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Writing Sample

Listening to the Landscape of Creation:

Benefiting Quilt Knowledge in Virginia's New River Valley Through Research and Rhetoric

Introduction

Quilts are one of America's most dominant art forms. They are democratic, accessible to everyone with basic sewing skills. They represent both artistic vision and cultural values, and they are displayed in both art galleries and in historical museums (Shaw 1). Quilts (which are fundamentally bed coverings) are also intimate objects that insulate bedroom sleep, sickness, love-making, and everything in between (Holstein 100). They engage multiple senses; we look at quilts, but we also touch them and interact with them in close proximity to the body (Shaw 4). Quilts are tied strongly to family traditions, often made by mothers to circulate among family members and keep children warm. For this reason, one could contend that quilts even represent the "primal bond between mother and child"— the possibilities for personal and cultural meaning imbued in quilts is vast and expansive (Shaw 272). The meaning of a quilt extends far beyond its pieced top.

Scholars from many different disciplines (from art history to feminist studies) read quilts as cultural texts and thoughtful works of art—much more than simple bed coverings. Since the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s, quilts have served as a much-studied academic medium, spawning countless books, oral history projects, and databases (Torsney 2). However, the complex meaning of quilts—their status as profoundly intimate, tactile objects, laboriously created by individuals and given life independent of origin—is difficult to capture in

documentation projects. In addition, much writing on quilts adheres to evaluative criteria based on a binary Western understanding of "fine" art (which limits broad aesthetic interpretation of quilts). Since the 1960s, researchers have undertaken many quilt documentation projects to record and preserve the visual appearance of quilt patterns and the complex cultural situation of quilts as intimate use-objects; however, the final "databases" used to record this information often fail to fully capture and communicate quilts' enormously textured meaning. Instead, databases often provide a photograph and a list of data describing pattern, construction, and geographic origin. While many quilt documentation projects are motivated by an understanding of quilts as complex cultural texts, this complexity is lost in the final deliverables, which become skeletons composed only of incorporeal quilt imagery.

For my undergraduate thesis project, I have explored this problem of communication by compiling (and supplementing) the vast and abundant body of quilt research conducted in Virginia's New River Valley and creating a component content management system that reflects the multifaceted, intimate interaction of quilts and culture in the region.[1] In the course of my research, I have dabbled in ethnography by attending quilt guilds and related events, digitized records of quilts, and reviewed oral histories collected four decades ago. I have also cultivated some wonderful friendships with local quilters (to whom I am deeply indebted). I have attempted to construct final document deliverables (in print and digital database format) that reflect not only the banal materiality of case-study quilts, but also the individual and cultural significance of quilts in the region. Through my project, I have explored how the tradition of quilting can be represented in a database project—how can it be documented—in a way that does not force

[1] Accessible at devonv.github.io/thesisproject

quilts into an artificial art hierarchy, does not treat them as simplistic vernacular objects, and does not fetishize them as a material representation of romanticized notions of the past. By eschewing these common pitfalls of quilt analysis, I hope to create a framework for "documentation" that will convey the true breadth of cultural meaning imbued in quilts.

An Overview of New River Valley Quilting

A quilt is a bed covering made by sewing together a decorative, pieced top fabric, an inside batting layer for added warmth, and a backing fabric. Despite the popular, mythological understanding of quilts as material metaphor for American history, quilt making was uncommon in colonial America; it did not become widely popular until the 19th century, fueled by expansion of the textile industry and a proliferation of women's magazines that began to publish quilt patterns and promote quilting (Faoro). In Virginia's New River Valley, women were exposed to such influences as women's magazines and store-bought patterns, but regional cultural attitudes that encourage resourcefulness and salvage (as well as geographic isolation) also factored into the 19th century adoption of quilting in the region (Johnson).

In "More for Warmth Than for Looks: Quilts of the Blue Ridge Mountains," Geraldine N. Johnson describes the prevailing characteristics of Blue Ridge (including New River Valley) quilts. According to Johnson, quilts from the New River Valley of Virginia and North Carolina are created "more for warmth than for looks," wherein construction techniques tend to optimize production and functionality over aesthetic value (Johnson 55). Historically, cold houses without central heat made sleeping with many heavy quilts imperative to survival. Although no longer necessary, the tradition of making quilts from dense materials that lay heavily on the body has continued (Johnson 59). Quilts might be filled with homemade cotton batting, cotton/polyester

blends, or even old blankets for added warmth (Johnson 60). Other regional variations—like the use of contrast-color quilting thread and the domination of fan-pattern quilting—further define New River Valley quilting customs. For much of the 19th century, quilts were undoubtably an important part of life in the New River Valley.

