From the Log Cabin: A Call for the Consolidation of Historical and Contemporary Quilts in Canada

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical significance of quilting in Canada and its evolution into a revived, highly individualistic art form in order to argue for the merits and value of a consolidating digitization project. Piecing together the patchwork of our quilt history reveals the traditionally feminized and criminally undervalued artistic processes and works that, in many cases, were the only medium by which women historically could memorialize, commemorate, or share their and their families' histories. They are undeniably a crucial part of our cultural record.

Keywords: Quilting, archival practices, digitization, Canada

“Much of what we know of the women of the budding nation we know through the needlework of those eras” (Smithsonian, 2011)

Despite quilting’s cultural significance across North America, the scholarship and consolidative efforts surrounding it remain frustratingly American. Quilting’s preservation in Canada much resembles the sewn together scraps of a patchwork quilt as several historically significant pieces are scattered across multiple museums in the country (Conroy, 1976, p. 128) or are represented by dated black and white photographs. This analysis seeks to illustrate the cultural and social importance of quilts in Canada and champions an initiative to consolidate both historical and, more radically, contemporary pieces through digitization. Although digitization presents challenges of management and lost tactility, an online archive is the best avenue for achieving accessibility across such a vast and fragmented network. Additionally, the pursuit of archiving and displaying quilts reveals an inherently “feminist agenda” (Clover & Stalker, 2008, p. 91) as it refutes the marginalising notions of quilting as a ‘women’s craft’ and creates a platform for their “exclusive art” (Oldani, 1980, p. 72) amongst other, more celebrated, mediums.

According to the Royal Ontario Museum’s resource, *300 Years of Quilts*, a quilt is “three layers of material, top, filling and backing, sewn together with decorative stitching and around the edges to make a bed covering” (Conroy, 1976, p. 4). The definition touches on two key elements of the quilt as a textile: its artistry and its functionality. Originally the art of quilting was brought over to North America by settlers’ wives emigrating from Europe. One of the earliest archived pieces originates from Newfoundland and dates back to the late 1700s (Conroy, 1976, p. 16). Although quilts were a functional and decorative staple of all Canadian homes until the nineteenth century, the work of these women “were given no recognition in the annals of history” (Walker, 2003, p. 6). Indeed, their limited exposure provides the rationale for why this analysis evaluates Canadian quilts as a whole. One quilt could not convey a country’s worth of untapped history nor would it lend enough agency to the thousands of women who contributed to the archive.

To be sure, quilts, as an art form, are part of the cultural record by the standards of even the most visually privileging definitions; moreover, quilts encode not only the “political and economic history of our country” (Conroy, 1976, p. 1) but also the “unrecognized genius” (Oldani, 1980, p. 72) of their makers. Stanley Chodorow (2006) liberally defines the cultural record as “everything we produce” or anything that was put in a “safe place” (p. 373) and preserved through time. Along that vein, Michael Buckland (1991) describes evidence as an object or thing from which one learns something new after perceiving it (p. 4). To quote Elizabeth Wayland Barber, “women have used textile practices such as quilting for centuries to commemorate, memorialise, or celebrate people, events or moments in person or community history” (Clover & Stalker, 2008, p. 80). Originally many quilts were a “catalogue of the fabrics people used for clothing” (Smithsonian, 2011) and were made out of necessity. However, as Clover and Stalker attest, quilt tops also convey specific moments within a community. For

example, the quilt “Healthy Land, Healthy People,” constructed from the combined patches of several Indigenous peoples across Canada, illustrated their “vision for a better future” (Williams, 2006, p. 201) to members of the First Ministers Meeting (FMM). In general, the fabric, pattern, and physical design of quilt tops weave a complex story about their maker’s surrounding environment (Conroy, 1976, p. 1) and can reveal details like economic status as with patchwork quilts.

Additionally, quilts reveal socio-political issues as with the “Red Cross Signature Quilt” quilted in 1917 in Waskatenau, Alberta. The community quilt inadvertently reveals the exclusion of Ukrainian citizens, by the lack of Ukrainian names embroidered on the quilt, as they were prevented from assisting with its construction and the subsequent fundraiser (Moir & Worman, 2016, p. 48). To affirm Chodorow and Buckland, our cultural record is the evidence of our existence that was saved over time. The true “contested ground” (Chodorow, 2006, p. 374) is the maintenance of the stories that the evidence encodes. The challenge becomes finding the best way to preserve these objects and their stories for generations to come.

