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# Quilting and the Modern Guild: A Cultural Idiom

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## Abstract

*In this paper, we interpret the meaning of contemporary quilting by characterizing how the collective activities of quilt guild members have structured women's understanding of quilt tradition. Ethnography offers a methodological orientation by which meaning can be interpreted by analyzing the sociocultural context of the guild and considering the quilters' perspective. We analyze a particular example of "feminine culture," Minnesota Quilters, Inc. The guild community is important to individual expression, and members' activities provide evidence about a socialization process by which individuals draw upon a collective knowledge of quilt tradition to express themselves. Women's statements about their quilts refer to the significance of quilting in the expression of personal experience. Three components of the discourse suggest that quilting facilitates a woman's increasing integration within the quilting community and appropriation of traditional values: identification as guild member, characterization as quilter, and affirmation of female identity.*

**Key Words:** quilting, meaning, female identity

The latter half twentieth century has witnessed the renewed popularity of various textile arts, including quilting, weaving, needlework, and knitting. Although not exclusively the domain of women, these textile traditions have long been appreciated as visual records of female social life (Parker, 1986; Macdonald, 1988). In the most recent revival in quilting, a fresh orientation to creativity and craftsmanship has rekindled interest in quilts among middle class women and has reshaped the character of the quilt guild (Brackman, 1989; Langellier, 1991; Ronning, 1991). Many quilters have joined guilds to develop skills in the craft, but they also are bound by their persistent interest in antique quilts and stories about past generations of quilters. Popular views of quilting represent the tradition as authentic evidence of female culture, a women's history that recognizes the textile form as a record of women's experiences and accomplishments. With this sentiment in mind, the modern guild can be examined as representing a

context of female social life for women drawing upon a female tradition to resolve the ambiguities of contemporary femininity. We propose, in this paper, to interpret the meaning of late twentieth century quilting through analysis of the collective nature of a modern quilt guild and its impact on the expressions of individual quilters. In particular, we analyzed the views of guild members of Minnesota Quilters, Inc. through their discourse about their quilts.

Within the quilt guild, quilting embodies an ideology shared by members of the quilt community and serves as an idiom where individual members identify and consequently characterize aspects of self to others. The quilt is the consequence of many technical and aesthetic decisions, made as it is designed, executed, and used. As she works, the quilter often incorporates references to her life experiences into the quilt. Correspondingly, the ideology concerns quilt tradition, a reconstructed past that celebrates "feminine" values of family and relatedness. Meanings about female experience from a past are reconstructed in the present through the collective activities of the guild members. By recreating the historic dimensions of quilting through ritualized activities, Minnesota Quilters, Inc. offers members a particular scheme of identity and isolates certain attitudes, values, and beliefs that are central to a female persona. Through their particular involvement in quilting, members adapt a model of social behavior that is appropriate to the circumstance of their lives. In the practice of quilting, individuals use creative skills not simply to construct a quilt, but also to define a female persona that prioritizes social relatedness.

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## Procedures

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Ethnography has been defined as "the work of describing culture" (Spradley, 1979a, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> An *emic* perspective dominates the researchers' orientation toward the community studied; the goal is to learn about the culture by learning from the people. In this context, culture refers to "the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior" (p. 5). Fieldwork positions an ethnographer within a community and provides the opportunity to observe, record, and draw inferences from the social and material manifestations of culture (behaviors, practices, speech, writings, and artifacts). The ethnographer reasons from the evidence and tests these inferences in order to interpret and analyze phenomenon.

Daly (1984), Daly et al. (1986), and Hamilton and Hamilton (1989) have demonstrated the applicability of ethnographic methodology to the study of textiles and clothing. However, in contrast to their studies of Kalabari and Karen cultures, we rely on fieldwork conducted within a subculture of American society. Because we recognize the United States as a pluralistic society, we must understand how people are governed by variant cultural beliefs and practices. As people move across social settings (e.g., ethnic, religious, occupational, leisure) in daily behavior, they employ different cultural rules (Spradley, 1979a, p. 12).

We consider how the culture of one social setting, the quilt guild, defines parameters of female identity through the collective practice of quilting. Minnesota Quilters, Inc., a cohesive, well-defined subculture with historic antecedents, provides one example.<sup>2</sup> One of the larger quilting guilds in the United States in the mid-1980s, Minnesota Quilters, Inc. can be seen as an umbrella organization that draws together individual quilters and independent community guilds and circles from throughout the state.<sup>3</sup>

Major fieldwork of Minnesota Quilters, Inc. was conducted between October 1984 and September 1985.<sup>4</sup> Selected participation continued through July 1986 and included attendance at the 1986 spring symposium. Orientation to the guild was dualistic in nature: the field researcher was both novice quilter who wanted to develop quilting skills and learn more about the tradition, and ethnographer who wanted to understand the culture from the perspective of other members and as elaborated by guild activities. Methods of data collection and documentation included participant observation and fieldnotes of guild activities (i.e., day and evening monthly meetings, fall and spring workshop-lecture series, fall retreat, annual spring symposium), content review of guild publications (i.e., monthly newsletter published since 1979 and annual reports), unstructured interviews with selected members (ranging from founders and board members to regular members),<sup>5</sup> and a questionnaire distributed to the membership. Initial observation of monthly meetings, where public dialogue centered so specifically on women and their families, defined the subsequent perspective taken in recording fieldnotes on guild activities and reviewing articles in the newsletter. During the period of fieldwork, membership

averaged between 800 and 850 members (Minnesota Quilters, 1986a).<sup>6</sup> Male participation activities in guild activities has been minimal.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning, the field researcher was interested in how discourse of public collective activities seemingly reinforced a traditional female image and how the social dynamic witnessed during guild activities might be shaping expression in an individual's quilting.

