

ABSTRACT

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AND POWER, 1971-1991

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This thesis examines the status of quilts in the Western art world from 1971-1991 as point of entry into the complex process of classifying “art.” Each chapter focuses on one of four art-world groups that represent the key contributors to the growing debate over quilts as art. Analysis of their strategies reveals the how quilts-as-art proponents advanced multiple agendas. The quilt became a symbol of power: for art museums and curators to demonstrate cultural hegemony, for art critics to legitimize their role as arbiters of taste, for feminist scholars to expose the oppression of women, and for collectors and dealers to enhance their economic and social status. At the dawn of the 1990s, the art world had granted only limited acceptance to quilts. Although the art world’s prevailing gender- and class-based hierarchy remained largely intact, quilts’ partial move into the art world had implications for the quilting community.

TO BE “HIGH” AND “FINE”: QUILTS, ART, AND POWER, 1971-1991

By

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Chapter 1: Framing the Debate.....	1
Chapter 2: The Modern Eye: Quilts, Art Museums, and the Politics of Display	17
Chapter 3: Form and Function: Quilts in Art-Critical Discourse	40
Chapter 4: Quilts, Gender, and the Art World: The Scholars Debate.....	64
Chapter 6: Quilts in the Art Market: Collectors, Dealers, and Capital.....	95
Chapter 7: The Consequences of Classification	119
Selected Bibliography.....	128

List of Figures

Figure 1: *Abstract Design in American Quilts* installation.....[Redacted]

Chapter 1: Framing the Debate

“Those who could codify the meanings of words fight a losing battle, for words, like the ideas and things they are meant to signify, have a history.”¹

-Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Social Analysis.”

The history of quilts in the United States from 1971-1991 marks one chapter in the ongoing battle over words—specifically, labels, categories and classifications. The story begins with an exhibition that opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the summer of 1971. The exhibition, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, debuted at a critical time when a number of factors, including the approaching American bicentennial, the rise of second-wave feminism, and changes in the political and social climate of the United States influenced a large-scale revival in the practice of quilting, as well as the study of quilts and their makers. Heralded as the first time a prominent American art museum displayed quilts as art, the Whitney show sparked a new chapter in an ongoing, centuries-long debate over the distinction between the categories of “art” and “craft.” The debate over quilts that developed over the two decades following the 1971 Whitney exhibit serves a point of entry into the complex process of classification in the art world, in which gendered and class-based concepts shape art world practices, institutions, discourses, and hierarchies.

Drawing on sociology, I define “art world” as the “people and organisations whose activity is necessary to produce the kinds of events and objects which that world

¹ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis, *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053.

characteristically produces.”² The notion of quilts’ “status” in the art world refers to their position within the network, where other positions may be superior or inferior, creating a hierarchy of forms.³ By definition, shifts in status benefit some at the expense of others, threatening those who maintain the top positions in a hierarchy. As sociologist Gary Alan Fine argues, “Art worlds are status and power games with the object as a strategic piece.”⁴ The outcome of the debate, the circumstances in which quilts were (or were not) accepted into the mainstream art world, resulted in shifts in power.

A brief history of how the modern categories of “art” and “craft” developed will provide the context necessary to examine how and why, beginning with the Whitney’s 1971 quilt exhibition, a number of people and groups within the art world began to argue that quilts should be considered “art.” The modern conception of the art/craft division ostensibly revolves around the notion of use: crafts are made for some practical function, while art is made “for art’s sake,” intended to function for display and contemplation as an art object. Looking at how these two categories developed will demonstrate that these definitions, and the assumptions behind them, are not fixed; they are historically-rooted and therefore subject to analysis and change. The modern dichotomy of art versus craft grew over centuries, shaped by contests for power among those who held stake in the art world. Many of these individuals gained power through struggles over categorization, which effected change in the art world.

² Jeremy Tanner, “The Social Production of Art,” in *The Sociology of Art: A Reader*, ed. Jeremy Tanner (London: Routledge, 2003), 69.

³ Jeremy Tanner, “The Sociology of the Artist, in Tanner, *The Sociology of Art*, 107.

⁴ Gary Alan Fine, “Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-taught Art,” *Theory and Society* 32, no. 2 (2003): 158.

Prior to the Renaissance, the words “art” and “craft” were synonymous and used interchangeably.⁵ It was not until the fifteenth century in Europe that artists ascended from “the level of petty bourgeois artisan to that of the free intellectual worker.”⁶ Art historian Arnold Hauser traces the early stages of this transformation to fifteenth-century Italy, where the structure of contracts between patron and artist began to change. Prior to that time, local guilds controlled and regulated art production, which was based in communal workshops where artists collaborated on a wide variety of products including tiles, guild flags, wedding chests, and bridal plates, in addition to paintings and sculpture. The workshops produced artifacts primarily for courtly or religious patrons according to strict contractual parameters. Near the end of the fifteenth century, Italian artists increasingly travelled throughout the region, finding a great deal of work with the courts. Travel often placed them outside of locally-based guild jurisdictions, which allowed greater autonomy for the artist. As the Italian economy prospered, the market for art increased, and town guilds were forced to compete with the courts for the most sought after artists, forcing the guilds to relax their creative restrictions.⁷ According to Hauser, this new freedom arose not out of any heightened self-respect or demands on the part artists, but out of changing market forces.⁸ Increasing market values led to even greater competition, which resulted in vast differences in earnings between artists.

Once freed from guild restrictions, some artists sought alliance with the humanists of the period, a group held in high regard by the elite of society. This union allowed the more successful, highly-paid artists to justify their superior social and economic positions

⁵ *OED Online*, n. “craft,” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43694> (accessed April 08, 2012).

⁶ Arnold Hauser, “The Social Status of the Renaissance Artist,” in Tanner, *The Sociology of Art*, 113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

to both the humanistically-minded upper-classes who paid them, as well as to artists of lower rank who posed a threat of resistance to this newly formed order. The humanists accepted painters and sculptors into their circle, in part because they recognized the practical value of art to transmit humanist ideas and principals.⁹

The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries saw the creation of the first art academies, drawing on the theoretical writings of Leonardo Da Vinci and the teaching style of the humanists to shape their curricula. The academies incorporated conceptual and theoretical principles in a classroom setting, which emphasized the study of nature over imitation of the masters. Handwork, manual labor, and execution became secondary to the concepts and ideas a work of art conveyed, separating and demoting the “craft” from the “art.” Another fundamentally new element to the formulation of art developed out of these circumstances: the concept of artistic “genius,” the idea that art arose out of original, individual expression and creativity.¹⁰ The resultant privileging of concept over execution formed the basis of an art world hierarchy that that a) separated certain classes of objects determined to be “art” from those determined to be “craft” on and b) placed these “art” forms, namely painting and sculpture, above all else.

In the seventeenth century, these new ideas began to spread. Artists looked to Rome as a hub of artistic production, where painting and sculpture were highly valued and treated as intellectual pursuits. Formal art academies began to spring up throughout Europe. As modern nation-states came into being, their rulers began to appreciate the visual arts as valuable commodities to convey power and inspire national pride, leading to an increase in state support and sponsorship for art academies, which dominated the

⁹ Ibid., 118-19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 119-20.

training of artists through the eighteenth century. The academies' "elementary" courses taught practical skills, while more advanced courses addressed conceptual approaches to art. Eventually, separate trade schools developed to teach "craft" skills, with the intellectual training completely reserved for members of the academy, further divorcing execution from concept, or "craft" from "art."¹¹

Exhibitions held by the academies to display student work became the first public, non-political, non-religious spaces where the middle class could view and discuss art. No longer considered a specialized activity, looking at and knowing about art became part of the everyday culture of the cultivated man.¹² Taste in art became a means to demonstrate cultural capital, to distinguish class. Eventually the field of art criticism developed to provide guidance to the expanding middle class in how to look at and respond to art.¹³

The establishment of public art museums in Europe and America in the nineteenth century further institutionalized the art/craft divide. Craft scholar Paula Owens argued that as the art museum rose as a social force in the modern era, so did the value of innovation in art as an end in itself. Fierce competition among artists in the free market brought the ideals of "genius" and original self-expression in art to the fore as a means to distinguish oneself from the rest. The elite, upper class adopted these concepts, as they depended on profits generated by innovation, name-recognition, and rarity, and translated these values into the values of art museums they founded. The rare came to be valued

¹¹ Tanner, "The Sociology of the Artist," 109-10.

¹² Jeremy Tanner, introduction to Tanner, *The Sociology of Art*, 5.

¹³ Ibid.

over the useful, further pushing those objects deemed “craft,” objects associated with practical, everyday use, to the margins of the art world.¹⁴

With the rising number of public museums, art criticism and art history flourished, and the nineteenth century saw the formation of new discourses on art, including the proliferation of additional art labels to separate and name objects that fell outside the parameters that dictated traditional painting and sculpture. Quilt scholar Jane Przybysz noted that “the terms ‘folk’ and ‘folklore’ were invented in the mid-nineteenth century to describe the people and culture of the lower classes.”¹⁵ “Folk art” came to be used by art institutions to describe “the cultural artifacts of people who are untrained in and/or unfamiliar with the conventions of the Western ‘high art’ tradition.”¹⁶ However, Przybysz argued, use of the term “simply masks the fact that access to the knowledge of these conventions was...largely a matter of class.”¹⁷ Likewise, art historian Elissa argued that in the early twentieth century, critics began to use the word “decorative” as a pejorative term. Through associations with mass culture, ornament, and femininity, “decorative” came to imply inferiority, to connote non-intellectual, non-substantive art.¹⁸ Like “folk art,” the category of “decorative arts” served to distinguish certain classes of objects from “high” or “fine” art. Although the art world presented such sub-categories as necessary, utilitarian, and neutral, these new labels held a political charge, ensuring that

¹⁴ Paula Owen, “Labels, Lingo, and Legacy: Crafts at a Crossroads,” in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 28.

¹⁵ Jane Przybysz, “Competing Cultural Values at the Great American Quilt Festival,” *Uncoverings* 8 (1987): 126, n. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Elissa Auther “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg.” *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339.

nontraditional forms remained separate from, and less than, traditional painting and sculpture.¹⁹

An early attempt at elevating the status of “craft,” by reuniting it with “art,” the Arts and Crafts movement arose in England toward the end of the nineteenth century, a reaction to the negative effects of the industrial revolution. Through the use of arts and crafts, John Ruskin, one of the earliest and most influential proponents of the Arts and Crafts ideology, sought social reform. To Ruskin, a move toward greater simplicity in art and design would revive the morality and dignity that he believed society lost amidst industrialization and mass-consumption.²⁰ Ruskin and his followers viewed the art academies as corrupt and elitist institutions that created hierarchical distinctions between the arts.²¹ As the Arts and Crafts movement spread across the United States in the 1890s, its proponents established a number of art communities to explore new forms and promote the movement’s ideologies.

Despite the high-minded utopian ideals propagated by Arts and Crafts advocates, more recent scholarship has explored ways that the movement was much less “pure” in actual practice, particularly in America. Although, geographically, it spread widely throughout the United States, curator Kenneth Trapp points out that the Arts and Crafts movement represented a “fundamentally a white, middle-class phenomenon.”²² Trapp argues that the movement’s artists appropriated artistic traditions from other cultures, but

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Paul Greenhalgh, “*Le Style Anglais: English Roots of the New Art*,” in *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 129-30.

²¹ Jo Lauria, et al., *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2007), 80; see also Greenhalgh, “*Le Style Anglais*,” 133.

²² Kenneth R. Trapp, introduction to *The Arts and Crafts Movement in California: Living the Good Life*, ed. Kenneth Trapp (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 10.

ignored their practitioners as a resource, in order to prop up nostalgia for a romanticized colonial past.²³ Although the English Arts-and-Crafts philosophy upheld handwork and rejected the machine, the movement in the United States, where “the technocratic and commercial spirit ruled,” embraced machine-made goods, with many entrepreneurs and large manufacturers capitalizing on the popularity of the Arts-and-Crafts style to build successful business enterprises.²⁴

Although the Arts and Crafts Movement enjoyed support, it became difficult to sustain. By 1915, the Arts-and-Crafts style had begun to seem old-fashioned. Increasing mechanization in the early twentieth century brought cars, radio, movies and new appliances into the marketplace, transforming Americans’ habits and tastes. In this new Machine Age, modern design began to take over.²⁵ After the onset of the Great Depression, high unemployment and widespread poverty meant many people could no longer afford to purchase handcrafted items, even if they wanted to.²⁶

²³ Ibid., Trapp gives the example of California Arts and Crafts artists adopting the design vocabulary of the Far East, but ignoring the Chinese and Japanese inhabitants of the state. See also Melanie Herzog, “Aesthetics and Meanings: The Arts and Crafts Movement and the Revival of Indian Basketry,” in which she argues that Arts and Crafts proponents interest in Indian baskets revolved around a set of romanticized concepts that had more to do with contemporary European American values than the meaning of Indian art within its culture of origin, *The Substance of Style: Perspectives on the American Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Bert Denker (Winterthur, DE: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1996), 69-91.

²⁴ Richard Guy Wilson, “‘Divine Excellence’: The Arts and Crafts Life in California,” in Trapp, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in California*, 18-21. Bert Denker’s edited volume, *The Substance of Style: Perspectives on the American Arts and Crafts Movement*, provides a number of viewpoints on the commercial aspects of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, in particular see Anna Tobin D’Ambrosio, “The Distinction of Being Different: Joseph P. McHugh and the American Arts and Crafts Movement,” 143-59; Donald A. Davidoff, “Maturity of Design and Commercial Success: A Critical Reassessment of the Work of L. and J.G. Stickley and Peter Hansen,” 161-81; and Richard Stamm, “The Bradley and Hubbard Manufacturing Company and the Merchandising of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America,” 183-97.

²⁵ Richard Guy Wilson, “The Arts and Crafts after 1918: Ending and Legacy,” in Trapp, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in California*, 238-39.

²⁶ Jo Lauria, et al., *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2002), 272.

After World War II, two key events significantly affected American craft traditions. The first event, the passage of the GI Bill, reinvigorated the study of craft in the United States by flooding colleges with veterans. To meet the demands of higher enrollment, art departments across the country expanded, with many developing courses in “craft” materials such as weaving, ceramics, and glass. Drawing on interviews with craftspeople, Vicki Halper and Diane Douglas argue that craft media held a special appeal to returning soldiers who had grown disillusioned with society, providing a meaningful alternative to traditional careers.²⁷

The second event to transform the craft world was the emergence of abstract expressionism, which shifted the focus of the art world from Europe to the United States. American art and artists became part of the country’s popular culture. People began to see the pursuit of art as a possible means to fame and fortune. Those who studied and taught craft courses in academic art departments observed that “painting...had brought unprecedented attention to the arts and created cultural heroes out of its practitioners.” Painting became the yardstick against which art world success could be measured.²⁸

The postwar academic arts setting became a “greenhouse for the arts as well as the crafts.”²⁹ The success of the abstract expressionists inspired experimentation, and many craftspeople moved toward a greater emphasis on self-expression and innovation over tradition. University art departments provided a financially stable environment that shielded craftspeople from the commercial market and its demands, facilitating avant-

²⁷ Vicki Halper and Diane Douglas, introduction to *Choosing Craft: The Artist’s Viewpoint*, eds. Vicki Halper and Diane Douglas (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), x.

²⁸ Rob Barnard, “Paradise Lost? American Crafts’ Pursuit of the Avant-Garde,” in Fariello and Owen, *Objects and Meaning*, 57.

²⁹ Barnard, “Paradise Lost,” 57.

garde experimentation. New craft forms emerged, setting off the studio craft movement, an approach to craft characterized by “one-of-a-kind pieces made by the artist from his or her original designs and expressing a strong idea or concept.”³⁰ In other words, non-functional forms made for exhibition rather than for use.³¹

Ceramicist and craft scholar Rob Barnard argued that the studio craft movement arose, at least in part, out of academic craftspeople’s desire to be taken seriously as artists and gain recognition in the mainstream art world. They sought parity with modern painters and sculptors by eschewing function and translating fine art trends into craft media. The rejection of function, Barnard argued, “was not based on any kind of intellectual or philosophical examination,” but had more to do with “the fact that the idea of functional crafts ran contrary to the values manifested in...the fine arts world-- a world on which fine crafts had modeled itself.”³² The rejection and devaluation of function by some created a schism between what remain the two dominant factions in the craft world: studio craftspeople (i.e. those who make “art” objects) and traditionalists (i.e. those who make functional objects). Traditional crafts continued to develop alongside the studio craft movement, experiencing a surge in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a reaction to the growing reliance on mass-produced goods coincided with nostalgia leading up to the American bicentennial. The modern craft world divided, with lines of debate developing along the studio/traditional divide; “innovators” pitted themselves against “traditionalists,” “professionals” looked down on “hobbyists,” and so on. Debates formed over the fractious question—“Is it art?”—with the notion of use at its crux.

³⁰ Lauria et al., *Craft in America*, 211.

³¹ Barnard, “Paradise Lost,” 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 61.

Despite efforts by studio craftspeople to separate their work from traditional craft, any ties to function, however cursory, were met with resistance by the mainstream art world. Like the “one-drop” rule, any trace of craft could be used as grounds for dismissal from the “fine art” realm. Seeing only limited possibilities for mainstream success, the craft community created specialized craft institutions, establishing their own museums, publications, and societies. While the growth of a separate “craft world” expanded avenues for craftspeople, it also contributed to the codification of art and craft as distinct, binary spheres, further removing craft from the discourses and institutions of mainstream art.³³

The separation of art and craft prior to the 1970s provides the backdrop against which this story of quilts begins. Although brief, this overview reveals that the art/craft division is not natural or fixed, but was constructed over a long period of time. The divide grew out of particular economic, cultural, and political circumstances, through efforts by individuals to enhance their social status and economic standing. Over time, the emergent definitions of “art” and “craft” became codified and institutionalized, strengthening the compelling power of the division.³⁴ The bifurcation of categories that began in the Renaissance eventually led to the normalization of a mutually exclusive opposition which sought to prevent the crossing over of objects from one category to the other. The tenets of the mainstream art world served to maintain a hierarchy of forms that privileged painting and sculpture over other media, and formally-trained painters and sculptors over other producers.

³³ Owen, “Labels, Lingo, and Legacy,” 28.

³⁴ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 53.

The historicization of the concepts of “art” and “craft” underscores the impossibility of attaching precise, fixed definitions to the terms. In *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star define classification systems in an ideal sense as being characterized by consistent principles which allow things to be arranged into mutually exclusive categories, in which everything can be classified into one category or another.³⁵ However, they qualify this statement by arguing that no “real-world” system matches this ideal.³⁶ Drawing on historian Joan Scott’s analysis of the terms “man” and “woman,” I argue that “art” and “craft” are simultaneously empty and overflowing categories. Categories are empty, Scott explains, when “they have no ultimate transcendent meaning.” They are overflowing “because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed elements.”³⁷ Any process of differentiation and distinction, of categorization and classification, requires “the suppression of ambiguities and opposite elements in order to assure (and create the illusion of) coherence and common understanding.”³⁸ Alternative, suppressed, or denied elements become visible when objects do not fit neatly into one or another category. Such objects challenge the purported mutually-exclusive basis of dichotomous categories.³⁹ Once fractured, normative categories can be questioned and contested, making resistance possible.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid., 10-11.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category,” 1074.

³⁸ Ibid., 1063.

³⁹ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 12.

⁴⁰ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category,” 1068.

Bowker and Star identify resistance as a potent means through which classifications change.⁴¹

The canon of Western art represents a system of classification which has proved difficult to change despite resistance. The canon represents, according to art historian Griselda Pollock, “the best, the most representative, and the most significant” objects in the field, identifying “what is unquestionably great, as well as what must be studied.”⁴² In order for the canon to have meaning, art historian Christopher Steiner asserts, it must exclude “a large body of what are deemed noncanonical and, therefore, inferior materials.”⁴³ In his essay “Can the Canon Burst?” Steiner explores changes in art classification by comparing the Western canon to the Indian caste system. Like the caste system, he argues that attempts to overthrow the canon have consistently failed, “giving way instead to ever more segmented and subdivided gradations.” While the “opening up” of the canon has allowed some formerly marginalized forms to “slip inside,” Steiner points out that these forms are then “ranked according to well-entrenched criteria.”⁴⁴ The expanded hierarchy of art forms can be seen in the proliferation of additional art categories, including “folk art,” “decorative art,” “outsider art,” “applied art,” “domestic art,” and “women’s art,” among others. As Jane Przybyz and Elissa Auther’s respective examinations of “folk art,” and “decorative art” revealed, such labels serve to keep the canon intact amidst attack. Former outsiders remain marginal, segregated and ghettoized

⁴¹ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 49.

⁴² Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

⁴³ Christopher B. Steiner, “Can the Canon Burst?” *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 2 (1996): 213.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

into “other” subcategories, which remain *other* to the dominant norm of “high” or “fine” art.⁴⁵

Because their ever-changing nature makes providing precise definitions for “art” and its subcategories a futile undertaking, a consideration of how these categories are applied, and who determines the logic of exclusion, is more fruitful. This analysis rests on a constructionist approach to art, in which “meaning is socially assigned and not inherent in objects.”⁴⁶ As art’s meaning is bestowed rather than intrinsic, sociologist Howard Becker concludes that definitions of art and craft shift according to influential actors.⁴⁷ Like Becker, Kopytoff argues that the viewpoints most widely shared, “what we are apt to call our public culture,” are largely determined by “groups who wield cultural hegemony in our society.”⁴⁸ However, he explains that different value systems coexist among myriad networks and that change can occur when schemes of valuation or categorization conflict, sparking debate between individuals and groups.⁴⁹ Struggles over categorization can lead shifts in exchange spheres, classifications, and values, which in turn lead to shifts in power.⁵⁰

The late-twentieth-century debate over quilts exemplifies one such struggle. I approach the exhibition of quilts in the Whitney Museum of American art in 1971 as a pivotal moment that fractured the normative categories of “art” and “craft,” opening the

⁴⁵ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 5-6.

⁴⁶ Fine, “Crafting Authenticity,” 158.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 77-78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

door for questioning, contestation, and resistance. The ensuing debate over the place of quilts in the art world continues to the present day, however this study will focus on the beginnings of the struggle, the twenty years following the exhibit, from 1971-1991. Having defined the art world as a network of individuals and groups, this study is divided into four groups that represent the “influential actors” or key contributors to the debate. The first section examines art museums and curators; the second addresses art critics in the popular press; the third looks at academic scholars, and the fourth analyzes the role of quilt collectors and dealers. There is fluidity between categories, as many of the individuals involved play multiple roles (quilt scholars were often collectors, curators were also scholars, etc.). Although they overlap and interact in complex ways, a discrete examination of each group allows for a clearer analytical approach. Each group constituted a particular role in the art world network, possessing their own histories, traditions, rules, and modes of communication that led to particular strategies of debate, unique ways in which they contributed to the larger question of whether, and under what circumstances, quilts should be considered “art.”

I examine each of these groups in depth, identifying possible motives for individuals’ involvement in the debate, the strategies used to argue their case, and the consequences of those tactical decisions. Joan Scott maintains that “changes in the organization of social relationships always correspond to changes in representations of power.”⁵¹ Likewise, craft scholar John Perreault argues, “to tamper with categories...is to tamper with power.”⁵² The story of quilts in the art world then becomes an account of attempts to challenge (or maintain) configurations of power. The debate over quilts in the

⁵¹ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category,” 1067.

⁵² John Perreault, “Crafts is Art: Tampering with Power,” in Fariello and Owen, *Objects and Meaning*, 69.

art world beginning in the 1970s provides a lens through which to view how quilt proponents within the art world advanced multiple agendas, where acts of appreciation might also be seen as acts of appropriation. The quilt became a symbol of power: for art museums and curators to demonstrate cultural hegemony, for art critics to legitimize their role as cultural mediators and arbiters of taste, for feminist scholars to expose the patriarchal oppression of women and their artistic achievements, and for collectors and dealers to enhance their economic and social status. I conclude with an examination of how these groups interacted as a whole, how power was configured among them, in order to analyze what was at stake in the elevation of quilts to “art” status and the consequences of the particular ways that quilts came to be classified.