Quilt making still abounds in the region today. Five different active quilt guilds currently exist in the New River Valley (Floyd, Montgomery, Pulaski, and Giles counties), along with hundreds of quilters. The Blue Ridge Quilt Festival, a biennial quilt festival organized by local guilds and held in Montgomery Co., regularly draws visitors from across the state ("Blue Ridge Quilt Festival"). This event, along with two smaller guild-organized quilt shows, and exhibits at a local library, historical society, and regional museum all occurred around the three-month period in which I conducted my research project. These events focused primarily on the visual qualities of quilt tops, sometimes highlighting particular skills required for certain construction techniques. While traditional, bed-sized quilts for use were displayed at these events, there were also "art quilts" created as decorative wall hangings and meant to exist solely as works of art.

A History of Quilt Documentation Efforts

The 1933 Index of American Design, a component of the depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA), is likely the earliest American documentation effort to include quilts (Zegart). The project was meant to be a comprehensive collection of American folk art for the purpose of recognizing unique American art trends and, eventually, developing a truly American vision of modern art. The Index included watercolor renderings of folk art objects (deemed worthy by Index administrators), which were collected and compiled with the intention of publishing a comprehensive portfolio of American folk art. Early 20th century quilts, along with

other forms of textile art, were abundant in the Index, where they existed as disembodied, two dimensional watercolor renderings—understood and valued only as objects of visual beauty and representations of American "design."

Recent quilt scholarship has evolved beyond this early documentation effort. The 1981 Kentucky Quilt Project (which became the foundation of the Quilt Index, the nation's largest online quilt database) set out, not to merely collect and document the visual characteristics of as many quilts as possible, but to find a representative sample of quilts that could be subjected to complete evaluation and contextualized with an accompanying oral history. Instead of analyzing every quilt they encountered at community documentation days, Kentucky Quilt Project volunteers collected only enough information to allow for later narrowing into a representative sample (Zegart). This method represents a qualitative data collection process, rather than the quantitative approach prominent in earlier (and later) similar data collection efforts in other US states. The Kentucky Quilt Project, and the numerous other state documentation efforts it has inspired, represents an important step away from the 1933 Index of American Design project. These documentation efforts were not conducted in order to establish parameters of "American" design with regard to fine art (as the Index of American Design was), and, instead of being devoted solely to capturing the visual qualities of pieced quilt tops, these state efforts have also sought information about the quilt-maker, the circumstances of creation, and the materials used in construction of the quilt (Zegart).

While the Kentucky quilt project seems to be guided by holistic, qualitative goals for the comprehensive understanding of quilts as cultural artifacts, the end deliverables are still affected by Western conceptions of visual art and notions of history. The data collection methods

employed by the Kentucky Quilt Project reflect a desire to showcase the multifaceted system of value endemic to quilts; however, the resulting database contains only factual data on the artistic and material qualities of each quilt and the circumstances of its creation (*go look at the Quilt Index*). There is little attention paid to use-value and no effort to provide a narrative of the quilt-maker's life or the human history of the quilt (although, presumably, this information was collected and still exists on paper at the University of Louisville Library). A similar problem exists in Virginia. In 1974, an extensive oral history project was undertaken by Virginia Tech students to collect oral histories with quilters in Grayson and Floyd Counties; however, these oral histories exist only on paper in the collections of Virginia Tech Libraries. In addition, the Virginia Quilt Consortium has documented more than 700 quilts across the state—but again, this information exists only on paper at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond. What is the purpose of employing thoughtful, holistic data-collection methods if the breadth and depth of data collected is not represented in final deliverables? If deliverables are not compiled at all? Complex, textured narrative information is being collected via state documentation efforts, but, since the public is not given access to it, this information is not being used to enrich and deepen public appreciation of quilts.

The Chasm of Quilt Interpretation

In the course of my research for this project, I attended multiple quilt "documentation days" sponsored by the Virginia Consortium of Quilters. The premise of these events is that quilt owners across Virginia bring family-heirloom quilts to regional documentation days and pay a small fee to have them examined and "documented" by quilt historians and other trained volunteers. The data collected at these events is then stored by the Virginia Consortium of

Quilters for future academic use. In 2006, the consortium used such documentation data to compile a book titled *Quilts of Virginia: The Birth Of American Through the Eye Of The Needle*. Much of the data collected at these documentation days focuses on quilt pattern and construction material or technique—not on the narratives or personal significance associated with the quilt.

