crazed pottery were shown at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, which Americans visited by the millions, and may have led to the late nineteenth-century increase in the popularity of crazy quilts.



Log Cabin: In a log cabin quilt, each quilt block has a central square as its focus. When the blocks are pieced together, they often form an overall pattern of contrasting light and dark areas. This style has historically been considered typically American, as the complexity of the design displays a quilter's ingenuity and determination, both thought to be characteristics of the United States' national pride.



Medallion: A medallion quilt has a central focal point surrounded by other designs. It can include many different construction techniques and many variations of the central motif, making this one of the most versatile quilt styles available.



Pictorial: In a pictorial quilt, a story is told by stitching together a number of individual blocks, each including recognizable images. A famous example is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, in which each square includes both a person's name and images that tell the viewer about that person's life.



Star of Bethlehem: These quilts (also called star quilts) use many individual diamond-shaped pieces to form a large central star. When new technology led to new fabrics in the early nineteenth century, star quilts became a popular way to show off many different textiles in one impressive display of painstaking quilting skill.



Whole-cloth: This is a quilt style that uses one large piece of fabric without patchwork or appliquéd pieces. Instead, the quilting stitches themselves provide the decoration, along with additional techniques such as trapunto, in which extra stuffing is added to make some areas of the quilt stand out even more from the background.



How to Make a Quilt: The Basics

A quilt is comprised of three layers: the backing, the batting, and the quilt top. The backing is the underside of the quilt and sometimes carries its own decoration, which is usually simple. The batting is the stuffing that makes up the “filling” of the quilt sandwich (a term quilters use, which provides a clear visual of how a quilt is constructed). The quilt top is the most highly finished part of the quilt, where most of the design work is done. Though this is the element people most often think of when they envision quilts, to create a quilt, you must combine all three components.

Questions for Viewing

Select a quilt in this exhibition or from the examples provided at the end of this Teaching Resource. Look closely at the quilt. What can you see about it that reveals the skills and choices of its maker(s)?

Most quilts include patterns or repeating visual elements. Can you find any examples in this quilt? How do the pattern(s) help direct your eye to move around the entire quilt surface?

When looking at quilts with recognizable imagery, such as the *Pictorial Quilt* (circa 1840), what images can you identify? What associations do you have with those images? How do your associations affect your ideas about this quilt?

In abstract quilts such as the *Bars Quilt* (circa 1890), colors and patterns combine to create a design that does not contain recognizable images. How do the colors and patterns in this quilt make you feel? How might your feeling change if those colors or patterns were altered?

One of the most important choices a quilter can make is what fabric to use. Think about how different a quilt made of fleece would look and feel from a quilt made of satin. Look closely at this quilt. How many different fabrics can you find? Think about how those fabrics combine with each other to form an overall design. If you could touch those different fabrics, how do you think they might feel?

Activities

Math/Geometry: Patterns and Tessellation

Two of the key mathematical principles that quilters use to compose their designs are pattern (a decorative design that repeats) and tessellation (a combination of geometric shapes that don't overlap and have no gaps between them). Create your own quilt design using these two concepts. Decide what shapes you want to use and cut them out of paper. Use a ruler and cut carefully to make sure they are all exactly the same size. Play around with different combinations of your shapes to make different patterns. Can you make a symmetrical design? Think about using different kinds of symmetry (rotation, reflection, etc.). An illustrated description of different kinds of symmetry can be found here: <http://mathforum.org/sum95/suzanne/symsusan.html>.

Art Making: A Quilt of Your Own

Quilts have always been connected to the idea of community. Using paper, make a quilt with your fellow students. Decide on a size for the quilt blocks. They should be square and big enough to be decorated with designs (6 x 6 inches is a good size), and everyone should start with the same blank square

block. Using other pieces of paper and glue, create a design on your paper quilt block that expresses your personality. Be creative with your paper: cut it while it is folded, combine cut pieces and torn pieces, think about making patterns. When everyone in the class has made their own quilt block, tape them all together to form a big class quilt.

