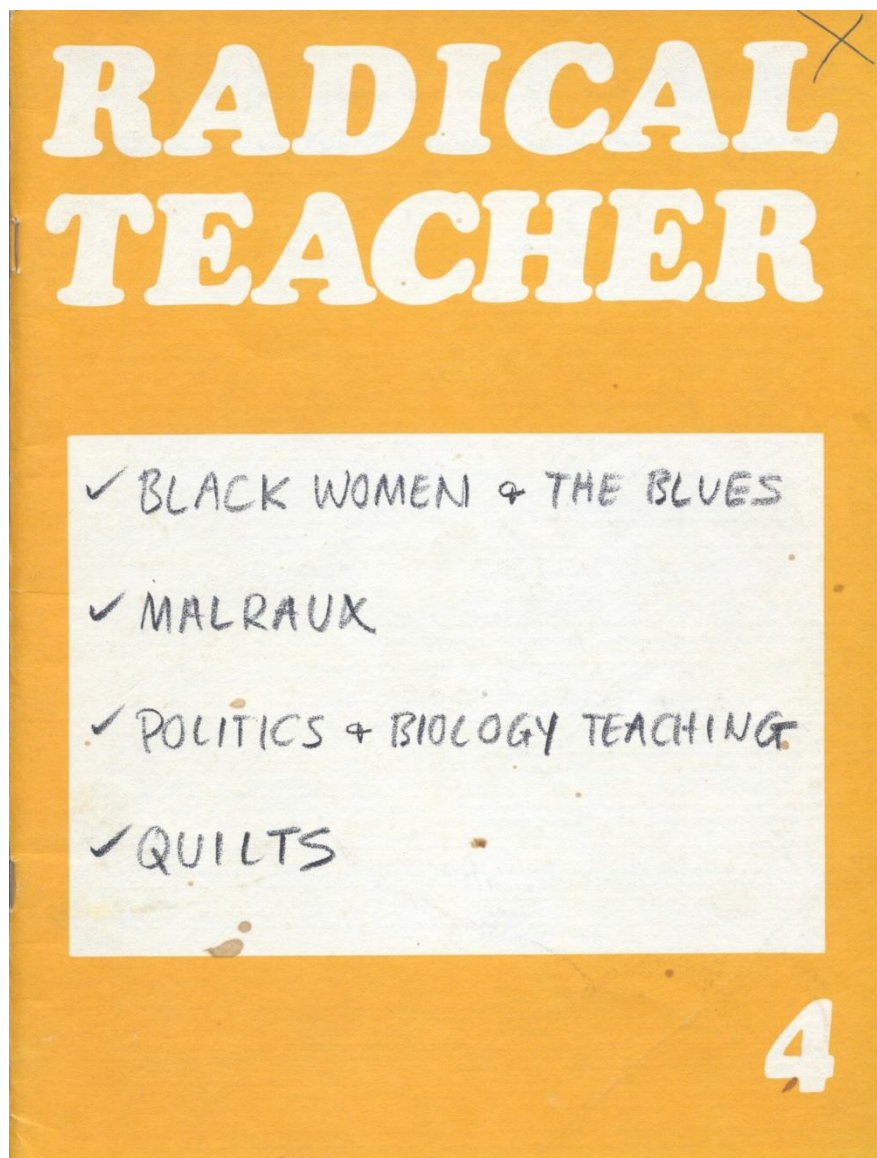


RADICAL TEACHER

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Quilts and Women's Culture

by Elaine Hedges



My interest in women's needlework, and especially quilts, began with a course I team-taught several years ago on women's art and literature. Because those of us teaching the course were concerned to break down class and race barriers, and distinctions between "high" and "low" art, or crafts, as well as distinctions between art and work, we were especially interested in women's needlework, as a form of activity that is universal – not confined to any one class or race – and that has combined the practical with the esthetic or artistic. It has always been necessary for women to sew, and, wherever and whenever extra time and energy have allowed, sewing has become "esthetic," in the sense of giving expression to an artistic impulse, providing its practitioners with an outlet for their creativity. Often this has been a creativity which, as Alice Walker has eloquently discussed in her article, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,"¹ a patriarchal society has officially stifled: for instance, by denying literacy to slaves and to many women. It is a creativity which might then erupt in the making of gardens, or blues songs, or quilts, such as the one she describes hanging in the Smithsonian Museum, made one hundred years ago by an anonymous black woman in Alabama: "an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use."