To ascertain the extent of shared attitudes and practices among a diverse group of quilters, open-ended interviews with twenty-three members about their orientations to quilting led to the design of a questionnaire. Demographics, quilting background and interests, participation in Minnesota Quilters, Inc., and preferences in making quilted apparel were covered (Cerny, 1992). Twenty percent of the membership, 170 members, completed the questionnaire, which was distributed during the 1985 annual symposium.

We report here on research data selectively drawn from a larger study that concerned the significance of

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<sup>1</sup>See also Agar (1980), Pelto and Pelto (1978), and Spradley (1979b) for more detailed explanations about ethnography.

<sup>2</sup>Founded in 1977 and incorporated in 1978, Minnesota Quilters is based in the urban and suburban communities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, where the majority of the members reside and where most of the activities are held. A board of fourteen members organizes an annual schedule of events, which includes monthly membership meetings (day and evening), biennial lecture-workshop series by nationally known quilters, a fall retreat, and a spring quilt show and symposium.

<sup>3</sup>Since the time this study was completed, the nature of quilting culture has not been static. Observations of general trends (state-wide quilt documentation projects, national quilt organizations) suggest a move away from a tradition experienced only within local communities of women to one experienced on a statewide or regional basis, even a national and international scale in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>4</sup>Fieldwork was conducted by the first author and included attendance at all but one monthly meeting; one workshop and lectures of workshop-lecture series; fall retreat, including one workshop; one workshop, lectures, exhibits, and other events of spring symposium. She also helped as a volunteer for various activities of the spring symposium. Finally, she attended monthly get-togethers of two smaller quilt circles, a neighborhood group and a group interested in the more contemporary quilting techniques.

<sup>5</sup>Given the final direction of this research, these interviews played a less apparent role in data analysis. Rather than examining the behavior of individual quilters, this study addressed the nature of quilter expression within the interactive context of the quilt guild. The women interviewed were selected for a variety of reasons: initially the principal researcher interviewed women who were leaders within the guild, either in the formation of the guild or with its present operation. Subsequently her attention turned to the general membership and focused on women who demonstrated an interest in making and/or wearing quilted apparel. A standard interview schedule was used in both cases with questions concerning their interest in quilting, their participation in the guild, and their orientation to quilted apparel.

<sup>6</sup>The organization has continued to grow; by the end of 1990, membership numbered 1100 (Wagner, personal communication, December 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Several men were observed at one lecture by a nationally known quilter. One man, who won a guild membership with his prize-winning quilt at the Minnesota State Fair, started attending monthly meetings during fieldwork. He has continued to be an active member in the guild (Stish, personal communication, October 1991).

quilted, patchwork apparel.<sup>8</sup> In particular, individual statements that accompanied display quilts during the symposium and responses to the open-ended question "What is special about being a Minnesota Quilter?" facilitated inferences about the meaning of quilting. Responses indicate women's perceptions about their quilting and replicate attitudes embodied by the on-going discourse, involved in guild activities.

The study of meaning can be approached from various theoretical perspectives, many of which are oriented by the purposes and techniques of the scholar (Osgood et al., 1957). Such approaches have implications for the understanding of self and the perception of others; symbolic interaction, cognitive psychological, and/or semiotic theories have been applied in clothing research (Kaiser, 1990). In its broad objective, ethnography builds a systematic understanding of all human cultures from the insider's perspective and provides the methodological tools by which critical theoretical analyses<sup>9</sup> can be undertaken. Yet at the core of ethnography is a consistent "concern with meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand" (Spradley, 1979a, p. 5). Spradley elaborates:

in every society people make constant use of these complex meaning systems to organize their behavior, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense of the world in which they live. These systems of meaning constitute their culture... (p. 5)

In this paper, we structure the interpretation of quilting around three premises of meaning: meaning is an inherent constituent of culture; meaning becomes apparent as the individual participates socially within the community; and meaning is relevant as the individual draws upon cultural knowledge in conceptualizing selfhood. We argue that quilting is the bridge by which the cultural knowledge of quilt traditions is imparted to an individual; it is a cultural expression that involves the individual in the collective experience, localized to a community of quilters, in this case Minnesota Quilters, Inc. This perspective on the meaning of quilting is developed by drawing upon the perceptions of the members. Our objective is to demonstrate: (a) how Minnesota Quilters, Inc. qualifies as a particular example of feminine culture in which community is important to individual expression, and (b) how guild activities provide evidence of a socialization process where individuals draw upon a collective knowledge of quilt traditions to express personal experience. The key to interpreting the meaning of quilting is the context of socialization, as a process that binds together collective and individual experiences of female social life.

