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COMMON THREADS:
TALES OF AMERICAN HERITAGE

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Introduction

Opening a book is like embarking on a journey. We are invited to become stowaways of sorts, experiencing stories of far-away places, interesting characters and events of long ago. I can remember my first introduction to books as a form of entertainment. I attended a Catholic school in the suburbs of Chicago during the early 1960's. Our school had undergone a rather extensive renovation and expansion project and one of the improvements was a large well-stocked library. It was amazing! I was able to visit places I had never seen, read about historical characters, follow the adventures of Nancy Drew and so much more.

All of this leads to my fascination with the concept of artists' books. After taking a bookbinding course as an undergraduate student, I was intrigued by the various binding techniques we explored. I enjoyed the idea of the book itself as an art form and how binding techniques could be created to suit the subject of the book. The idea of matching the content with the format is inherent to the idea of artists' books and provides the artist a limitless artistic space to create. From the concept to the content, and finally the construction, it is a fascinating process. My approach to this project was to create a collection of books based upon a central theme. Photographs were displayed to give the viewer a sense of place for each of the four styles represented. My skills as photographer and graphic designer played a crucial role in this project.

I have been researching the concept of artists' books and even after more than a year of reading on this subject I see that I have barely begun to scratch the surface of this subject. One thing I have found as a recurring theme is that the definition of the artist book is as varied as there are resources on the topic. One source I read presents the idea that artists' books have been around since the early 1900's. Revolutionaries in the art world during that period used this medium to make a statement. Many of these works became political statements by the artists. For many book artists the notion of making a statement on any subject, whether personal, political or professional, is still a driving force in their work. For other book artists the idea of exploring an idea or presenting a group of ideas in a book format is the impetus behind a project.

The idea that reading a book is a very personal interaction between the viewer or reader, in this case, and the artist/author appeals to me as an artist. I am intrigued by the concept that when the reader/viewer is looking through an artists' book, the world around that person can simply fade away. When viewing a painting in a crowded gallery it is a much more impersonal experience; a book is an interaction on a much more intimate level. The idea of the viewer being completely consumed by the book,
even for a brief moment, in my opinion would be the hallmark of a successful book.

Judy Larsen, Director of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, stated in her forward to the exhibition catalog titled The Book as Art, "A majority of gifted book artists are women, owing perhaps to women's attraction to storytelling, intimacy and collaboration." This idea of women in the role of storytelling sparked another thought.

When I began thinking about how I would present the work for my thesis exhibition I decided to focus on a central theme that could pull this idea of storytelling together. Having been a quilter for many years, I knew of the legends that surrounded particular types of quilts. I decided to explore which quilters throughout history have in some way captured or preserved a story or history with their work. I finally settled on four different styles of quiltmaking.

A Central Theme, a common thread

My early research provided me with a better understanding of the artists' book as an art form. I was now ready to research the styles of quilts I would focus on for my final exhibition. The first style of quilts I chose was that done by members of the Amish community. The Amish communities have become known for their attention to detail in both their daily life and their craftsmanship. Their unique simplicity and use of solid, bold colors has become a trademark of their style. Function was the underlying motivation for Amish quilts. The simple beauty of these works has become an added bonus. The inspiration for these quilts comes from their everyday world; perhaps it as simple as the rows of a newly plowed field or as complex as a flower garden. Devotion to God is also evident in the quilts. In a conversation I had with an Amish woman, I asked her if she had any secrets for making her work seem so perfect. Her reply surprised me but it is a theory I still consider relevant. She said, "Amish quilters incorporate what is known as 'a foolish error' into their quilts because only God can create something perfectly." A foolish error might be a wrong color for a block, a piece turned the wrong way or even a missed quilting stitch. These deliberate mistakes reflect the quilter's spirituality.

Many Amish quilters don't really remember when they started quilting. One of the household chores for a girl growing up in an Amish home is to help out with the sewing tasks. Since all of their clothing is made in the home, there are plenty of jobs to go around. At a large quilting bee, the young girls would be responsible for going around the frame and threading the needles for the quilters. As they grew older, their responsibilities would increase until one day they would be allowed to join the quilters at the frame.