Chapter 2: The Modern Eye: Quilts, Art Museums, and the Politics of Display

On July 1, 1971, *Abstract Design in American Quilts* opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The museum showcased quilts as if they were modern paintings—hung flat on stark, white walls, with very little contextual information. The exhibition received widespread critical acclaim and, according to one of its curators, broke attendance records at the museum.⁵³ Using the Whitney exhibition as a starting point, this chapter will examine the role art museums and curators played in attempts to elevate the status of quilts within the mainstream art world. A close look at the curatorial choices evident in Whitney exhibit not only reveal the gender bias that underlies the tenets of the mainstream art world, but also how “assimilationist” appeals and temporary exhibitions resulted in only limited acceptance for quilts, leaving the established structure of the art world largely intact. Through the display of quilts, museums and their curators gained power as cultural authorities with the ability to legitimize quilts as “art.”

The story of this landmark exhibit begins with its curators, Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, and their shared interest in quilt collecting. In the late 1960s, the New York City-based couple embarked on weekend trips to the nearby countryside to scour flea markets and antique stores for quilts. As regular visitors to such venues, the two established strong connections with local dealers. Holstein, a Harvard graduate, recalled having a life-long interest in American art, spending much of his free time traveling to

⁵³ According to Jonathan Holstein, one of the exhibit’s curators, *Abstract Design in American Quilts* was “the best-attended exhibition to that point in the Whitney’s history,” although no figures were cited, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1991), 54.

museums and “thinking and reading about art.”⁵⁴ In the late 1960s, around the time he began collecting quilts, Holstein started building a career in the New York art scene as a gallery and museum photographer. His partner, Van der Hoof shared these strong connections to the art world. The child of a museum director, she spent much of her childhood in museums and eventually attended art school where she studied painting, printmaking, and art history.

Reflecting on the exhibit and its origins in the twentieth anniversary publication *Abstract Design in American Quilts: Biography of an Exhibition*, Holstein described the gradual process by which he and Van der Hoof came to see quilts in a different light. As their collection of pieced quilts grew, he recalled how they began to note similarities between the quilts and modern art they had seen and studied. Like modernist paintings, the quilts often featured bold colors and repetitive, geometric patterns, in addition to being large and rectangular.⁵⁵

With this newly realized point of view, the couple decided to plan an exhibition, setting their sights on an influential New York art museum as the venue. After carefully selecting a group of quilts, they met with the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Diane Waldman. Waldman recalled noting the similarities between the quilts and modern painting, but ultimately rejected the exhibition, telling Holstein “it was not a suitable subject for the Guggenheim Museum.”⁵⁶ She suggested the Whitney as a possible alternative and arranged for them to meet with Robert Doty, the museum’s curator. Like Waldman, Doty characterized his initial reaction to the idea of a quilt

⁵⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14-24.

⁵⁶ Diane Waldman, quoted in Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 29.

exhibit as “negative,” but he recalled being convinced by Holstein’s confidence and determination to show the quilts as “art” rather than “craft.”⁵⁷ After their preliminary meeting, Holstein and Van der Hoof drafted a proposal, which Doty accepted, and planning for the exhibition began.

Holstein and Van der Hoof selected ninety quilts based on their “aesthetic impact,” which Holstein later defined as the “look” that produced “the immediate pleasurable sensations we experienced when we saw great works of art.” Holstein described the selection process as one based on “visual and intellectual reactions” to the formal design elements of the quilts.⁵⁸ Having narrowed their pool of quilts, the pair enlisted the help of prominent pop artist Roy Lichtenstein and his wife, Dorothy, a curator, to make the final selections.⁵⁹ After the group settled on sixty quilts, Holstein and Van der Hoof worked to develop a method of suspension so that they hung as flat as possible, consciously striving to make the quilts appear as closely as possible to paintings.⁶⁰

Little contextual information was presented alongside the quilts on display, although the Whitney provided an exhibition catalogue for sale. Holstein insisted that there be a catalogue so the exhibit would not “disappear” at the end of its run.⁶¹ The cover featured a “Rainbow” quilt from Pennsylvania, chosen for its unique, “un-patchwork-like” appearance.⁶² The text included an essay by Holstein, several

⁵⁷ Robert Doty, quoted in Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 30.

⁵⁸ Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 32-34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 35.

illustrations, and a checklist of quilts in the exhibition including information on their pattern, state of origin, approximate date of creation, material, and size. No quiltmakers were identified. Holstein explained that provenance was difficult to establish.⁶³

In contrast to the physical exhibit, which provided little historical context, Holstein's short catalogue essay outlined a brief history of quilting in America, identifying various types of quilts, their traditional uses, and their dual function as bed coverings and creative outlets for women. The essay focused mainly on pieced quilts, which Holstein described as being inherently abstract and visually superior to appliqué quilts. He made clear that he and Van der Hoof selected the quilts based on their visual properties rather than workmanship. Describing the quilting process as "painting" with fabric, Holstein argued that the makers of the quilts featured in the exhibit creatively arranged and manipulated color, arrangement, and size, using a "traditional American approach to design." Exhibiting "vigorous, simple, reductive, 'flat,'" design characteristics, and "bold use of color," Holstein believed the quilts displayed qualities that typified the best American art.⁶⁴

When the exhibit opened, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Praised by critics in the popular press, it received news coverage throughout the United States.⁶⁵

Janet Malcolm of the *The New Yorker* wrote, "[A] quilt that looks merely homey lying at the foot of a bed may become a great work of abstract design when it is hung on an

⁶³ Checklist from Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971); reprinted in Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, Appendix 1, 210-11.

⁶⁴ Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts* [exhibition catalogue], 1971; reprinted in Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, Appendix 2, 212-13.

⁶⁵ Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 42-53.

enormous white wall and regarded from a distance.”⁶⁶ *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer also praised the exhibit, citing the bold colors and patterns displayed in the quilts as evidence of a uniquely American brand of “genius.” Kramer argued that the exhibit “prompts us to rethink the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as the lesser forms of visual expression.”⁶⁷ *Quilter’s Newsletter Magazine* proudly proclaimed, “It seems to be official now—quiltmaking is indeed an art.”⁶⁸ In the end, the Whitney decided to extend the run of the exhibit due to its popularity.⁶⁹

By the time the exhibition closed in October of 1971, Holstein and Van der Hoof had received numerous requests to mount the exhibit at other venues. Over the next year and a half, versions of the exhibit traveled the country, appearing in The Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and The Los Angeles County Art Museum. Afterwards, Holstein and Van der Hoof traveled with the quilts to Europe, mounting exhibits at the Musée des arts Décoratifs in Paris and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.⁷⁰ When the quilts returned from Europe, Holstein and Van der Hoof curated a quilt exhibition for the 1972 inaugural season of The Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution’s newly established craft venue. When that show closed, Holstein and Van der Hoof continued their collaboration with the Smithsonian, dividing the quilts into two smaller exhibitions that toured the country simultaneously as part of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibitions Service (SITES). The SITES

⁶⁶ Janet Malcolm, *The New Yorker*, September 4, 1971, p. 60.

⁶⁷ Hilton Kramer, “Art: Quilts Find a Place at the Whitney,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1971, p. 22.

⁶⁸ *Quilters’ Newsletter*, September 1971, quoted in Karin Elizabeth Peterson, “Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of Patchwork Quilt,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (2003): 477.

⁶⁹ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 475.

⁷⁰ Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 57-75.

exhibits traveled for two years to a variety of art, history, and university museums throughout the country.⁷¹

Despite the positive reaction to the *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, criticism arrived over the next decade with feminist scholars questioning its curatorial choices and methods of display. Art historian and feminist Patricia Mainardi published the most vocal critique of the exhibit in her 1973 article, “Quilts: The Great American Art.”⁷² Mainardi accused Holstein of presenting the quilts in the exhibit as anonymous, when evidence showed that at least one of them was signed (a claim which Holstein later disputed).⁷³ Doing so, she argued, dismissed the quiltmakers as artists while allowing the curators to appropriate their quilts in order to legitimize modern painting.⁷⁴

Mainardi also criticized Holstein’s use of gendered language. She argued that Holstein used the masculine terms “strong,” “bold,” and “vigorous” to describe pieced quilts, which he regarded more highly. Conversely, he described appliqué quilts using feminine descriptors: they were “pretty,” “elegant,” and “beautiful,” but “decorative.”⁷⁵ Holstein’s descriptive language drew on widespread cultural conceptions of sexual difference and inequality to differentiate between pieced and appliqué quilts. By “masculinizing” pieced quilts and “feminizing” appliqué quilts, Holstein implied that the former were superior to the later. This observation exemplifies Joan Scott’s argument that

⁷¹ Ibid., 82; for a complete list of the SITES exhibition schedule see *ibid.*, Appendices Three and Four, 216-17.

⁷² Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 1, 18-23; reprinted in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 330-46, which I cite, 344.

⁷³ Ibid., 332; Holstein responded in a later publication that the signature, “E.S. Reitz,” referred to the owner of the quilt, rather than its maker, Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (Greenwich, CT.: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), pl. 21.

⁷⁴ Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” 344.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

while terms of a discourse may not be explicitly about gender, they may reference to gender to establish meaning.⁷⁶ The discursive use of gender-inflected language, Scott argues, ensures the maintenance of normative definitions of gender embedded in culture.⁷⁷

More recent scholarship by Beverly Gordon suggests that Holstein and Van der Hoof's method of displaying the quilts flat on the walls represented a masculine form of viewing that is typical of art museums. Gordon uses anthropologist Edward T. Hall's notion of "proxemics," or "the study of people and their use of space as an elaboration of culture," to examine how certain "distance zones" correspond to gender. According to Gordon, nearer, more personal distances are typically associated with women, while men are more comfortable with "farther, more abstract and impersonal distances."⁷⁸ Applying this to quilts and their display, Gordon explains that quilts hung on walls, as they were in the Whitney exhibition, promoted distanced evaluation. Looking up at quilts made them seem grander and more powerful and the distancing effect added to "the sense of grandeur that the classical Western academy expected of 'important' works of art."⁷⁹ Conversely, she argues, looking down on quilts, as they would have typically appeared on beds, would have made them seem "controllable and non-threatening."⁸⁰ Gordon extends this proxemics-based argument to the selection of quilts for the exhibit, arguing that Holstein, as a male curator, preferred pieced quilts because they produce a cohesive

⁷⁶ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1070-73.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1073.

⁷⁸ Beverly Gordon, "Intimacy and Objects: A Proxemic Analysis of Gender-Based Response to the Material World" in *The Material Culture of Gender, The Gender of Material Culture*, eds. Katharine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 238-39.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 246-47.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

design that can be viewed from afar.⁸¹ She points to his disdain for “crazy” quilts, another type of quilt, because they exhibit “near-sighted” design and intricate detail, rather than a “longer-range view of total effect, as in painting.”⁸² Gordon’s analysis, coupled with Mainardi’s criticisms, reveals how gender permeated nearly every aspect of the exhibition: the selection of quilts, the “flat” hanging method, the decontextualized display, and the descriptive language of the exhibition catalogue.

Sociologist and quilt scholar Susan Bernick notes that, in scholarship on the Whitney exhibition, a custom developed whereby Holstein is identified as “the only curator, despite the fact that his wife, Gail van der Hoof, was centrally involved.”⁸³ While she argues that the trend arose because Holstein “has generally been the more public member of the couple,”⁸⁴ it is worth noting that he is also a man, and allegations of sexism fall more neatly in line when leveled against a man, even though women do participate in the perpetuation of patriarchal systems that subordinate them.⁸⁵

In order to understand why Holstein and Van der Hoof took the approach they did, it is helpful to look at the exhibit within the larger context of museum culture and politics at that time. Political shifts in the late 1960s initiated a period of sustained questioning of societal traditions and institutions that privileged certain groups over others on the basis of race, class, and gender. As art museums came under scrutiny, allegations arose that the curatorial and collecting practices of art museums were far from

⁸¹ Ibid., 244.

⁸² Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt*, 62.

⁸³ Susan Bernick, “A Quilt Is An Art Object When It Stands Up Like A Man,” in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, eds. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 137, n.7.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 37.

impartial and routinely marginalized women and minorities. Similar protestations against academia resulted in the emergence of the social history paradigm, proponents of which sought to reclaim the histories of previously overlooked groups. The search for historical evidence of marginalized segments of society led to a new focus on vernacular, commonplace objects, which gave rise to the field of material culture studies.⁸⁶ As the scope of scholarship widened, and amidst allegations of racism, sexism, and elitism, many museums began to reexamine their role in society and became more receptive to new forms.⁸⁷

Holstein and Van der Hoof capitalized on this willingness, prompting sociologist Karin Elizabeth Petersen to label them “cultural entrepreneurs,” able to identify a “cultural product that was not highly valued” and develop strategies to legitimize it as art.⁸⁸ The development and execution of these strategies required the pair to draw on various forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu—social capital, consisting of “connections,” relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, and cultural capital, which is embodied in mental dispositions developed through formal and informal education (i.e. schooling and upbringing).⁸⁹ Holstein and Van der Hoof’s education in the arts allowed them to see the similarities between quilts and mainstream modern art movements. As art-world insiders, they recognized the power of the art museum as a

⁸⁶ Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976,” in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 68-69, 73.

⁸⁷ A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello, introduction to *The New Art History*, eds. A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1986), 3-4; Andrew McClellan, “A Brief History of the Art Museum Public,” in *Art and Its Publics*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 30-32; Edith Tonelli, “The Art Museum,” in *Museum: A Reference Guide*, eds. Michael Steven Shapiro and Louis Kemp (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 44.

⁸⁸ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 468.

⁸⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Education: Culture, Economy, and Society*, eds. A.H. Halsey et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47-53.

cultural authority and legitimizing force in the art world. In order to arrange meetings with prominent museum administrators, the pair utilized their “connections,” their social and professional ties to the New York art scene.

The circumstances of the time provided a window of opportunity, but Holstein and Van der Hoof faced resistance. The rejection by the Guggenheim and the initial hesitation by the Whitney demonstrate the reluctance of major art museums to feature quilts, widely considered an everyday “craft” object. To convince the Whitney of the art-like qualities of quilts, Holstein and Van der Hoof appealed to the prevailing conception of art in the mainstream art world, what Peterson terms “the modern eye.” The modern eye developed out of modernist aesthetics, a “particular, historically located set of ideas about how to appreciate works of art and to evaluate their worth.”⁹⁰ According to Peterson, the modern eye embodied three primary characteristics: formal evaluation of art, art as a product of “artistic vision” that expressed individuality and innovation, and the “pure gaze,” or disengaged contemplation of “art for art’s sake.”⁹¹ Holstein and Van der Hoof appealed to the modern eye by evaluating quilts based on their formal (i.e. visual) qualities, selecting those quilts that most already highly-regarded art forms, and emphasizing the similarities between them.

Even after securing the exhibition, evidence of apprehension on the part of the Whitney can be seen in the timing of the exhibit and the struggle to come up with an “appropriate” title. The Whitney planned to show the exhibit in the summer months, when “fillers,” or less serious exhibits, were mounted.⁹² In addition, the Whitney staff

⁹⁰ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 462.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 462-63.

⁹² Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 32.

rejected Holstein's original title "American Pieced Quilts," claiming it was not informative enough, though Holstein believes the real reason to be because the museum would be hard pressed to justify an exhibit with such a prosaic title. They eventually decided upon "Abstract Design in American Quilts," which Holstein described as "clumsy but safe."⁹³ The addition of the words "abstract" and "design" to the title made it more easily associated with art and hence more "appropriate" for the Whitney.

Having selected quilts which visually resembled modern painting and working with the Whitney to develop an appropriately artistic-sounding title, Holstein and Van der Hoof further appealed to the "modern eye" by presenting the quilts according to the dominant mode of display in the mainstream art world, commonly called the "white cube," in which art work was displayed on blank, white walls accompanied by little to no contextual information.

The white cube model arose in art museums in the twentieth century. As art historian Christoph Grunenberg explains, modes of display have historically changed along with innovations in art. The appearance of the white cube corresponded to the rise of Modernism in art, which regarded artistic creation as "an act of rational and disengaged calculation."⁹⁴ The white cube reflected and furthered this notion, attempting to cut out all outside contextual cues to allow "rational and disengaged" contemplation. Challenges to the white-cube model have existed since its inception, with detractors arguing that it "dehumanizes" art, and runs counter to the way art is produced (by

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Christoph Grunenberg "Case Study 1: The Modern Art Museum," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999), 28.

humans, for humans, in society).⁹⁵ Although challenges to the white-cube mode of display grew in force in the 1960s, most museums continued to employ the model, which Grunenberg describes as having “a surprising longevity, as it continues to be constantly reinvented and transformed to fit the latest developments in contemporary art and the latest museum concepts.”⁹⁶

[Image removed in respect for the owner's copyright A complete version of this document, which includes said referenced material, resides in the University of Maryland, College Park's library collection.]

Fig. 1. This photograph of the *Abstract Design in American Quilts* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971 illustrates how the museum's installation techniques conformed to the “white cube” model of display. From: Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition, Exhibition* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1991), 41.

Holstein defended the exhibit's decontextualized, white-cube mode of display as “a necessary step in freeing quilts from their bedspread/craft/mythology baggage.”⁹⁷ He asserted that the exhibit's emphasis on formal evaluation of quilts over their historical context in was “a means to an end,”⁹⁸ supporting Peterson's argument that in order for a “craft” object to be accepted as art, an initial rejection of its other contexts is a necessary step.⁹⁹ Holstein's method of introducing a new form (i.e. quilts) to the art world through the adoption of conventional art-world methods of display is what Peterson terms an

⁹⁵ For more on criticisms of the white cube model see Tonelli, “The Art Museum,” 36-37, 44-45; and Julie Springer, “Deconstructing the Art Museum: Gender, Power, and Educational Reform,” in *Gender Issues in Art Education: Content, Context, and Strategies*, eds. Georgia Collins and Renee Sandell (Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 1996), 44.

⁹⁶ Grunenberg, “Case Study 1,” 40-41.

⁹⁷ Jonathan Holstein, “The Whitney and After....What's Happened to Quilts,” *Clarion* 11 (1986): 83.

⁹⁸ Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 110.

⁹⁹ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 462.

“assimilation” approach as opposed to a “transformative” one.¹⁰⁰ Peterson argues that while assimilationist approaches like Holstein’s may appear to work initially, they prevent wholesale acceptance by the art world because they limit the contexts in which those objects can be seen as art.¹⁰¹ A second look at the *New Yorker* review of *Abstract Design in American Quilts* shows evidence of the limited, context-based acceptance the Whitney exhibit achieved: “[A] quilt that looks merely homey lying at the foot of a bed may become a great work of abstract design when it is hung on an enormous white wall and regarded from a distance [emphasis added].”¹⁰² From this perspective, quilts become art only after hanging them on a white wall in a museum, where they can be contemplated from afar.

Assimilationist appeals to the art world extended beyond the Whitney exhibit and were common among early feminist art historians who sought to elevate the status of women in the art world by attempting to identify “great” women artists who had been overlooked. As the feminist discourse on women’s place in art history grew, others began to critique such assimilationist appeals. Linda Nochlin articulated one of the most influential arguments against the assimilationist approach in her 1971 article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”¹⁰³ Nochlin argued there have been no “great” women artists, “no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cezanne, Picasso or Matisse” and she asserted that “no amount of manipulating the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 480.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 463.

¹⁰² Janet Malcolm, *The New Yorker*, September 4, 1971, p. 60.

¹⁰³ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *ARTNews* 69 (1970/1971): 22-39, 67-71; reprinted in *Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History*, eds. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 1-39, which I cite.

historical or critical evidence will alter the situation.”¹⁰⁴ Thus attempts to retroactively identify “great” women artists not only failed, but resulted in the opposite effect than intended, reinforcing the negative implications of the question.¹⁰⁵

By emphasizing the visual aspect of the quilts in *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, Holstein and Van der Hoof largely circumvented the issue of quiltmakers (i.e. women) as artists. They seem to have made little attempt to identify the quiltmakers, much less present them as “heroines” of art history. After quilts gained entry to the art world following the Whitney exhibition, negotiating the role of the quiltmaker as artist proved problematic. As Peterson argued, the contemporary mainstream art world defined art as the product of an artist’s “artistic vision,” with emphasis placed on individuality and innovation.¹⁰⁶ The quilting process did not align with this aspect of the “modern eye.” In his book, *The Pieced Quilt: an American Design Tradition*, published two years after the Whitney exhibit, Holstein warned that despite the similarities between pieced quilts and modern art, “Implicit in the act of creating a painting is the intellectual process which ties the work of an artist to his aesthetic ancestors and his peers, and places it in the history of objects specifically made to be art. This is precisely the quality which was absent in the making of pieced quilts. The women who made pieced quilts were not ‘artists,’ that is, they did not intend to make art.”¹⁰⁷ This statement underscores claims that assimilationist strategies did not guarantee wholesale acceptance for quilts in the art world. Although assimilationist methods allowed quilts to be appreciated in an artistic

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 462.

¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt*, 115.

manner when placed in an art museum context, quilts were not accepted as true “art” because they were not intended as such.

Holstein’s denial of “art” status based on the intention of the quiltmaker is problematic because intentions may not always be fully understood, realized, or even conscious.¹⁰⁸ As Nochlin pointed out in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” for most of history, women in Western society were systematically excluded from formal art training and artistic pursuits. Even if they did not explicitly articulate intent to “make art,” it does not logically follow that quiltmakers lacked an aesthetic purpose or an intellectual conception of their work. The art world’s exclusion of women coupled with its institutionalized separation of “art” from “craft” prevented the possibility that quilts might be labeled art by the vast majority of quiltmakers prior to the twentieth century.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that “intention” is itself the product of the social norms and conventions which combine “to define the always uncertain and historically changing frontier between simple technical objects and objets d’art.” Intention can be seen as being entwined with *doxa*, which Bourdieu defines as what happens when a constructed order matches up with actual practice and experience, producing “the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.” *Doxa* is beyond the realm of questioning because it appears so natural that alternate views are not possible.¹⁰⁹ It was not until the late twentieth century, when the quilts-as-art debate arose, that the doxic order, which took for granted that quilts and fine

¹⁰⁸ An entire subfield of philosophy, “intentionalism,” is devoted to defining and exploring intention. Some suggest that contrary to popular conceptions, there may be intentions that operate on a subconscious level, for example see Jeffrey Geller, “Painting, Parapraxes, and Unconscious Intentions,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 3 (1993): 377-87.

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164.

art did not coincide, began to come under scrutiny. As a result, the vast majority of earlier quiltmakers would not have explicitly considered themselves artists, nor have intended to make “art” in the Western tradition; the social conventions of the doxic order ensured that the thought would have been outside the realm of possibility.

In order to grapple with the issue of defining art, it is helpful to borrow from sociology the idea that peripheral “art worlds” exist in addition to the dominant one of Western painting and sculpture.¹¹⁰ While the mainstream art world continually devalued, ignored, or excluded women, the “quilt world” developed alongside it, comprising a women’s art world, an environment that fostered creativity and expression among many women who quilted.¹¹¹ Like the mainstream art world, the “quilt world” contained aesthetically-designed objects, venues for display, criteria for evaluation, and a system of exchange. Until the quilts-as-art debate gained force after Whitney exhibition, the quilt world remained well-protected by its exclusion from art institutions.

Overlooked by the mainstream art world, quilting was widely perceived as a necessary chore or harmless hobby. According to feminist scholars Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser, this type of “trivialization” served as a strategy of coding in women’s culture. Trivialization involves “the employment of a form, mode, or genre that the dominant culture considers unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant.”¹¹² While friends and family members, even quiltmakers themselves, may have been alienated by the thought of a woman pursuing art, quilting was seen as an acceptable, non-threatening pastime

¹¹⁰ Bernick, “A Quilt Is An Art Object,” 134-35.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser, “Strategies of Coding in Women’s Cultures,” in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 19-20.

for women. Barred from the mainstream art world, many women used quilting as a means of powerful personal expression. The quilt world became a place where women could display, share, evaluate, and discuss their work without outside policing or judgment. In this way, the separation of quilts and art actually served to nurture artistic creativity.