Many quilts today do hang in museums, and not just in historical museums such as the Smithsonian, but in art museums – the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Chicago Art Institute, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. And quilts are being avidly collected by many individuals. Quilts, as well as other forms of needlework, have achieved a status of some respectability in the art world. There was a major quilt exhibit at the Whitney in 1971, which travelled to the Louvre the following year, and other museums throughout the country have also mounted exhibits.

Such interest and exposure have led to some re-thinking of what is, and what should be, contained within the official definition or canon of fine art; more specifically, of what is, or what should be, the relation of what we commonly call "high" art to what have been regarded as minor forms of visual expression. The dividing line between creating with paints on canvas and creating with fibers has to some extent broken down in the twentieth century, ever since early-century collage began to incorporate bits of paper and cloth into the painted surface. In more recent decades weaving, knotting and crocheting have been used to create art works, such as wall hangings, fabric collages, soft sculptures, and the "art fabric" – a piece of fabric created with the sole intention of being a work of art.

Insofar as these new developments have made the definition of serious visual art more all-encompassing, we have a more hospitable context for the quilt, and possibly for some other working-class art products as well. But in practice such receptivity can also result in distortion, if the effort is merely to accommodate the

newly-defined art product, such as the quilt, to preexisting or currently prevailing standards of high art: to judge the style known as the "stuffed quilt," with its highly textured surface, for example, merely in terms of the subtle play of light and shadow or in terms of three dimensional form; or to judge an Amish (Pennsylvania Dutch) quilt, with its broad, bold, horizontal and vertical blocks and bands of simplified, solid color, in terms of a modern abstract painting.

Since pure geometric forms, abstract designs, contrasts of light and shadow, line rhythms, and both startling and harmonious combinations of color do have appeal, do give sheer visual pleasure, and can be evaluated by certain esthetic criteria, quilts most certainly qualify as art and can and should be appreciated and enjoyed as art. In many cases they represent an extraordinarily sophisticated art, of an intricacy, complexity and subtlety that bear comparison with much "high art" painting. Some quilts have rightly been called "quilt paintings."²

However, to think of them only or primarily as, or in relation to, paintings, is to run the risk of eventually seeing quilts as second-rate paintings, inferior to a modern abstract canvas. It is to see quilts through categories not intrinsically their own, categories that try to force them to be something else. Such categories isolate quilts, as the products of working women, from the social, economic and political context out of which they evolved and to which they must be returned for their full validation and meaning. We run the risk of doing to quilts what the new criticism has done to much literature: establishing works as timeless universals, divorced from their historical context, to be judged by some presumably "objective" standards – standards which, we now realize, surreptitiously embody a white male perspective, and which may therefore distort, or obviate the possibility of our discovering, the nature of artistic meaning in work by women.

To talk about quilts, then, as part of an interest in rediscovering working-class culture and working-class art, must mean returning the quilt to its origins. These origins are not in a "working class" as distinct from a "middle class," but are origins quite specifically in work – women's work of sewing, which, as has been said, cut across class lines. All women sewed; it was an experience they shared, and it could create common bonds.