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### Minnesota Quilters, Inc.: An Example of Feminine Culture

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Modern quilting builds upon a rhetoric shared among quilters: textile handwork represents a visual record of female social life and occupation that parallels the

written history of male dominated society. We acknowledge men's contributions to textile traditions, but we are concerned less with factual realities than with the romanticism that has linked female experience to the processes of needlework. Such sentiment has precedence in Elizabeth Stone's *The Art of Needlework from the Earliest Ages* (1844). For her, needlework represented enduring evidence of women's domestic endeavors, distinct from men's social responsibilities, yet equal in its contribution to society's well-being:

these splendid results are not the effect of great exertions—of sudden, and uncertain, and enthusiastic efforts. They are the effect of a course of a system of minor actions and of occupations, individually insignificant in their appearance, and noiseless in their approach. . . . It is entirely of insignificant details that the sum of human life is made up; and any one of those details, how insignificant so ever *apparently* in itself, as a link in the chain of human life is of *definite* real value . . . . It is not the independent intrinsic worth of each isolated action of women which stamps its value -- it is their bearing effect on the masses (p. 4-5).

As Stone described the routine of women's daily existence, it is easy to recognize a parallel to the handstitching of designs onto fabric.

Similar rhetoric abounds in the instructional manuals and histories of the twentieth century quilt revivals. The metaphor of quilt as life history becomes more apparent. Mary D. Webster (1928) referred to a quilt's "universal use and intimate connection with our lives" (p. xv). Marguerite Ickis (1949) noted that "Life histories are tightly stitched within the gay cover—tales of individuals and communities filled with failures and triumphs" (p. 253). Most recently, Beth Gutcheon (1980) identified the quilt as "a craft with a soul" (p. 10), "both the symptom and the cure for what life demanded of the American woman" (p. 15). The understanding that quilting demonstrates a particular facet of feminine culture is inherent to this rhetoric and underscores appreciation of the quilt; however, substantiating the basis of this meaning in women's lives necessitates a more thorough examination of the subculture.

The subculture of quilting can be defined by the activities of members of a quilt guild and elaborated through the interactions of the members. Attention to the characteristics of the members and how the guild responds to their needs offers insights into the particular qualities of this feminine subculture. The demographic profile of the Minnesota Quilters member reveals a middle-income woman

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<sup>8</sup>A more complete discussion of the fieldwork and the study is found in Cerny (1988).

<sup>9</sup>Critical approaches may use theories such as Marxism, structuralism, and/or semiotics to interpret and explain cultural phenomena. See, for example, Weiner and Schneider's anthology of studies (1989) that examine the role of cloth in human society and experience from a largely Marxist perspective.

who has combined family responsibilities with employment outside the home (Table 1). Seventy-seven percent of the respondents had family incomes within a \$20,000 to \$100,000 range, with the mode at \$30,000 to \$49,000 category (42%). Married women predominated (86% of respondents). Eighty-five percent had children; 35% had grandchildren. Ninety-two percent of the respondents were between ages of twenty-six to sixty-five years; the mode fell at

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Minnesota Quilter\***

<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	6%
Married	86%
Widow/widower	4%
Separated	1%
Divorced	2%
Total responses	99%
No responses	1%
<b>Children</b>	
Children	85%
Grandchildren	35%
<b>Age</b>	
18 or younger	0%
19-25	0%
26-35	22%
36-45	27%
46-55	25%
56-65	18%
65-75	6%
76 & older	2%
Total responses	100%
No responses	0%
<b>Residence</b>	
Twin Cities metro	78%
Outstate MN	20%
Outside of MN	1%
Total responses	99%
No responses	1%
<b>Family Income</b>	
Less than \$10,000	3%
\$10,000-\$14,999	4%
\$15,000-\$19,999	7%
\$20,000-\$29,999	16%
\$30,000-\$49,999	42%
\$50,000-\$99,999	19%
\$100,000-\$199,999	4%
\$200,000 or more	0%
Total responses	95%
No responses	5%
<b>Employment</b>	
Full-time	45%
Part-time	38%
No response	17%
Total response	100%
<b>Quilt Related Employment</b>	31%

\*The percentages reflect the responses of one hundred seventy respondents, or twenty percent of Minnesota Quilters Inc. membership.

36-45 years (27%), and median fell at 46-55 years. Most respondents (78%) resided in the Twin Cities' metropolitan counties; additional respondents resided outside of the Twin Cities (i.e., "outstate") and in neighboring states and Canadian provinces.<sup>10</sup> Eighty-three percent were employed: 45% full-time and 38% part-time. Thirty-one percent of the respondents gained income from quilting (i.e., as quiltmakers, teachers, retail store owners).

Minnesota Quilters, Inc. has attracted women with common interests in quilts. Most (82%) had been quilting for ten years or less. Table 2 indicates they saw quilting as a leisure activity (84%) and preferred a traditional approach to quilting that involves handpiecing and handstitching.<sup>11</sup> Because the leisure quilter has given priority to family obligations and/or paid employment, time for quilting has been limited and fragmented. The guild has acknowledged such demands on women in planning its activities. Day and evening meetings, weekday and weekend workshops have allowed participation, whether the quilter was employed full time, retired, or caring for young children.