At the same time, because of their everyday ubiquity, quilts held widespread appeal, bringing in visitors who might not otherwise attend an art museum. Increases in visitation prove worthwhile for museums, which often depend heavily on public funds and admission fees. As sociologist Vera Zolberg points out in “‘An Elite Experience for Everyone’: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy,” this creates a tension within museums to balance the goals of collecting and preserving works of art with the need to draw visitors from the “general public” who possess little art education.¹¹³

Although museum administrators at the Whitney expressed uncertainty as to whether *Abstract Design in American Quilts* would be a success, the exhibit consistently attracted high visitation. The show’s popularity led to the museum extending its run. *New York Times* art critic John Canaday noted that at the start of the fall art season, the exhibition continued to bring unusual crowds, countering the “public apathy” that had come to characterize the beginning of the season. It “absolutely must not be missed,” he insisted.¹¹⁴ In this sense, *Abstract Design in American Quilts* might be considered one of the earliest “blockbuster” exhibits, a phenomenon art historian Andrew McClellan traces back to the 1970s. McClellan argues that such shows typically arise out of highly

¹¹³ Vera Zolberg, “‘An Elite Experience for Everyone’: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy,” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, eds. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 49.

¹¹⁴ John Canaday, “Art: Apathy Absent as Season Begins,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1971, p. 27.

commercial motives, often conceived as marketing schemes. Usually temporary, they are put on to with the goals of quickly increasing revenues and attendance, and attracting more visitors.¹¹⁵ Despite their genesis in less-than altruistic motives, McClellan points out that blockbuster exhibits do allow many new art forms into museums.¹¹⁶ They feature these new forms as “novel attractions,” which draw more crowds.¹¹⁷ Critics of the blockbuster argue that despite rising attendance, the type of visitor does not expand to include new diverse segments of the population.¹¹⁸ Historian Harold Skramstad argues that many museum professionals view blockbuster exhibitions as “little more than necessary pandering to the public rather than as opportunities to try to engage a broad audience in subjects and collections that in the long run benefit both the museum and the public.”¹¹⁹ Backlash to the blockbuster phenomenon also set in motion a surge in elitist nostalgia and reemphasis on traditional values among some individuals in the art world, who argued that blockbuster exhibits resulted in the death of “high culture” and “serious audiences.”¹²⁰

The rise of the blockbuster exhibit supports art historian Linda Nead’s assertion that new approaches, even if they are seemingly accepted, are often trivialized as “temporary and ephemeral” in contrast to the permanence and continuity of traditional

¹¹⁵ McClellan, “A Brief History,” 32-33.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 32-33.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Harold Skramstad, “An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century,” *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): 123.

¹²⁰ McClellan, “A Brief History,” 34.

practices.¹²¹ The practice of allowing new strategies only in limited amounts may be the reason behind museum director Robert Sullivan's observation that "museums tend to be... 'episodic institutions,' having episodes of success but having difficulty sustaining longitudinal change."¹²² If museums only adopt new approaches in their temporary exhibits in order to appease the public and do not incorporate them into their permanent displays, any potential long-term effects of these new approaches are greatly minimized. This argument is supported by art historian Bruce Robertson's investigation into the role of museum collecting in canon formation. Robertson argued that the addition of objects to public museum collections constitutes a "tipping point," only after which objects can legitimately be seen as "art." Robertson identifies museum collecting as a precondition for canonization as it allows for preservation, regular viewing, and scholarship to be conducted.¹²³

It must be remembered that as a first effort at displaying quilts as art, Holstein and Van der Hoof faced a number of obstacles. The Whitney exhibited a reluctance to show quilts at all, much less add them to the permanent collection. Given the museum's hesitation, it might have been the case that an assimilationist approach to quilts in the form of a temporary, exhibition was the only circumstance in which the Whitney would agree to a quilt show. To determine the impact of *Abstract Design in American Quilts* on art museum culture, it is worthwhile to examine what happened with quilts in art

¹²¹ Linda Nead, "Feminism, Art History and Cultural Politics," in *The New Art History*, eds. A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1986), 121.

¹²² Robert Sullivan, "Evaluating the Ethics and Consciences of Museums," in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 257.

¹²³ Bruce Robertson, "The Tipping Point: Museum Collecting and the Canon," *American Art* 17, no. 3 (2003): 2.

museums in the years following the exhibition. The Whitney exhibit did not lead to subsequent exhibits at other influential art museums. The rest of the 1970s saw only a few quilt exhibits at art museums including: *Bed and Board* at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts in 1975; *Quilts for 76* at the Boston Center for the Arts, 1975; and *Quilted Tapestries* at the Kornblee Gallery, New York City, 1975. A number of quilt exhibits also debuted at craft museums around the country, including the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and The American Craft Museum in New York City. While these did generate some positive reviews, the existence of "craft" museums as peripheral to "art" museums prevented these exhibitions from fully challenging the prevailing art/craft divide.

The following decade did see some exhibitions pertinent to the quilts-as-art saga. In 1981, Lucy Strauss curated *Artist's Quilts*, which opened at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in California. The exhibit featured seventeen quilts designed by contemporary artists from the region and sewn by expert quiltmakers. Strauss recalls conceiving the idea in 1974, only a few years after Holstein and Van der Hoof's Whitney venture. Although she does not explicitly mention the Whitney exhibit in her catalogue essay, Strauss enlisted Holstein to author the catalogue's foreword. In his contribution to the text, Holstein echoed many of his previously-stated sentiments, describing quilts as a "painterly" craft. He lauded Strauss for taking the "next logical step" in the evolution of quilts by enlisting modern to artists use quilts as a medium. He deemed the project a success in showing that quilts can effectively be used to "support triumphantly the visual ambitions of sophisticated artists."¹²⁴ The exhibit, however, did nothing to further the

¹²⁴ Jonathan Holstein, foreword to *Artists' Quilts*, by Lucy Strauss (La Jolla, CA: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980), 11.

idea of quiltmakers as artists. Each photographed quilt was accompanied only by the name of the “artist” (i.e. designer), the title of the work, and its dimensions—the quiltmakers were not named. Robert MacDonald, chief curator of the museum, went into detail in his catalogue essay to describe the artistic process used by each of the contemporary artist/designers, but did not mention the quilts’ makers at all except to refer to them as “a group of fine craftspersons...in eastern Ontario,” clearly separating the quilting as “craft,” and the design process as “art.”¹²⁵

Another important quilt exhibition opened at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery a few years later, in 1986. This exhibit also displayed contemporary quilts made as art for the wall. This time though, the quilts were both designed and constructed by quiltmakers. The exhibit traced the movement of quilts from the bed to the wall as far back as the 1950s, when a few formally-trained artists began experimenting with quilts intentionally as an art medium. Curators Penny McMorris and Michael Kile, aware of the growing popularity of this movement, commissioned the quiltmakers featured in the exhibit to create new works exemplifying the cutting edge of art quilting. McMorris and Kile titled the exhibit *The Art Quilt*, putting a name to the movement that has endured to this day.

Unlike Holstein and Van der Hoof, McMorris and Kile had strong ties to the quilting community. McMorris, a quiltmaker herself, hosted a popular quilt-themed show on PBS, and Kile, an influential quilt dealer, had just launched *The Quilt Digest*, a journal dedicated to scholarship on quilting, both traditional and contemporary. Like the earlier Whitney exhibition, the methods of display in *The Art Quilt* exhibit greatly

¹²⁵ Robert MacDonald, “The Quilts,” in Strauss, *Artists’ Quilts*, 19.

conformed to the “white cube” model, the difference being that these quilts were intended to be displayed that way. In addition, the exhibition catalogue presented an in-depth historical examination of the history of quilting in America, the genesis of the art quilt movement, an analysis of how the quilt operates as an art medium, as well as a discussion of the quilters featured in the exhibit.¹²⁶

However, relative to *Abstract Design in American Quilts* in 1971, *The Art Quilt* took place on a small scale, limiting its influence and reach. It did not debut at an internationally-known and influential art museum like the Whitney, but at a regional gallery in California. Although the exhibit created waves in the quilt community, it did not gain the widespread media coverage and attendance of the earlier exhibit; the art quilt movement remained obscure to most of the mainstream art world as well as to the public at large. In fact, no subsequent quilt exhibitions replicated the scale or magnitude of *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, which would remain the most well-known quilt exhibit for at least the next thirty years.

While the Whitney exhibit proved very influential in many ways, it did not transform the art world by establishing full acceptance of quilts as an art form. Assimilationist appeals to the “modern eye” led to a successful run, but allowed only a certain type of quilt to be seen as art, and only within the art museum’s “white cube” context, confirming the power of the art museum as holding the ability to transform objects into art. Made almost exclusively by women as functional objects, the Whitney’s presentation of quilts outwardly ceded to allegations that the art museum marginalized women and presented only “elite” art. While quilts seemingly posed a risk to the

¹²⁶ Penny McMorris and Michael Kile, *The Art Quilt* (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1986).

established order, the exhibit's gendered language and modes of display coupled with its absence of information on the quiltmakers upheld the existing power structure of the art world. By minimizing the role of the quiltmakers as art-producers, Holstein and Van der Hoof appropriated the role of "makers," transforming quilts into "art" via the Whitney. The exhibit became a "novel attraction" that drew crowds and generated publicity, garnering widespread acclaim for the museum and the exhibition's curators. However, the temporary nature of the installation further hindered any potential for long-term transformative change to the prevailing concept of art or the traditional art historical canon.

Although the tenets of the mainstream art world remained intact, the show had a profound effect on many aspects of American quilt culture. Coupled with the approaching bicentennial and shifts in academia, it contributed to a revival of interest in quilts. The exhibit also led to a marked increase in market-value of quilts, creating a lasting hierarchy of value that privileged traditional, pieced quilts above other types. The effect of the exhibit on other art world groups will be discussed at greater length in the subsequent chapters on art critics, scholars, and collectors and dealers. The exhibition is perhaps best viewed as a stepping stone that opened the door for new discussion and debate, which appeared first in the form of critical reviews.

Chapter 3: Form and Function: Quilts in Art-Critical Discourse

The earliest writings to address the budding quilts-as-art debate appeared in the early 1970s in the form of critical reviews of Whitney's *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. Critics brought widespread attention to the exhibition and raised important questions about the hierarchy of the art world. However, like the organizers of the Whitney exhibition, critics predominantly used assimilationist strategies to argue that quilts were "art." Coupled with the use of gendered language and "phallic criticism," such strategies undermined full acceptance of quilts as art. Over the two decades following the exhibition, critics struggled to develop a new discourse to approach the quilt aesthetic, taking into greater consideration the historical function of quilts and the role of the quiltmakers. In forging new ways to discuss them, critics used quilts to reinforce their status in the art world as arbiters of taste. Critics gained cultural capital by demonstrating their ability to read and translate the artistic "code" of quilts, explaining the familiar quilt in an unfamiliar art-world context.

A brief look at the history of art criticism will provide the context necessary to understand the role of the art critic in the mainstream art world. By the 1970s, when they turned their attention to quilts, art critics held a long history of wielding influence over museum visitation, popular conceptions of art, and the commercial art market. The art critic as a profession first appeared in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Europe, at the height of the academic salon era. As the middle class gained greater access to art during this period, they sought guidance to understand and evaluate what they saw. Critics filled this advisory role, gaining influence until eventually the "dealer-critic" system replaced the academy as the force driving the art market by the end of the

nineteenth century. Whether positive or negative, publicity in the form of a critical review legitimized its subject as worthy of discussion, attributing it a measure of value.¹²⁷

As art historian John Perreault noted, “Criticism...is largely composed of a series of hidden agendas,” making the motives of the critic difficult to decipher. A triangulation of aesthetic, economic, and social values interact to determine the form and content of any critical text.¹²⁸ As a historically determined practice, social and cultural forces mediated critics’ decisions about what to review and the discursive strategies adopted to do so. Although critics’ motives cannot be definitively known, the form and content of critical texts can be analyzed. Mapping the critical discourse on quilts brings to light not only how critics contributed to the debate over quilts as art, but also reveals how the art critic’s power is manifest and maintained through language.

Given the complexity of the subject and the scope of this project, this analysis is limited to those articles on quilts and quiltmaking that appeared between 1971 and 1991 in *The New York Times*, focusing specifically on the development of art criticism on quilts. Hailing from New York City, the epicenter of the American art world, the *Times* held a reputation as a leading venue for popular art criticism. It boasted one of the highest circulation rates of any American newspaper, with widespread readership throughout the world. Although art criticism also appeared in scholarly publications, this analysis will focus on art criticism in the popular press. As mediators between the museum and the public, *New York Times* art critics held power by virtue of shaping public attitudes toward

¹²⁷ For more on the “dealer-critic” system and the influential role of critics in the art market see Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹²⁸ John Perreault, “Crafts is Art: Tampering with Power,” in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 72.

art. Although mere exposure in *The New York Times* marked quilts as a subject worthy of discussion, thereby raising their value, much of the *Times* criticism on consisted of description, offering little in the way of interpretive analysis.¹²⁹ This chapter will focus on those critics who explicitly explored the status of quilts in the art world.

When *Abstract Design in American Quilts* debuted at the Whitney in 1971, it attracted a great deal of media coverage. Grace Glueck, art journalist at *The New York Times*, first published the story of Jonathan Holstein and Gail Van der Hoof's road to the Whitney a few days prior to the exhibit's opening.¹³⁰ Glueck's article supports Peterson's notion of the pair as "cultural entrepreneurs," with the power to transform quilts into objets d'art. Glueck described Holstein and Van der Hoof as quilt saviors, rescuing quilts from backs of trucks and barn floors. She recounted their realization that quilts looked "like paintings" (i.e. art) through distanced viewing of quilts spread out on the floor. Like the exhibit, Glueck's article included little discussion of the quiltmakers. She quoted Holstein, who asserted that for their makers, quilting served as an "escape from grinding labor," the sole means for women to express "a feeling for color and design."¹³¹ However, he explained, while "people loved to look at them—they didn't feel in any way strange, as if they were some form of avant-garde art."¹³² In this way, *The New York Times*, the pre-eminent newspaper of the American art world, credited Holstein and Van der Hoof with the "discovery" of quilts as art.

¹²⁹ For more on the lack of critical interpretation despite the overall rise in crafts criticism see Patricia Malacher, "Critical Approaches: Fragments from an Evolution," in Fariello and Owen, *Objects and Meaning*, 36-55.

¹³⁰ Grace Glueck, "They're Shoofly and Crazy, Man," *New York Times*, June 27, 1971, p. D24.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

Hilton Kramer, then resident art critic at *The New York Times*, reviewed *Abstract Design in American Quilts* just two days after it opened. In his glowing assessment, Kramer related how the exhibition led to a necessary questioning of the dominance of “high” art (i.e. painting and sculpture) over the “so-called ‘minor arts.’”¹³³ His addition of the qualifier “so-called” to the label “minor arts” reveals a skeptical attitude toward the conventional hierarchy of the art world and a hesitancy to cosign the common designation of quilts. His cautious application of labels demonstrates an awareness of how the art/craft hierarchy was upheld through language and categorization.

Kramer registered surprise at the Whitney’s decision to exhibit quilts, noting that the museum “rarely condescended to acknowledge the ‘decorative arts,’ as they are called, as a significant contribution to American artistic achievement.”¹³⁴ Again questioning the customary labels applied to quilts, Kramer’s tone cast an accusation of pretension at the art museum, marking it as a key institution in the perpetuation of the art hierarchy. He implied that although art museums like the Whitney held the power to influence change, administrators were often too concerned with status or entrenched in tradition to take risks and “condescend” to concede the value of marginalized art forms.

Expressing hope that the exhibition would lead to a “change of heart” and prompt a reevaluation of “the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as the lesser forms of visual expression,” Kramer supported the argument that the status of quilts, relegated to the category of “minor arts,” ought to be reevaluated.¹³⁵ However, like those involved in the staging of the Whitney exhibition, Kramer largely relied on

¹³³ Hilton Kramer, “Art: Quilts Find a Place at the Whitney,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1971, p. 22.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

“assimilationist” strategies to argue his case. He noted that the pieced quilts in the exhibit preceded aesthetic developments in European painting, creating “a remarkable succession of visual masterpieces that anticipated many of the forms that were later prized for their originality and courage.”¹³⁶ Despite granting a greater degree of agency to the quiltmakers than the exhibit had, by placing quilts in the linear progression of Western art history, Kramer implied that quilts became relevant only through their resemblance to work already accepted as “great” within the art historical canon. Although he directly questioned the existing art/craft hierarchy, Kramer’s approach ultimately precluded the dissolution of the divide. Kramer applied the language of the mainstream art world to quilts by referring to them as “masterpieces,” a term for the finest examples of art, typically canonical works. However, he went on to say that quiltmakers were not self-consciously aware of any connection to the larger art world.¹³⁷ He implied that their achievements could only be recognized and appreciated as “art” in the Western art historical tradition by those who, like himself, possessed “the modern eye,” a working knowledge of art history and the modernist aesthetic.

Following Kramer, the use of assimilationist strategies continued to be the dominant approach adopted by critics to assert the value of quilts as art. One strategy involved likening quilts to already accepted modern art forms. Rita Reif, in a 1972 article on quilt collector Rhea Goodman, described one quilt as “a late Victorian harbinger of Op and Pop Art,” created “half century before Jasper Johns began painting his flags.”¹³⁸ Likewise, in a later article on Amish quilts, Reif remarked that “the roots of hard edge

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Rita Reif, “An Art Form as American as Apple Pie,” *New York Times* January 11, 1972, p. 42.

and op art may well be found in these naïve studies.”¹³⁹ Other critics focused on the transformative effect of the art museum environment, highlighting its ability to alter the perception of quilts, allowing them to be seen as art. For example, critic Donald Janson in his 1974 review of an exhibit at the Hunterdon Art Center in New Jersey asserted that by hanging quilts on white, plastered walls (i.e. the quintessential “white cube” display), quilts could be appreciated as “works of art.”¹⁴⁰ These two semantic strategies, both hinging on appeals to the “modern eye,” were repeatedly adopted by critics to demonstrate the value of quilts as art.

Hilton Kramer adopted both strategies when he revisited the art/craft hierarchy in a series of reviews of a 1974 exhibition of post-Revolutionary American Folk Art at the Whitney, which included quilts as well as rugs, toys, furniture, and shop signs. Kramer pronounced the show a “turning point in the place traditionally assigned to folk art in the hierarchy of esthetic experience” that would “shatter many preconceptions about the dimensions of the folk-art achievement.” The idea that “high art” had always been superior to “folk art,” Kramer believed, would now have to be argued rather than assumed.¹⁴¹ Specifically mentioning the quilts featured in the show, he proclaimed: “Masterpieces of the quilt-makers’ art, hitherto relegated to the lowly world of the ‘crafts,’ are seen to prophesy and rival—and often to exceed in sheer visual invention—the paintings of abstractionists who were considered ‘daring’ a century or more after the

¹³⁹ Rita Reif, “Antiques: Amish Quilts Abound,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1973, p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ Donald Janson, “Quilts Go On View as Works of Art: A Going-Away Gift,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1974, p. 87.

¹⁴¹ Hilton Kramer, “New Perspective on American Folk Art,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1974, p. 12.

folk artists had done their work.” The quilts, he argued, displayed an inventiveness that would not be seen in the mainstream American art world until the twentieth century.¹⁴²

Like his earlier review of *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, Kramer credited the art museum as the force that allowed the quilts, as well as the other objects in the exhibit, to be seen as art. Removed “from the realm of ethnographic history,” from any historical or functional context, and placed “firmly in the esthetic arena,” he argued, enabled the objects to be seen “in a way that was literally not possible” before. With the sole focus on the visual, they could be evaluated “with a more disinterested esthetic consciousness” by contemporary viewers who possessed “eyes attuned to the expressive liberties of modernist styles.”¹⁴³ In other words, the “white cube” mode of display facilitated adoption of the “the modern eye,” allowing quilts to be perceived as “art” in hindsight—at least by those who possessed the cultural capital to recognize it. Although Kramer credited the quiltmakers for producing designs in inventive ways long before the rise of Modernism in art, it was not until the rise of Modernism that quilts could be reevaluated as “art,” and only after curators placed them in a context in which their aesthetic properties could be contemplated apart from their function and history.

Compared with his earlier review of *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, Kramer granted quiltmakers a slightly greater degree of artistic agency by referring to the quilts not just as “masterpieces,” but as “masterpieces of the *quiltmaker’s art* [emphasis added].”¹⁴⁴ Kramer marveled at the quiltmakers’ abilities to wrest from functional objects a “purity of expression...that speaks to us with such force—and undiminished charm—

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

today,” despite their lack of formal artistic training.¹⁴⁵ He described quilting as “an art of affectionate, intimate expression, of domestic felicity and hard-headed functionalism,” bringing to light how the historical context of quilts might have contributed into their aesthetic.¹⁴⁶ Although Kramer initially argued that the removal of contextual cues allowed the quilts and other objects in the exhibit to be seen as art, he then reintroduced the context of production as a factor in their interpretation. However, greater attention to the production process brought with it the problematic task of negotiating the role of the quiltmaker as artist. Kramer hypothesized that the artistic potency of quilts stemmed not from the vision of the maker, but from the fact that it “is an art closely attuned to the common rituals of life...of commonplace existence.”¹⁴⁷ In this view, the “art” of quilts was not the product of artistic vision, but a byproduct of their functional roots.

Kramer’s more nuanced consideration of the quilt aesthetic did form a new line of critical inquiry, and he seemed to be speaking in part to his fellow critics when, later in his review, he chastised those in the mainstream art world for ignoring the folk arts. As a lesser-valued category in the existing hierarchy of the arts, Kramer argued that folk art comprised “a heritage we have not yet accorded its true value” because those who held the capability to bestow this value lacked “the courage or the vision” to gauge it “with the necessary candor.”¹⁴⁸ He implied that those in power in the mainstream art world, those who governed what was deemed “great” in art, were either unable to distinguish the value

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Hilton Kramer, “A Reservoir of Visual Memory,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1974, p. 272.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

of folk art (perhaps lacking Peterson's "modern eye") or recognized its value, but did not have the courage to address it.

Kramer's accusations give some insight into reasons why critics may have shied away from analyzing and interpreting craft objects. Artist, critic, and craft scholar Patricia Malarcher explored the "uneasy" relationship between art critics and craft media in the late twentieth century in her 1989 essay "Critical Approaches: Fragments from an Evolution." After closely examining articles on contemporary craft exhibitions in the popular press as well as craft- and art-oriented publications, she concluded that "journalistic coverage of craft had increased exponentially in quantity, but not in critical quality," over the previous two decades. Malarcher determined quality by the degree to which critics offered "thoughtful considerations on the state of crafts."¹⁴⁹ She relayed curator Mildred Constantine's story of her encounter with art critic Harold Rosenberg during his visit to a 1969 contemporary fiber art exhibit that she curated at the Museum of Modern Art. According to Constantine, while Rosenberg expressed that he found the show to be new and exciting, when asked to review it, Rosenberg answered that "he wouldn't know how." Malarcher argued that Rosenberg's admission pointed to the "possibility of value that is not understood."¹⁵⁰ This anecdote evidences the uncertainty that arose when art critics confronted the unfamiliar "craft" object. Malarcher largely supported Kramer's allegations as to the dearth of crafts criticism, concluding that lack of in-depth coverage by art critics on craft media, despite the booming craft movement,

¹⁴⁹ Malarcher, "Critical Approaches," 40-41.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 37.

resulted from the lack of discourse to draw on and the resistance toward developing a new critical lens.¹⁵¹

The lack of art criticism on “craft” objects had a widespread effect on both the art and craft worlds. In his 1969 catalogue essay for *Objects USA*, a major exhibition of contemporary craft at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, one of the collection organizers, New York gallery director Lee Nordness pleaded for greater critical coverage: “There is a dire need for serious critics to review [these] works. New York, as the contemporary art center of the world, still has not one critic to assess the merits of new objects.”¹⁵² As coverage in the art world remained lacking, heightened demand by craft practitioners brought about the establishment of new craft periodicals in the mid-1970s, including *Fiberarts* and *Surface Design Journal*.¹⁵³ Despite these new venues for review, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, contemporary craftspeople continually complained that influential art critics’ indifference toward craft maintained the distinctions between “high” and “low” art, resulting in lower market values for their work. Little had changed by the mid-1980s, and contemporary craft artists continued to call for support from art critics to evaluate craft from a fine arts perspective.¹⁵⁴ As more craftspeople began seeking recognition within the mainstream art world, a line was drawn between those who sought “art” status and those who wished to retain the “integrity of craft,” which in turn contributed to the growing divide between those who made non-functional “art” objects and those who made more traditional, functional crafts.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Lee Nordness, *Objects USA* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 14.

