

A Final Look at American Textiles
My Concluding Research and Opinions

Before I begin writing a final paper upon the importance of textiles in nineteenth-century art, a further explanation as to why I chose this topic is needed. In a class centered around historical American paintings and architecture, how does this topic connect? After preliminary research, I have come to find that textiles relate to this class quite a bit. This surprised me because I originally chose textiles as a way to keep my enthusiasm in a topic I find uninteresting. By researching textiles, I was able to relate to American art in a way I could not before. Sewing, quilting, and 'crafting' are activities in which I participate in, therefore I could better understand the importance of this class through folk art rather than the works we studied through slides. As a result, I have come to appreciate nineteenth-century American art much more, and I see how artists of all kinds have influenced our culture. I still find textiles to be more interesting, however, than works by Copley, Bierstadt, or Cassatt. Therefore I devoted my research to find the influences of unnamed folk artists and argue that textiles have an undeniable importance within nineteenth-century American art.

While in class, we discussed the piece entitled "George Washington and His Family Portrait" (anonymous, c. 1810), and it is what first sparked my interest in textile art. It caused me to question how the often overlooked use of textiles contributed to the definition of a new culture. When fine art was predominantly defined as oil paintings, who decided to paint with thread? And who were the artists who found their

expression not in the forging of sculpture, but in the fabrication of the American wardrobe? Hopefully by examining the treatment of textiles, we can discover how they contributed to the creation of American art.

An obvious use of textiles within American art was to depict wealth and luxury. This was used both in paintings and in wardrobe. In a sense, more materials meant more wealth, therefore paintings often included an abundance of fabric that was either part of the environmental decor or worn by the subject. Looking at John Singleton Copley's portraits would be a prime example of this use of textiles. Often, Copley was commissioned to portray upper class individuals in their best possible light. A great advantage to Copley was the fact that painting allowed for exaggeration. Waistcoat buttons could be maneuvered to make the man appear thicker, and elaborate dresses could be repainted for several figures. Wealth was displayed through possession, and in Copley's work they could possess anything he painted, including fine tapestries and clothing. In the portrait entitled "The Copley Family" (Copley, c.1776), the use of textiles almost dominates the piece. Every figure in the family is extravagantly dressed in a variety of fine fabrics. The plush couch and pillows are upholstered with a delicately patterned cloth, as well as the draping tapestry on the left. Even the doll that was seemingly tossed upon the floral rug is clothed in decorative attire. The importance of textiles in displaying wealth and prestige is obvious within Copley's painting, and it was skillfully used in promoting the American elite.

Textiles were also important for the middle class, as they were often the only form of art they could afford. Making samplers, quilts, coverlets and bed hangings were not only more cost effective, but functional as well. Textiles were portable and necessary

for the creation of the average household. Bed hangings, for instance, kept those in colonial America warm at night and created a canvas for creative embroidery. A young girl's education at this time was predominantly based around homemaking, which included sewing and embroidery. Therefore, women were the 'artists' of the households and left their legacies through textiles. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, Ruth Rogers is remembered because of her featured embroidered sampler made in 1739. Most girls were required to learn the craft of embroidery through the creation of a sampler, which comprised of letters and patterns. Rogers excelled in her sampler by including multiple decorative motifs, and an image of Adam and Eve. Not much is known about Rogers, other than the fact that she was eight when she created the sampler. It is likely that this sampler was passed along the family as an heirloom. Although it was nothing like Copley's portraits, it displayed an obedience and skill from a young girl that any family, as well as suitor, would be proud of.

Among the textiles produced in the nineteenth-century, the quilt was arguably the most universal. Made by women of all classes, it created a myriad of opportunities for creativity as well as social interaction. Quilts were made for functional use, to honor a certain event, express a relationship, or decorate a home. The fact that most quilts were made for aesthetic reasons set them apart from other textile collections. Unlike samplers, these textiles did not become art, but were directly made to be art. One extraordinary example would be the "Signature Quilt" created by Adeline Harris Sears within the years of 1856 and 1863. Seventeen years old at the time, Harris sent out pieces of white silk to prominent figures around the world. Some of the signatures that returned were Charles Dickens, Abraham Lincoln and seven other Presidents, Ralph

Waldo Emerson, heroes from the Civil War, and several popular artists of the age. Upon receiving the returned signatures, Harris sewed the silk into a colorful geometric pattern. The finished piece not only represents the beauty of quilts, but what cultural aspects were important to an educated girl of the nineteenth-century. Harris used her abilities in textiles to express her worldview which may have otherwise gone unknown. Women often found their voices in textiles because other forms of expression were not available to those below the upper class.