Quilting itself goes back to the Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Persians, from whom it was introduced into Europe by the Crusaders. This discussion confines itself to the American quilt, or what is known as "patchwork." Patchwork arose out of necessity: the necessity for warmth, in clothing (which was sometimes quilted) and in bed covers, the form the quilt most commonly took. And it arose out of scarcity: there was little cloth in the American colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; that which was imported from England and the continent was expensive; and so all scraps and fragments were saved, salvaged from worn-out items, and reused. The activity of quilting consisted of two main stages: designing and

sewing the quilt top, which would be exposed on the bed; and doing the actual "quilting," which consisted of binding or stitching this finished top layer to a plain bottom layer, with filling or wadding in between. It was this triple thickness which gave warmth.

From the beginning, however, women expended time and care on the making of quilts beyond their utilitarian purpose. Artistry was possible, and was pursued, in two areas. First, the quilt top offered nearly limitless possibilities of design and color as one pieced and sewed together small, straight-edged bits of fabric to create an overall patterned top known as a "pieced" quilt; or as one "applied," that is, sewed small pieces or patches of fabric according to some design on to a larger ground fabric. These were the two main kinds of "patchwork." Second, in the quilting or stitching together of the three layers fine sewing could be practiced. Small stitches, and different, highly complex kinds of stitches were employed, often to create intricate designs of scrolls, flowers or feathers. In Emily Dickinson's words (Poem #617), "I'll do seams - a Queen's endeavor/ Would not blush to own."

The results, as one looks at hundreds and hundreds of quilts, are varied and dazzling - truly a visual feast. There is an esthetic indigenous to quilts, and the more one knows about the craft and the techniques - the possibilities and limitations of various fabrics and ways of cutting them, the geometric intricacies of various designs, the various stitch patterns - the more one can appreciate and even marvel at the skill, the sophistication, the inventiveness, the visual daring that quilts display. That women responded to the technical challenge implicit in quilt making, just as a painter might set and solve a technical problem of shading or perspective or design, is apparent when one learns, for instance, of a pieced quilt that contains 30,000 pieces, each 1/2 inch by 1/4 inch in size. One may have mixed reactions, of admiration and dismay, to such a revelation; and the implications of that kind of expenditure of time and energy on one product serving an essentially humble function will be examined later. But

the reality is that quilts were, from the middle of the eighteenth through the nineteenth century in this country, where patchwork achieved its highest form of development, *the* major creative outlet for women.

As we return the quilt to its original context in work and in history, then, there are certain characteristics that shaped and defined it as a product of women's culture and that are essential to a full understanding of it and respect for it. Many of these characteristics, I suspect, are analogous to or even identical with characteristics of other working-class art products. And many of them define at least part of what might be considered an artistic ideal.



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The quilt was both an individual and a collective art. Usually, an individual woman designed and executed the top layer. The work of quilting together the three layers, however, was collective, and in fact no other art has ever brought together for its execution so many people. To the "quilting bee" would be invited the best sewers from the community. Quilting bees were usually festive occasions, opportunities to renew and cement friendships, to reestablish social bonds among women otherwise isolated, to exchange news and ideas and to express feelings. Under the stimulus of friendly competition, women vied to do their best sewing, creating art within a context that had a broadly nourishing social function. Where men had the tavern or saloon, the marketplace or the courthouse square for bonding together, women had the quilting bee.

Competition within a framework of cooperation functioned also to produce one specific class of quilts: the Friendship Medley, Autograph, Album or Presentation quilt, so named according to the occasion. In each case a group of people - friends, relatives, parishioners, and men as well as women - would independently create individual squares for a quilt top. The squares were then sewn together and the finished product, after quilting, presented to the recipient. Each sewer would do his or her finest work; but, since all of the pieces were intended to harmonize and complement each other in the finished design, there could be no destructive competition. Rather, there was a

competitive challenge intended to bring out one's individual best while yet acknowledging the claims of the group.

Quilt making was a traditional art. The origins of many stitches and patterns go far back in time, and as an art form, therefore, much of it remains anonymous. It is, in its overall distinguishing features, more representative of a culture or a society than of an individual or any series of individuals. As such, it asserted and conveyed values of continuity, stability and tradition – all useful values in a country of immigrants and of geographic mobility.