¹⁵³ Malarcher, “Critical Approaches,” 38.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 42.

Near the end of the 1980s, critical resistance toward craft began to erode, a change that Malarcher attributes to the rise of postmodernism in art.¹⁵⁶ However, an additional influential factor that Malarcher that did not consider effect of changes in academic scholarship on art criticism. Art museums typically presented objects, in this case quilts, in a “contextless” white-cube format. Tasked with translating the “code” of art into printed language for a widespread audience with varying levels of art education, popular art critics necessarily provided additional contextual information to support their analyses and value judgments. Critics’ possession of the ability to read, decode, and evaluate works of art, while often disguised as innate “taste,” represents a form of cultural capital that Bourdieu attributes to education.¹⁵⁷ By demonstrating an understanding of operative aesthetics, art history, and art theory, critics signaled that they were “knowledgeable and credible” authorities on art.¹⁵⁸ Critics not only mediated between the museum and the public, they also mediated between academia and the public, bridging the gap between academic scholarship and museum practice.¹⁵⁹ As the emerging academic fields of material culture studies and social history grew in force in the 1980s, critics would have had access to these discourses, which stressed the importance of context in analyzing objects.¹⁶⁰ The move toward greater contextualization can be seen in critics’ increasing consideration of how function might contribute to the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Mary Ann Glynn and Michael Lounsbury, “From the Critics Corner: Logic Blending, Discursive Change and Authenticity in a Cultural Production System,” *Journal of Management Studies* 42, no. 5 (2005): 1042.

¹⁵⁹ For more on the gap between curators and scholars, see Sylvia Yount, “Braving (And Bridging) the Great Divide: The Academy and the Museum,” *American Art* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 2-7.

¹⁶⁰ For a more detailed history of the development of Material Culture Studies see Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976,” in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1999), 1-75.

quilt aesthetic, which would become the focal point of the new critical discourse on quilts.

Changes in the quilt world expedited the development of new critical approaches to quilts. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the practice of quilting began to widen. The rise of the “art quilt,” which emerged as part of the larger studio craft movement, resulted in a proliferation of hybrid and crossover forms, which increasingly came under critical scrutiny. As greater numbers of contemporary quilters discarded function to create quilts meant to hang on the wall as “art,” critics continually reasserted the ties between quilts and their historical function. Although some critics argued that the functional roots of the medium added to the quilt aesthetic and enhanced the appreciation of quilts, the focus on function inexorably tied art quilts to a “craft” tradition, marking them as different from painting and sculpture. Critics’ assertions greatly impeded the acceptance of contemporary art quilters as legitimate “artists” rather than “craftspeople.”

New York Times critic Lisa Hammel reviewed an exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in 1976 that featured a number of contemporary “art,” or “studio,” quilts. The quilts displayed a range in visual subject matter that took her by surprise: “Did you ever hear...of a funny Early American quilt?” she wrote, “How about a quilt covered with social commentary? A portrait quilt? A landscape quilt? A still-life quilt?” Hammel argued that contemporary quiltmakers transcended the limits of the medium imposed on their historical counterparts by incorporating such new images.¹⁶¹ Her shock illustrates a lack of knowledge on the part of Hammel, as quilts could be found as far back as the nineteenth century that incorporated figural and representational forms, as well as

¹⁶¹ Lisa Hammel, “Quilts: A Folk Idiom That Has Come of Age,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1976, p. 64.

political or social statements.¹⁶² However, Hammel did attempt to tie modern art quilts to their traditional counterparts by way of function. She argued that the most fascinating element of the show was “the way many of the artists, in discarding function (although you can actually use most of these quilts on a bed if you want to), transliterate use into iconography, function into images of the mind.”¹⁶³ Whereas quilts atop a bed kept people warm while sleeping, the work of contemporary art quilters expressed the unconscious, or “sleeping,” mind.¹⁶⁴

Hammel’s review provides a point of comparison with the criticism examined thus far, the venue for this show being a contemporary craft museum rather than an art museum. Although the quilts still hung on the wall, their display in a craft-friendly venue seems to have altered the way Hammel perceived the objects. In an institutional context that displayed quilts alongside other craft objects, a clearer link could be established between the contemporary studio quilts and their functional counterparts. Rather than characterizing art quilts as a break with craft tradition, Hammel described them as “another sign of what is happening in crafts today and how deep in the past the roots of present expression can go.”¹⁶⁵ This comparison illustrates the importance of the setting in which quilts were displayed and illustrates the powerful role that institutionalized labels played in establishing meaning and value.

Critic David Shirley also reviewed several contemporary art quilt exhibits over the course of several years. An examination of his reviews illustrates how over time he

¹⁶² For examples of such quilts, see Jane Benson, Nancy Olsen, and Jan Rindfleisch, *The Power of Cloth: Political Quilts 1845-1986* (Cupertino, CA: De Anza College, 1987).

¹⁶³ Lisa Hammel, “Quilts: A Folk Idiom That Has Come of Age,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1976, p. 64.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

developed a more complicated understanding of the quilt aesthetic. In his first quilt exhibition review, on a 1976 show of quilts made by community groups in New Jersey, Shirley touched on the quilting process, noting the considerable amounts of time and dedication involved in the various techniques of “appliqué and piecework methods, solid color or all-white quilting, stuffwork and embroidery.”¹⁶⁶ His review mainly consisted of rich visual description; for example, Shirley described how in one quilt, “A view of the rose window is a wonderful cloth counterpart to the complexities of the church’s glass decoration. The color, the light and rhythms are effectively translated into a quilted medium.”¹⁶⁷ In February 1977, when Shirley reviewed another contemporary quilt exhibition at the Hofstra University gallery, he began to explore the similarities and differences between quilts and other art forms. “Quilts,” he wrote, “seem to make as ideal a medium for the visualization of stories and motifs as painting or sculpture, and because of their nature, they can at times be better. They have a homespun intimacy about them that makes them immediately accessible to us. We don’t stand back and treat them with the same awe with which we treat a painting, even if their artistic quality is as good, because we associate them more easily with our private lives.”¹⁶⁸ Like Hammel, Shirley noted that quilts may be successfully used as an art medium, further adding that the intimate associations between quilts, home, and body serve not as detriment to aesthetic appreciation, but give quilts a unique advantage in terms of accessibility.

Turning a critical eye towards historical, traditional quilts, in his review of a quilt exhibit at the Newark Museum in the winter of 1980, Shirley focused even more attention

¹⁶⁶ David Shirley, “A Patchwork of Craftsmanship,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1976, p. 370.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ David L. Shirley, “A Bright New Wrinkle for Quilts,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1977, p. 443.

on the how the functional associations of quilts affected their aesthetic appeal, noting that they radiated warmth, intimacy, and neighborliness. He directly challenged the assimilationist approach, writing, “It is common today to describe quilts in terms of modern art because their abstract and even representational formats are not without a visual resemblance. But even though such references help us to have a certain appreciation of the quilts, they can also limit our understanding of them.”¹⁶⁹ Supporting the view that quiltmakers of the past did not consider themselves artists, Shirley argued that “the quilts were made not by people who considered themselves artists, but by women who viewed them as decorative and functional objects enriching family life.”¹⁷⁰ Although he provided no evidence to support this claim, Shirley used it to call for a new approach to quilts that would consider them “in terms of themselves and in terms of the people who made them, who they were and in what circumstances and for what purposes they made them.”¹⁷¹ Shirley warned against the tendency to pigeon-hole quilts as “folk art,” arguing that while, “they do have a folk heritage, its diversity makes the quilt tradition “markedly more far-reaching and surpassing.”¹⁷² As Shirley increasingly considered the historical context of quilts, his view of them became more complicated. He recognized that quilts and their makers did not fit neatly into established art world categories and aesthetic models. However, rather than call for a revision of the existing concepts of art, Shirley argued for a new approach to quilts.

¹⁶⁹ David L. Shirley, “Some Cold Facts on Quilts, *New York Times* January 27, 1980, p. NJ22.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Vivien Raynor's review of a contemporary quilt show at the Castle Gallery in New Rochelle, New York illustrates the consequences that resulted when critics relied on the established criteria of the mainstream art world to evaluate quilts. Raynor contended that those quilts which exhibited "avant-garde sensibilities" and more "direct expression" of the artist, burst "out of the limitations of the craft" to move "closer to high art."¹⁷³ Because they showed greater signs of innovation and individuality, essential "art" qualities according to Peterson's "modern eye," Raynor considered the more avant-garde quilts closer to "art," while more traditional-looking quilts placed lower on the art/craft spectrum. Raynor's review highlights the difference in critical approaches to historical versus contemporary quilts. When critics reviewed exhibitions of historical quilts, they applied "the modern eye" retroactively, focusing on how their pattern-based geometric forms and color arrangements anticipated modern movements in painting and sculpture. However, when applied to modern quilters, the more traditional approach became a negative aspect; a reliance on patterns signaled a lack of originality, which placed their work further away from "art."

Raynor more closely examined the relationship between contemporary craft and the art world in her 1980 article on two fiber artists. She reported that, although "fine artists have been poaching the crafts territory since the late 19th century," the situation has become very complicated, "with mediums that formerly were used for functional objects becoming vehicles for high art."¹⁷⁴ Raynor recounted how contemporary craftspeople struggled for recognition in the art world by "not only appropriating the ideas of painters

¹⁷³ Vivien Raynor, "Quilts Spread Across a Broad Spectrum," *New York Times*, May 18, 1980, p. WC16.

¹⁷⁴ Vivien Raynor, "Art: Two Women Take Crafts to a Higher Plane," *New York Times*, June 27, 1980, p. C24.

and sculptors, but also, in effect, demanding the same kind of autonomy, including the freedom to be unfunctional.”¹⁷⁵ Whereas earlier critics stressed how the “art” in historical, functional quilts became apparent when compared to the work of later painters and sculptors, Raynor argued that contemporary art quilters “appropriated” the ideas of painters and sculptors so they could be seen as “artists.” Her evaluation of contemporary craft exhibitions led Rayner to conclude that “the argument seems to be that if works of high art are objects in their own right, then objects are high art, and anyone resisting the tautology does so at grave risk. As a result, quilts too important looking to sleep under have become commonplace.”¹⁷⁶ Her description of the argument as tautological implies that contemporary art quilters sought to be recognized as legitimate artists, not somewhere in-between.

Later that year, Raynor reported that the art, or “studio,” craft movement seemed to have made gains. The rejection of function, resulted in “craft objects becoming less and less utilitarian,” she wrote, making it “no longer possible to define exactly the difference between them and works of high art.”¹⁷⁷ However, she cautioned, “despite this and the rather militantly creative stance taken by crafters as a group, the two kinds of work remain distinct.”¹⁷⁸ Crafters “avoid the functional as if it were radioactive. But the vehicles for their skill still retain functional associations, and so crafts exhibitions have a more domestic and intimate atmosphere than do shows of fine art.”¹⁷⁹ Although curators and critics continually relied on assimilationist strategies to demonstrate the “art” in

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Vivien Raynor, “Crafts: Tasteful Workmanship,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1980, p. WC14.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

quilts, Raynor questioned the “assimilationist” appeals made by craftspeople themselves in seeking greater recognition and parity with painters and sculptors through the denial of function. Raynor argued that the functional associations of craft media remained ever present, even when used to create non-functional forms.

As a critic, Patricia Malarcher explored the alleged distinctions between craft and art in her 1984 *New York Times* review of *Stuff and Spirit*, a gallery show curated by Mildred Constantine, which exhibited pairs of similarly-made objects, one by a recognized artist and one by a so-called craftspeople. The show prompted Malarcher to ask: “Is a sculptor’s work in clay art or is it craft? If a quilt is made by a painter, is it really art?”¹⁸⁰ Such questions, she argued, were rooted in the history of the art world and their answers determined “where artists show their work and where they are reviewed.”¹⁸¹ Malarcher declared that the striking similarities between the pairs demonstrated “the uselessness of the old-fashioned hierarchy” based on media type. Despite the emergence of “crossover” artists and “the blurring of media boundaries,” Malarcher reported that “the issue of art versus craft still seems alive for many people working in craft materials.” She asked Constantine about the motives of craftspeople who sought equality with fine artists: “Are they concerned with the economic value of their works, higher status or more appreciation?”¹⁸² Constantine replied that those questions could not be separated, because “all of those are part of the ‘daisy chain’ made up of galleries, collectors, museums and the press.”¹⁸³ Through this quote by Constantine,

¹⁸⁰ Patricia Malarcher, “Art? Or Craft? A Different View,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1984, p. NJ18.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Malarcher identified the power players in the mainstream art world, who upheld the traditional hierarchy despite the insistence by Malarcher and others that it had become “old-fashioned” and “useless.”

While, like Malarcher, the vast majority of critics identified craft media’s functional ties as the primary factor barring the acceptance of quilts as art, Helen A. Harrison in “A Woman’s Way in Art?” examined how gender influenced the valuation of particular art forms.¹⁸⁴ Harrison’s visit to *Home Work*, an exhibition of feminist art at the Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca New York, inspired her to explore the question of whether particular materials and/or style could indicate the gender of an artist. The question became of vital importance, Harrison argued, because while the art world no longer barred women, they continued to struggle “to establish the validity of art arising from what, in a less charitable era, would have been called their ‘condition’”¹⁸⁵ The art displayed in the exhibit, she argued, complicated the relationship between women and society, challenging traditional notions of femininity and domesticity.

Harrison ultimately left the question is unanswered, hoping that further analysis would provide greater insight. However, her presentation of the possibility that gender may be a factor barring artists’ acceptance in the art world is worth noting. Whereas second-wave feminism arose in the 1970s and grew in force through the 1980s, making gender a hotly-debated subject in academia, feminist concerns did not filter into the mainstream art criticism on quilts, despite the fact that the vast majority of quiltmakers were women. An analysis of the discursive strategies and language used by critics reveals that although they did not explicitly address gender, gender did factor into their reviews.

¹⁸⁴ Helen A. Harrison, “A Woman’s Way in Art?” *New York Times*, March 28, 1982, p. L118.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Historian Joan Scott posited that “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,” and served as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power,” as well as “a primary way of signifying differentiation.”¹⁸⁶ In discussing quilts, critics drew on gendered concepts and language to not only differentiate between “art” and “craft,” but to uphold “art” as having greater significance and value than “craft.”

Gendered conceptions of art were long-established before quilts entered art-critical discourse in the 1970s. A prime example of this is mid-twentieth century art critic Clement Greenberg’s derision of the term “decorative.” Art historian Elissa Auther, in her analysis of Greenberg’s writings, argues that he used the word “decorative” as a pejorative term to distinguish craft objects from “high” art. Greenberg wielded the term as a weapon in the “struggle to distinguish the Modernist aesthetic from ‘mere decoration,’” a term used by Greenberg to denote work that lacked substance and meaning.¹⁸⁷ Greenberg used the term “decoration” to define “a form of surface attractiveness masquerading as art.”¹⁸⁸ Through Greenberg’s influence, Auther argues, the notion of “decorativeness” was “transformed from that of a positive feature of the Modernist aesthetic to its antithesis through the demonisation of mass culture, ornament, and femininity.”¹⁸⁹ Auther demonstrates that whereas prior to that time “decorative” served as a more neutral descriptive term, denoting surface ornamentation or beauty, it became a negative term that simultaneously implied femininity and inferiority, used to

¹⁸⁶ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1067, 1070.

¹⁸⁷ Elissa Auther “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg.” *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

describe non-intellectual, non-substantive art. Author's scholarship exposes the category of "decorative arts," into which quilts were often placed, as value-laden and inflected by gender bias.

Cindy Nemser's concept of "phallic criticism," in which women's work is evaluated in relation to men's, also addresses the role that gender played in the selection of descriptive language.¹⁹⁰ In reviewing the art of men, she argues, critics drew on "clichés derived from male physiognomy and sexual biology," noting that words like "strong, grand, powerful, forceful, assertive, bold, rigorous, creative, direct, tough...abound in critical accounts of men's art works."¹⁹¹ A review of popular art critic's writing on quilts reveals they did draw on such cliché's. Critics asserted the artistic value of certain types of quilts by referring to them as "masterpieces," as "forceful," "daring," "hard-edged," and "courageous." Conversely, critics described other quilts using words associated with femininity—"charming," "pure," "affectionate," "intimate" and "private." Made by women in the private, domestic (i.e. female) sphere, any parallels drawn between quilts and modern art were mitigated when placed in the context of production. Through the use of gendered terms, critics upheld the prevailing masculine/feminine binary and the corresponding privilege of "art" over "craft," revealing how gender and power intertwined in the art world, mutually reinforcing one another.

The concept of phallic criticism also helps explain the lack of credit given to the quiltmakers as "artists," even when their quilts were heralded as an art form. As Nemser

¹⁹⁰ Cindy Nemser, "Art Criticism and Women Artists," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 7, no. 3 (1973): 73.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

argued, critics often attribute to women “a passive, unconscious creativity.”¹⁹² This holds true for the majority of art criticism on traditional quilts, which presented quiltmakers as “anonymous” or “naïve,” with no knowledge of the larger art world and how they fit into it. Critics repeatedly asserted that quiltmakers of the past did not see themselves as “artists” or their work as “art.” Although the art quilters who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s were able to avoid anonymity, they struggled to be recognized as artists, despite articulating their intentions to make “art.” Critics not only accused contemporary art quilters of appropriating the concepts of the mainstream art world to gain acceptance, but maintained that even when quiltmakers discarded function, the functional roots of the tradition remained ever-present. Through binding quilts to function, critics asserted that, regardless of their form, quilts embodied the feminine qualities of “intimacy,” “affection” and “charm,” which differentiated them from “true” art forms.

The language of criticism constituted a site that made manifest a multiplicity of discourses, not only on aesthetics and function, but on gender and power. Throughout the twenty year period examined here, art critics continually relied on “assimilationist” tactics to argue the artistic merit of quilts. Although many critics called for a reevaluation of the established art hierarchy, their efforts to demonstrate the value of quilts through comparisons to known and revered artists and art movements hinged on an understanding that the latter were unquestionably worthy of the label “art.” Rather break down the existing hierarchy, this line of reasoning ultimately reinforced it. Although they conceded to the quiltmakers a greater degree of agency than museums and curators had, critics attributed greater power to the art museum as the catalyzing force that transformed quilts

¹⁹² Ibid., 76.

to objets d' art. Critics repeatedly credited art museums' "white cube" mode of display with providing the necessary setting for aesthetic contemplation to take place. Removed from their functional context and placed on white, plastered walls in a museum or gallery, quilts could be seen in a new light, but only by those who possessed "the modern eye," a working knowledge of Western art history and modern aesthetics. If, as critics purported, quilt makers and users had remained unaware of the artistic value of quilts for centuries, and major art museums "rarely condescended to acknowledge the 'decorative arts,'" then critics themselves held the greatest power, as they possessed the "courage and vision" to gauge the "true value" of quilts.

This is not to say the assimilationist approach had no merits. Popular critics dealt with spatial limitations and reviews consisted mainly of text, with few supplemental images. Comparing quilts to other art forms allowed critics to establish visual reference points that served to take the place of more lengthy description, at least for those readers who were familiar with well-known artists and art movements. In addition, such comparisons provided a starting point for further critical inquiry. Early critics had little discourse draw on to demonstrate the value of quilts, as the Whitney exhibit had no precedent. The assimilationist approach provided a means to demonstrate that quilts were at least like art and therefore deserved more critical attention. The initial reviews opened the door more nuanced interpretations of quilts as art objects in their own right.

Critics did make inroads in the formation of a new discourse that negotiated function with aesthetics. As John Perreault observed in 1987, "beyond what can be adapted from established critical vocabularies, the proper discourse for crafts criticism is still in the process of being formed. We are dealing with the uncharted areas of visual

production usually confined to the cataloguing mode of the decorative arts template or to oral culture.”¹⁹³ Over the course of two decades, critics moved toward a more complicated understanding of the quilt aesthetic. However, when greater contextual analysis brought to light ways that quiltmakers did not align with the mainstream art world’s traditional conception of the artist, critics called for a new approach to quilts rather than a new approach to art. The growing insistence that quilts could not be completely separated from their historical function, even when no longer functional, further contributed to the art/craft divide rather than dissolving it, and carried implications for contemporary quiltmakers, many of whom struggled to achieve recognition in the art world.

While form and function structured the explicit terms of critical discourse on quilts, critics implicitly drew on gendered concepts and references to establish meaning.¹⁹⁴ The gendered language that saturated quilt criticism had discrete but powerful underlying implications on the status of quilts in the art-world hierarchy. As second-wave feminism grew in force over the 1970s and 1980s, gender would become the central feature of the quilts-as-art debate for feminist scholars, a group which will be examined in the following chapter on scholarly literature. Whereas the 1971 Whitney exhibit *Abstract Design in American Quilts* was lauded in the popular press, feminist scholars condemned the exhibition’s curators and their methods of display, exposing not only how gender played a role in the determining the status of quilts, but how it permeated the entire Western art world.

¹⁹³ Perreault, “Crafts Is Art,” 72.

¹⁹⁴ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category” 1070-73.

Chapter 4: Quilts, Gender, and the Art World: The Scholars Debate

Writing on quilts and quiltmaking was not new to the 1970s, but it was not until that decade that quilts became the subjects of sustained scholarly inquiry.¹⁹⁵ While the rise in quilt studies may seem a natural outgrowth of the 1970s quilt revival, it contrasted with the two earlier periods of intense quiltmaking in America's history that took place in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which did not generate a pronounced body of scholarship on the subject. Cultural changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s and developments within academia allowed quilt studies to flourish as part of this new quilt revival. The civil rights movement and subsequent rise of second-wave feminism contributed to the formation of new academic domains, including social history, material culture studies, and women's studies, bringing the history of women and of daily life to the fore. As an everyday object made by large numbers of American women, the quilt became an object of inquiry to which a number of academics from these new fields were drawn. Jonathan Holstein, curator of the seminal Whitney exhibit *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, noted that quilt studies, as an "untouched field," appealed to scholars with a desire to explore something new and exciting.¹⁹⁶ Since quilts and their makers existed throughout the United States, would-be scholars benefited from easy access to subjects for research.

Interest in quilt scholarship was not confined to academic settings. As the unprecedented revival in quiltmaking that began in the 1960s continued to grow, the

¹⁹⁵ Although there are a few exceptions, most writing on quilts prior to the late twentieth century took the form of how-to manuals. Those that did focus on quilt history, as more recent scholarship has pointed out, were often poorly researched and perpetuated romantic "myths" about quiltmaking; see Virginia Gunn, "From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship," *Uncoverings* 13 (1992): 192-205.

¹⁹⁶ Jonathan Holstein, "The Whitney and After...What's Happened to Quilts," *Clarion* 11 (1986): 83.

desire for information grew as well. Many quiltmakers began to explore the history of their tradition and at the same time, quilt collectors and owners sought information regarding the quilts they possessed. Faced with a gaping lack of source material, those interested in the history of quilts and their makers gathered their own. Outside academia, they initiated grassroots ventures including quilt study groups, documentation projects, exhibitions, and scholarly-minded publications.

The interest in quilts from within the academic world and outside it resulted in a proliferation of new scholarship, some of which explored the standing of quilts as art. Generally, scholars approached the matter in one of two ways, either implicitly or explicitly. The implicit approach involved simply referring to quilts as “art” or quiltmakers as “artists,” but not making an argument or directly addressing the standing of quilts or quiltmakers in the mainstream art world. Given the abundance of labels and categories applied to quilts, and the contention surrounding them, the choice to refer to quilts unambiguously as “art” was a political one, whether intended or not. The application of the language of “art” to describe quilts saturated scholarship, revealing that many quilt scholars accepted the quilts-as-art stance. At the same time, labels and categories were not uniformly applied or defined; authors labeled quilts in differing, seemingly conflicting ways. The terms “craft,” “art,” “folk art,” “applied art,” “design” and “decorative art” might be used interchangeably, with no distinction or clarification. Because the debate over the status of quilts comprised a power struggle that hinged on definition and categorization, it is important to note such uses of labels. Through the implicit approach, many scholars took a stance that may have advanced perceptions of, and interest in, quilts as an art form.

