

Lisa Turner Oshins. **Quilt Collections: A Directory for the United States and Canada.** Washington, D.C.: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1987. Pp. 255, foreword by Alan Jabbour, preface, acknowledgements, introduction, questionnaire, appendices, glossary, filmography, bibliography, list of institutions, photographs, color plates. \$24.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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Folklorists and other scholars conducting research on American quilting traditions face a difficult task when trying to broaden the context of their findings beyond immediate informants. The very ubiquity of quilting which makes it easy to locate examples and practitioners also makes it difficult to document sufficient material to make comfortable generalizations about quilting in a specific area or even within a particular family. Unlike architectural structures, which may be surveyed often with little interruption of informants' lives, observation of a family's quilts usually requires entering the private spaces of homes and family relationships. A house-by-house survey of quilts conducted in order to understand the range of influences and activities operating within even a small quilting community would be a long-term project. Add to the logistical difficulties the mobility of quilts, and one is faced with little hope of a thorough study.

The decade of the 1980s saw a remarkable movement toward systematic surveying and documentation of quilts. Initiated primarily by grassroots groups of quilters, sometimes with support from museums, folk arts programming or corporations, the various state quilt projects have begun to sample, through photography and questionnaire, the quilts owned by individuals and families across the country.

The state quilt projects, which depend upon voluntary participation and broad sampling techniques, are no substitute for detailed field research. Rather, they provide a contextual framework of local quilting traditions over time within which a researcher can identify a particular type of work as rare or abundant. In addition to their short-term goals of quilt exhibitions and accompanying catalogs, the quilt projects have also amassed important, mostly unanalyzed raw data, which suggests and supports additional research.

At the same time the quilt projects were beginning to survey quilts in private hands, Lisa Turner Oshins, at the American Folklife Center, undertook to survey quilts in the collections of museums and archives in the United States and Canada. *Quilt Collections*, the compilation of the results of this survey, provides descriptions of the size and scope of quilt holdings in both large and small, mostly public, collections.

This book is of primary use to researchers with object-centered research interests who can use it to identify collections with the most potential for providing access to quilts of particular genres or eras. Researchers with less defined research interests might use the book to locate nearby collections in

order to learn quilting terminology from actual examples or to better understand the variety in which American quilting flourishes.

Folklorists, more so than other quilt researchers, are as interested in the lives and social contexts of quiltmakers as in the objects themselves. In my experience, families are most likely to donate quilts to museums when they can no longer identify the name or relationship of the maker. With the exception of quilts made by famous people or notable families, quilts in museum collections are often anonymous or otherwise separated from the contextual information that most folklorists would find desirable.

The directory lists the collections alphabetically by state, then by city. The address and hours of operation of each collection precede a narrative description of the institution's quilt holdings, study services, public services, and publications.

In addition to the directory listings, Oshins has included a variety of related materials. Photographs, both from the Library of Congress and from participating museums, dot the text, but they are reproduced in a much smaller format than one would wish. The Farm Security Administration photographs of quilts in use in relocation camps are particularly intriguing, although they are jarringly juxtaposed with descriptions of fine nineteenth century quilts. Sixteen color plates feature spectacular quilts from various collections, but a more systematic survey of changing quilt styles through history might better have served the novice researcher.

The filmography is an important feature, providing listings for twenty-nine films which feature quilts or quilting to some degree. Although the selected bibliography includes some important recent scholarly works, these items are not annotated or otherwise distinguished from popular works.

The American Quilt Study Group is included in a list of national and regional organizations (although with an outdated address), but, without annotation or additional identification, a beginning researcher would have no way of knowing from this directory that the AQSG is the primary organization devoted to quilt scholarship in this country.

The problem with all published directories is that they begin to go out of date even before they appear in print. Nonetheless, this volume will continue to be useful in locating quilts in collections even though holdings, user services, and telephone numbers may change. Researchers wishing to use collections are always wise to call or write ahead for appointments.

Quilt researchers are beginning to discuss the possibility of establishing a national database for research materials of all kinds, including the results of state projects, published sources, and data on quilts in museums. *Quilt Collections* and its updated entries would be an important source to include in such a database.

Lisa Oshins and the American Folklife Center have created a volume which is primarily a "travel guide to quilts in museums." As such, it is a useful volume for researchers and vacationing quiltmakers alike. It is not, however, an introduction to scholarship on quilts. The publications of the American Quilt Study Group, both an annual volume of research papers and a series of technical guides, serve this function better. *Quilt Collections* successfully fulfills its directory purpose and, in the process, provides some additional information about quilts and quilting.