The second style of quilts is from a small, rural community in Alabama known
as Gee’s Bend. Many of the residents of this backwoods area are the descendents of slaves who once worked on the largest plantation in the area known as the Pettway Plantation. Many of the women of the quilting group known as the Gee’s Bend Quilt Collective still carry the last name of Pettway. The matriarch of this group was a slave who came from Africa on one of the last slave ships to carry human cargo. It is believed that she was a skilled textile worker in her home country and these skills served her well on the plantation. In order to keep from being forced to work in the fields, Dinah made certain the mistress of the house was aware of her skills. These skills were passed down from one generation to the next. One unique aspect of these quilters is the fact that, like their Amish counterparts, they have no formal training in the elements of art or the principles of design. Many of the quilts created by the members of this group have a bold, sophisticated style that some art critics have compared to such modern artists as Matisse, Klee and Picasso. Their skill comes from traditional lessons passed down from generation to generation. Many of their designs come from their local architecture such as the rooftops of shacks or the designs created by the siding of barns as well as variations on another quilter’s style or design.

The third style of quilts is that with connections to the Underground Railroad. Several years ago I came across a book titled Hidden in Plain View, a Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad by Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Ph.D. The premise of this book is that there was, up until its publication, an unwritten code or message of quilts for the Underground Railroad. The slaves would hang the quilts on the fence as if to air them out. They knew the plantation overseers would not suspect this was a secret means of communication. Potential runaway slaves would watch for each quilt as it appeared to be “hung on the fence to air” to learn the next step in preparations for plans to escape.

This code had been passed by word of mouth for generations until Tobin met a quilter in Charleston, South Carolina who told the story of the code and how it was instrumental in the successful escape to freedom for many slaves. Bill Arnett, author of Souls Grown Deep, is quoted in the book as believing, "Every great quilt, whether it is patchwork, appliqué, or strip quilt, is a potential Rosetta stone. Quilts represent one of the most highly evolved systems of writing in the New World. Every combination of colors, every juxtaposition or intersection of line and form, every pattern, traditional or idiosyncratic, contain data that can be imparted in some form or another to anyone." While Arnett is referring to African American quilts in this instance, I believe his statement holds true for traditional as well as non-traditional quilts from many cultures.
In her article “The Rhetoric of Quilts: Creating an Identity in African-American Children’s Literature”, Olga Idriss Davis explored the concept of the importance of quilts in the African American heritage. She selected six children’s books that illustrated not only the role of quilts in the African American experience, but the significance of the child as the main character of the book and empowering that character to take their place in history. Among the books Davis focused on were, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson, this book is a child’s version of Jaqueline Tobin’s quilt code as told through the eyes of a child. *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold tells the story of two children dreaming of freedom while travelling with Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad. Valerie Flournoy’s *The Patchwork Quilt* tells the story of a young girl and her grandmother making a memory quilt using various fabric scraps from family members clothing. When the grandmother falls ill and cannot finish the quilt the child takes the task upon herself to finish the project.

The final selection of quilts featured pieces done during what has become known as the “Golden Age” of quilting. From the early 19th century to the early 20th century quilting was a very popular pastime for many women in urban areas. Considered one of the “womanly” arts, quilting and needlework were a suitable hobby for ladies of the genteel class. This group includes a style of quilts known as “album quilts”. These complex appliquéd quilts are generally associated with specific geographic areas such as Baltimore, Ohio, Kentucky, etc. The original album quilts date back to the mid-nineteenth century, but a recent revival of this style has brought them back into focus. Artistically, these quilts could be considered the opposite of some of the other styles of quilts I have chosen to present. The technique and craftsmanship are equally as beautiful as their counterparts, however their style is more sophisticated and the symbolism more elaborate than the others.