A few scholars did put forth explicit arguments for why quilts should be considered “art,” and a detailed analysis of their arguments will provide greater insight into how the labeling of quilts functioned as a mechanism of power. Explicit arguments for quilts as art took various forms. As with the case of museum curators and art critics, many scholars drew comparisons between quilts and accepted modern art movements. However, quilt scholarship became the site of new approaches to the debate, as a number of feminist scholars challenged such assimilationist arguments. The larger feminist struggle for gender equality in society greatly shaped the debate over quilts as art within academia. For feminist scholars, the marginal status of quilts in the art world served as a touchstone for the marginal status of women in society; the quilt became a symbol of the patriarchal oppression of women’s achievements. Drawing on the work of feminist quilt scholars, this chapter concludes with a look at the struggle of quilt scholars to gain greater recognition within academia, which closely paralleled the struggle to gain greater recognition for quilts and quiltmakers within the art world, revealing how gendered and class-based power structures operated similarly in both cases.

The academic debate over quilts as art took off in response to the Whitney’s 1971 exhibit, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. Although the exhibit received acclaim from popular critics, not everyone viewed the show as a success. Feminist scholar and artist Patricia Mainardi harshly criticized Jonathan Holstein and Gail Van der Hoof’s curatorial approach in “Quilts: The Great American Art,” first published in 1973 in the *Feminist Art Journal*.¹⁹⁷ In it, Mainardi accused Holstein and the Whitney of “turning history upside down and backwards” by using quilts to legitimize modern painting while simultaneously

¹⁹⁷ Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 1, 18-23; reprinted in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 330-46, which I cite.

dismissing quiltmakers as artists.¹⁹⁸ Mainardi opposed the exhibition's inclusion of only pieced quilts, arguing that because they more closely resembled the work of male artists, the art world deemed them superior to other types of quilts.

Furthermore, she accused Holstein of perpetuating a "fabric of lies" by presenting the quilters as anonymous when, she argued, one quilt appeared to be visibly signed by its maker. Mainardi equated this forced anonymity to "a tool of sexist oppression." Given the great pains taken by Western art historians to identify the work of male artists, Mainardi argued, the Whitney's lack of information on quiltmakers revealed that the curators did not consider them legitimate artists.¹⁹⁹ Mainardi used the exhibit to highlight ways that women's artistic production and influence were marginalized by the mainstream art world. She argued that quilts had a longstanding influence on the work of male artists, who for hundreds of years had been exposed to quilts on "permanent exhibition in most households," but that the mainstream art world obscured this influence by omitting quilts from the history of art, chiefly because they were made by women.²⁰⁰

Mainardi contended that the language of the art world was gendered and that its labels and categories served as prejudicial tools to devalue the work of women. The hierarchy of "high" and "low" art forms corresponded to the patriarchal hierarchy of masculine and feminine that structured society. Applying this to her critique of the Whitney exhibit, she pointed out that Holstein described appliqué quilts in feminine terms (e.g. pretty, elegant, beautiful, decorative), whereas he referred to pieced quilts

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 344.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 332-33.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 337, 341-43.

using masculine traits (e.g. strong, bold, vigorous, tough).²⁰¹ She also identified the use of passive sentence structure as a sexist mechanism used to separate quilts from their makers, for example stating that “quilts were made” rather than “women made quilts.” Ultimately, she concluded that *Abstract Design in American Quilts* demonstrated how “the sexist and racist art world will, if forced, include token artists” but “will never allow them to *expand* the definitions of art.”²⁰²

Because Mainardi approached quilts as a feminist art historian, her approach is better understood when viewed in the context of second-wave feminism, a movement that sought equality for women in all aspects of society. In the field of art history, this led to a focus on the absence of women in the art historical canon. In “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (published in 1971, the same year as the Whitney exhibit debuted) Linda Nochlin questioned assumptions behind the idea of “greatness” in art, particularly the myth of artistic “genius.”²⁰³ By examining the conditions of art production from a sociological perspective, Nochlin concluded that women failed to achieve artistic greatness not because of lack of talent, or “genius,” but because it was institutionally impossible for them to do so.²⁰⁴ She criticized those feminists who attempted to identify “great,” yet overlooked, women artists of the past, as well as those who endeavored to define a different type of “greatness” for women by searching for a distinct feminine style, which she argued, did not exist.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Ibid., 343-44 and 346, n. 14.

²⁰² Ibid., 341, emphasis in original.

²⁰³ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *ARTNews* 69 (1970/1971): 22-39, 67-71; reprinted in *Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History*, eds. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 1-39, which I cite.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 37.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

Mainardi's article then, seems as much a response to Nochlin as to Holstein and the Whitney exhibit. Whereas Nochlin warned against retrospective attributions of "greatness" to women artists of the past, Mainardi unabashedly argued that quilts were not only "great" art, but also that they were "The Great American Art." Mainardi argued that quilts had always been art to the women who made them, displayed on beds and at fairs, "much as our contemporary 'fine' art is exhibited in museums."²⁰⁶ Like the mediums of painting and sculpture, Mainardi asserted that quilts varied in terms of success, but that all quilts fell under the category of art nonetheless.²⁰⁷ Mainardi's contribution to the debate over quilts as art resulted in the establishment of what I term the "reclamationist" approach which sought to demonstrate that quilts had always been an art form in their own right and that quiltmakers were "artists" who viewed their work as art, regardless of their status within the mainstream art world. Reclamationists argued that quilts should be considered as art on their own terms, rather than those that defined other media.²⁰⁸ As the reclamationist approach developed over time, feminists increasingly opposed the assimilationist strategies that permeated museum exhibitions and popular art criticism, supporting more radical, transformative change.

In 1975, two years after Mainardi put forth her argument, Holstein staunchly defended his assimilationist approach to quilts in the Whitney exhibition in *Pieced Quilts: An American Design Tradition*.²⁰⁹ Quilts, he argued, could only be appreciated

²⁰⁶ Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," 330.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 343.

²⁰⁸ Susan Bernick, "A Quilt Is An Art Object When It Stands Up Like A Man," in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, eds. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 142.

²⁰⁹ Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (Greenwich, CT.: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), 7.

aesthetically when hung on the wall and removed from their “romantic associations.” Furthermore, he argued that the vertical display of quilts more closely resembled how quiltmakers would have envisioned the final product in their minds, making his presentation “truer to [the] original graphic insight and plan” of the maker.²¹⁰

As a scholar, Holstein continued to adopt “assimilationist” strategies to demonstrate the value of quilts, devoting a significant portion of his book to identifying similarities between early American quilts and twentieth-century Modernist art. Holstein drew parallels between pieced quilts and Abstract Expressionism, Systemic painting, and the work of Andy Warhol, Josef Albers, and Kenneth Noland, among others. He traced the resemblance between pieced quilts and mainstream art movements to function: quilts had a practical function and modern art was intellectually rooted in ideas regarding form and function.²¹¹ However, he warned that,

“Intriguing and startling as these resemblances may be...any direct linking of the two mediums would be demeaning to the history and presence of both quilts and paintings. Implicit in the act of creating a painting is the intellectual process which ties the work of an artist to his aesthetic ancestors and his peers, and places it in the history of objects specifically made to be art. This is precisely the quality which was absent in the making of pieced quilts. The women who made pieced quilts were not ‘artists’ ...they did not intend to make art, had no sense of the place of their work in a continuous stream of art history, did not, in short, intellectualize the production of handicraft any more than did the makers of objects in the vernacular tradition the world over.”²¹²

In Holstein’s assimilationist view, quilts could be appreciated in an artistic manner when they resembled modern art, but their makers could not be considered “artists” because they did not “intellectualize” their work, nor did they intend it as “art.”

²¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹¹ Ibid., 47-50.

²¹² Ibid., 115.

Holstein's discussion of Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, in which the artist used a quilt as a canvas on which to paint, furthers his view that quilts are *like* art, but ultimately not art. "Were they all-unsuspecting sleeping under 'art,'" Holstein asked, "or did the quilt become that only when Rauschenberg made his bed on the wall?" The answer, he argued, "would have to be that Rauschenberg made the quilt into art by incorporating it in his painting, even though the quilt itself, extracted and put on the wall, would, like many of its fellows, be visually similar to paintings of some of Rauschenberg's contemporaries."²¹³ Prior to the advent of Modernism, people thought of quilts "as common, utilitarian objects which did not carry the implications of 'art.'"²¹⁴ Only after contemporary art emerged, he argued, did it provide a reference point against which quilts could be reevaluated and appreciated as art.

Holstein then defended his preference for pieced quilts on the basis that they most resembled modern art, being "the most 'painterly' products of the vernacular tradition."²¹⁵ In his estimation, appliqué quilts exhibited "less variety, invention, and ingenuity than pieced quilts," with "static design" and less color. While he admitted some were beautiful, he described their beauty as more "decorative" in nature.²¹⁶ Addressing the labeling of quilts, Holstein argued that the widely-used categories of "folk" or "primitive art" were imprecise, as they included too wide a variety of objects. He suggested that quilts might be best termed "functional design," explaining that while they possessed an aesthetic rooted in function, they were not intended to be "art," and thus

²¹³ Ibid., 187, n. 4.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 116.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 122, 125.

should not be labeled as such.²¹⁷ Like Mainardi, Holstein recognized that quiltmaking made up an aesthetic tradition. He wrote that “like paintings, pieced quilts have marked stylistic periods, a history of aesthetic development, which can be traced and described.”²¹⁸ However, unlike Mainardi, he did not conclude that because of those characteristics, the quilt world represented an alternative art world. Despite their similarities, to Holstein, the quilts and art comprised separate spheres that could not be directly linked.

Expounding on the assimilationist strategies used in the exhibit, Holstein’s scholarly writing gives more insight into his curatorial approach to quilts, and the thought processes and motives that informed it. In his view, quilts did not “naturally” exist as art, but became art, or at least could be appreciated in a way similar to art, only after being hung flat on the wall in an art museum. He used his scholarship to defend his actions as a curator, putting forth a view of quilts as art that advanced his status within the art world. If quilts became art only when hung in an art museum as if they were paintings, then as the curator who orchestrated one of the earliest, most influential quilt exhibitions, Holstein’s power as a cultural authority in the art world would be confirmed.

Not everyone agreed with Holstein’s distribution of power, his denial of quiltmakers’ status as artists. To combat such a view, Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buford published *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art* in 1978. They cited the 1971 Whitney exhibition as their inspiration to find out information on quiltmakers, in order to bring them long-deserved credit as “artists” and provide a better understanding of quilts

²¹⁷ Ibid., 115-6.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 116.

as an “art form.”²¹⁹ After conducting oral history interviews with quiltmakers from the American Southwest, they deemed “domestic art” to be the best label for quilts because the home, they argued, served as “the studio, art school, and gallery” for quiltmakers.²²⁰ In *The Quilters*, Cooper and Buford included photographs of quilts on chairs, beds, and clotheslines, and in laps, not just in flat, “art book” style images. Drawing parallels between the quilt and art worlds, Cooper and Buford largely adhered to the reclamationist idea that quilts constituted an art form in their own right, and that their makers were artists. By showing quilts in a variety of contexts, they countered the notion that quilts could only be art when presented flat on the wall or on the page.

Pattie Chase and Mimi Dolbier also brought greater attention to quiltmakers in their 1978 publication, *The Contemporary Quilt: New American Quilts and Fabric Art*.²²¹ Whereas many scholars of the quilt revival focused on the historical quilting tradition, Chase and Dolbier hoped to bring to light contemporary quilts as “fabric art.” In the book’s preface, Dolbier argued that the use of quilts explicitly as an artistic medium elevated the quilt from a craft to an art that stood “alongside the more universally recognized art forms such as painting, sculpture, and graphics as a valid means of artistic expression.” Based on interviews with fiber artists featured in the book, Dolbier identified “function versus aesthetics, art versus craft, tradition versus innovation,” and

²¹⁹ Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buford, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), 15.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²²¹ Pattie Chase and Mimi Dolbier, *The Contemporary Quilt: New American Quilts and Fabric Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978).

“artistic and cultural chauvinisms” as the primary issues faced by artists working with fiber.²²²

In the foreword to *The Contemporary Quilt*, Radka Donnell, a painter-turned-quiltmaker, noted that because of the recent upsurge in interest in quilts, the concept of quilts as an “art phenomenon” was only beginning to be understood.²²³ Chase, a fourth-generation quiltmaker authored the volume’s introduction, in which she attributed power to quiltmakers, arguing that it was American women who defined quilts as an art form. Through their quilts, she argued, women “largely supplied the visual matrix that modern American artists...have consciously or unconsciously drawn upon.” She pointed to the similarities between quilts and modern art as proof of the influence of quilts on modern painting.²²⁴ The fact that quiltmakers designed their quilts, she argued, revealed that they were “more interested in the beauty than in the function.” The designs, she argued, made quilts “unquestionably” art.²²⁵ She supported the reclamationist view that “quiltmaking has always been a women’s art,” evidenced by the fact that women continued to make quilts even after the Industrial Revolution and the ready availability of machine-made blankets.²²⁶

Chase argued that quiltmaking developed as an alternative artistic tradition to the realm of “fine arts,” from which women were barred. She responded to those who, like Holstein and mainstream art critics, argued that quiltmakers were unaware that they were making art by countering, “It is impossible to believe that a woman could cut hundreds,

²²² Mimi Dolbier, preface to Chase and Dolbier, *The Contemporary Quilt*, 6.

²²³ Radka Donnell, introduction to Chase and Dolbier, *The Contemporary Quilt*, 6.

²²⁴ Pattie Chase, introduction to Chase and Dolbier, *The Contemporary Quilt*, 7.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

sometimes thousands of pieces of fabric, laboriously piece them together into intricate chromatic and geometric designs, put several miles of stitches into the whole pieced surface to create complex relief and refractive designs, and then consider the whole process, which took months and in some cases years, nothing more than a particularly elaborate domestic exercise.” As to claims against quilts as art on the basis of function, she argued that it was not unusual for a quilt to be handed down through generations of women without ever being used.²²⁷

Chase and Dolbier introduced a new type of quilt to the scholarly debate, quilts made explicitly as art. The arguments they put forth in *The Contemporary Quilt* correspond to the new critical discourse being developed in the popular art press. As art critics began reviewing contemporary quilts, the issues identified by Chase and Dolbier of “function versus aesthetics, art versus craft, tradition versus innovation,” became the basis of critical debate over how quilts should be categorized. Although Chase and Dolbier purported in the introduction that contemporary fiber artists elevated quilts to “art” status, Chase used the book’s introduction to argue that quiltmakers never considered functionality the sole purpose of quilts, supporting the reclamationist view that quilts were always an art form to the women who made them.

The same year, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” was reprinted as a bound edition. It included a new introduction by Mainardi, in which she reflected on the original essay and changes that occurred in the art world after its publication. Mainardi attributed the passion and anger of the original essay to the circumstances of that particular time. Since then, she argued, quilts had gained greater acceptance and came to be “recognized

²²⁷ Ibid., 9.

as women's design heritage."²²⁸ Despite Mainardi's assertions that quilts had achieved greater acceptance, the 1980s saw an increase in feminist scholars who argued that quilts continued to be denied status in the art world along with other forms of art made primarily by women. Many of these scholars furthered the reclamationist approach that Mainardi introduced. Although they did not always focus specifically on quilts, these works provided a broader argument for the reclamation of women's art forms, of which quilts were a part.

In 1980, literary scholar Elaine Hedges and poet Ingrid Wendt edited *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*, a selection of essays, articles, and images, with the goal of "rediscovering and rewriting the lost history of women in the arts" to show that "women have indeed been contributors to the history of Western art."²²⁹ They argued that women's art could not be fit into the existing progression and categories of Western art history because women had historically been excluded from traditional realms of art production. While Hedges and Wendt argued that no essential differences existed between the art of men and women, they insisted that because men and women lived gendered experiences in society, new approaches must be developed in order to study women's art. Hedges and Wendt argued that the current categories of art history would not suffice, as they excluded entire genres of women's art, such as needlework.²³⁰ The category of "craft," into which the majority of women's work was placed, served to support a hierarchy of value that privileged the male-dominated forms of painting and

²²⁸ Patricia Mainardi, introduction to *Quilts: The Great American Art* (San Pedro, CA: Miles and Weir, 1978), xiv.

²²⁹ Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1980), xx -xxi.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxi.

sculpture, which comprised the category of “fine” or “high” art. Part of the reason that the art world denigrated most of women’s art, they argued, was because it “has been—and for a variety of reasons continues to be—more ‘homebound,’ more tied to manual labor and practical tasks,” whereas painting and sculpture served no practical function.²³¹ Like Mainardi before them, Hedges and Wendt concluded that the classification system of the art world served as a sexist tool to devalue the art of women.²³²

Although they claimed opposition to the traditional progression of art history, Hedges and Wendt attributed the renewed interest in quilts partly to the recognition of parallels between modern painting and quilts by art professionals, who saw in their designs “an exciting forerunner of twentieth century abstract painting.”²³³ Hedges and Wendt pointed to the fact that quilts hung in museums and sold for high prices as evidence that this “uniquely woman’s art form” had achieved widespread recognition.²³⁴ They warned, however, against forgetting the quiltmakers when viewing quilts in a museum environment. Hedges and Wendt asserted that quilts provided tangible evidence of women’s lives, even if the makers were unknown.²³⁵

In her essay within the anthology, Hedges argued that by the nineteenth century, quilts in America had become “a highly developed art, a unique female art, and *the* major creative outlet for women.”²³⁶ While Hedges believed that the need for quilts arose out of physical necessity, she argued that the time women spent making quilts far exceeded their

²³¹ Ibid., 2-3.

²³² Ibid., 2.

²³³ Ibid, 4.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Elaine Hedges, “Quilts and Women’s Culture,” in Hedges and Wendt, *In Her Own Image*, 14.

utilitarian purpose, that “artistry was possible,” and could be seen in the quilt top and stitched quilting designs, which allowed for infinite combinations of size, color, pattern, and texture.²³⁷ She compared the process of designing a quilt to a painter’s approach to shading, perspective, and design, and further claimed that many women did sign their quilts in order “to create a work of art for posterity.”²³⁸ Like other reclamationists, Hedges used assimilationist strategies to highlight how the quilting process embodied traditional concepts of art production, drawing on such similarities to argue that quiltmakers did treat their work as art, even if they did not explicitly express it.

While Hedges identified ways that quilts could serve as creative outlets, symbols of sisterhood and solidarity, and graphic responses to societal change, she argued that quilting comprised part of a larger context of women’s oppression in patriarchal society. For much of history, Hedges pointed out, girls were forced to learn how to sew rather than taught how to read and write. For this reason, she deemed quilting “an art born of oppression.”²³⁹ Her feminist response to quilts then became a conflicted “combination of admiration and awe at limitations overcome and of sorrow and anger at limitations imposed.”²⁴⁰ By articulating a view of quilting that acknowledged the sometimes unpleasant realities of day-to-day life for quiltmakers, Hedges countered the “romanticized” view of quilting put forth by earlier feminist scholars.²⁴¹

Hedges and Wendt furthered the reclamationist approach by arguing that quilts had always been an art form, adding the qualification that quilting was an art “born

²³⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

²³⁸ Ibid., 15-17.

²³⁹ Ibid., 17-19.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 19.

²⁴¹ Bernick, “A Quilt is An Art Object,” 142.

of oppression.” Although they explicitly argued against traditional art-world categories, they did adopt assimilationist strategies to demonstrate the art-like qualities of quilts and the quilting process through repeated comparisons to painting. Like other feminist scholars, they sought to expose the hierarchical structure of the art world as gendered. They granted agency to the quiltmakers, reconciling the issue of intent by arguing women’s gendered experience in society necessitated an approach other than that offered by traditional (i.e. male) art history. They used their anthology to present a new way of looking at women’s art, combining illustrations, formal and literary analyses, poetry, and oral history.

Art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, in their 1981 monograph, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, also adopted a “reclamationist” approach, however they argued that quilts could only be accepted as art through the deconstruction of the art world.²⁴² Parker and Pollock built on other feminist’s proclamations that the art world’s hierarchy of media served as an exclusionary construction rather than representing an objective truth as it had been seen in the past.²⁴³ However, rather than try to argue the case for quilts as art by demonstrating how the quilting tradition paralleled fine art traditions, Parker and Pollock sought to deconstruct the art world’s fundamental concepts. Like Nochlin, they critiqued feminists who tried to incorporate women artists into the already established structure, arguing that in doing so, the underlying structures that resulted in the dismissal of women remained intact.²⁴⁴ Parker

²⁴² Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

and Pollock argued for a radical critique of art history that included a revision of traditional definitions of “art” and “artist.”²⁴⁵

Parker and Pollock began with a critique of the language used by art historians, supporting the allegations of earlier feminist writers that it served as a sexist mechanism. The pejorative labeling of women’s work as “craft” and the use of descriptors such as “decorative, dexterous, industrious, geometric, and...feminine,” they argued, established a value system through which men could retain their “dominance and privilege on the pages of art history.” Art historians depicted “masculine” as neutral, thus making “artist” and “woman artist” separate categories.²⁴⁶ In light of these arguments, Parker and Pollock called for a transformation of traditional art-historical ideology, although they recognized that because “the operation of ideology is deeply rooted,” it would be difficult to break through. Making incremental gains by achieving token acceptance of individual artists, they feared, would not be enough to change the system. Such small concessions, they argued, may actually prevent greater change; once the art world accepted a few women into its ranks, proponents of the status quo might claim they had “met the quota,” shutting the door on future developments and leaving the art-historical establishment intact.²⁴⁷

Parker further explored the concept of gender in the art world in her subsequent monograph, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, published in 1984.²⁴⁸ Like quilting, embroidery was typically categorized as “craft” rather than “art.” This division, Parker argued, suggested not only a difference of media

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 75.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 80-84.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 134-135.

²⁴⁸ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd., 1984)

but a qualitative difference as well, the message being that “art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant.” Again pointing to the mode of production as a definitive characteristic in establishing the value of an object in the art world, she argued that art world categories were less about an object’s physical characteristics and more about *where* it was made and *who* made it.²⁴⁹ Like others, Parker struggled to identify a way to elevate the status of “craft” without affirming the existing hierarchical categorizations.²⁵⁰ She opposed the use of assimilationist strategies, including the projection of modern ideas of art onto past traditions. Parker provided the example of scholars who argued that Victorian embroidery was an expressive, individualistic artistic pursuit, “a manifestation of the self,” while Parker’s historical research showed that Victorian-era embroiderers thought of their work as a selfless task for the benefit of others. This type of projection, she argued, developed because of the changes in the notion of the artist that took place in the twentieth century, after which an artists’ personality became all-important. Thus, many scholars believed that in order for embroidery to be recognized as art, it had to be “stamped not with a pre-drawn pattern, but with a particular personality.”²⁵¹ Through her historical analysis of the relationship between embroidery and femininity, Pollock sought to deconstruct the definitions of “art” and “artist,” as well as “masculine” and “feminine,” revealing them to be constructed and therefore susceptible to change.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 203.

²⁵² Ibid., 215.

Over a decade since his last foray into the quilts-as-art debate, Jonathan Holstein revisited it in 1986 in his essay, “The Whitney and After...What’s Happened to Quilts.” Once again, he touted the influence of his 1971 exhibition in sparking many to view quilts as an art form for the first time.²⁵³ He continued to defend his approach to quilts in the exhibition, his emphasis on their aesthetic qualities, as “a necessary step in freeing quilts from their bedspread/craft/mythology baggage.”²⁵⁴ Holstein argued that the exhibition resulted in an increase in quilt collecting, as well as in quilt scholarship, paving the way for social-historical research on quilts, which scholars neglected prior to the 1970s. He recognized the important place of quilts in the field of women’s studies, although criticized early feminist writings as being “characterized by polemics.”²⁵⁵

Whereas up until that point, other than Holstein, the scholarly debate surrounding quilts as art had come mainly from feminists, in 1986, Penny McMorris and Michael Kile published a historical account of the art quilt movement that presented a new approach to the subject. *The Art Quilt* began as an exhibition catalog for a show of the same name, which debuted at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery on October 1, 1986. While the book included illustrations of the quilts from the exhibition, McMorris and Kile dedicated the bulk of the text to outlining the first comprehensive history of the art quilt movement, an offshoot the 1970s quilt revival. Although they were not the first to examine the movement, the pair coined the term “art quilt” to describe quilts made explicitly as art for the wall. Following McMorris and Kile, the term “art quilt,” would become the dominant way to describe such quilts.