Guild events are planned so that the quilter can determine the extent of her involvement in the subculture and still benefit from the experience, thereby balancing her avidity for quilting with family priorities. For example, the annual cycle of guild events allows the quilter to anticipate and maximize periods of quilting activity by accounting for children's return to school in the fall, the Christmas holidays, the long Minnesota winters, and vacations at the lake cabin in the summer. The fall workshop and retreat anticipate December gift giving, and the spring workshop foreshadows the spring symposium; together, they intensify the quilting experience and a woman's exclusive attention to quilting by providing the quilter with new ideas and new techniques to apply as a vest for Christmas, a baby quilt for a grandchild, or a quilt for herself to display at the spring exhibit. The spring symposium represents the culmination of the year's quilting as attention is redirected to the family and its activities. Throughout the year, monthly meetings sustain interest and commitment. Overall, the events schedule provides a routine by which individual members can integrate quilting as a vital component of her social life. The predictability of the events allows members to gauge their participation to suit individual restrictions and needs.

At the same time, contact with other quilters at these events is important in defining the direction and significance of their quilting. Identity as a "Minnesota Quilter"<sup>12</sup> can be seen across differing planes of experience (i.e., novice or master, teacher or student, officer or mem-

<sup>10</sup>Fieldwork indicated that a few quilters from neighboring states and provinces retained membership in Minnesota Quilters to gain priority registration for classes held during the annual symposium. In addition, members from Wisconsin added monthly meetings regularly and a Wisconsin guild sponsored the day meeting in May 1985.

<sup>11</sup>A detailed discussion of questionnaire responses is provided in Cerny (1988).

<sup>12</sup>Responses are drawn from the open-ended question on the questionnaire, "What is special about being a Minnesota Quilter?"

ber); yet collectively this identity connotes linkage to a broader "feminine culture," wherein friendships among women empower individual expression and identity (Lenz and Myerhoff, 1985). Overall, the "stimulation to try new things" is central to members' participation, which may range from attendance at workshops or lectures to conversations during a weekend retreat. They note that activities provide the "inspiration" to start or complete a project. According to one woman, "I find others' ideas inspire new projects and keep me going on the 'old' ones."

Guild membership satisfies the individual needs of the quilter in a number of ways. By attracting both experienced and novice quilters, Minnesota Quilters facilitates situations

necessary for a quilter's education and consequential integration within the tradition. A new member responds to the question of the value of Minnesota Quilters: "Haven't really found out. Figure I will really learn a lot." In contrast, a longtime member and quilting teacher comments: "The bonding between women. The appreciation — seeing the talent of younger women. Absolutely marvelous! Watching them 'grow'." Two others comment: "always learning about new areas" and "Helps with problems, new aids and methods." Seeing what others have done, whether by members in show-and-tell or by nationally recognized quilters in workshops, motivates the quilter to challenge herself in new directions.

The modern guild is an updated version of the nineteenth century quilting bee. Although members may be unrelated by family ties and less similar in social background than members of the quilting bee, Minnesota Quilters brings together women in the sharing of quilt traditions; there is the "Comradery" (sic) of women who "speak the same language." One respondent notes that Minnesota Quilters is the "Only place I am understood!" Another elaborates on the benefits of this community:

It is a group of people who can appreciate your interest and have understanding for the sorts of problems you may encounter. (Like a mother with small children feels better knowing that other kids do what hers just did even though the problem was not resolved.) There is comfort in knowing you are not alone and the support and encouragement of those with similar interests is more meaningful than groundless praise of those who have never had the experience. [second half of parenthesis added]

The confirmation of shared values reaffirms social well-being and consequentially authenticates a personal expression of female experience. Friendships are essential to maintain a quilt community, an otherwise transient example of "feminine culture." One member associates the various factors: "friendship common bond understand your obsession." Others mention "friendship," "companionship," "common interests," or "being with others who share this interest." Friendships among quilters empower their expression as women, as clarified by one quilter: "The fellowship with women of all ages from which inspiration flows."

The opportunities that come from being a "Minnesota Quilter" extend beyond learning the art and craft of quilting. Guild activities frame the social context within which the quilters "share" with and gain "inspiration" from other quilters, including their contemporaries within and outside the guild and their predecessors from previous generations. The quilt guild provides a social context in which a distinctive "feminine culture" manifests values of friendship and family relatedness. Women draw from the friendships to empower creativity, to appropriate meaning from the shared tradition, and to personalize this meaning through quilting. From this perspective, the quilt guild is more than a community in which women make quilts: it is a community where quilting is intimately linked with being female.