Social Studies: Quilting Communities

Quilting is an important practice in many communities, each with their own unique traditions. Research the quilting traditions of a community of your choice (think about both past traditions and how they continue today). Share your findings in writing or in an oral presentation. Include illustrations so everyone can see examples of different quilts. (Hint: African American, Native American, and Amish communities are particularly known for their quilting.)

English Language Arts: Quilt Stories

Quilts go hand in hand with oral history. They might be made to commemorate a special occasion or a particular group of people, and the quilters may have shared memorable anecdotes while they worked. Ask your family members if they have any quilt stories to share. If so, interview them (with a voice recorder or a pen and paper) and record what they share. (Hint: If you need some guidance in how to collect stories from your family, you can find useful tips at http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html.) Or think about what or who might inspire you to make a quilt and record that. When everyone in your class has collected their stories, share them with each other to pass on the oral histories to a whole new group of listeners.

Resources

quilting.about.com/od/quiltingglossary/Quilting_Glossary.htm

A glossary of terms specific to quilt styles and techniques.

www.historyofquilts.com

A website covering many of the historical aspects of quilts and the people who have made them over the years.

www.aidsquilt.org and www.aidsquilttouch.org

A website about the history of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and an online interactive allowing users to zoom in on and examine individual squares.

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=970364

Audio of a 2003 National Public Radio story about the community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, where African American women quilters have been creating unique designs since the early twentieth century.

Cooper, Patricia. *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, an Oral History*.

Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1999.

A compilation of interviews with and photographs of women quilters from the Southwestern United States.

Cunningham, Joe. *Men and the Art of Quiltmaking*. Paducah, Ky.: American Quilter's Society, 2010.

A book by "Joe the Quilter" discussing the history of men's quilting practices.

Freeman, Roland L. *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*. Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1996.

A survey of photographs and stories of African American quilt-makers around the United States.

Granick, Eve. *The Amish Quilt*. Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 1994.

An authoritative, illustrated history of Amish quilting.

Macdowell, Marsha L., and C. Kurt Dewhurst, eds. *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1997.

A collection of essays and photographs featuring many Native American and Hawaiian quilting stories that accompanied an exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

Morris, Catherine, ed. *“Workt by Hand”: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts*. Exh. cat. New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2013.

The catalogue of the exhibition, featuring essays and interview transcripts about various aspects of quilting.

Cover, pages 3, 7: Mary A. Stinson (American). *Crazy Quilt*, circa 1880. Silk, 81¼ x 81¼ in. (206.4 x 207.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Designated Purchase Fund, 1995.87. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Page 3: *Bars Quilt* (detail), circa 1890, Pennsylvania. Cotton, wool, 83 x 82 in. (210.8 x 208.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Peter Findlay, 77.122.3. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Pages 3, 8: *Baskets Quilt*, circa 1860. Cotton, 74½ x 73¼ in. (188.3 x 185.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Margaret S. Bedell, 29.1379. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Pages 3, 9: *Log Cabin Quilt*, circa 1890. Printed cotton, printed chintz, 76 x 76½ in. (193 x 194.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Alice Bauer Frankenberg, 59.151.3. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Pages 3, 10: Elizabeth Welsh (American). *Medallion Quilt*, circa 1830. Cotton, 110½ x 109 in. (280.7 x 267.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of The Roebling Society, 78.36. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Pages 3, 11: *Pictorial Quilt*, circa 1840. Cotton, cotton thread, 67¼ x 85½ in. (172.1 x 217.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Franklin Chace, 44.173.1. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Pages 4, 12: *Star of Bethlehem Quilt*, circa 1830. Cotton, 95 x 95½ in. (241.3 x 242.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Alice Bauer Frankenberg, 59.151.7. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

Pages 4, 13: Betsey A. Canfield (American, born 1794). *Coverlet*, circa 1810. Cotton, feathers, 99 x 98 in. (251.5 x 248.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mary Dunderdale Bedell, Maria Dunderdale Bange, and Mrs. Forbes Dunderdale, 18.168. Photo by Gavin Ashworth

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“Workt by Hand”: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts is organized by Catherine Morris, Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum.

This exhibition is made possible by the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation.

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