From the preliminary research, it is easy to argue that textiles played a major part in the nineteenth-century American image. While landscape painters advertised America's land, Copley advertised the American people. If Copley had painted the same figures without the elaborate wardrobes and tapestries, who would they become? Most certainly they would not represent a nationality deserving respect from Europe. And without the embroidered samplers and quilts, how would we remember the unnamed middle class women, who also held beliefs and changed history? It would be hard to argue against the influence of textiles given the plethora of examples preserved in museums and collections. Even today, textiles are a major part of our visual culture thanks to the progress of innovative artists and techniques.

These realizations, however, were only the beginning in my search to understand, as I have formed several more questions as the result of further research. For instance, what aspects about textiles made it so much more influential to the American identity than other art forms? How is the growth of American culture reflected in textiles? Who else, other than women, gained a creative voice through this medium?

A simple response to the first question is that Americans have always needed

clothes. When the first pioneers came over from England, they did not transport paintings, prints, or any sort of artistic material. They did, however, wear clothes. It may seem like a primitive explanation for the existence of textiles, but the need for protection and warmth was an undeniable fact. This fact created a pool of consumers who needed textiles in order to live. Laborers, raw materials, and necessary technology would soon follow to cater to these consumers. As the population expanded, more clothes were either created or imported from England. Although the first textiles in America came straight from the mother country, the "...North American population (its growth and its composition), climate, soil and sheer land mass resulted in a textile tradition different from that of the European nations, even though much in the way of technology and design was initially drawn from them." (Harris, pg. 250)

As colonies and trades were established, the increase of textile manufacturing mirrored its continued increase in population. More materials such as silk, wool, and cotton were produced rather than imported, and Britain could not help but notice. In 1699, a ban was placed upon the exporting of woolen cloths between other countries as well as other colonies. In 1719, Britain even had the nerve to ban weaving throughout the Carolina colonies. It was obvious that America's textile manufacturing was a threat to Britain's economy, but they were powerless to repress its growth. By 1760, the colonies within Philadelphia held the highest population and the greatest concentration of textile manufacturing in the continent. Even Britain began importing about 4,000 ships worth of textiles from America annually in the 1840's. The growth of textiles was like an unstoppable train that pulled America into its own economic power.

Textiles was also an important factor in the Industrial Revolution. An integrated mill which combined hand-carding, spinning, and weaving was created by George Cabot in 1787, followed soon after by the water-powered cotton-spinning mill invented by Samuel Slater in 1790. In 1793, Eli Whitney patented the cotton gin, which greatly eased the process of removing the lint from the seed and resulted in greater productivity. These creations were the stepping stones into more advanced technology and an industrial society. As the production of necessary textiles became more streamlined, it also allowed for more exploration in the art of textiles. Homemade textiles and designs were always prevalent, but as Americans became wealthier and more efficient in their lifestyles, there was more time for further creativity. Overall, the life-sustaining and profitable aspects of textiles are what differentiated this form of 'folk' art and paved the way towards a society capable of producing 'finer' pieces comparable to foreign artists.

Not only do textiles reflect the economic health of America, it also has a deep connection to its growth of culture. From the beginning, textiles have been a way to add warmth and decor to a home. Often the quilts, coverlets, bed curtains, and rugs were the only decorated item a family owned, and were the focus point of the home. Learning necessary textile skills was a major aspect of a girls education, and the level of her needleworking was an influential factor towards her future. Therefore girls would create elaborate samplers for school, which were often required for graduation, in order to show off their abilities. This highly reflected the patriarchal society in which men needed proficient women to manage the home. Looking at a young girls sampler was like looking at her resume for a housewife role, therefore the American sampler began to

take on characteristics different from those seen in Europe. In Europe, the typical sampler included the alphabet, letters, reclining stags, carnations, and fleur-de-lis designs. American samplers often include similar designs, but were further decorated with verses, poems, biblical quotations, maker's name, community in which she lived, birthdate, date completed, and even an elaborate pictorial scene. Another major difference was that American samplers were framed and displayed, while European samplers were rolled into storage and used only as a stitching reference. Obviously these samplers meant much more to the American culture than to Europe's. Not every girl enjoyed the practice, however, as evidenced by a stitched phrase in a sampler from 1800;