I was present at one such documentation day in Montgomery County when a young woman came in with a quilt made by her grandmother. "She just had it out in the barn!" This woman was incredulous that her grandmother would reduce a quilt to the barn (where it was used by a family of cats). The quilt had, at some point, been a shade of green. It appeared to be just a few squares of scrap fabric pieced together in no particular pattern—almost evoking the mood of a whole cloth quilt (in which the piecing, or lack thereof, does not matter). It was a small quilt, probably for a lap or a small bed. In its current state, it was completely stained, torn and tattered, almost completely free of its binding.

The quilt was documented nonetheless. We filled out the forms and listened to the woman's story—her mother and grandmother and great grandmother from Washington County (on both sides) quilted. After she left, the head quilt historian (who organizes these events) told me this happens quite often in Southwest Virginia; people bring in old barn quilts that they've rescued from irresponsible, irreverent parents or grandparents, and they're convinced they've got a national treasure—a vitally important piece of our nation's disregarded folk art history. But, according to the quilt historian, these tattered old quilts are exceedingly common and unworthy of documentation. For her, these old quilts have no value as aesthetic or cultural artifacts.

In some ways, this dichotomy between the young woman's perception of her quilt as cultural artifact and personal treasure, and the quilt historian's perception of the quilt as

"garbage" represents the polarity of American understanding of quilts. Thinking ranges from fetishized worship of quilts as symbols of our fading past to academic and artistic interpretations based on visual aesthetics. Quilt documentation efforts range similarly across this spectrum. There exist countless coffee table books, full of images of colorful, pristine quilt tops, with titles like "Classic American Quilts" or "The American Quilt"; there also exist countless museum exhibits housing tattered rag-quilts in glass cases. I think the truth of quilt-value lies somewhere in between these things, with a third eye to the practical use of quilts and their value as functional objects within a community, among the individuals who actually use them. Documentation projects, however, tend to focus on one of these particular characteristics and we are left with databases full of images and lists of facts. The importance—as family heirloom, as evidence of grandma's skill, as object of intimate use that caused the woman in the above anecdote to drive an hour with her scrappy barn quilt—is lost.

Quilts as Art

While documentation and database efforts tend to focus on the visual qualities of pieced quilt tops, academic perspectives on quilts range from celebrations of quilting as an art form overlooked by patriarchal prejudice to rejections of quilts as "symbols of women's unpaid subjugation" (Duniway qtd. in Torsney). Art historians have, at different times, seen quilts as vernacular "folk art" unworthy of the fine-art genre, or as in the case of the famous Gee's Bend quilts, as the unusual medium of some of "America's greatest artists" (Chave). According to Geraldine N. Johnson, quilts in the New River Valley historically functioned as utilitarian bed coverings. They certainly required the maker to implement artistic judgment in construction of the quilt top, but the "value" of a quilt did not lie totally in its visual aesthetics. Elements like

texture (to the hand, to the eye, to the body lying under it), warmth, and fabric also played a role. Social relationships and use value were part of the quilting amalgam, right along with visual aesthetics.

In his book *Sensual Relations,* David Hows, describes how western anthropologists historically interpreted the artifacts of foreign cultures according to Western aesthetic standards. Although Howes' book focuses on indigenous art, his analysis of anthropological interpretations of the art of cultural others is also applicable to quilts. According to Howes, "Anthropologists tended to classify non-Western cultural phenomena in terms of the familiar disciplinary divisions of Western culture [...] practices or objects with apparent aesthetic dimensions were classified either within the domain of visual arts or within that of music" (7). These Western classification systems only account for visual and aural cultural forms. As illustration for this limited, binary system of perceiving art, Howes provides the excellent example of Navajo sandpainting. In Navajo culture, sandpainting incorporates important elements of movement, touch, and impermanence (8). However, Westerners interpret these sandpaintings as visual objects, taking pictures for reproduction, and hence reducing them to flat, disembodied shadows of their original cultural circumstances.

Following this initial categorization, the arts of cultural others were analyzed according to criteria "drawn from those fields in the West: line, form, melody, and so on" (7). By reducing sandpaints to visual art, Westerners created a framework of analysis based on line and form, without regard for other sensory elements. Howes refers to the "sensory specialization" of Western culture, arguing that it prevents cross-sensory ethnographic interpretation of cultural artifacts (7). Western audiences cannot understand the sandpaintings as they were intended to be

understood because they have been trained to understand objects in artificial categories and according only to the evaluative principles of said categories. Western audiences narrow the original cultural meaning of the sandpainting—an impermanent, textural ceremonial manifestation—to fit their definition of "visual" art. Quilts, like sandpaintings, also have a tactile element; they have meaning beyond line and form (and beyond the narrative), which is hard to conceptualize within the hegemonic, visual system of Western artistic value.

