WOMEN IN THE QUILT CULTURE:

An Analysis of Social Boundaries and Role Satisfaction

by Gayle R. Davis

Among social historians who are especially interested in documenting the life experiences of American women, quilts and the traditions surrounding the quilt making culture have been valued as significant areas of research for at least the past twenty years. American society has always encouraged quilt making as appropriate women's work. The quilting activities of women in this country, whether done alone or in groups, have also been established through domestic folkloric traditions which are more fully developed than almost any comparable activity. Although the degree of popularity of quilts has fluctuated with changing times, this difficult, labor intensive needle art form has consistently attracted sufficient numbers of devoted women to insure the continuation of quilting's long heritage.

A thorough examination of the social context of this firmly established creative tradition promises to add new depth to the study of actual female behavior in response to their culturally prescribed gender roles. The traditions of quilting can be used, in ways as yet inadequately explored in quilt research, to determine the degree to which women's basic needs for personal achievement, affiliation, and power have been satisfied within their socially assigned roles. After an examination of the concept and consequences of cultural sex typing of behaviors, this essay will explore the complex set of reasons that quilt making has been regarded as such a socially approved activity for women within a patriarchal system. This will include deciphering the messages the culture has conveyed regarding the creative activities which have been considered compatible with women's roles, followed by an analysis of women's real life responses to the culture's ideal expectations. Uses and gratifications theory, often applied to the study of consumer motivation in their leisure time use of the media, is helpful in this analysis of the personal motivations of quilters.

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Recognition of the tensions between ideal and real behavior of women in a society is vitally important for a full understanding of female experience. When ideal roles are overly restrictive, people must find alternative ways to lead satisfying lives. The arena of quilt making provides an exceptionally clear example of a setting in which partial rebellion from constraint has taken place. Quilting is particularly well matched to the expected behaviors of the "perfect woman" on the surface a happy conjunction of cultural rules and a woman's personal preferences. It also may be argued that traditions surrounding quilt making have encouraged women to remain stereotypically "in their place." In an ironic but not surprising effort, women have created various opportunities, within what has always appeared to be the perfectly gender constant female world of quilt making, to achieve a kind of autonomy and personal fulfillment which break from idealized behaviors.3

On an individual level such examples of a woman's rebellion against conventional female sex roles prove that her personal needs or desires are left unmet when she follows the life-style that society has customarily encouraged for her. There is also a larger cultural significance when nonconformity becomes a pattern for many women. The numbers of women behaving outside of the cultural norms provide a key to ascertaining how much society's definition of women's nature contradicts their real experiences and whether the resulting unrest in society is sufficient to signal the emergence of a movement for cultural change.

The relatively new field of quilt history has been thus far untapped as a means of helping to determine women's role satisfaction in the society, though great progress has been made in clarifying the previously underestimated social significance of quilt making in women's lives. Material culture experts have researched the quilts themselves, been fascinated with their naming, identified the techniques of designing and stitching, discovered their regional origins and the nature of their geographic movement as the country's population traveled west. Social historians have studied quilts along with letters, diary entries, oral histories and photographs of the maker in order to help explain the daily lives and symbols of ordinary women in the culture.4 Of course, these studies, which primarily focus on the named or anonymous quilt makers, provide the most useful insights and background for this essay concerning the personal motivations of women quilters within the boundaries of proper female behavior.

Any time period in American history could be chosen for the investigation described here. However, the gender role and response dynamics are most clearly defined when society has most adamantly prescribed narrow gender roles, and when people are most likely to rebel. Nineteenth-century America provides just such a setting. By taking the nineteenth century as its extended example, this essay will establish a clear, if extreme, case with which to then briefly compare women's roles and the quilt culture of contemporary America.

The ideal of separate spheres reached maturity during the increasingly affluent days of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution. This ideology was the foundation for Victorian perceptions of the proper middle-class occupations, demeanor, and influence.