In her preface to Frances Benton’s book, *The Making of a Baltimore Album Quilt*, quiltmaker and author Elly Sienkiewicz states, “The quilts themselves teach as much about the method of their making as they do about the lives and times of the women who made them.” Unlike the typical patchwork quilt each block in an album quilt is different. The subjects of these blocks resemble some of the finest Flemish still life paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries. The blocks might include birds, flowers, fruit, and historic buildings among other things, all in strong contrast to their white backgrounds.

Other quilts featured during this time period include “crazy quilts”. The pieces came from scraps from clothing, especially ladies gowns. They featured snippets of silk,
taffeta, brocade, etc. These small odd-shaped pieces featured complex embroidery stitches and designs pulling the various colors and textures of the fabrics together. Monograms, embroidery designs and symbols made this style of quilt a kind of a textile scrapbook of the quilter's life.

Another style of album quilt is known as the "friendship quilt" or "signature quilt". Signatures were collected on pieces of a solid color or pieced fabric; these were then embroidered and pieced into a large patchwork quilt. Many times these were done as a gift for someone who might have been moving away, to commemorate a special occasion or just as a family heirloom.

Many of the traditional styles of quilts still being used today have come from this eclectic era known as the "Golden Age" of quilting. Quilters from today's generation owe a great deal to these early trendsetters. Because of their hard work and perseverance quilting has finally become an accepted form of artistic expression.

Process -

The body of work created for my final exhibition consisted of four elements:

- a set of four hand-bound books in a slip case,
- each of the four books were on display and available for the viewer to browse through,
- I used photographs shot at various locations for each of the four themes for the books, to give the viewer a sense of place for each of the styles of quilts presented or provide a close-up view of some of the quilts featured,
- a set of multi-colored wooden blocks in a variety of shapes for the viewer to create their own patterns and designs. I included photographs of some of my own designs created by using these blocks.

Once I decided on how I was going to present my theme and what subjects I was going to cover, I had to find a way to create my own images. I didn't want to use other artists' work or stock photographs. Each style of quilt had to be handled in a way that was best suited to that style.

Since the actual Underground Railroad quilts were a large group of quilts, I wanted a way to illustrate the code by creating the individual blocks in a unique manner. I chose fabrics that resembled the colors and prints from that period. I then scanned these fabrics, and using Photoshop, created a photographic set of quilt blocks by "cutting" the shapes for the blocks out of the scanned fabric and "piecing" them on the computer screen. Still working on the computer, I then drew my quilting stitches onto the finished
block. Using these digital blocks I created a “poster quilt”, featuring the blocks as well as the code. Mounting these blocks and the sashes and borders on three different thicknesses of foamboard gave the final “quilt” a dimensional look to it.

I had some concerns regarding copyright issues since the code was part of a published work. I contacted the publisher of Hidden in Plain View, Anchor Books a division of Random House. After explaining my project, I was granted permission to use the code, provided I would use it exactly as it is written in the book, and give credit to the authors as well as the publishers.

I discovered that some of the quilts from the quilters’ of Gee’s Bend were going to be part of an exhibition travelling the county sponsored by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This is the second exhibition for the members of the Gee’s Bend Quilters Collective. This exhibition was at the Speed Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, from January through March of 2008. I contacted the Speed and was able to obtain permission from the MFA Houston, the organizer of the travelling exhibition, the Speed Museum and Matt Arnett of Tinwood Media, the owner of the quilts, I was granted permission to go to the museum and take my own photographs of the quilts as they hung in the gallery. I was able to photograph each quilt in the exhibition.

These digital images, shot in RAW format, a digital negative that would allow adjustments to the image if necessary, provided a good set of images to work from.

The Amish quilts presented their own set of challenges. I wanted to find a way to talk to Amish quilters and learn about their craft directly from them as well as photograph some of their work. Naomi Stoll, a member of the Amish community in Montgomery, Indiana, has been a quilter for most of her life and allowed me to come to her home and visit with her and photograph her work. For many Amish quilters, quilts have become a commodity, a way for them to help support their family. Naomi works all year getting her quilts ready to sell at the annual auction. She also takes commissions from people who want a custom designed quilt. As a result, she has very few of her own quilts. I was only able to photograph the quilts she made for each of her children as wedding gifts.