Consequently, the dilemma that arises when archiving quilts is one of preservation over appreciation; by comparing the archival efforts of various American museums, a digital archive emerges as the best method for making a high volume of artwork accessible to all. The National Museum of American History boasts a large collection of 423 quilts and pieces spanning across three centuries (Smithsonian, 2011). However, their quilts are kept in lightless drawers and are displayed and handled infrequently and only by special invitation. Such measures are in place to protect the fragile fabric from disintegration, yet the Smithsonian’s efforts of preservation make accessing or appreciating the quilts extremely difficult. By contrast the American Folk-Art Museum recently received a grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources to digitize its collections of physical quilts and photographs (Meier, 2017). The 1500 photographs and descriptions will be made accessible on the “Quilt Index” which documents quilts from Hawaii to Kansas (Meier, 2017). This method of digitization is appropriate for Canada due to our large geography and small population, because it ensures that the physical quilts, both publicly and privately owned, can remain stored in their various homes across the country. Furthermore, digitization allows for a high volume of appreciation the way a tangible collection could not; it immortalizes not only the quilt but also the name and story of the person who constructed it. While both examples identify their primary audience as “researchers” (Meier, 2017), digitization to a public archive allows for general access. The target audience should be the public. To quote Clover and Stalker (2008) “the key to quilter’s political empowerment is to establish their credibility” (p. 91) and their credibility needs no defense from researchers. Rather they need to be accessible to the public to “combat their exclusion and marginalisation within the world of art” (p. 83).

Additionally, digitization provides a unique and untapped opportunity for a modern submission-based archive that speaks to Canada’s current interest in quilting, which would offer a platform for contemporary quilters to share their work. Quilting is by no means a remnant of a bygone era: in fact, there are currently 320 quilt guilds in Canada representing every province and territory except Nunavut (Canadian Quilter’s Association). Contemporary

pieces, for primarily industrial reasons, such as the advent of the electric sewing machine, are not constrained by the same confines as historical pieces. Fabric is explicitly purchased in stores rather than cut from old garments. Quilting in Canada has shifted for many from a traditional art to a modern form of expression. A digital archive has the potential to catalogue contemporary submissions, which would reveal and document this shift from a utilitarian practice to a high art form. Furthermore, it would provide a platform to artists who do not have access to juried shows. Artists and fans alike could cross reference and seek inspiration from the work of their peers. The inclusion of contemporary pieces affirms the quilt's artistic relevance, and by extension the relevance of its makers, beyond its status as a historical object. It goes without saying that contemporary submissions would eventually become historic if the archive were maintained for generations to come.

While the method of digitization affords volume, accessibility, and relevance to quilting, it also has limitations regarding breadth, selection, and detail. Its undertaking is vast and costly and many quilts, historical or otherwise, would be left out. Such an archive would still require management or a jury of its submissions, which calls into question who would decide for and maintain the collection. The success of this endeavour also relies on the assumed cooperation of many museums and private parties. Yet, applications such as Instagram and Pinterest illustrate that a media archive based on thousands of photographic submissions is technologically feasible.

Additionally, by digitizing, some artistic elements of the quilt are lost. Digital photographs mean a loss of tactile or physical appreciation for the beading, appliqué, or stitching that garnishes many works. The limitations of screen size also reduce the amount of perceivable detail such as embroidery. Yet the methodology of both the National Museum of American History and the American Folk-Art Museum illustrate that there is no perfect solution for both preserving and appreciating a quilt; digitization still allows for the greatest consolidative effort regarding the scattered nature of Canada's current archives.

According to Mary Conroy (1976), "into every one of Canada's quilts is sewn the cultural and social history of Canada" (p. 1). Our cultural heritage surrounding the art of quilting has shifted from one of necessity, commemoration, and celebration to one of highly individual artistic expression, and all the while these pieces have been created primarily by women. Canada has as much claim to quilting as our southern neighbour and yet its emphasis remains pocketed likely due to imbalances in size and population. However, the population is primed to recognize and reflect on quilting's cultural relevance, and this could be achieved by creating a patchwork of history through a highly comprehensive digital archive.

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