The public sphere of business, politics and professional life was defined as the male sphere. The private sphere of love, the emotions and domesticity was defined as the sphere of women. The public sphere was the male's exclusive domain, whereas the private sphere was seen as presided over by females for the express purpose of providing a place of renewal for men, after their rigorous activities in the harsh, competitive public sphere.5

The male public world was seen as one consisting of heavy physical or intellectual work which was rewarded with various levels of wages and public esteem. His
work supplied the primary financial sustenance for the family. The Victorian "Cult of True Womanhood" pressed women towards the confines of "pious, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" to complement the male public sphere. The female private arena of domestic labor was centered on child rearing and the nurturance of a comfortable home environment. Though she was unpaid, she was expected to receive a private, intangible sense of compensation through her family's appreciation of her labor and of her physical nurturance in support of her husband's public success and status.

Home is woman's world; the training of the young her profession, the happiness of her household her riches; the improvement of morals her glory. ... And all indoor pursuits she should be encouraged to learn and undertake, because these harmonize with her natural love of home and its duties, from which she should never, in idea, be divorced.  

Of course, like most cultural ideals, this scheme is too simple to accurately describe lived reality, even of the small minority of the elite society which it claimed to reflect. However, our tastes and expectations have continued to the present day to be affected by the sex typing which grew out of this Victorian gender mythology.

The nineteenth century's strict delineation of sex roles limited a person's scope of activities; and the same firm definition of appropriate gender behaviors, along with favoritism toward the elite socio-economic classes, also created separate social systems of recognition and evaluation of an individual's achievements. For instance, though young women of the middle and upper classes were encouraged to develop skills in art and music, they were never to consider following their interests in these cultural accomplishments toward serious professional goals. Rather, affluent women's talents were to be privately appreciated within the confines of the protected domestic world, reserving for men the larger society's recognition in terms of acclaim and financial compensation for work in the competitive public realm.

The ideology of femininity as it is constructed through patriarchal capitalist determinations must always be seen both in relation to its overdetermination by "masculinity" and as it is simultaneously included but set apart from the capitalist construction of the "free" individual. Ideologically, women, as women, whatever their actual place in production, are negatively placed within the social relations of reproduction.  

Until the recent emergence of scholarly interest in women within American social history, historians have maintained this separation of spheres by concentrating primarily on the public lives of upper class leaders of society while ignoring the private lives of ordinary individuals. Since the majority of upper class women were active in private roles and not as public leaders, and since the lower classes were virtually left out, history has traditionally documented only a tiny portion of human experience. It has certainly not recorded information about the female quilt culture, a societal construct which crosses class lines in the lives of American women.

This devaluation of women's creative production was accepted because the notion of separate spheres was based upon the assumption that each gender had different needs and ambitions which suited their different inherent natures. Women were thought to be content with only the quiet appreciation of their work which they could attain within the private realm. Art objects such as quilts or other examples of women's creative production were given no recognition within the public sphere of the art world. The very definition of fine or high art relegated all such utilitarian, decorative objects made by creators without formal training to a category deemed subordinate to elite art, that of folk art or decorative craft. Rozsika Parker argues further that "The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real difference between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them." As is the case with any acculturated attitude, this second-rate evaluation of quilts has been supported by most people of the society, including many quilters themselves, who have defined their art form as a hobby craft.

Since it was so widely assumed that women and men did not want the same things in life, when a person ignored the gender or class role imperatives, that person's work usually was either left unappreciated or it was considered a fluke. The person's cross-gender action was deemed "unnatural." It was not until this century's women's art movement that scholars brought society's attention to this issue. They noted that when quilts were beginning to be exhibited as "art" in the early 1970s, the focus was on how these works "surprisingly" lived up to the standards of design and color that were used to evaluate fine art
paintings. The quilts had to be taken out of context in order for the art world to appreciate their aesthetic value because of society's long-standing views of the gender-based separation of work into male/public and female/private spheres. In American culture, it was a novel idea which required a somewhat confrontational process of "consciousness raising" for a private realm object like a quilt to receive the art world's public recognition on its artistic merits.