In "Art, Authenticity, and Baggage," Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner also discuss the effects of this imposed system of classification. Philips and Steiner argue that, in the past century, the objects of cultural others have been appropriated into the categories of "artifact" or "art." Further, the "art" classification is segmented by a system of distinction between "fine" and "applied" arts, both of which are further grouped based on material (e.g. textile, ceramics, jewelry, sculpture, etc.) (Phillips 8). The effect of this categorization is the creation of an "art" hierarchy that reinforces social hierarchies of gender and class (Phillips 6). In order for an object with "artistic" qualities (like visual aesthetics or decorative value) to be understood, it must be forced into this hierarchy. It must be understood according to the rules and values of western art classification (which leaves little room for consideration or appreciation of nontraditional artistic values—like texture or practical use).

Howes, Phillips, and Steiner all describe manufactured paradigms of classification and interpretation; these imposed hierarchies affect the way that we understand quilts and the way we choose to arrange and understand them in databases. Like the arts of indigenous groups, the arts of (mostly) female quilters in early 19th century Southwest Virginia must be "transposed" to fit into this foreign hierarchal classification system. Quilters in this region of Virginia were

concerned with use (the ability of quilts to keep young children from freezing to death), not necessarily with "artistic" prestige or expression (Johnson). Like the disembodied Navajo sandpaintings, quilts are often evaluated and understood according only to visual principles and stripped from the complexity of their creation and use. Further, the desire of Western audiences to subdivide and delineate "categories" of art results in a hierarchy of merit, which has historically deemphasized quilts (and all "folk" art) (Phillips). Accepting these artificial art categories in their application to quilts means subscribing to a value system that does not account for the true complexity of the medium.

Neal Conan's 2003 NPR story titled "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" provides an excellent example of Western audiences' confused national reconciliation of fine art with the vernacular practice of quilting. According to the article, "Like many American quilters, the women [of Gee's Bend] transformed a necessity into a work of art" (Conan). Conan's statement suggests, first of all, that not all quilts are art--that quilts must undergo some kind of "artistic transformation" in order to fit into the category of fine art. This statement also seems to privilege the "work of art" over the "necessity." The article continues on with a quote form Alvia Wardlaw the then curator of "Modern and Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts" who says that, "There's a brilliant, improvisational range of approaches to composition [in the quilts] that is more often associated with the inventiveness and power of the leading 20th-century abstract painters than it is with textile-making." Wardlaw seems to say that these quilts are worthy of museum display because they've got the same "improvisational range" of leading 20th-century painters; the quilts' value lies in their relationship to the fine arts of established modern painters--in their visual characteristics.

The perspectives expressed in this NPR article illustrate the extent to which our hierarchal, visually biased perceptions of art define how we appreciate quilts. While it is instinctual to categorize and "document" quilts according to this paradigm—according to visual criteria—doing so negates values and systems of importance endemic to the craft. Quilts in a database meant to illustrate the visual artistry of pieced tops are estranged from their cultural origins.

Quilts in Component Content Management Systems

While many data collection efforts represent a desire to capture the true scope of meaning embedded in quilts—not just to represent visual characteristics—final database interfaces often follow formats more suited to quantitative data; they are often devoid of narrative, context, or cultural complexity. According to the theory of social construction of technology, the meaning of a technology does not reside in the technology itself; instead, meaning is socially constructed and interpreted (Anderson, "Planning"). Quilt database projects embrace the hierarchies of art and aesthetic interpretation described above. They are products of a socially constructed understanding of art. However, the tendency of database projects to focus on the visual is also exaggerated by a conflation of complex content and standardized design. It seems that many quilt experts intend to collect complex data, but this data is lost in the process of digitization and categorization. It is sacrificed in favor of visually-focused final deliverables. This conundrum can be addressed by technical communication that recognizes the social construction of technology and by deliverables better tailored to the content and audience. By doing so, technical communicators can build deliverables that account for a range of complex values and provide a more holistic picture of quilts' significance.