**Table 2. Members' Orientation to Quilting\***

<b>Years Quilting</b>	
Less than a year	2%
1 to 2 years	14%
3 to 5 years	34%
6 to 10 years	32%
11 to 20 years	12%
More than 20 years	5%
Total responses	99%
No responses	1%
<b>Orientation to Quilting</b>	
Only a leisure activity	64%
Leisure activity with some monetary gain	20%
Professional pursuit but enjoy at leisure	13%
Only a professional pursuit	0%
Total responses	97%
No responses	3%
<b>Perceived Skills</b>	
Beginner	12%
Intermediate	61%
Advanced	23%
Master	2%
Total responses	98%
No responses	2%
<b>Style Preferences</b>	
Only traditional	3%
Prefer traditional	48%
Equally like traditional and contemporary	39%
Prefer contemporary	5%
Only contemporary	0%
Total responses	95%
No responses	5%
<b>Technology Preferences<sup>b</sup></b>	
Hand applique	66%
Hand piecing	58%
Hand quilting	88%
Machine applique	9%
Machine piecing	54%
Machine quilting	8%
Fabric dyeing	8%
Fabric printing/stenciling	12%

\*The percentages reflect the responses of one hundred seventy respondents, or twenty percent of Minnesota Quilters Inc. membership.

<sup>b</sup>The percentages include multiple responses from single respondents.

## Quiltmaking: A Cultural Idiom of Femininity

Interpreting the meaning of quiltmaking necessitates close attention to the activities and discourse that circumscribe the making and use of quilted items within the quilt guild. With the fabrication and use of the quilt, the quilter not only contributes to a modern reality of quilt tradition but marks herself as part of the subculture. Quilted items (e.g., bedcovers, apparel, wall hangings) have become cultural symbols that potentially qualify female identity in modern American society. While the traditional foundations of the craft provide a framework for female expression, modern options of technique and design place her as an active agent in the expression of her individuality. The quilt guild directs the course of this socialization through the elaboration of the quiltmaking process. As a participant in the educational programs, the guild member learns the technical and artistic components of the quilt tradition and methods of employing the aesthetic system to represent social life. As a participant in the display events, the member views her own identity as a quilter in reference to present and past generations of quilters.

### Socialization of the Quilter

Modern strategies of quiltmaking are derived from tradition. The Minnesota Quilters member can further her knowledge of quilt tradition in two ways: by taking quiltmaking classes during the workshop-lecture series, fall retreat, and quilt show and by attending the program segments of the monthly meetings and the lectures that are presented by locally and nationally known quilters at the workshop-lecture series, fall retreat, and quilt show (Table 3).

Classes in quiltmaking provide members with the opportunity to learn and refine individual technical and design skills as quilters and to acquire more complete knowledge of the tradition by which quiltmakers have historically expressed themselves. Traditional techniques (i.e., hand piecing and quilting), patterns (i.e., log cabin, double wedding ring), and uses (i.e. bed cover) are learned and adopted through observation of historic quilts; workshops assist the student in developing these skills. Innovation is integral to quilt tradition and the workshops provide the guidance required to reproduce or adapt historic patterns, as well as to create new designs or uses such as garments, wall covers, and techniques such as machine piecing and quilting that reflect contemporary social life. This attention to tradition is apparent as instructors promise students in this publication:

Experience a creative, innovative approach to designing your very own vest or jacket. The focus is on string patch and all its variations; medallion design with a central focus; and the creative cut-up approach . . . The use of ribbons, buttons, and laces are explored in creative and informative ways; design, color and fabric selection are covered and techniques are simplified whenever possible with special attention to those extra details that make designs one of a kind. (Minnesota Quilters, Inc., 1986b)

Whether beginner or advanced, the student quilter may be open to new strategies in quilt design. This may entail learning basic design principles (i.e. apparel design, color theory) and art techniques not usually associated with quiltmaking:

Learn to dye in mottled gradations for exciting marbelized variations and color combinations. Results are perfect for a realistic look in hand applique, so valued in Baltimore brides bouquets. Also great for piecing avant-garde garments. (Minnesota Quilters, Inc., 1986b)

Thus at the same time as instructors compose workshop descriptions to appeal to a broad quiltmaking audience, they reinforce the potential for individual preferences in technique or style.

The quilter's choices in the learning and refining quiltmaking skills and in teaching others, contribute to her identity as a quilter. In the broadest terms, she may develop a more traditional or more contemporary orientation. In the case of the Minnesota quilter, preferences are for a more traditional approach in which more attention is given to the fundamentals of quiltmaking than to the principles and techniques of an art world. More specifically through reference to quilt tradition in the use of its fundamentals, the quilter can differentiate interests and priorities about herself

**Table 3. Participation in Minnesota Quilters, Inc.<sup>a</sup>**

Years as Member	
Less than one year	16%
1 to 3 years	36%
4 to 7 years	39%
Charter member	8%
Total responses	99%
No responses	1%
Frequency of Attendance at Monthly Meetings	
None this year	12%
1 to 5 meetings	37%
6 to 9 meetings	19%
10 to 12 meetings	29%
Total responses	97%
No responses	3%
Attendance at Educational Activities <sup>b</sup>	
Quilt show workshops	45%
Fall workshop	21%
Spring workshop	16%
Fall getaway	16%
None	36%
Participation in Display Activities <sup>c</sup>	
Show and tell	56%
Quilt exhibit	33%
No participation	33%

<sup>a</sup>The percentages reflect the responses of one hundred seventy respondents, or twenty percent of Minnesota Quilters Inc. membership.

<sup>b</sup>The percentages include multiple responses from single respondents.