I contacted a quilt shop in Arthur, Illinois to inquire about any Amish or Mennonite quilters from the surrounding Amish community. Anna Kauffman, a Mennonite woman from Arthur, had two very old quilts made by her grandmother some time around 1860.
I visited with Anna and was able to photograph these lovely antique quilts as well as some of the more modern quilts she has made. I spent a delightful afternoon talking with her and listening to her stories about growing up with quilters and how quilting has become such an important part of her life. Like Naomi, Anna could not remember a time in her life that she didn’t sew or quilt. She shared some very fond memories of learning to sew with her mother and grandmother.

The final group, the quilts from the “Golden Age” of quilting presented a challenge to find a wide variety of quilt styles from that era. Marylee Hagan, director of the Vigo County Historical Society, gave me access to their entire collection of quilts. They have an extensive collection and I was able to photograph several different styles of quilts for this time period and even some styles that are frequently attributed to the Amish quilt. My husband’s great-grandmother, Mollie Bowman, was a quilter for many years; we are fortunate to have many of the quilts she made during her 103 years. I was able to photograph these quilts to illustrate the styles I was could not find elsewhere.

Before I found a source for the Amish quilts, I considered using a set of multi-colored/multi-shaped wooden blocks to create the quilt blocks I needed. These wooden blocks come in a variety of shapes and colors suitable for quilt blocks. This hands-on experience proved to be quite fun and produced some beautiful patterns and designs. I decided to use these blocks to make some images to accompany the other photographs for my exhibition.

I went to Eastside Elementary school in Brazil, Indiana to give some of the students an opportunity to work with the blocks. It was a great experience to watch the students begin to create patterns, get inspiration from one another and do some problem solving to get the blocks to work the way they wanted them to. It was especially interesting to watch the progression of their designs, from simple to 3 dimensional pieces that rose off the surface of the table. I included the photos I took while at Eastside in my exhibition.

I included these blocks in a portion of the exhibition to incorporate an interactive element to the show. People were immediately drawn to the blocks and many visitors stopped to design their own shapes and patterns.

I wanted the format of the book to draw the viewer into the content of the book. I decided to use an accordion fold style of book with pages that unfolded to reveal
information and photographs of the quilts and emulated the area where the quilts might have originated. Each set of pages featured photographs of the quilts featured and text to reveal the research I had done on each style of quilt. The center panels of the back of the book featured pages where I acknowledged the various people, businesses and organizations that were helpful in the creation of each book. The final page of the book featured a fold-out poster of one or more quilts in the collection.

I didn't want the book cloth that I used to cover the boards of the book to compete with the colors and images of the book, so I chose a black, Italian rayon fabric, Cialux, from Talas Book Binder's Supply Company in New York. This tightly woven fabric was lightweight enough to eliminate bulk at the corners and hinges of the binding process but still provide a solid cover for the book.

Cutting Binder's Board to the exact size can be a difficult task. I needed thirty-two pieces of board cut to exactly 6.5 inches square so I ordered the board precut by a bindery in Indianapolis. This job was contracted through Dolphin Papers in Indianapolis. I chose a board of .080" thickness because it was heavy enough to hold the shape of the book while not being too bulky to accommodate the smaller size of the overall book.

The slipcase is an eight inch square cube with slots on each of the four sides of the cube to hold one volume in each slot. The cover of each book was featured on the outside of the cube. I used a heavier binder's board, .098" thick, to accommodate the weight of the set of four books. I covered the box with the same Cialux fabric in a copper color to contrast the black cover of the books yet still not detract from the photographs on the covers.