“Patty Polk did this and she hated every stitch she did in it. She loves to read much more.” -Patty Polk, age 10 (Bishop, Atkins, Niemann, and Coblentz, p103)

Although the design of samplers reflected the importance of capable matriarchs, it did not reflect a wide expanse of creativity. In the early 19th century, “...samplers were not fully explored as an art form because they were too much a part of the socialization process; conformity, restraint, and sentimentality were important, and thus, the ‘creativity of sampler makers and development of a powerful sampler style were inhibited’” (Bishop, Atkins, Niemann, and Coblentz, p103). A woman, at the time, was distinguished in the way that she submitted to her given roles. Respectable girls made what their teachers taught, and teachers profited from this as they sold their specific design for others to copy. Newspapers became lined with ads for popular patterns, and the result was an assimilation of the American textile produced within homes. New

education opportunities in the for women in the 1830's also did not encourage creativity, as stronger curriculums replaced the practice of needlework. Pre-drawn patterns, especially from Germany, became the norm and were dubbed the title 'Berlin work'. Only women who could afford hobbies were able to continue in more original and creative textile endeavors.

One technique of textile art that defied the creative trends were quilts. It is said that "quilts may, in fact, be considered one of America's great indigenous art forms" (Bishop, Atkins, Niemann, and Coblentz, p121). Although samplers reached a pinnacle of originality, quilts continued to expand and differ in its material and composition. This technique could be accomplished with a wide variety of fabrics including scraps found within the average home. Men in the tailor trade even participated in the quilting sensation by reusing leftover resources. The popularity of this textile art resulted in social gatherings, or 'quilting bees', in which people could gather to socialize, share ideas, and express themselves. Many of the expressions made their way into the quilting work and reflected the status of the American culture at the time.

When Britain placed tariffs on imported cotton, Americans responded by producing more of their own cottons printed with patriotic designs. Compositions of the quilts were also quite patriotic, as seen by the piece entitled "Trade and Commerce", in which ships are sailing around little scenes of contemporary people. It was common to see red, white, and blue color schemes along with icons of the growing American government. Quilting had become another medium in which to advocate a free America and promote loyalty. Historical scenes also preserved a sense of nostalgia, along with the use of old fabrics from hair ribbons, mens neckties, a favorite dress, etc. It may be

true to say, therefore, that not only the "...history of quilts is embedded in our culture but also that the history of our culture is embedded in quilts." (Bishop, Atkins, Niemann, and Coblentz, p130)

In the mid 19th century, however, the popularity of women's magazines put a damper on the creative scope of quilts. Similar to what happened to samplers, popular designs were being advertised and copied by the many women who viewed the magazines. Unlike samplers, however, there was an untouched demographic which took charge of the creative field. African Americans living in America, either free or in slavery, did not partake in the reading of women's magazines. Therefore, they were unscathed by the pressure to conform in their designs.

A technique called "crazy" quilting originated with the African Americans, and have become a popular approach to the art. Most of the materials for construction were gained through leftovers, discards, and handouts. Crazy quilting took advantage of the hodge-podge of fabrics through improvisation, something that most American women would never try. It resulted in dazzling and original quilts that were similar to the block patterns seen in native African textiles. No two quilts were the same, and the simple process of piecing scraps together did not require extensive technology. Similar to quilting bees, the African American communities would come together and sew multiple quilts in one night in order to help their neighbors. It is a beautiful reflection of the growing power and voice that African Americans held together against their oppressive circumstances.

In conclusion, there is much to be said about textiles, both through visual observation and through in-depth research. Although textiles may not be what first

comes to mind when one thinks about nineteenth-century American art, it cannot be denied that it played an essential role. Looking back to the slide of “George Washington and His Family Portrait” (anonymous, c. 1810), it does not do the topic justice. One slide cannot begin to cover the amounts of information that can be learned about American textiles. Many scholars may just brush it aside as ‘folk art’ or a ‘craft’, which limits interpretations to certain connotations. What I have revealed through research, however, is that textiles were much more than a folk art, they were a deeply connected part of the developing American culture. By researching this topic I was able to greatly enhance my American art studies, and better understand the given curriculum. Although it is important to know such names as Sargent or Homer, I would advocate that discussing the unknown wives, tailors, and immigrants is just as essential to fully understand nineteenth-century American art.