Within its broad traditionalism and anonymity, however, variations and distinctions developed. There were regional variations, ethnic or religious variations, and finally, individual variations, in the works of specific quilt makers whose names are known to us. Regional variations would include, for example, what is known as the Baltimore quilt, an appliqued Friendship quilt of the early nineteenth century with distinctive, recognizable designs, which reached an extremely high level of skill. Ethnic or religious variations would include the quilts of the Amish and of the Moravians; similar to and yet distinguishable from each other in their color ranges and patterns, these quilts are significantly different from those of other groups.

Regionally, too, distinctions were introduced into quilt making through the interesting process of re-naming. Ordinarily quilts were given names, usually the name of the basic pattern chosen for the top layer. In the course of time, and with geographical movement within the United States, name changes and sometimes small design variations were introduced in response to local needs and to both sectional and national events. Thus, during the Civil War a traditional rose pattern (of which there were many) was modified by the additional of a black patch at its center and renamed the "Radical Rose," in recognition of the slavery controversy. A chain or loop pattern originally called "Job's Tears" – one of many early pattern names taken from the Bible – was renamed the "Slave Chain" in the early 1820's; by 1840 the same pattern was being called "Texas Tears" in response to new political developments; and after the Civil War it was used to describe "The Rocky Road to Kansas." Indeed, quilt names provide a capsule version of much nineteenth-century American history, not least the hardships of the western journey. A pattern made of rectangles inside diagonal bands and known in pre-Revolutionary New England as "Jacob's Ladder," from the Bible, became in western Kentucky "The Underground Railroad," and in Mississippi and the prairie states "Wagon Tracks" or the "Trail of the Covered Wagon."

With equal inventiveness women renamed traditional patterns to accommodate them to the local landscape. Thus a pattern called "Duck's Foot in the Mud" on Long Island became "Bear's Paw" in western Pennsylvania and Ohio. Quilt names, indeed, give us insight into many aspects of the lives of the women who made them and their families. There are names of occupations, from farming to carpentry and mechanics, names (although

fewer) of recreations and amusements, and names expressing moral beliefs and hopes and dreams.³ "Hens and Chickens" and "Trip around the World" demarcate the poles, real and ideal, of many women's lives. Whereas it has been estimated that the total of distinctively different quilt patterns is probably not more than three hundred, the names run into the thousands.⁴

Finally, out of such regional and other variations come individual, signed achievements. Many women did sign their quilts: their skill was recognized; they responded with pride and aspiration; they aimed to create a work of art for posterity. Often, too, individual women who became known as master quilters created a final "legacy" quilt composed of all of their favorite or best patterns. A woman's proudest boast might be that she had originated a quilt pattern. And women for whom quilting became an outlet for esthetic or creative expression invariably made, in the course of a lifetime, many more quilts than need demanded. The form thus removed itself, to an extent, from its work origins. Thus we know of a Susan McCord in Indiana (1829-1909), who in addition to her regular household chores as wife and mother, made soap and candles, raised, dried and canned fruits and vegetables, did embroidery, and left at her death over 150 quilts, many of them made according to patterns she had herself invented.⁵

In what has been said so far the emphasis has been broadly positive: quilts as an outlet for creative energy; as a source and emblem of sisterhood and solidarity; as a graphic depiction and dramatization of, and ingenious response to, historical and political event and change.

Such a list of positives could be extended to include, for example, quilts as inspiration and imaginative stimulus to the viewer. Thus we have Agnes Smedley, recalling her impoverished childhood at the beginning of her semi-autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth*:

I recall a crazy-quilt my mother once had. She made it from the remnants of gay and beautiful cotton materials . . . (T)he crazy-quilt held me for hours. It was an adventure.