²⁵³ Holstein, “The Whitney and After,” 80.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 83.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

John Perreault, a noted curator and critic, wrote the introduction to *The Art Quilt*, in which he made explicit use of assimilationist strategies, drawing parallels between quilts and modern art. He argued that the quilt represented the origin of collage, predating Picasso and Braque. He likened the shifting of quilts from the bed to the wall to Jackson Pollock's approach to his drip paintings, which he created on a horizontal plane before hanging.²⁵⁶ He used these parallels to make a case for quilts as art, arguing that "craft" existed not in opposition to "art," but comprised a "visual art not confined to paint on canvas or 'normal' sculptural materials, and not confined to the art market/art cult." Acknowledging the reclamationist stance, Perreault stated that from "an enlightened point of view, quilts have always been art." He addressed the contention over artistic intention by qualifying that "they were not always verbalized as such by their makers."²⁵⁷ Although he argued that functionality should not preclude art status, he pointed out that for contemporary art quilters who created quilts explicitly as art, the "question of use...never even comes up."²⁵⁸

McMorris and Kile addressed the issues brought up by Perreault in the context of the art quilt movement. They dedicate a significant portion of their book to coverage of the Whitney exhibition. In contrast to earlier criticisms leveled against it by feminist scholars, McMorris and Kile highlighted the positive impact the show had the recognition of quilts as art, which they said was "difficult to overestimate."²⁵⁹ Because of the exhibition, "Almost overnight, antique quilts were granted a new, sometimes grudging,

²⁵⁶ John Perreault, introduction to *The Art Quilt*, by Penny McMorris and Michael Kile (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1986), 18.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 17-18.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁵⁹ McMorris and Kile, *The Art Quilt*, 46.

respect in the art world.” However, they pointed out, “What was left unsaid was that only antique pieced quilts had been accorded a measure of status in the art world.”²⁶⁰

McMorris and Kile recognized that a variety of individuals contributed to the valuation of art forms, attributing the art world’s focus on antique quilts to resistance on the part of art collectors, dealers, and critics to accept contemporary quilts as art. McMorris and Kile argued that the resistance arose because the sheer number of quiltmakers active in the late-twentieth century threatened the scarcity upon which the art market depended. The pair argued that such fear was ungrounded, because “only some examples within any art form truly deserve the status of ‘art.’”²⁶¹ In making these observations, McMorris and Kile identified two distinct definitions of art, one that defined art based on media and one that bestowed “art” status as a measure of quality.

McMorris and Kile largely avoided direct comparisons between quilts and modern painting, choosing instead to address the linkage by arguing that shifts in the mainstream art world allowed a number of new forms to be accepted as art, which in turn allowed quilts to be reconsidered as an artistic medium by the mainstream art community.²⁶² However, McMorris and Kile argued that the focus on certain styles and periods evidenced only a partial acceptance of quilts. They worried that art quilts might reside in a “state of artistic limbo,” fearing that “as quilt artists continue to challenge the quilt medium, they risk alienating their current audience—the quilt world—before they have gained the admiration of the art establishment.”²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 58.

²⁶² Ibid., 52-53.

²⁶³ Ibid., 69.

McMorris and Kile identified sexism as one factor contributing to the resistance toward art quilts within the “male-dominated” art establishment, which, they argued:

For the most part, continues to associate fabric with ‘women’s work.’ This denial of the changing role of fabric in art is spurious, especially in light of the growing interaction among the media. However, the denial verges on ludicrous when trained...artists give up their canvases and paper to work in cloth and thread, only to find the world of art suddenly closed to them. Indeed, it makes no sense, given the historical perspective, for trained, experienced artists working creatively within the quilt medium to be barred from the art world.”²⁶⁴

The fact that art quilters continued to struggle for acceptance as “artists,” even though they explicitly intended to make art, undermined the argument propagated by Holstein that intention of the maker was the primary characteristic that barred quilts from attaining full “art” status. McMorris and Kile’s argument regarding scarcity and their observation that traditional, antique quilts had gained greater acceptance as art than contemporary art quilts pointed to a number of factors outside the object and maker that contributed to determining what constituted “art.” Throughout their analysis of the art quilt movement, McMorris and Kile mentioned museums, collectors, dealers, and critics as vital players in the quilts-as-art debate, and furthermore, pointed out that the arguments put forth by these individuals did not always hold up under scrutiny. Although McMorris and Kile did not adopt an overtly feminist stance, their observations in many ways supported the arguments made by feminist scholars. Since the issues that allegedly prevented traditional quilts from being accepted as art (i.e. intention, functionality) did not apply to art quilts, yet the resistance remained, arguments that quilts were marginalized because of their association with women carried more weight.

While McMorris and Kile presented a view of the quilting tradition that balanced Holstein’s modernist and feminist’s reclamationist approaches. Still, with few

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

exceptions, the majority of academic scholars approached the quilts-as-art debate from a feminist perspective. Over the twenty-year period from 1971-1991, feminist dominated the scholarly debate, advancing a reclamationist stance that quilts had always been an art form in their own right, marginalized because they were made by women. Whereas museum curators and art critics focused on the visual and functional aspects of quilts in determining their status, within academia gender became the central focus of the debate. For feminist scholars, the quilt became a potent symbol of the oppression of women and their achievements in Western society. As feminists increasingly considered quilts on their own terms, it became more apparent that full-scale acceptance for quilts in the mainstream art world could not be achieved through the adoption of assimilationist strategies because quilts and quiltmaking did not adhere to all aspects of “the modern eye,” the prevailing standard of modern art evaluation. Whereas, in light of the revelation that quilts held features that differentiated them from painting and sculpture, some sought to develop a new discourse for quilts, feminists argued that those unique aspects of quilts: their functional roots, modes of production, and women makers, challenged the core values of modernism, necessitating a complete revision of art history and its tenets. While feminist art historians argued for a revolution, other quilt scholars began to build a broader foundation for the discipline.

Vicki Halper and Diane Douglas argued that the lack of sustained scholarship on craft contributed to the eventual omission of craft media from the Western art historical canon. In light of the general disinterest on the part of the mainstream art establishment, those who did pursue craft scholarship, primarily the practitioners themselves, were

forced to develop a “separate track.”²⁶⁵ The debate over quilts as art formed only a small fraction of a larger body of quilt scholarship that began to flourish in the 1970s, marking the beginning of what Virginia Gunn considered a new phase of quilt scholarship, a shift from “myth” to “maturity,” as scholars began to strive for greater accuracy in their work and reevaluate the findings put forth in earlier scholarship.²⁶⁶ Small-scale, grassroots quilt publications that began in the 1970s, bolstered by coverage in broader craft- and fiber-oriented publications, allowed quilt scholars to discover one another and form networks. In 1980, Sally Garoutte and a group of California women founded the American Quilt Study Group and published the first issue of *Uncoverings*, the group’s annual volume of papers.²⁶⁷

From its inception, the group stated that one overarching goal of *Uncoverings* was to present research on the “history of American quilt art.”²⁶⁸ Although none of the early *Uncoverings* articles explicitly argued the status of quilts as art, “implicit” references to quilts as an art form appeared throughout, and articles in the early issues examined related topics including: quilts an outlet for creative expression,²⁶⁹ quilts in art museum collections,²⁷⁰ and analyses of the symbols and patterns used in quilt designs,²⁷¹ among

²⁶⁵ Vicki Halper and Diane Douglas, *Choosing Craft: The Artist’s Viewpoint* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), ix.

²⁶⁶ Virginia Gunn, “From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship,” *Uncoverings* 13 (1992).

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁶⁸ Sally Garoutte, foreword to *Uncoverings* 1 (1980).

²⁶⁹ For examples, see Lucille Hilty, “The Passion for Quiltmaking,” *Uncoverings* 1 (1980): 13-17; Marilyn P. Davis, “The Contemporary American Quilter,” *Uncoverings* 2 (1981): 45-51.

²⁷⁰ For example, see Joyce Gross, “Four Twentieth Century Quiltmakers,” *Uncoverings* 1 (1980): 28-40.

²⁷¹ For examples see Bets Ramsey, “Design Invention in Country Quilts of Tennessee and Georgia,” *Uncoverings* 1 (1980): 48-55; Cuesta Benberry, “Afro-American Women and Quilts: An Introductory Essay,” *Uncoverings* 1 (1980): 64-67; Judy Mathieson, “Some Sources of Design Inspiration for the Quilt Pattern Mariner’s Compass,” *Uncoverings* 2 (1981): 11-18.

others. Their authors variously referred to quilts as “art,” “folk art,” and “domestic art.” Bets Ramsey, the only author to explicitly argue for quilts as art in the first issue, focused on the artistic merits of the “plain, country quilts” of Appalachia.²⁷² Ramsey likened her recognition of Appalachian quilts as art to Holstein and Van der Hoof’s experience with the pieced quilts they collected. She argued that “the average eye has rejected the plain, country quilt because of a lack of understanding of its purpose and making.”²⁷³ Although she related her experience to the Whitney curators, Ramsey put forth a context-based aesthetic understanding of quilts, closer to the reclamationist view than to Holstein and Van der Hoof’s visual appraisal.

Although *Uncoverings* did not take a radical feminist stance, some of the authors exhibited feminist sentiments. The premier issue’s editor, Sally Garoutte, recounted how she approached the first meeting of the American Quilt Study Group with apprehension, unsure “whether there was enough serious interest among American women in their own indigenous art to call forth the effort of research necessary to make up a program of papers.”²⁷⁴ Also in the premier issue, Lucille Hilty cited Nochlin to argue since women were systematically excluded from formal artistic training, they used quilts as a creative outlet²⁷⁵ and Joyce Gross presented research on a number of quilts that were owned by art museums throughout the United States, but on which they had little information.²⁷⁶ Gross

²⁷² Ramsey, “Design Invention,” 49.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁷⁴ Garoutte, foreword to *Uncoverings* 1 (1980). As it turned out, while Garoutte assumed that all those interested would be women, the conference also attracted at least one man, as the first issue of *Uncoverings* included the work of a John L. Oldani, professor of English and Folklore, who discussed archiving the American quilt using oral histories as part of a 1974 project at Southern Illinois University in “Archiving the American Quilt: A Position Paper,” *Uncoverings* 1 (1980): 72-23.

²⁷⁵ Hilty, “The Passion for Quiltmaking,” 16.

²⁷⁶ Gross, “Four Twentieth Century Quiltmakers,” 28-37.

seems to have followed Mainardi's appeal to feminists to call for greater inquiry into quilts owned by museums, which she noted in "Quilts: The Great American Art," were often not on "permanent exhibition, but in permanent storage."²⁷⁷

Many of these early quilt scholars faced obstacles because of the lack of primary source material. Quilt scholar Diane DeVaul observed that because concerted scholarly interest in quilts developed quickly over a short period, the "collecting and describing" phase and the "analytical" phase, which other disciplines typically progress through in sequence, were conflated.²⁷⁸ To gather primary source material, quilt scholars established a number of state-wide quilt documentation projects beginning in 1981 with the Kentucky Quilt Project.²⁷⁹ They gathered information through holding quilt documentation days where residents of different areas would bring quilts they owned and volunteers would photograph and record information about the quilt. Once enough material was gathered, a book would typically be published on the history of quiltmaking in that state, although documentation days continued on a periodic basis to gather more information. These documentation days, often heavily advertised, raised awareness about the value of quilts and quiltmaking in addition to gathering raw data for scholars researching quilts and their makers.²⁸⁰

Scholarship did ensue, and over the course of the 1980s, quilt studies continued to attract would-be scholars from both inside and outside academia. A gap grew in the field

²⁷⁷ Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," 343.

²⁷⁸ Diana DeVaul, "Mother Work—Quilts and Art: A Material Culture Study" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1998), 35.

²⁷⁹ For more on the Kentucky quilt documentation project see Zegart, introduction to Zegart and Holstein, *Expanding Quilt Scholarship*, 3-4; and the first of the project's publications, Jonathan Holstein and Jonathan Finley, *Kentucky Quilts, 1800-1900* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

²⁸⁰ For example, see Mary W. Madden, "The Kansas Quilt Project: Piecing Together Our Past," *Kansas History* 13, no. 1 (1990): 2-4.

of quilt studies between “academics” with formal schooling, and “independent quilt scholars,” many of whom came to study quilts via quilting.²⁸¹ The latter, as “amateurs,” had trouble being taken seriously in the academic world. Beginning in the last half of the decade, a number of articles appeared that sought to address methodological problems in the field by outlining research methodologies to aid the untrained researcher. The American Quilt Study Group presented a special panel at its 1987 seminar titled “How I Do Research.” Presenters outlined basic research strategies, covering topics like searching historic newspapers, using a microfilm reader, organizing notes, and citing sources.²⁸² Barbara Brackman discussed her changing approach to quilt pattern dating, articulating her struggle to overcome subjective analysis by developing research methods to explore her “feelings” that certain dates might be wrong.²⁸³ Likewise, Laurel Horton urged researchers to adhere to academic principles, to try and avoid “letting their own preconceptions get in the way of the information they seek.”²⁸⁴ She stressed the importance of research in “examining generalizations and stereotypes” against historical findings.²⁸⁵

Although these tutorials aided the development of quilt research, the move from “myth” to “maturity,” at the dawn of the 1990s, the field remained in its infancy. Patricia Keller identified a primary problem in quilt scholarship as the lack of interpretive analysis. She cautioned that “While contemporary quilt scholars have made significant

²⁸¹ Judy Elsley, “Making Critical Connections in Quilt Scholarship,” *Uncoverings* 16 (1995): 230-231.

²⁸² Virginia Gunn, “Library Research: Reflections and Advice,” in “Panel: How I Do Research,” by Brackman, et al., *Uncoverings* 8 (1987): 157-160.

²⁸³ Barbara Brackman, “Research on Quilt Patterns and Style,” in Brackman, et al., “Panel: How I Do Research,” 161.

²⁸⁴ Laurel Horton, “Local History Research and Folklore Fieldwork,” in Brackman, et al., “Panel: How I Do Research,” 167.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

strides in gathering quantifiable data...the mere gathering and publication of quantitative masses of information about artifacts does not constitute interpretive study.”²⁸⁶ In November 1991, the Kentucky Quilt Project held a conference, “Expanding Quilt Scholarship,” to examine the state of quilt studies. In her conference presentation, “Directions in Quilt Scholarship,” Shelly Zegart argued that the number of self-taught scholars in the field resulted in scholarship of “mixed scholarly quality.”²⁸⁷ Jonathan Holstein in his presentation on “Problems in Quilt Scholarship,” pointed out that “in the fields of the high arts—painting and sculpture—proof of formal training is almost a necessity for a reasonable career as a scholar.”²⁸⁸ At the same time, he argued that career-minded scholars from fields like art history did not see a rewarding career in studying quilts. He explained:

Quilts have been seen as a female field and a female pursuit, and therefore, probably a dead end for male scholars. This has had the effect of keeping from the field some of the rigorous give-and-take, the quiet warfare, which is waged interminably in other fields, where careers can be built on attacking others’ premises and substituting one’s own. Quilt scholars are by and large women. Quilt scholars are by and large nice people. Quilt scholars are by and large people who avoid confrontation, rather than seeking as a means of drawing attention to their own scholarship.”²⁸⁹

According to Holstein, the absence of these qualities rendered quilt studies “insular and isolated.”²⁹⁰ Marginalized by the greater academic community, its reach was limited because its audience consisted mainly of other quiltmakers and quilt scholars.

²⁸⁶ Patricia J. Keller, “Methodologies and Meaning: Strategies for Quilt Study,” *The Quilt Journal* 2, no. 1 (1993): 2.

²⁸⁷ Shelly Zegart, introduction to Zegart and Holstein, *Expanding Quilt Scholarship*, 22.

²⁸⁸ Jonathan Holstein, “Problems in Quilt Scholarship,” in Zegart and Holstein, *Expanding Quilt Scholarship*, 52.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹⁰ Jonathan Holstein, introduction to Zegart and Holstein, *Expanding Quilt Scholarship*, 7.

Holstein further argued, “We must disband what one of my colleagues calls ‘The Girl’s Club’ of quilt scholarship if we are to be taken seriously as scholars.”²⁹¹ His identification of the quilt studies community as a “girls’ club” brings to light how gender not only shaped the valuation of quilts within the art world, but also influenced the status of quilt scholarship within the academic world. Holstein attributed the differing values between quilt studies and established academic fields to gender; women were “nice” and “non-confrontational,” and therefore not inherently suited to the pursuit of academic careers. Furthermore, Holstein claimed that it could be difficult for women to approach quilts objectively. He cautioned, “I have watched female colleagues in the field make...embarrassing and serious mistakes in scholarship...because a romanticized view of quilts has such force in their psyches that it sometimes overpowers their critical judgment.”²⁹² While he acknowledged the status of quilts as important icons in the women’s movement, he condemned feminist historians as women “with personal griefs to register,” arguing that their attacks on “the way quilts are exhibited, discussed, studied, even photographed,” represented political rather than scholarly issues. He identified the “ludicrous fulminations of Patricia Mainardi on the Whitney and Smithsonian exhibitions,” as one example.²⁹³ In response to her accusations that he appropriated quilts from their makers to elevate the status of quilts to fine art, he defended his position, stating, “a great deal has been learned and more will be learned, by looking at quilts solely as designed objects, disregarding...their social context. Hanging quilts in museums is not an attempt to make fine art of them; rather, it is an attempt to treat their aesthetic as

²⁹¹Holstein, “Problems,” 60.

²⁹² Ibid., 58.

²⁹³ Ibid., 59.

a serious and independent study.”²⁹⁴ While Holstein attributed the marginal status of quilt studies to its lack of rigorous debate and “academic warfare,” his dismissal of Mainardi and other feminists as scholars with “axes to grind” reveals a reluctance to engage in such debate when directed towards him.

Holstein’s arguments illuminate the ways in which the marginalization of female scholars in the academic world paralleled the marginalization of female artists in the mainstream art world. Drawing on the work of feminist art historians and quilt scholars, the status of women in the academic world can be investigated using a similar approach. Prior to the twentieth century, academia represented a realm that, like the art world, offered very limited opportunities for women. Only after women’s roles in society shifted did it become acceptable for them to pursue educational goals. Increasing leisure time following the post-war period allowed for the pursuit of individual interests, including research as a hobby. The prevalence of quilt history throughout the country allowed small-scale, localized research to take place, without having to travel far from home, which allowed women to pursue research while still attending to family obligations, including child-rearing.²⁹⁵

The problems that plagued quilt studies stemmed not from any innate qualities particular to women, but because women had only recently begun to gain greater access to formal academic education. As Mainardi pointed out, many early quilt scholars lacked “the art-historical background to place these women’s accomplishments in an art-historical context.”²⁹⁶ It is not surprising then, that in the time period at hand, despite the

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 58.

²⁹⁵ Gunn, “Library Research,” 157.

²⁹⁶ Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” 343.

proliferation of quilt scholarship, relatively few quilt scholars explicitly contributed to the quilts-as-art debate, and those who did mainly came from an academic background with ties to the art world. Their access to specialized knowledge allowed them to draw on the vocabulary and theoretical base that were necessary to formulate arguments about the relationship between quilts and art.

Scholars used quilts to advance different agendas. Feminist scholars dominated the scholarly debate over quilts as art, using quilts a means to expose patriarchal oppression of women. Advancing a reclamationist approach, they increasingly moved toward radical revisions of the art world. At the same time, Holstein used scholarship to defend his actions as a curator and thus retain his status as a cultural authority. In his attempts to discredit the feminist scholars who criticized his approach to quilts, Holstein alleged that their arguments were anti-intellectual, political rather than scholarly, and served to exclude men from the “girls club” of quilt studies. His retaliatory arguments demonstrate how gendered assumptions shaped the academic world in ways that strikingly paralleled those identified, ironically, by those same feminist scholars in their research on quilts in the art world. Whereas scholarship brought new focus to the role gender played in shaping the art hierarchy, the next chapter, on quilts in the art market, will demonstrate how the focus on gender obscured another important factor that contributed to the status of quilts— class.

Chapter 6: Quilts in the Art Market: Collectors, Dealers, and Capital

Art holds cultural as well as monetary value and these values intertwine in a complex exchange. Thus, economic factors influence nearly every aspect of the art world including how “artistic,” or “aesthetic,” value is determined. The price of art outwardly seems to be a reflection of a work’s position in the art world; the higher the standing of an artist or particular form, the more buyers are willing to pay.²⁹⁷ However, an examination of quilts in the art market points to a reciprocal relationship between cultural and economic value. Whereas price may be determined by perceptions of value, perceptions of value can be altered through the manipulation of price.

Economic studies have shown that the relationship between price and “value” in the art world is difficult to determine. Many economic principles do not apply to the art market because its complexity and unpredictability have prevented economists from developing reliable models.²⁹⁸ In this light, anthropologist Igor Kopytoff argues that the value of commodities is best understood from a cultural, rather than economic, perspective, that understanding commodity markets requires an exploration of cultural factors.²⁹⁹ Approaching the study of commodities through the construction of “cultural biographies,” he argued, would offer greater insight into cycles of commoditization as well as the larger cultural framework. According to Kopytoff’s model, a commodity must

²⁹⁷Louis-André Gérard-Varet, “On Pricing the Priceless: Comments on the Economics of the Visual Art Market,” *European Economic Review* 39 (1995): 510.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 511-16

²⁹⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 68.

be approached as a cultural construction assigned culturally-specific meanings and classified (and reclassified) into culturally-constituted categories. Meanings and labels are not static or uniform; some things may be seen as commodities at some times and not others, and what one individual may see as a commodity, another might not.³⁰⁰ Shifts and differences in classification, he argued, “reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.”³⁰¹ Unraveling art market transactions exposes “a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments and of convictions and values that shape...attitudes to objects labeled ‘art.’”³⁰² This chapter explores the relationship between the moral and monetary economies of the art world through an examination of the roles played by collectors and dealers in the valuation of quilts. The scarcity of data on quilts in the art market made any quantitative analysis beyond the scope of this study. The application of theoretical concepts drawn from Kopytoff and others to data culled from news and scholarly sources will demonstrate how quilt collectors and dealers contributed to the debate over quilts as art through the marketplace, gaining cultural as well as economic capital.

Kopytoff identifies two ideal types of things: commodities which are common, saleable, and widely exchangeable, and those which are “uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else.” In complex economies, the majority of objects lie somewhere between these two types. Given the plethora of objects found in Western culture, categorization is necessary in order for exchange systems to exist. Kopytoff argued that the labeling of objects is a vital

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 64-68.

³⁰¹ Ibid, 64.

