
Reviewed by Louise B. Dunn

The field of material culture specifically, and folk-life research generally, deal with the placement of things in people's lives. The significance of a particular article or artifact is given meaning when couched in a context that includes the background which culminated in the production of that item. To simply study an isolated piece of man's imagination does little to tell us about the mental process of its formulation or the importance of it in the maker's eyes or those who behold it. These concerns lie at the heart of the film Quilts In Women's Lives.

This production is not meant to present a methodology of quilting; very little, in fact, is presented with regard to the skills required. The film is composed of six vignettes of individual quilters. Intense discussions with seven women bore into the subject of what quilting means to them. One of the benefits of this film is that exceedingly introspective thoughts are elicited from the women to the extent that the viewer is left with a feeling of having gotten to know each personally. This is ethno-graphic filmwork at its best.

Expert editing by Jennifer Chinlund allows about four minutes with each woman (except for the one segment treating the two Miller sisters). Within that time each is able to express her initial exposure to quilting, how she acquired the skills, and most importantly, how it affects her personally. These aspects differ from woman to woman, resulting in a spectrum provided by their lives. One end of the scale is occupied by four women (Nora Lee Condra, the two Miller sisters, and Lucy Helty) who entered into quilting as a social craft and derive pleasure expressing themselves through traditional designs. Lucy provides a transition since she personally would like to see some innovation in quilting. The other three women (Susan Calderon, Grace Earl and Radka Donnell) engage in quilting from an intensely personal point of view, looking at the medium from an artistic and even professional perspective, and less as a traditional craft.
The most traditional approach is provided by Nora Lee Condra, a black woman born and raised in a "log cabin" in Mississippi. She was taught the medium by her mother, aunt and grandmother. By the time she was married at nineteen she had completed sixteen quilts. She describes the flour sacks used in the process and the circle of friends and family who would quilt at each other's homes until a number of quilts were completed. During the film she piles quilts upon her lap representing the three immediate generations of quilters in her life and their most prized examples. She appreciates that depth of tradition and recognizes the pride each woman has taken in her work.

The two Miller sisters, Hortense and Christina, would occupy the next step from the most traditional level, for while they were taught quilting as young girls, both apparently pursued active careers which precluded quilting. It was not until they both retired that they decided to form a team and, at the time of the film, had quilted together for twenty-five years. Their goal is to provide quilts for each of their nineteen grandnieces and nephews. They employ all the traditional patterns and mention their mother who was a perfectionist when it came to the design process. They are both utterly fascinated by the emerging quality of a quilt which begins as a collection of pieces which are combined to form the completed whole. They quilt together for the fun of it, confident that they will complete their goal. There is also a touch of sisterly competition; their delightful banter about a few of the skills alludes to this.

Lucy Helty can be seen in a transitional role: while she presently adheres to traditional motifs, she expresses the desire to be more innovative and "branch out." This feeling evidently is a recent revelation to her for she has not yet made the step into less traditional forms. She is a Mennonite, although we are given very little information about her ties to that community or her family. She recently retired from teaching and since that time has had an all-consuming passion for quilting. She describes the comfort one derives from quilting especially as she discusses her mother and father who quilted together, and from whom she learned the craft.

Susan Calderon would appear next on our continuum as she looks less to quilting from its traditional and
social values and more to the purely personal expression of one's artistic talents. She discusses the symbolism of birds that occupy most of her patterns, as well as the repetitive patterns of quilting which "speak to something quite deep" in the human soul. She compares it to the mantras of eastern religions and is quite philosophical about what quilting means to her. She does her work in a barn to seek refuge from her family, and in fact surrounds herself with her creations. We are not told if they leave her barn, and it is doubtful they would, since they are created by her for herself.

Grace Earl was formerly an art teacher at the Chicago Institute of Art, and recently made a concerted effort to begin her post-retirement life anew in her present home in San Francisco. Her quilting creations are her "love" and she attacks quilting from the standpoint of a palette of "shimmering" colors and textures. She is absolutely methodical in her neat stacks of fabric in a closet and her use of a felt board on which to place the pieces to test their effect together. She is a perfectionist in her desire to give her quilts meaning in their form, movement, rhythm and the totality of the unit. She wants a vibrating, or "shimmering" effect and will not tolerate any distracting or "ugly" colors or textures. While she learned quilting from her mother she did not pursue it until after her retirement. Quilting became something on which she could concentrate and loves to do.

The final woman, Radka Donnell, represents the least traditional end of the spectrum as she is a first generation American woman whose original career involved painting. After discouraging years in that medium, she converted her talents into quilting and now perceives herself as being taken seriously as an artist. She notes that because the sense of touch is especially important to a woman, quilting can convey deep emotions. Whereas Nora Lee quilts because she derives a feeling of closeness with those dear to her and in fact prays while doing her handiwork, Radka quilts to express herself as a professional artist. She is commissioned by clients to produce quilts according to their stylistic preferences, such as the quilt she made for the mother whose daughter had recently passed away. The quilt was seen by Radka as a catharsis for the mother and as a memorial to the deceased girl. While some of
her quilts are done by hand, she is the only one of the seven women who admitted the use of a sewing machine; the sturdy quality of machine stitches are seen as beneficial to her work.

*Quilts In Women's Lives* is a graphic account of the personal and introspective awareness of the craftsperson. All too often an item of material culture is studied for its tangible qualities to the exclusion of those intangible thoughts put into its making. The seven women interviewed for this film give tribute to the human elements which contribute to the enduring quality of the handmade item.