<sup>c</sup>The percentages include multiple responses from single respondents.

as a woman. She has acquired the skills to transpose selectively and/or modify established patterns and techniques and to instill personal experience through her expression.

Equally important to this socialization process are the displays of historic quilts and the stories about quiltmakers. Such programs, by juxtaposing the quilts with stories of hardship on the American frontier, recognize the accomplishments of the individual quilter for her skills in crafting the quilt and in resolving adversity. Programs that focus on the work of a contemporary quilter suggest that today's quilter likewise faces stress, as economic and social hardships force compromises between family expectations and individual needs. Speakers, nationally and locally known quilters, use quilts to describe their growth as quilters and demonstrate how they have integrated quilting in a family-centered lifestyle (e.g., as reflected in a lecture titled "The Birth and Subsequent Development of a Reluctant Quilter"). In particular, the programs become a means of defining female relatedness, as exemplified by empathizing with the circumstance of other female needleworkers or by the bonding of generations of family:

They come from a long line of quilters and will share with the group four generations of quilts and the interesting stories that only a family member would know about each quilt and its maker. (Monaghan, 1985, p. 1)

Overall, the wide range of programs, from a slide survey of nineteenth century "Christmas quilts" to a member's "Humor in Quilting," further constitute the collective "memory" of quilt tradition from which members can delineate personal meanings.

Minnesota Quilters' programs tend to elaborate on quilting as a lifestyle in contrast to the classes that emphasize instruction in technical and artistic considerations. Together, the activities exemplified within the guild become intricately linked to the construction of quilter identity. The workshops address the symbolic components of quilt form; the lectures elaborate on the significance of the quilt as a reflection of its maker, the quilter. Through their participation in educational activities, members develop the consciousness and skill to articulate values of family and relatedness.

### Negotiation of a Female Identity

With the display of quilted items through a show-and-tell and/or quilt exhibits, the guild member publicly documents her achievements and receives validation from other quilters. "Show-and-tell" requires a quilter to show a quilt to others and to describe its design, construction, and/or use. The activity plays a role in major Minnesota Quilters events, whether it is the sharing of quilted Christmas gifts to husband and children, projects among classmates in a workshop, or quilts completed during the weekend retreat. The quilt exhibit is a formal public showing; quilts are arranged in an auditorium-sized room and brief explanations by the quilter are included in a catalog. Whether through show-and-tell or exhibition, all participants are welcomed and applauded for their efforts. While exemplary quilts receive extra praise, criticism of workmanship is restrained

because members recognize the importance of having made the effort to learn how to quilt.

With the display of the quilt, the woman shares with members the significance of her quilting. From examples drawn from the 1985 quilt show catalog (Minnesota Quilters, Inc., 1985), the discourse of quilting can be examined according to three components: (1) identification as Minnesota Quilter, (2) characterization as quilter, and (3) articulation of female identity. These components suggest the members' increasing integration within the quilting community and the appropriation of quilt tradition as a female persona is negotiated. Likewise, these components can be identified in the more informal statements of show-and-tell (Cerny, 1988).

(1) *Identification as Minnesota Quilter.* Primarily, the woman indicates her affiliation with Minnesota Quilters by her participation in guild activities. This involvement has stimulated her quilting by providing skills and/or inspiration. In her commentary, a member notes such involvement, but in this case she was a teacher rather than student:

This was made as part of my lecture on sampler and friendship quilts at the April MQ meeting . . . . The goal of my lecture is to show as many ways as possible to make samplers and friendship quilts fresh and exciting . . . .

Likewise, members credit inspiration or skills gained from attendance at a monthly program or participation in a workshop.

(2) *Characterization as quilter.* Whereas participation in the display activity affirms her membership and support of the organization, it also reveals her orientation as a quilter. Through the act of quilting the quilter emulates the desired identity. Correspondingly, through particular choices of technique and design, she demonstrates a personal style and thereby, lends depth and individuality to the self as quilter. The displayed quilt marks her growing knowledge of quilt tradition and her increasing skill at drawing upon the aesthetic system in formulating her expression. In her verbal comments, the quilter marks this selfhood by noting (a) her ability to maintain a quilting lifestyle by managing time and materials, (b) her ingenuity in the technical, aesthetic, and expressive aspects of quilting, and (c) her socialization through the accomplishment of quilting skills and through affiliations with other quilters. An example from each of these areas is developed more fully in the following discussion:

(a) Balancing quilting with other domestic obligations means the quilter must to manage her resources and time. A popular image of the nineteenth century quilter is that of the midwestern pioneer making a beautiful quilt from old clothing and other fabric scraps, in the evening after long hours at backbreaking work. A parallel accomplishment by modern quilters is emulated by the theme of the 1985 exhibit, "Scrap Quilt Magic." Quilters' statements identify the source of their "scraps":

. . . We found a couple of packets of fabric samples and scraps of muslin and started sewing them together . . . . The lavender print used on the back and

front was purchased for another quilt and later "scrapped" . . . .

While the modern quilter no longer has the strenuous life of the pioneer, she still must find time for herself as she cares for the family. Completing a quilt requires conscious use of time:

I enjoyed working on this green, pink and blue stenciled and quilted vest during July and August. It followed me to the beach and pool and it reminds me of the sun and warm water when I wear it.