Printing the pages of the books on both sides proved to be a difficult process because of registration issues. The pages were only 6.25" tall so the registration on all four sides needed to be very accurate. After several unsuccessful attempts using different photo papers and printers I decided to have the pages professionally printed. Big Picture Imaging of Terre Haute printed the pages for the interior of the books as well as the cover images. The interior pages were printed on a 60 lb. weight Cougar matte finish paper. This choice of paper kept the colors true and crisp. The cover images were printed on 100 lb. Cougar and the fold-out posters were printed on a 40 lb. Cougar. This lighter-weight paper provides a poster that folded nicely in the back of the book without cracking the finished poster.

For the Amish quilts, I used black and white images of the area surrounding Arthur, Illinois. This area is known for a rather large community of Amish and Mennonite people.
I created a series of tri-tone, shades of brown and white, images so that the colors and designs of the quilts would be the most prominent element of that particular book.

The community of Gee's Bend has suffered through many difficult financial times. Poverty and struggle were the only way of life many of the residents of that community knew. I feel that, black and white photography is often the best means of illustrating this aspect of life. The photographs created by depression-era photographer Dorothea Lange are a perfect example of this style of photograph. Similar in style to the Amish book, the black and white images give a sense of the poverty and simplicity of this community has endured. The bold colors and strong geometric patterns of the Gee's bend quilts stand out in strong contrast to the black and white images.

The Victorian era is often associated with a time of stately elegance and beauty. The images I used in the Golden Age of Quilting book were shot at Sycamore Farm, a Victorian era bed and breakfast in Terre Haute. The beautiful outdoor settings and elegant indoor settings provided a perfect backdrop for this subject.

For the Underground Railroad book I wanted to incorporate the blocks I created in Photoshop as well as explain the legend found in the book, Hidden in Plain View. Many of the photographs for this book were taken in Charleston, South Carolina and on location at Boone Hall, a plantation outside of Charleston. The photographs in Jacqueline Tobin's book were taken at this same plantation.

Conclusion

Now that this project has come full circle it is interesting to reflect on the entire process. Of course there are things I would do differently if I had it do over again but all in all I am satisfied with the final outcome. I see this as a beginning of further research and expression of other cultures in the United States and how fiber arts and quilts hold a significant place in the preservation of their history. The art of storytelling may have become a lost art but we, as the potential historians of our generation, have an obligation to preserve those wonderful stories and traditions.
Works Cited


Images from Final Exhibition

Set of four books

Boxed set of books

Underground Railroad Quilts Exhibition
Amish Quilts Exhibition

Gee's Bend Quilts Exhibition

Golden Age of Quilting Exhibition

Gallery part 1
Gallery part 2

Interactive portion of the Exhibition

Eastside Elementary School Students
Book Layout detail images, continued

Back Cover spread

Conclusion page spread

Fold-Out Poster spread

Acknowledgement Page Spread
Opening a book is like embarking on a small journey. Upon opening the cover, we are invited to become a stow-away of sorts, experiencing stories of far-away places, other people's triumphs and tragedies, new ideas and so much more. My intention is that these books take you into the world of four styles of quilts, which are of significance to the history of quilting in the United States.

As a quilter, hearing the stories and legends associated with many of the quilts and quilt blocks I have seen is almost as much fun as making the blocks themselves. The sense of history and tradition is very strong among quilters. Talk to a quilter about quilts she has made in her lifetime and you will hear some great stories. The works featured represent the role of quilts, as well as the history connected with them, of four groups of people in the United States. The making and preservation of quilts are essential to each of these groups because they tell stories, whether the secret language of the Underground Railroad code or the beautiful expressions of creativity of the Victorian era.

The photographs give a sense of place for each of the quilt styles. Many of the quilt designs have been inspired by the world around them, such as those of the quilters of Gee's Bend, a small rural community in Alabama where many residents are descendants of slaves. Amish quilters have become known for attention to detail and their natural sense of color and design. The simple designs of some of their quilts reflect the simple lifestyle they hold so dear.

So go ahead, pick up a book and take a little journey. Look at the photographs and allow them to take you to a time or place far away, to experience the stories they have to tell.
Thesis Reading List Fall 2008


Lyons, Mary E. *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers (African-American Artists and Artisans)*