³⁰² Ibid., 67.

characteristic of human culture: “[T]he human mind has an inherent tendency to impose order on the chaos of its environment by classifying its contents, and without this classification knowledge of the world would and adjustment to it would not be possible.” Classification is made possible through culture, which imposes a “collectively shared cognitive order upon the world.” Objects are classified according to perceived similarities in value, then grouped into exchange spheres onto which societies impose a hierarchy.³⁰³

At the top of the hierarchy are “singular” objects, which include art. As objects approach singularity, they become more valuable. Singularity is confirmed “by intermittent forays into the commodity sphere, quickly followed by reentries into the closed sphere of singular ‘art.’” “Pricelessness” can only be confirmed by immense market price.³⁰⁴ Choices regarding what objects are considered singular may be overtly to benefit society at large, but they often serve those in control. It is a reciprocal process; those in control demonstrate power by designating certain objects as sacred (i.e. singular) and those objects then tangibly represent and expand the power of those in control. Power is manifest through ownership of singular objects and through influence in the process of singularization. One way singularization occurs is by pulling objects out of the commodity sphere, as in the case of museums. Another way is through restricting commoditization to a small sphere of exchange.³⁰⁵

Although they may be widely shared, the values that structure the art market have been largely determined by “groups who wield cultural hegemony in our society and define much of what we are apt to call our public culture.” However, Kopytoff argues

³⁰³ Ibid., 69-70.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 82-83.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 73-74.

that “the widespread rejection, since the 1960’s, of the very idea of cultural restraints has...opened a door to a great variety of definitions by individuals and small groups.” Within society, a number of smaller exchange spheres exist, maintained by groups that share cultural codes and values.³⁰⁶ While “public culture” provides broad values for goods, individuals and smaller networks may hold competing classifications and assign value differently. When schemes of valuation and singularization conflict with one another, the result is debate between individuals and groups. In the art world, debates over aesthetic value may be rooted in “conflicts of culture, class, and ethnic identity.” These power struggles can lead to shifts in exchange spheres, classifications, and values.³⁰⁷

Beginning in the 1970s, the biographical possibilities for quilts as commodities began to expand. Until then, most quiltmakers made quilts for themselves or as gifts. Therefore, quilts fell outside the scope of Kopytoff’s notion of commodities. According to Kopytoff, commodity transactions involve direct exchange, whereas the giving of a gift is only a partial transaction, neither discrete nor terminal.³⁰⁸ Quilts entered the commodity market as early as the 1920s, when traditional quilts became collectible. However, after World War II, with the rise of consumer culture and mass production, the value of quilts dropped off. Society largely came to see quilting as obsolete, “old fashioned,” and out of style.³⁰⁹ Anecdotal evidence relayed by individuals who began collecting quilts in the 1960s supports the view that quilts were not highly valued: one

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 77-79.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 81-82.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 69.

³⁰⁹ Karin Elizabeth Peterson, “Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of Patchwork Quilt,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (2003): 466.

recalled receiving a quilt as packing for a piece of furniture she had ordered, another recalled travelling the country paying \$5 to \$10 a piece for quilts.³¹⁰ In a 1980 *New York Times* article, Frances Phipps reported that as late as 1965 almost no one considered quilts anything more than bedcoverings.³¹¹ The low value of quilts prior to the 1970s classifies them as what Susan Pearce terms “rubbish.” Pearce argued that the transition from rubbish, “the unregarded detritus of commodity,” to objects regarded as culturally and economically valuable, happens through collecting.³¹²

The upsurge in quilt collecting in the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with the beginning of a quilt revival in which the number of people taking up quiltmaking sharply increased. The approaching bicentennial and larger cultural shifts led to growing interest in quiltmaking as an historical American practice as well as an important women’s tradition. Some collectors, many of them budding quiltmakers, sought out quilts as antiques, Americana, and women’s material history. At the dawn of the 1970s, quilts appeared mainly in craft and antique venues, although many collectors purchased quilts directly from quiltmakers or quilt owners.

After the Whitney exhibit in 1971, the cost of quilts steadily rose. In early 1972, nineteenth century quilts sold for between \$100 and \$400.³¹³ The following year, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Amish quilts sold for \$350 to \$1200, reportedly ten times higher than a decade prior.³¹⁴ By 1977, nineteenth century quilts could still be

³¹⁰ Suzanne Slesin, “Elaine Hart: Quilt Dealer,” *New York Times* August 26, 1990, p. 50; Suzanne Slesin, “Judy and Erin Boisson: Quilt Dealers and Designers,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1991, p. 51.

³¹¹ Frances Phipps, “Display of Quilts,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1980, p. WC9.

³¹² Susan M. Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 93.

³¹³ Rita Reif, “An Art Form as American as Apple Pie,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1972, p. 42.

³¹⁴ Rita Reif, “Antiques: Amish Quilts Abound,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1973, p. 22.

found for as low as \$150, but the upper end of the scale jumped to \$5500.³¹⁵ In the 1980s, the overall range of prices steadily climbed, while prices for individual quilts spiked considerably. The decade began with a new auction record, with a quilt selling for \$7,750 at Sotheby's Parke Bernet in 1980.³¹⁶ Quilts began to regularly command prices into the thousands; by 1981, Mennonite quilts ranged from \$800 to \$2,000 and Amish quilts fetched up to \$4,800.³¹⁷ New trends emerged, with Depression-era quilts increasing in value by ten to twenty times their original price, commanding up to \$1,500.³¹⁸ By 1983, Amish quilts sold at auction for between \$3,000 and \$10,000.³¹⁹ That same year, *The New York Times* reported "it would be difficult to find a good quilt for less than \$100. Most are several hundred dollars, and museum-quality quilts can cost upward of \$2,000."³²⁰ Also in 1983, new auction record was set when an album quilt sold for \$16,000.³²¹ Through the rest of the 1980s, quilts continued to draw figures in the thousands at auction and in shops.³²² Yet another record sale took place in 1987, with collector Stuart Feld's purchase of a Baltimore album quilt for \$176,000.³²³ In 1988, a buyer paid \$30,800 for a Sarah Ann Wilson signed quilt, and a Baltimore Album quilt by

³¹⁵ Rita Reif, "Antiques: Dazzling Quilts On Display," *New York Times*, February 4, 1977, p. 58.

³¹⁶ Rita Reif, "Auctions: A Test for Silver," *New York Times*, February 15, 1980, p. C20.

³¹⁷ Rita Reif, "Quilts Reveal a Complex Art," *New York Times*, May 17, 1981, p. D40.

³¹⁸ Judith Reiter Weissman, "'Depression Quilts': A Renewed Interest," *New York Times*, December 3, 1981, p. C3.

³¹⁹ Rita Reif, "The Special Appeal of Amish Quilts," *New York Times*, July 3, 1983, p. H20.

³²⁰ Muriel Jacobs, "Quilts: Good Ones and Great Ones," *New York Times*, July 17, 1983, pg NJ19.

³²¹ Rita Reif, "Auctions: Diamonds in the Hamptons," *New York Times*, July 22, 1983, pg C22.

³²² For example see Rita Reif, "Auctions," *New York Times*, August 5, 1983, p. C21; Ann Barry, "The Deft Geometry of Log-Cabin Quilts," *New York Times*, July 14, 1985, H23.

³²³ Rita Reif, "Stuart Feld Brings Zest to Americana," *New York Times*, January 10, 1988, p. H36.

Mary Evans sold for \$110,000.³²⁴ In 1989, *The New York Times* predicted that another Mary Evans quilt would fetch upwards of \$100,000 at auction.³²⁵

A closer examination of the rising monetary value of quilts will reveal how collectors and dealers played an instrumental role in elevating the status of quilts in the art world. This chapter begins with a look at the variety of strategies adopted by collectors and dealers to increase the cultural and therefore economic value of quilts, including cultural entrepreneurship, piggybacking on exhibits, assimilationist appeals, and marketing authenticity. An examination of the auction process provides an example of the reverse process: how rising prices might have increased the perceived cultural value of quilts. An exploration of how economic and cultural capital translated to status and power will give insight into some of the possible motives of quilt collectors and dealers, taking into consideration larger economic conditions and how they impacted the art market as a whole. However, a consideration of the “psychic gains” of collecting reveals the motives of the collector to be much more complex than pure financial profit.

The Whitney’s 1971 exhibition, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, proved a major catalyst in the appearance of quilts in the art market. Looking again its curators reveals that the origins of the exhibit lie in the context of quilt collecting; before they became curators, Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof were quilt collectors. Because prior to the exhibition, quilts were widely thought of as obsolete and out-of-style, Karin Peterson deemed the pair “cultural entrepreneurs” able to identify a “cultural product that was not highly valued” and develop strategies available to them as art-world insiders to

³²⁴ Rita Reif, “Auctions: Folk-art Paintings by Ammi Phillips at Christie’s and a Silver Independence Hall at Sotheby’s,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1988, p. C29.

³²⁵ Rita Reif, “Auctions: A Baltimore Album Quilt By a 19th Century Master, Chinese Ceramics in Hong Kong Sales,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1989, p. C24.

persuade the art world to promote quilts as a legitimate art form, thereby raising their value in the commercial art market and the eyes of the public.³²⁶ The example of Holstein and Van der Hoof reveals the capacity of collectors to draw on various forms of cultural capital (e.g. art education, art world knowledge) to influence art market trends. By successfully staging a quilt exhibit in a respected art museum, Holstein and Van der Hoof increased the economic value of their collection. Their cultural capital also increased through their ownership of quilts, now legitimized as “singular” objects, and through demonstrating their influence in the process of quilts’ singularization.

The New York Times reported that after the Whitney exhibit, dealers ramped up efforts to procure old quilts by raiding “attics from the Hudson to the Mississippi.”³²⁷ Collectors who had amassed quilts prior to this period then piggybacked on the exhibit’s popularity to make a profit for themselves by becoming dealers. Economists describe this phenomenon as “aesthetic risk arbitrage.”³²⁸ Dealers, as one type of arbitragist, take advantage of price differences to obtain a profit from buying and selling. In January of 1972, *The New York Times* profiled quilt collector and dealer Rhea Goodman, who began collecting nineteenth century American quilts around 1960. Goodman told the *Times* that she decided to sell some of her collection in order to buy more, as she was running out of storage space for quilts in her home. She opened her apartment to buyers as Quilt Gallery, Inc. in December of 1971, just after *Abstract Design in American Quilts* closed. Goodman recounted that the first buyers to contact her were Europeans who became interested in quilts because of the Whitney exhibit. Goodman priced her quilts, which

³²⁶ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 470.

³²⁷ Rita Reif, “Antiques: Amish Quilts Abound,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1973, p. 22.

³²⁸ Gérard-Varet, “On Pricing the Priceless,” 516.

dated from 1800 to 1910, at several hundred dollars each.³²⁹ Recalling the anecdotes of early quilt collectors, Goodman's prices were much higher than in the previous decade.

As prices rose in the wake of the exhibit, dealers and galleries increasingly began to refer to quilts as "art," marketing quilts as aesthetic objects to be hung on the wall. Art galleries began mounting quilt shows of nineteenth century quilts, pricing them as much as ten times higher than what quilts had sold for ten years prior.³³⁰ Like Holstein and Van der Hoof, dealer Rhea Goodman described her selection process to the *New York Times* as being based on "aesthetics."³³¹ Reporter Rita Reif described Goodman's quilts as graphic, likening them to Op and Pop Art.³³² In a 1978 *New York Times* article, antique dealer Douglas Wiss asserted that his quilts could "be described solely as graphic pieces of art."³³³ Wiss noted that color and design had become the primary criteria for collectors, who increasingly sought out quilts to serve as wall hangings. Pricing his quilts from \$50 to \$2,500, Wiss noted that quilts with documented provenance fetched greater sums because collectors wanted to know that the quilts were "authentic."³³⁴

A closer examination of the meteoric rise in prices of Amish quilts after 1971 demonstrates how the marketing of "authenticity" by dealers served as a means to appeal to collectors while simultaneously imposing limits on the market, creating scarcity, which in turn drove up prices. Isolated from mainstream society, the Amish had developed a unique quilting tradition. Quilt scholar Jana Hawley argued that for many collectors,

³²⁹ Rita Reif, "An Art Form as American as Apple Pie," *New York Times*, January 11, 1972, p. 42.

³³⁰ Rita Reif, "Antiques: Amish Quilts Abound," *New York Times*, July 14, 1973, p. 22.

³³¹ Rita Reif, "An Art Form as American as Apple Pie," *New York Times*, January 11, 1972, p. 42.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Carolyn Darrow, "Quilting: A Dateless Work of Art," December 13, 1978, p. NJ25.

³³⁴ Ibid.

Amish quilts tangibly represented a simpler existence. She attributed the appeal of Amish quilts to nostalgia for the past, the longing for a simpler lifestyle, and a desire to connect to an “exotic” culture.³³⁵

By the 1980s, dealers had determined 1940 as the established cut-off date for Amish quilt collecting, pointing to the growing interaction between Amish communities and outside culture that began around that time. Increasing contact with modern American society brought with it greater access to synthetic fibers, and perhaps more importantly, affected changes in Amish cultural traditions. Cultural shifts became apparent in their quilts, as Amish quiltmakers began to incorporate more mainstream patterns and designs.³³⁶ As quilt collecting began to pick up in the 1960s, collectors and dealers traveled to Amish communities to purchase their late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century quilts. Hawley interviewed one Amish woman who recalled an instance in which a man came to her door in the 1960s, asking if she had any old quilts for sale. She needed money at the time, so she sold him three quilts for \$50 apiece, which she thought was too much, but he insisted. “They were just old quilts,” she said, “I don’t understand why he wanted them anyway.”³³⁷

Over the next two decades, the Amish became increasingly aware of the growing commercial interest in their quilts. However, by the 1970s, few Old Order Amish quilts remained in Amish communities. Many families had already sold off their old quilts and, of those that were left, many had been used to “their threadbare demise.” Attempting to capitalize on the interest in their quilts, Amish women began to make new quilts for sale,

³³⁵ Jana M. Hawley, “The Commercialization of Old Order Amish Quilts: Enduring and Changing Cultural Meanings,” *Clothing and Textiles Research* 23, no. 2 (2005): 105.

³³⁶ Heather Cadogan, “Artistic Creation: Amish Quilts and Abstract Art,” *Uncoverings* 26 (2005), 135-36.

³³⁷ Hawley, “The Commercialization of Old Order,” 108.

paying attention to the tastes of the non-Amish consumer.³³⁸ By 1985, an estimated ninety percent of Amish quilts were made for the market.³³⁹ Unfortunately for the Amish quiltmakers, quilt collectors and dealers deemed these newer quilts “tourist art,” and therefore not “authentic.” The reason they gave for this devaluation is exemplified by quilt scholar Heather Cadogan, who argued that historic Amish quilts, made for loved ones, were “painstakingly crafted to express affection,” whereas Amish quilts for sale were designed to garner a profit. Once “the purity of creation was lost...the aesthetic appeal of the quilts declined.”³⁴⁰ Collectors and dealers began to make the distinction between “Amish” and “Amish-made” quilts, the former made by the Amish for use in their homes, the latter made for the tourist market.³⁴¹

The establishment of parameters by collectors and dealers to denote the “authenticity” of Amish quilts is paralleled in sociologist Gary Alan Fine’s examination of how members of the cultural elite sought to establish “self-taught,” or “outsider,” art as a legitimate artistic sub-field beginning in the 1970s.³⁴² To do this, they too sought to establish “aesthetic authenticity” as a central characteristic in determining value. According to “outsider art” proponents, authenticity derived from an image of the artist as existing “outside” the mainstream art establishment, and thus “pure” and unmediated, not driven by financial gain or commercial success. The artist’s identity became the

³³⁸ Cadogan, “Artistic Creation,” 135.

³³⁹ Linda Boynton, “Recent Changes in Amish Quilting,” *Uncoverings* 6 (1985): 41.

³⁴⁰ Cadogan, “Artistic Creation,” 135-36.

³⁴¹ Hawley, “The Commercialization of Old Order,” 108.

³⁴² Gary Alan Fine, “Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-taught Art,” *Theory and Society* 32, no. 2 (2003): 154.

determining factor in establishing the “authenticity” of their art.³⁴³ As in the case of Amish quilts, collectors and dealers of “outsider art” sought out earlier works, which they valued more highly on the basis of claims that they were “purer.”³⁴⁴ Fine argues that through the establishment of these symbolic boundaries, collectors and dealers appropriated the work of “the disadvantaged” to gain power for themselves.³⁴⁵

The case of the Amish quilts is further illuminated by philosopher Larry Shiner’s argument that the devaluation of “tourist art,” objects produced by traditional societies for the commercial art market, reverses the typical art/craft distinction. “Authentic” objects, made for use, could be considered “art,” but the same type of objects, when produced for the market, were scorned as mere “craft.”³⁴⁶ Shiner argued that the equation of tradition with authenticity is bogus because all cultures change and no cultures are “unspoiled” or “untouched.” Thus, the concept of authenticity, he argued, ultimately served to justify a continuing exploitative power relation.³⁴⁷

By limiting “authenticity” to Old Order Amish quilts, collectors and dealers manufactured a hierarchy of value that limited commoditization to a small sphere of exchange, in which they held the power, rather than contemporary Amish quiltmakers. The scarcity of pre-1940 Amish quilts provided an economic fortress that allowed collectors and dealers to create a high demand for an object in short supply. By 1985,

³⁴³ Ibid., 155.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 164.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

³⁴⁶ Larry Shiner, “‘Primitive Fakes,’ ‘Tourist Art,’ and the Ideology of Authenticity,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 2 (1994): 226-27.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 228.

antique Amish quilts cost between 10 to 100 times more than contemporary Amish quilts.³⁴⁸

As the prices of certain types of quilts rose to astronomical levels, collectors looked for less-expensive investments that might appreciate over time. In the early 1980s, the *New York* reported that more collectors were seeking out “top-notch” quality in objects that hovered “just beneath the widely acknowledged peak,” with the goal to then redefine the objects, promoting them to another level of value.³⁴⁹ Quilt dealers capitalized on this phenomenon by attempting to create new markets, one example being the reevaluation of Depression-era quilts in the 1980s. Whereas nineteenth century quilts dominated the quilt market through the 1970s, Judith Weissman reported in a 1981 *New York Times* article that collectors had recently become interested in quilts from the 1930s. Depression-era quilts, which sold at Macy’s department stores for between \$20 and \$65 in 1938, were priced starting at \$600 at a Madison Avenue shop in 1981. Weissman cited a number of other New York dealers selling Depression quilts from \$250 to \$1,500, with price points determined by “quality of workmanship, condition, uniqueness and excellence of design.”³⁵⁰ Although their prices had increased, these newly collectible quilts cost less than quilts from earlier eras, allowing dealers to profit off those consumers who wanted to buy in at a more affordable price.

The reevaluation of Depression-era quilts also illustrates how the “antiquing” process serves as a mechanism through which greater singularization is achieved.

Whereas most commodities steadily decline in value, some begin to increase in value

³⁴⁸ Boynton, “Recent Changes in Amish Quilting,” 43.

³⁴⁹ Carter Horsley, “Recession Affects Dealers, Too,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1982, p. C23.

³⁵⁰ Judith Reiter Weissman, “‘Depression Quilts’: A Renewed Interest,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1981, p. C3.

after a certain period of time.³⁵¹ The period after which an item is considered an antique varies. Prior to the 1970s, 100 years was considered the minimum age for antique furniture, but the boom in collecting in the 1980s, collectors and dealers began to refer to items as antiques after as few as thirty years. By marketing Depression-era quilts as “hot” collectible items with the potential to quickly advance in price, dealers appealed to collectors looking for an affordable investment.

Strategies to elevate the status of quilts in the marketplace required collectors and dealers to draw on various forms of social and cultural capital. Many quilt collectors and dealers who profited from the increased value of quilts drew on formal and informal art education and social or familial connections to the art world. A number of ways that dealers drew on knowledge of the mainstream art world to gain profit and status are exemplified in the case of Stuart Feld, an Americana dealer who ran several folk art and furniture galleries beginning in the 1970s. His mother was a major dealer in American glass and Feld began his career as an Americana collector. After graduating from Princeton University, he earned a Master of Arts degree in art history from Harvard University. He then worked as an associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the American painting and sculpture division. Feld left the museum in 1967 to pursue scholarship, but was offered a partnership in Hirshl & Adler Galleries, which he helped expand. Because of his background, Feld recognized the power of museums, the press, and scholars in establishing value in the art world, and drew on all of these in his attempts to influence the market. He supported his market dealings by authoring scholarship and

³⁵¹ Kopytoff gives the examples of cars, which he observed, usually decline in value up until about thirty years, after which they rise every year, and furniture, which typically becomes “antique” after roughly the span of time between an individual and their grandparent’s generation, “The Cultural Biography,” 80.

through “aggressive” presentations of folk-art exhibitions and catalogues.³⁵² Robert Bishop, director of the Museum of American Folk Art, credited Feld with creating “a whole new awareness of American folk art among an expanded community of collectors, art historians and museum curators.”³⁵³ In 1983, his partner retired and Feld became the sole owner of Hirshl & Adler.

Recognizing the means through which quilts came to be regarded in higher standing in the art world, Feld attempted to emulate the phenomenon in 1988 for Jacquard coverlets—to “elevate the craft to an American art form.”³⁵⁴ He presented the coverlets in a gallery show, where the items could be directly purchased. Frank Miele, director of Hirshl & Adler’s folk art branch, touted the show to the *New York Times* as the first to present the coverlets as “works of art, rather than for their historical or geographic interest.” Although the coverlets were machine-made, raising questions about their “authenticity,” Miele adopted the language of the mainstream art world responding, “It’s the creative genius that determined what the machine would do.” Miele also used the assimilationist strategy of comparison to modern art movements by drawing parallels between the coverlets and pattern paintings of the 1970s. He appealed to investment-oriented to collectors, stating that, “Because it is a neglected art form,” the prices of Jacquard coverlets were more affordable.³⁵⁵

In 1987, Feld purchased a Baltimore album quilt for \$176,000, establishing a new record price paid for a quilt.³⁵⁶ On the surface, it may appear that as a quilt dealer and

³⁵² Rita Reif, “Stuart Feld Brings Zest to Americana,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1988, p. H36

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ann Barry, “Jacquard Coverlets Weave a Spell,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1988, p. 102.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Rita Reif, “Stuart Feld Brings Zest to Americana,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1988, p. H36.

collector, he simply had to have it. However, an examination of the auction process calls into question his motives. Auctions played an increasingly important role in the art world in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977, Stephen Birmingham of the *New York Times* described auction houses as the backbone of the art market. He reported that the Sotheby Park Bernet auction house netted \$20 million in 1964, and by 1974 topped \$90 million. Sotheby's sales increased to \$175 million internationally in 1977.³⁵⁷ By 1980, Sotheby's North America sales alone had grown to \$247.7 million, up \$100 million from the previous season's record numbers.³⁵⁸ Record prices for quilts at auction were set in 1980, 1983, and 1987, as prices steadily climbed. Christie's president David Bathurst cautioned that, while hopeful that the art market would continue to grow, he "would like to see less uncritical acclaim for what appears to be an endless series of world records in auction prices...the prominence these record prices receive in the press, frequently without regard for the rarity of the work, its condition or provenance, to say nothing of the effects of inflation, can mislead the public."³⁵⁹ The singular focus on prices, the "concern about art as a commodity traded like stocks and bonds," Bathurst argued, "distorts the ancient and honorable history of collecting works of art."³⁶⁰

Additional reasons that auction prices could be misleading that Bathurst did not deign to mention, involved less-than-honorable practices. In fact, auctions were highly subject to manipulation by dealers and sellers, in particular through the practice known as the "buy in." Prior to an auction, the seller would set a "reserve price," a minimum price

³⁵⁷ Stephen Birmingham, "The Auction Crowd," *New York Times*, March 6, 1977, p. 203.

³⁵⁸ Rita Reif, "New York Challenges London in Art Sales: Sotheby Up to \$100 Million," *New York Times*, July 14, 1980, p. C15.

³⁵⁹ Rita Reif, "Auctions: At Midseason, Boom is Still On," *New York Times*, December 19, 1980, p. C28.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

they would accept for the item. If at auction, bids did not reach the reserve price, the auctioneer would be obliged to “buy in” at the reserve price and return the item to the seller. The commission charged for buy-ins was typically five percent, much lower than the standard commissions for works sold. “In other words,” Stephen Birmingham of *The New York Times* explained, “many works that appear to have been sold have not, in fact, been sold at all, many ‘mystery bidders’ are often the sellers themselves and many of the prices achieved are not real prices at all.”³⁶¹ This practice allowed sellers to “boost,” or drive up, prices.³⁶² Higher auction prices translated to higher values across the art world. Museums used auction catalogs to determine insurance amounts and private dealers would move prices up and down according to auction sales. To maximize profit, collectors would often piggy-back on auction sales, putting objects up for sale after a similar work had auctioned for a high price.