As the circumstances of modern quilting are documented, each quilter establishes her part in perpetuating the tradition.

(b) A woman's knowledge of quilt tradition encompasses a range of technical, design, and subject matter possibilities. In her statement, the quilter can identify the aesthetic features that personalize the quilt and thus highlight her ingenuity. Choices are drawn from the traditional format of quilting or innovate on the basis of its aesthetic principles. A more traditional quilter is differentiated from a more contemporary quilter through decisions to hand-piece/-quilt rather than machine-piece/-quilt, or to replicate a nineteenth century pattern (e.g., double wedding ring) rather than design an original pattern. Commentary points out the significant innovations that mark a quilter's position along the continuum:

This quilt has a muslin background [sic] with scrap fabrics making the rings and the stars. The Wedding Ring Star is a variation on the traditional Wedding Ring block. The quilt is entirely handpieced and handquilted, consisting of over 1,890 pieces . . . .

Integral to innovation is the woman's problem solving ability. A quilter is admired not only for technical skills but for her resolve in accomplishing a particular design. Commentary describes some of these difficulties and the quilt evinces the quilter's success:

This quilt is an experimentation of the basket design worked into a scrap quilt. Over the last year, I re-worked the over-all quilt plan three times until I was finally happy with the result . . . .

A few of the more contemporary quilters consciously work traditional ideology into the creation of the design by juxtaposing traditional subject matter in an unconventional format. This can be done with wit, as in the quilt "The Beauty Shop (Or Rebecca's Fan Was Never Like This)," or with original reasoning:

Based on the ocean waves pattern, this interpretation focuses on the beauty of the well-loved and used quilts of long ago. The hands in the photos are those of the quilter, suggesting that every quilter remains a part of her/his work forever. Blue printed, machine pieced, hand quilted. Original design 1984.

Although guild members tend to prefer the more traditional to the contemporary format of quilting (Table 2), the range of possibilities offers individual quilters valid options in personal expression.

(c) Being a quilter necessitates establishing social relationships with other quilters. Minnesota Quilters plays a vital role in structuring activities where the quilter can learn and experience the quilt culture. Individually, the quilters acknowledge the influence and assistance given in the making of the displayed quilt, through the workshop setting and/or from peers:

This work is handpieced from a seminar given by Shirley Kirsch. The colors were chosen to match the hearts in the "Brides Bouquet" quilt for the same bedroom. This wall hanging was quilted at Mary Ann's Quilt Shop by Mary Ann Hron and Phyllis. Later the scraps were handpieced to make the "Postage Stamp Streak of Lightning" doll bed quilt for the silent auction at this show.

This statement is complex in its expression of relatedness. Not only does the quilter reveal her involvement in the symposium (i.e., second quilt on display and doll bed quilt for silent auction), but acknowledges the importance of her involvement with other quilters, both within the guild and with other quilters outside the guild.

Similarly, the quilt becomes an opportunity for the quilter to reflect on her relationship with quilters from previous generations:

The blocks for this quilt were given to me by a cousin. My great aunt pieced these blocks in 1930. They were later embroidered by a neighbor in about 1940. When she finished them, they were stored away in a linen closet until 1984. I have assembled the top, put it together and quilted it. It is a great treasure and remembrance.

From within the guild setting, each quilter can establish a social bond with women, both in the present and past, and acknowledge their influence in her development as a quilter. These quilters may include the anonymous nineteenth century pioneer, her grandmother, or a neighbor. As diverse as they are as individuals, together they substantiate a female heritage.

Membership in Minnesota Quilters facilitates a woman's quilting education. Yet integral to learning the necessary technical and design skills is the woman's realization and activation of her own creativity. As identity as quilter is integrated into the conception of self, she acquires the confidence to address other facets of her social experience. Success at planning and completing a bed quilt connote success at addressing the more problematic circumstances of everyday life, which for many of these quilters centers on the family.

(3) *Articulation of female identity.* Quilting does more than situate the woman within a quilt community, it defines her position with respect to the larger social environment. The women's statements about their quilts suggest both the commonality that unifies female experience and the diversity by which quilters characterize their individuality. In this instance, commonality is shown primarily

as a value placed on human relatedness, albeit to family, to friends, and to community. The individuality of female experience becomes apparent as relatedness is demonstrated in the selection of the quilt design and fabric, in the process of quilting, or in the gift of the quilt. The quilt denotes not only identity as quilter but establishes the significance of this identity. At the same time guild members make quilts to solidify a "feminine" community, they use their creative skills to bind themselves symbolically to the larger social setting, be that of family, friends, neighbors, church, or other community group. The woman's quilts potentially document a complex network of female roles, embedded in the quilter identity.