It was also, obviously, what Agnes Smedley and working-class women in general had instead of books and paintings. The recollection of that quilt provided Smedley with a motivating analogy for her novel:

*I shall gather up these fragments of my life and make a crazy-quilt of them. Or a mosaic of interesting pattern – unity in diversity. This will be an adventure.*⁶

And finally, quilts, or women's sewing in general, can be seen as sometimes providing opportunities for political discussion and statement. Susan B. Anthony's first talk on equal rights for women was at a quilting bee, and she and Elizabeth Cady Stanton frequently used such gatherings to advocate political action and change. Earlier, Sarah Grimke advised women to

embroider anti-slavery slogans and images on domestic artifacts, urging, "May the point of our needles prick the slave-owner's conscience."⁷ And there is the delightful story of the subversive wife who had her husband sleep under a quilt that bore, unknown to him, a pattern named after the political party he opposed.

But such freedoms or assertions must ultimately be interpreted in the larger context of women's work and oppression within a patriarchal society – an oppression of which needlework was not only symbol but actuality. Little girls were forced to learn to sew; and learning to sew often took precedence over, or was the female substitute for, learning to read and write. Sewing is thus used by Emily Dickinson in one of her poems (#508) as a symbol of the childhood and female bondage she rejects as she arrives at her own achieved status of poet. Sewing, for instance of samplers with moral messages, was intended to inculcate in little girls their class or gender virtues of neatness, submissiveness, docility and patience. One learned quilting, for example, by working on one small square, sewing it, ripping out the stitching, sewing it again, over and over and over, until proficiency had been achieved. Many women learned to hate the work. In other countries, various kinds of needlework have amounted and still amount to sheer exploitation of girls and women: young girls painstakingly tying the innumerable fine knots in Persian rugs because their fingers are small enough to do the work; young girls seated in rows in convents in Belgium, making lace for hours on end, not allowed to raise their eyes from their work; Italian women going blind after a lifetime of lace making.

To return to this country, one must ask to what extent needlework had to substitute, for women, for what might have been more meaningful work, or more freely chosen work, or for various forms of political activism. Does one respond with admiration, or dismay, to that quilt of 30,000 pieces? One may admire the dexterity of Pennsylvania Dutch women, who challenged themselves with the sewing of convex and concave, rather than merely straight, edges. Their quilts show a higher degree of exacting sewing than do the quilts of New England women, and may therefore receive higher accolades as art. But one realizes it was an

art born of oppression: the Pennsylvania Dutch women were among the most severely confined, almost never allowed to learn to read, rarely venturing beyond the home.

In the Victorian era, when middle-class women lost the productive role they had held in an earlier agricultural economy, quilts became more and more decorative, more and more examples of conspicuous waste in their often irresponsible use of expensive fabrics such as satin, lace, brocade and velvet. They became an inadvertently ironic sign of woman as consumer rather than producer, and of her confinement to a narrowed and less functional domestic sphere. They became a badge of her oppression and even an unfortunate safety valve that served to delay rebellion by diverting energy.

Our response to quilts as an art form rooted in both meaningful work and in cultural oppression will therefore inevitably be complex: a combination of admiration and awe at limitations overcome and of sorrow and anger at limitations imposed.

NOTES

1. Alice Walker, "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens," *Radcliffe Quarterly*, June, 1974, p. 5.
2. Lenice Ingram Bacon, *American Patchwork Quilts*, New York, 1973, p. 44.
3. Name changes are described in: Ruth Finley, *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them*, Philadelphia, 1929, pp. 99, 103; Carrie A. Hall, *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt In America*, Caldwell, Idaho, 1936, pp. 65, 66, 117.
4. Finley, p. 107.
5. Robert Bishop, *New Discoveries In American Quilts*, New York, 1975, pp. 111-113.
6. Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth*, Old Westbury, N.Y., 1973, p. 8.
7. Quoted in Mary Ryan, *Womanhood In America*, New York, 1975, p. 181.



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