
Laurel Horton
Seneca, South Carolina

Folklorists and other scholars conducting research on American quiltmaking traditions face a difficult task when trying to broaden the context of their findings beyond immediate informants. The very ubiquity of quiltmaking which makes it easy to locate examples and practitioners also makes it difficult to document sufficient material to make comfortable generalizations about quiltmaking 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 quiltmaking 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 quiltmakers, 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 quiltmaking 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 quiltmaking 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 quiltmaking 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 quiltmaking.