As noted by Lenz and Myerhoff (1985) in their characterization of "feminine culture," women's energies are devoted to the quality of social life. An underlying impulse is toward social integration. Whereas traditionally a woman's attention to hearth and home would have been crucial to family unity, many of today's quilters are faced with having to combine employment with homemaking. A quiltmaker plays upon the tradition of quilting to reinforce a priority of family togetherness. This is demonstrated as the quilter enlists the aid from the nonquilter in rendering a quilt design or in deciding on color, fabrics, and/or block design. Cooperation can come from a spouse:

After taking Georgia Bonesteel's class on flexi-curve, I wanted to make a landscape. My husband drew the picture for me and I used the "curved two-patch" method to design the border. An original design, colors are blue and beige.

Or from a child:

This quilt had its beginning when Kelly, age 5, was visiting Grandma's house and wanted to sew. We found a couple of packets of fabric samples and scraps of muslin and started sewing them together. Kelly and her little brother picked out the various colors and handed them to me to sew. . . . Many enjoyable hours were spent on our quilt. That's my Kelly—"can do anything anyone else can do."

Affiliations are intensified when quilts are made with fabric from family scrap bags:

. . . I made this quilt for my mother, . . . , to thank her for the help she gave us after the births of our two daughters. Although most of the fabric is new a few pieces come from scraps of clothes my mother made for me when I was a child . . .

or from a relative being remembered:

Made out of 84 ribbons that Grandfather won for showing peonies. When I was a little girl he showed me the ribbons and said "There are enough ribbons for a quilt here." And so I did it!

Thus rapport is enhanced through shared experiences and memories.

With many of these quilts made as gifts, the quilter draws upon her familiarity with the recipient in designing the quilt. In this case, meaning is marked not through the physical form of the quilt, but in the quilter's conception of the block pattern or overall design. While most acknowledge kinship, some mark a special event in the recipient's life:

Grandma always wanted a family tree and this is an answer to her dreams. For her golden anniversary, family members and friends put together this wallhanging. There are fourteen branches for the children, forty-six leaves for the grandchildren, and eleven acorns for the great-grandchildren. . . .

In a similar manner, a quilt design acknowledges an ongoing friendship:

This is a traditional design done in blues and white. A dear friend, . . . and her husband, . . . , recently retired. She always wanted a dove quilt and sent me several patterns over the years. I finally made her this quilt because I love her so much. But she'll have to finish the quilting since she has more time than I do. I did one block to tease her to finish it.

Correspondingly, the gift of a quilt helps to sustain the relationship.

Articulating identity through quilting draws upon the situational circumstances of the woman's life. Although established patterns continue to be reminders of modern experience (e.g., "The pattern [flying geese] is traditional and reminds me of all the Canadian Geese we have on our lake all summer."), design inspiration is not limited to historic sources. As in the past, quilters observe their surroundings for subject matter to develop new quilt patterns:

An original design, the idea for this quilt came from the balloons that fly in the St. Croix Valley over our home. The Wiederkehr Balloon Academy is just over the hill from our home and in the evenings or early morning we see lots of brightly colored balloons flying. . . .

In such cases, ingenuity and individuality is demonstrated as quilters modify traditional quilt techniques or adapt other art techniques in expressing more personal perceptions.

Quilting translates physical form into symbolic vehicle. The quilt becomes a metaphor in which the quilter's role as wife, mother, daughter, grandchild, etc. is visually signified. While female identity is qualified by a particular personality, interests, attitudes, and/or values of the quilter, a quilter's ingenuity provides the opportunity for a particular, detailed elaboration of self. Creativity is focused on establishing and promoting friendship and familial rapport. The expression, although generated and shared by a larger "feminine culture" of quilters, reflects and elaborates the circumstances of personal experience and identity. This pragmatic orientation to meaning expands the processual model of self, used by Sontag and Schlater (1982) to define the proximity of dress to self: not only is the self established and validated through social transactions but now linked to a collective consciousness.

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## Conclusions

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In this study, we approached the issue of meaning by interpreting the significance of quilting. Historically, the need for warmth stimulated the quilt's manufacture in the home and its use as bedcovers. Although mass manufactured comforters recently have offered an easy care, low cost alternative, quilting experienced a revival in the late 1970s. We questioned what was inherent in the practice of modern quilting that has made it an important preoccupation for many women. We proposed a meaning that was interpreted through examining the context of the quilt guild within which modern experiences and perceptions were shaped and expressed.

Through ethnographic study, we can observe the process by which the meaning of self is transacted and can trace the foundations of this meaning to shared cultural knowledge. Meaning is a complex, dynamic phenomenon that is shaped by the historic and contemporary experiences of a community. The meaning that underlies individual perceptions and behavior is acquired through participation in the collective activities. In late twentieth century American society, where the sense of an dominant overriding culture is vague, individuals gain a sense of social self through more fragmentary circumstances to resolve ambiguities of modern social life.

Our study of quilting offers further insight into the collective nature of women's aesthetics and its consequences in mediating female social experience. In this case, a community's representation of quilt tradition through social interaction and discourse empowers individual behavior and expression that values family and social relatedness. With the continued popularity of craft guilds in many female-dominated textiles (i.e., weaving, needlework, knitting, and lacemaking), further research is needed to differentiate how women draw upon the ideological foundations of particular textile traditions in typifying and affirming female identity. Similarly as coexisting instances of "feminine culture," these craft guilds provide perspective on the diversity of female social life and options for the individual in defining selfhood.

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