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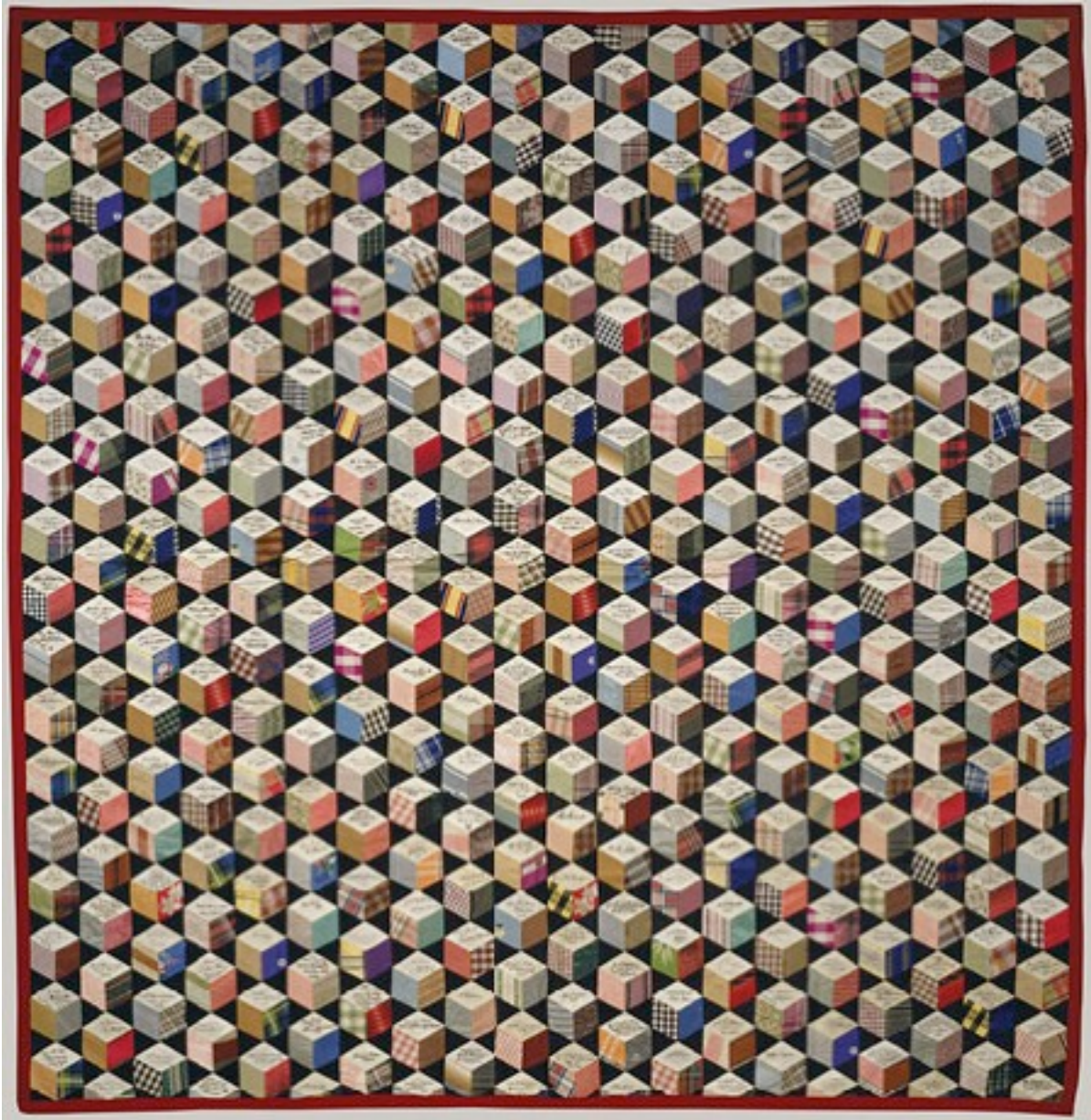
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"Trade and Commerce" Spread; Hannah Stockton Stiles;
Philadelphia, PA; c. 1835. (Bishop, Atkins, Niemann, and
Coblentz, p126)



"Mourning Picture for Mrs. Ebenezer Collins"; probably Lovice Collins (c. 1793-1847); South Hadley, MA; 1807. (Bishop, Atkins, Niemann, and Coblentz, p105)



"Half-squares Medallion"; pieced by Rosie Lee Tompkins; Richmond, CA; quilted by Willia Ette Graham; Oakland, CA; c1986. (Leon, cover art)