Just as prices rose alongside increases in cultural value, cultural value increased with rising prices. The wide-spread publicity given to record-breaking auctions meant greater exposure, which resulted in greater interest. *The New York Times* reported the folk art market was more popular than ever among collectors, due to the increased number of exhibitions, books and auctions. Nancy Druckman, head of Sotheby’s folk art department said, “The rising prices have also helped make it more legitimate... When things get expensive, they’re taken more seriously.”³⁶³ The rising economic value of quilts thus resulted in perceptions of greater cultural value, and therefore contributed to

³⁶¹ Stephen Birmingham, “The Auction Crowd,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1977, p. 203.

³⁶² Grace Glueck, “How Do You Price Art Works? Let the Dealers Count the Ways: Dealers Tell of the Pricing of Art Works,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1976, p. 48.

³⁶³ Carol Vogel, “Currents: Nothing Folksy About Folk Art Market,” *New York Times*, January 14, 1988, p. C3.

quilts move toward singularization as art objects. Without further evidence, it is impossible to determine whether quilt dealers explicitly engaged in auction “boosting” to attract publicity and create the illusion of higher prices for quilts. However, at least three of the record quilt prices at auction were paid by dealers.³⁶⁴ Stuart Feld’s record-setting quilt purchase in 1987 then becomes more suspect, especially in light of his other dealings in the art market, which demonstrated Feld’s astute knowledge of the processes by which objects came to be attributed greater value in the art world.

Despite questionable practices found in auction houses, Christy’s president David Batherst’s defense of the “ancient and honorable history of collecting works of art” against commoditization speaks to the complex interrelationship between economics and culture that art embodies. Kopytoff warned that it “would be missing the point...to conclude that the talk about singular art is merely an ideological camouflage for an interest in merchandising.”³⁶⁵ The cultural significance of such defenses, he argued, “is precisely that there is an inner compulsion to defend oneself, to others and to oneself, against the charge of “merchandising” art.”³⁶⁶ The motives of collectors and dealers in elevating the status of quilts should not be entirely attributed to profit. Although in seeking greater recognition for quilts, dealers and collectors often engaged in practices that would maximize profit, their primary motive may not have been sheer monetary gain. In the period at hand, quilts variously and simultaneously served as financial

³⁶⁴ James Glazer paid \$16,000 for a quilt in 1983, see Rita Reif, “Auctions: Diamonds in the Hamptons,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1983, pg C22; Kate and Joel Koppt, dealers from the Manhattan shop America Hurrah, paid \$30,800 in 1984, see Rita Reif, “Auctions: Americana to Be Sold,” *New York Times* December 28, 1984; and Stuart Feld paid \$176,000 for a quilt in 1987, see Rita Reif, “Stuart Feld Brings Zest to Americana,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1988, p. H36.

³⁶⁵ Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography,” 83.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

investments, means to acquire cultural capital, and objects through which individuals could experience “psychic” gains.

Economists Bruno S. Frey and Reiner Eichenberger argue that because art serves as a “consumption good,” as well as a financial investment, the art market functions differently from pure financial markets (e.g. the stock market).³⁶⁷ Buyers range between two extremes of the “pure collector” and the “pure speculator,” creating disequilibrium in the market which affects gains and losses. “Pure collectors,” at least in principle, are insensitive to economic risk factors; “they buy and hold an art object because they like it and do not mind if its price variability increases or if its attribution becomes uncertain.” “Pure speculators” invest in art for financial gain and flee the market when financial and other risk factors increase.³⁶⁸ Factors such as the costs, fees, and taxes, affect who takes part in the market. When taxes across the board increase, speculators will be driven to purchase art in an attempt to skirt higher taxes applied to other assets. When speculators flood the market, the financial net returns equal other markets. If holdings are taxed only when sold, the market thins.³⁶⁹ Because changes in taste that drive the art market are difficult to predict far in advance, speculators shy away from those markets that are out of fashion.³⁷⁰

Collecting as a means of speculation increased as a whole over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. The scope of this study precluded any analysis of art taxation policies, however evidence points to some of the larger economic factors that played a role in the

³⁶⁷ Bruno S. Frey and Reiner Eichenberger, “On the Rate of Return in the Art Market: Survey and Evaluation,” *European Economic Review* 39 (1995): 533.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 534-35.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 534.

collecting boom. In the late 1970s, during “the Great Inflation,” art served as a means to keep ahead of inflation, offering a tax shelter.³⁷¹ In addition, tax write-offs granted for donations to museums resulted in the widespread practice (and resulting scandals) of collectors working in collusion with auction houses and museums to “boost” prices. Collectors would then donate the items to museums, using the falsely inflated price to avoid paying higher income tax rates.³⁷² The creation of new markets, the rise in “discoveries” of “forgotten areas” of aesthetic production, led to increased interest in antiques and folk art in the early 1980s, which *New York Times* reporter Carter Horsley attributed to the economic recession. With people unable to splurge, they sought out objects that they hoped would increase in value over time.³⁷³

Prices rose in all segments of the art market in the late 1980s, suggesting the possible presence of a “rational bubble,” a situation in which, although prices had attained seemingly unsustainable levels, investors continued to buy art with the belief that “the short-run prospects for continued gains were sufficient to compensate for the risk that the bubble might burst.”³⁷⁴ As the boom continued, “the near desperate demand” exhibited by buyers began to make some investors nervous. Art dealers saw no end to the upward climb, but financial-sector insiders, familiar with boom and bust cycles, recognized that buying binges typically marked the end of a boom cycle.³⁷⁵

In 1987, Mary Cantwell of *The New York Times* reported seeing a placard on the entrance to New York City’s Fall Antiques Show that read “Antiques and art have

³⁷¹H.J. Maidenberg, “Tax Shelters in Original Art,” *New York Times*, October 28 1979, p. F2.

³⁷² Stephen Birmingham, “The Auction Crowd,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1977, p. 203.

³⁷³ Carter Horsley, “Recession Affects Dealers, Too,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1982, p. C23.

³⁷⁴ Gérard-Varet, “On Pricing the Priceless,” 516.

³⁷⁵ Anise Wallace, “In a Hot Market Fear of Getting Burned,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1989, p. E6.

consistently appreciated in value over the last 50 years. There have been plateaus, but never a down market. The added dividend is that you have the pleasure of living with them.”³⁷⁶ The “added dividend” is what Frey and Eichenberger term “the endowment effect,” that “an art object owned is evaluated higher than one not owned.”³⁷⁷ Art ownership offers benefits other than potential financial gain. As Kopytoff argued, “Power is manifest through ownership of singular objects.” Expanding on that concept, Bourdieu contended that “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class.’”³⁷⁸ *New York Times* reporter Stephen Birmingham supported these claims, writing in 1977, “A good art collection does wonders for your social status.”³⁷⁹ He further explained, “Owning good art...creates the impression that the owner is a person of taste, breeding, cultivation and refinement—qualities rated high among social assets.”³⁸⁰ The acquisition of art through collecting, he continued, “has become one of the major routes, if not the major route, for today’s social climber. A collection of any kind conveys instant status.”³⁸¹ As quilts became regarded more highly as art over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, they became increasingly more potent as symbols of status, as carriers of cultural capital.

Supporting the view that most collectors do not harbor purely financial motives, Frey and Eichenberger argue that collectors do not typically consider how they might

³⁷⁶ Mary Cantwell, "How to Invest without Anxiety." *New York Times*, November 14, 1987, pg 26.

³⁷⁷ Frey and Eichenberger, “On the Rate of Return,” 532.

³⁷⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

³⁷⁹ Stephen Birmingham, “The Auction Crowd,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1977, p. 203.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

make a higher return if they were to invest the fund elsewhere (e.g. in the stock market). Economist Louis-André Gérard-Varet provides an additional reason for collecting; art ownership yields a “psychic return” in addition to monetary appreciation.³⁸² Prominent quilt collector Ardis James supported Gérard-Varet’s claim when she stated in 1987, “It’s more interesting to collect quilts than to be in the stock market.”³⁸³ Material culture scholar Susan Pearce’s work on contemporary collecting revealed that the motivations behind collecting are much more varied and complex than financial investment. Pearce identified ways in which the drive to collect might be rooted in identity, gender, race, class, relationships, and the body, among other things. The fact that early quilt collectors began accumulating quilts before they were widely valued by the rest of society supports Pearce’s argument that individuals formulate personal systems of value, which are not always the same as market values, although these values may intersect or create tension at certain points.³⁸⁴ The efforts of the “pure collector” can influence wider society by turning “rubbish” into “culture.”³⁸⁵ This examination of quilt collectors and dealers demonstrates some of the ways such an elevation in value is achieved.

As many predicted, the collecting bubble of the 1980s eventually burst. In 1990, auction sales slowed as the economy worsened, and in 1991, auction houses announced record declines.³⁸⁶ A weak art market characterized the year, with many galleries closing, and wary bidding at auctions. Art became a buyer’s market, with prices far below

³⁸² Frey and Eichenberger, “On the Rate of Return,” 533.

³⁸³ “Quilting Comes into its Own as an Art,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1987, p. C11.

³⁸⁴ Pearce, *Collecting*, 91.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁸⁶ Rita Reif, “Hard Times at Auction Houses: Has the Art Market Hit Bottom?” *New York Times*, August 19, 1991, p. C11.

previous years. Facing financial distress, many collectors began selling off their collections.³⁸⁷ Although the early 1990s saw a decline in quilt collecting among the elite, the demand for mass-produced bed quilts grew.³⁸⁸

The late twentieth century quilt revival also continued to grow, and the quilt world became the site of a controversy when the Smithsonian Institution began to import and sell reproductions of several heirloom American quilts from their collections. Manufactured in China, the quilts sold for between \$190 and \$200. Accompanied by a registration card and mock certificate of authenticity, the quilts had no markings stating that they were not American made.³⁸⁹ Quiltmakers became upset and protested the Smithsonian's actions, which Smithsonian officials defended as "part of an educational process" to further appreciation for the significance of quilts.³⁹⁰ Quilt scholar Judy Elsey argues that the "Smithsonian Quilt Controversy," as it came to be known, represented a series of "cultural dislocations," in which the museum appropriated quilts for economic gain, shifting control of quilts from the quiltmakers to a commercial enterprise, isolating and alienating quilts from their cultural context, and relegating quilts back to "craft" status.³⁹¹ Although these consequences of commoditization come more sharply into focus in the blatant commercialism that the Smithsonian's mass-produced, imported quilts embodied, many of Elsey's arguments could be extended to the quilt market as a whole. This analysis demonstrates how, through the creation of hierarchies that valued certain

³⁸⁷ Ibid.; Carol Vogel, "Wary Bidding at Auctions Reflects a Weak Art Market," *New York Times*, November 7, 1991, p. C19.

³⁸⁸ Judy Elsey, "The Smithsonian Quilt Controversy: Cultural Dislocation," *Uncoverings* 14 (1993): 124

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 121.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 125.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 126.

types of quilts over others, collectors and dealers manufactured scarcity to suit their own ends. Contemporary quiltmakers held little control over the market, whereas quilt collectors and dealers increasingly gained power through accumulations of cultural and economic capital.

Chapter 7: The Consequences of Classification

The debate over quilts as art from 1971-1991 represents what Kopytoff upholds as one of the “most interesting empirical cases to be studied,” as it demonstrates, “how one breaks the rules by moving between spheres which are supposed to be insulated from each other, how one converts what is formally unconvertible, how one masks these actions and with whose connivance, and not least, how the spheres are reorganized and things reshuffled between them in the course of a society’s history.”³⁹² This analysis of the key art world groups that influenced the valuation of quilts reveals that the quilts-as-art debate revolved around much more than just the objects themselves. The quilt became a symbol of power: for museums to demonstrate cultural hegemony, for art critics to legitimize their role as cultural mediators and arbiters of taste, for feminist scholars to expose the patriarchal oppression of women, and for collectors and dealers to enhance their cultural and economic capital. In the immediate sense, for those directly involved in the art world, at stake in the debate were their professional standing, their own authority and legitimacy in the field, and the value of their collections.

Assimilationist appeals comprised the dominant strategy adopted to try and achieve greater acceptance for quilts as art. These appeals involved emphasizing the characteristics of quilts that aligned with the “modern eye,” a mode of art evaluation based in the modernist aesthetic.³⁹³ Curators of the 1971 Whitney exhibit *Abstract Design*

³⁹² Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 88.

³⁹³ Karin Elizabeth Peterson, “Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of Patchwork Quilt,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (2003): 462.

in American Quilts used persuasive ways of displaying and talking about quilts to emphasize those traits that conformed to art-world norms, while downplaying or omitting the aspects of quilts that might contradict a traditional conception of “art.”³⁹⁴ Art critics in the popular press supported this move from the bed to the wall, crediting the Whitney exhibit with allowing people (at least those who possessed art-world knowledge) to see the ways in which quilts visually resembled many contemporary modern art movements.³⁹⁵ Although critics argued that such resemblances necessitated a reevaluation of the art/craft divide, the basis for their arguments upheld the existing value structure. In the words of feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, “This is a prime instance of being trapped in a binary where reverse valuation of what has hitherto been devalued does not ultimately breach the value system at all.”³⁹⁶ As contemporary art quilts came increasingly under critical scrutiny, critics moved toward a new discourse on quilts, demonstrating their capacity to read and communicate about art. Likely influenced by the context-based methodologies of their scholarly counterparts, critics began to consider the quilt’s context of use and process of production. The functionality of quilts and the dubious assumption that quiltmakers did not in any way intend to produce art, highlighted ways that quilts did not align with the “modern eye,” which required that art be the product of “artistic vision,” produced not as a utilitarian object, but as “art for art’s sake.”³⁹⁷ Rather than using quilts to challenge prevailing concepts of “art” and “artist,” critics called for a new (i.e. separate) discourse on quilts.

³⁹⁴ Peterson, 462-63.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 25.

³⁹⁷ Peterson, “Discourse and Display,” 462-63.

As Bowker and Star argued, “no category stands alone—when a new member is added to a class, this has ramifications for the class and the system of which it is a part...the new exemplar can change the whole nature of the system.”³⁹⁸ Although the strategies adopted by curators and critics allowed only limited acceptance for quilts within the art world, they did have ramifications, contributing to the increasing gradations of the Western canon of art. Although quilts had the potential to disrupt the art historical canon, the reliance on well-entrenched criteria to evaluate them left the established value schemes of the art world intact. The quilt tradition was divided up accordingly, with certain types of quilts achieving greater status in the art world than others.

Although the methods adopted by curators and critics limited and contained the subversive potential of quilts, the mere appearance of quilts in art-world discourse disrupted the notion of fixity of the art/craft divide. Because quilts did not fit neatly into the prevailing categories of “art” or “craft,” they challenged the alleged mutually exclusive basis of the categories, revealing institutional and intellectual weaknesses that opened the door for questioning. The high visibility of the exhibit in the press brought greater attention to quilts, and as second-wave feminism grew in force over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, many feminist scholars began to ask why quilts had been ignored by the art world for so long. As most quiltmakers were women, the quilt became a potent symbol invoked by feminists to expose the ways that gender operated in the art world to marginalize and devalue women’s art. Within the feminist purview, quilts came to symbolize the status of women in society, raising the stakes in the debate over their acceptance as art. Feminists argued for greater appreciation of quilts as an art in their own

³⁹⁸ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 60.

right, rather than within the constraints of the mainstream art world, and offered increasingly radical revisions of fundamental art-world concepts.

Allegations leveled by feminist art historians threatened to turn the art world upside-down. However, the marginal status of feminist scholarship mitigated its impact.³⁹⁹ Museums in particular have been notoriously slow to adapt to developments in scholarship. Far from adopting a radical feminist point of view, even the larger academic shifts toward greater contextualization made curators in the 1980s uneasy.⁴⁰⁰ Holstein's defense of his curatorial approach to quilts against feminists who criticized it also points to some of the ways that gender shaped the academic world in addition to the art world. Quilt scholars, as women, were characterized as too "nice" and "non-confrontational" to engage in serious scholarly debate or their scholarship was clouded by "romantic" notions of quilts, "personal griefs to register" or "axes to grind."⁴⁰¹ Although feminist scholars contributed to the quilts-as-art debate in new ways, they had limited influence. Their lack of support from other influential art-world groups prevented transformative change to the art establishment.

In the "greed decade" of the 1980s, collectors and dealers "emerged as the power brokers of the art system."⁴⁰² Quilt collectors and dealers capitalized on the limited acceptance of quilts as art. They supported the hierarchy of value put forth by the

³⁹⁹ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1055.

⁴⁰⁰ William Truettner, "A Case for Active Viewing," in *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and The University*, ed. Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francis Clark Art Institute, 2002), 102.

⁴⁰¹ Jonathan Holstein, "Problems in Quilt Scholarship," in *Expanding Quilt Scholarship: The Lectures, Conferences and Other Presentations of Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt*, eds. Shelly Zegart and Jonathan Holstein (Louisville, KY: Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1994), 52, 59.

⁴⁰² Eleanor Heartney, "What Are Critics For?" *American Art* 16, no. 1 (2002): 6.

Whitney exhibit and the art-critical press, in which antique, pieced quilts held the highest position. They engaged in “cultural entrepreneurship,” using museum exhibitions, scholarship, press coverage, and market interventions to legitimize quilts’ value. The marketing of “authenticity” allowed collectors and dealers to maintain scarcity, driving up prices for certain types of quilts. Through the subsequent creation of new markets, quilt dealers capitalized on those collectors who could not afford the most highly-valued quilts. Perhaps the most influential group of actors in the 1980s art world, collectors and dealers perpetuated a hierarchy of quilt value that further limited the wholesale acceptance of quilts as art.

The symbolic boundaries established by curators, critics, collectors, and dealers suppressed the potentially subversive aspects of quilts that feminists brought to bear. Although feminist scholars identified numerous ways that quilts challenged the mainstream art world, these other art-world insiders, who together wielded greater cultural hegemony, succeeded in limiting the conditions under which quilts might be seen as art. Whereas quilts did not transform the art world, the art world’s limited acceptance of quilts transformed the quilt community. Susan Bernick argued that “the increase in status for some quilts was bought at the cost of women’s control over quilting as an art form, the creation, reception, and preservation of their quilts, and at the cost of deep divisions between traditional quilters and art quilters...a splintering of what had been a fairly unified artistic tradition.”⁴⁰³ Although the art world’s classification of quilts was constructed, it had real consequences.

⁴⁰³ Susan Bernick, “A Quilt Is An Art Object When It Stands Up Like A Man,” in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, eds. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 134.

As the “Smithsonian Quilt Controversy” brought sharply into view, quiltmakers had little control over the perception of quilts in the art world. Antique pieced quilts, following *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, achieved the greatest acceptance as art objects through their resemblance to modern art forms. Although they granted quilts a measure of acceptance, curators and critics repeatedly asserted that quiltmakers of the past did not conceive of their work as “art” or themselves as “artists.” Such assertions allowed the curators and critics to appropriate the artistic value of quilts for themselves. Having removed the quilts from their original context, the quiltmakers remained “anonymous,” preventing the possibility that they might offer any defense against such assumptions. Contemporary art quilters, the most vocal group from within the quilt community in seeking acceptance as “artists” on par with painters and sculptors, were relegated to lesser “craft” status. While antique quilts garnered increasingly high prices, art quilters struggled in the market, a fact that McMorris and Kile attributed to their potential threat to the scarcity upon which quilt collectors and dealers depended.

The lack of participation in the quilts-as-art debate by contemporary quilters working in a more “traditional” fashion may be the result of what quilt scholar Clover Nolan Williams ascertained to be “a profound ambivalence towards the designation ‘art’” among them.⁴⁰⁴ While many of the traditional quilters Williams interviewed “were pleased” by the greater recognition of “their work as a creative, skilled artistic expression, and embraced the term ‘art’ on that level,” she found that they exhibited a reluctance to consider themselves “artists.”⁴⁰⁵ Williams argued that their hesitation

⁴⁰⁴ Clover Nolan Williams, “Tradition and Art: Two Layers of Meaning in the Bloomington Quilters Guild,” *Uncoverings* 12 (1991): 119

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

seemed not to “come from a lack of self-esteem, but from their impression that the validations of art [were] at odds with more ‘traditional’ qualities through which they defined quilting.”⁴⁰⁶ Williams pointed to the quips made by several quilters, “that in order to make a quilt an ‘art quilt’ one need only make sure the work is useless and unaffordable,” as evidence that many quiltmakers perceived the mainstream conception of art to be at odds with the qualities of utility and generosity, which they considered “integral to the quilt’s true value.”⁴⁰⁷ To such quiltmakers, honors bestowed in the art world came with a price—control over their work and the validity of their values.⁴⁰⁸

The reluctance of some contemporary quiltmakers to label themselves “artists” brings the issue of classification once again to the fore. Bowker and Star identify two schools of thought on classifications: the first maintains that when looking at the past we should only apply classification systems that were available to the actors at that time, the other holds that we can apply classifications retroactively because we can perceive orders “nowhere apparent to contemporaries.”⁴⁰⁹ Both art-world insiders and quiltmakers themselves recognized that the prevailing conceptions of “art” and “artist” did not entirely align with quilts and quiltmakers. Though feminists revealed the classification system of the art world to be historically constructed, the established ideology of the art regime was so pervasive, embedded in discourses, institutions, and individual psyches, and upheld by groups who wielded influence in the art world, that alternative conceptions

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁰⁹ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 41-42.

of art offered by the quilt world could not overthrow the “doxic order.”⁴¹⁰ The existing categorical system remained intact.

This study has shown that definitions of art are culturally constructed and change over time. The shifting parameters and multiplicity of definitions make it impossible to definitively define art, and therefore make it impossible to definitively answer the question of whether or not quilts were, or are, art. What this examination of the status of quilts in the art world from 1971 to 1991 does demonstrate is how, despite contestation from those who supported alternative views, art-world insiders upheld a particular definition of art that could not be wholly applied to quilts. The limited acceptance of quilts in the art world had consequences, perpetuating an unequal distribution of power. Curators, critics, collectors and dealers, retained control over the singularization process and established a value structure for quilts that allowed them to gain cultural and economic capital while contemporary quiltmakers remained marginalized.

Quilt scholar Gail Davis identified the mainstream art establishment as particularly difficult to change because of its “mystique” and its appearance as neutral and “above politics.”⁴¹¹ Although the art world regime reigned triumphant over the twenty years following 1971 Whitney exhibition that facilitated quilts entrée into the art world, the debate over quilts as art continued to wage on. The door to questioning, once opened, could not be shut. The work of feminist quilt scholars contributed to increasing the visibility of the mechanisms that shape the mainstream art world and its ideology. As

⁴¹⁰ For a discussion of the concept of a “regime” and how regimes maintain power, see Tasleem Padamsee and Julia Adams, “Signs and Regimes Revisited,” *Social Politics* 9, no. 2 (2002): 189; For a more detailed discussion of “doxa,” and “doxic orders,” see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164.

⁴¹¹ Gayle R. Davis, “Gender and Creative Production: A Social History Lesson in Art Evaluation,” in *The Material Culture of Gender, The Gender of Material Culture*, eds. Katharine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 55.

material culturist Michael Kimmel pointed out, increasing exposure of constructions of power allows greater “leverage by which to change them.”⁴¹² Davis’s research on movements to change the art world showed that those seeking the greatest change experienced the greatest resistance.⁴¹³ While change can occur suddenly, through revolutions, it can also happen incrementally. The early debate over quilts as art blurred the line between art and craft, contributing to an ongoing erosion of traditional art world hierarchies. Evidence that change that has taken place can be seen in art historian Christopher Steiner’s observation that “the canon is awash in a swarming sea of rapidly multiplying impurities,” its boundaries “fragile and embattled.”⁴¹⁴ Whether quilts will ever be widely accepted as “art” remains to be seen, though if Steiner’s observations are any indication, greater change may be on the horizon. In the meantime, the quilt revival that began in the 1970s continues to grow and flourish, offering quiltmakers a creative outlet, a sense of community, and much more. These real experiences defy classification.

⁴¹² Michael S. Kimmel, “Introduction: The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power,” in Martinez and Ames, *The Material Culture of Gender*, 2.

⁴¹³ Davis, “Gender and Creative Production, 70.

⁴¹⁴ Christopher B. Steiner, “Can the Canon Burst?” *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 2 (1996): 213.

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