In “Rhetorical Work in the Age of Content Management,” Rebekkah Andersen addresses the strategies technical communicators can use to manage large volumes of information-rich content (like data on quilts). According to Andersen, problems often arise in component content management (CCM) systems because technical communicators (or others who generate content) are not responsible for the design of the final interface (120). These communicators work within parameters established by system designers and within a “routinized process” that is often “formalized and delegated to a technology” (Anderson, “Rhetorical” 120). Quilt research is an acute example of this problem. While data for the Quilt Index was generated by quilt experts, the content and maintenance of the final Quilt Index database is determined and managed by the Michigan State University Museum, and it contains mostly descriptive information about the quilt’s appearance and materiality (see Figure 1). Some quilts contain brief two-sentence statement about their origin—this is the extent of cultural information offered by the Quilt Index. In the process of transformation from rich cultural text to database entry, much of the complex

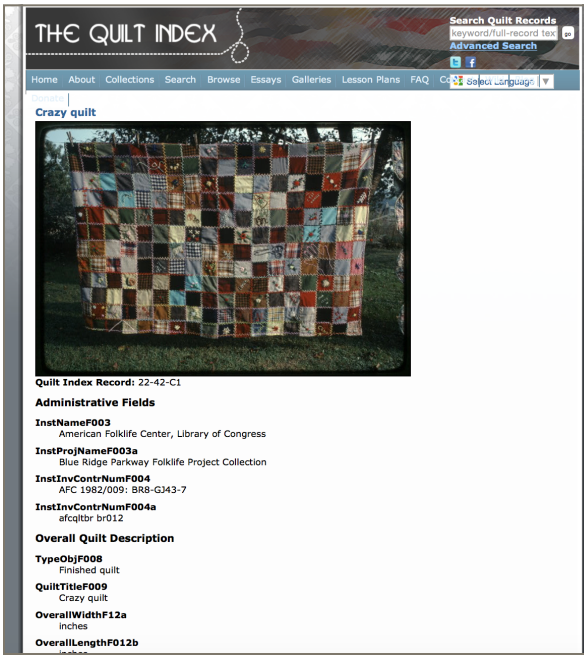

Figure 1.

A sample entry from The Quilt Index. All information is provided in this quantitative, categorized format.

meaning of each quilt was lost, quantified and categorized to fit the parameters of the Index's interface.

I have attempted to implement these principles in my undergraduate thesis project. Last summer I undertook a data collection effort, wherein I attended quilt guilds and events and reviewed previously-collected quilt documentation. I was surprised by the scope and volume of data that exists on quilts in the New River Valley—hundreds of quilt documentation forms have been collected across Southwest Virginia, and upwards of forty thorough oral histories with 20th century quilters exist in special collections at the Virginia Tech Library. This data, supplemented by some of my own observations and oral histories, forms the pool of information from which I have compiled a small, experimental component content management system that attempts to display information on quilts and quilters in the New River Valley in a way that is more culturally coherent and appropriate than the dry statistical, image based databases that seem most common. My experimental component content management system is composed entirely of narratives drawn from previously collected-interviews with quilters; there are no photographs and no classification based on pattern, fabric, or construction. Quilters—not quilts—are the focus of my project.

Conclusion to Literature Review

Our national perception of quilts—the way we frame and understand quilts—seems to say simultaneously that quilts are an egalitarian art form with complex feminine meaning as well as an example of overlooked fine art. Based on the work of Geraldine N. Johnson and my own research, I think the truth of quilt history lies somewhere between these extremes. Quilters in Virginia's New River Valley made quilts to keep their families warm—this was stated universally

and unequivocally. Families often slept under multiple quilts, as well as lighter blankets and sheets, in order to stay warm at night. However, quilts are also visually appealing art objects that required the maker to exercise acute artistic talent and to learn a complicated set of sewing skills.

This complexity of meaning is often lost in quilt database projects that tend to highlight only the visual qualities of pieced quilt tops without regard for additional contextual meaning or cultural significance. This tendency is likely due to the "Western hegemony of the visual," which privileges visual sensory input over other channels of knowing, thereby leaving the textural materiality and proxemic intimacy of quilts out of data pools (Howes). In addition, this tendency to categorize quilts according to their visual qualities while excluding other sensory data is due to the internalization of artificial art "hierarchies of merit" described by Phillips and Steiner. By understanding quilts according to the same criteria we use to evaluate "fine" arts (in more prestigious hierarchical categories), we subjugate quilts and appropriate them to fit imposed standards of artistry and value. We strip them of their true, complex meaning. While these database projects do provide voluminous information on pattern technique, they fail to capture the true intimacy and personal importance of quilts; they fail to capture "that by which the soul lives" and are instead incomplete skeletons of the rich, textured complexity present in quilts (Hurston qtd. in Chave).

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