In the nineteenth century one solution for women who felt dissatisfied with the restrictions of the separate sphere belief system was to enter the male world surreptitiously. Some women signed their literary or visual art with male pseudonyms or used only their initials in order for their work to be considered by the editors and curators of the public sphere. A second and more common response to these restrictions was for women to use the guise of their socially assigned role to mildly subvert the cultural reward system. In this way they could achieve some amount of positive societal regard, increased self-esteem, and even power which is usually associated with recognition in the public sphere. One finds an example of this pattern of subversion of prescribed roles among women moral reformists of the time who seemed to accrue a modicum of political power and social status, otherwise considered inappropriate for women, through their involvement in various moral crusades. The fact that society thoroughly encouraged women of all classes to engage in quilt making provided the perfect opportunity for quilters to follow this subversive second route.

Quilt making supplied the informal structures within which women, who were to some degree discontented with society's stereotype of the female's modest aptitudes and ambitions, could subtly circumvent those restrictive domestic roles. In this way, women who chose to could gain some amount of personal freedom, a degree of power, and certain opportunities for public sphere involvement which were usually considered available only within the male realm. Uses and gratifications theory analysts would conclude that the popularity of quilt making in most of the nineteenth century signified women's desire for the kinds of rewards they received in the quilt culture which were not attainable in other segments of their lives. That those crucial needs for achievement, power, and affiliation were not sufficiently met in the larger society reflected the specific circumstances of women as an oppressed population in nineteenth-century culture.

Quilt making provided an effective camouflage for this mild female rebellion because this creative activity perfectly fit certain of the many domestic behaviors expected of the Victorian woman. She was to be cheerfully selfless, to keep quietly busy at useful occupations...
involving advanced skills in sewing and other needlework, to artfully decorate and maintain a nurturing home environment, and to be frugal in accomplishing these tasks. Certainly making quilts, a highly time-intensive needlework occupation, kept women busy creating very functional objects, even during their leisure time. In fact, the quilting party tradition probably grew out of the recognition of the enormity of the task of creating a quilt and women’s socialization to help each other. The quilts not only supplied nurturing warmth to the family, but they also brought beauty to the domestic environment, fulfilling the woman’s role to present herself and her home in an aesthetically pleasing way. Women’s responsibility to keep careful watch over the household budget could also be met while she made quilts, since that work was seen as making something valuable out of virtually “nothing.” This perception was literally true of scrap quilts, and relatively true of quilts for which fabrics were purchased since the end product was seen as so desirable.10

 Doubts, women felt some personal gratification by fulfilling the gender role expectations society assigned to them and receiving the modest rewards of acceptance and approval which resulted. Since quilt making met many of the role responsibilities a woman felt at home, she had a practical rationale and thus a guilt-free license to spend the inordinate time required of the process, a needed rationale even though she usually took that time after the completion of her other household work. Women apparently so valued the experience of this art form that they even attached “necessity” to the idea of quilt making, although inexpensive bed coverings were readily available to most households.11

 Having thus satisfied the expectations of others that quilting was both practical and appropriate, the home quilter could begin to derive benefits strictly for herself. Assuming she enjoyed her decision to make quilts, this activity provided her with a pleasurable outlet for aesthetic expression.12 In addition, the act of making a quilt allowed some women to spend coveted time in contemplation and at least mental if not physical solitude, a rare occasion for women trained to nurture their family to the point of self-sacrifice.

 In keeping with their role as domestic nurturers, women of the nineteenth century were seen as the gender best suited to maintaining the traditions and commemorating the historic moments in the personal lives of family members and of the citizens of the local community. Therefore, women frequently played a central role in acknowledging both the celebratory and the solemn rites of passage which marked people’s personal lives by making and presenting gift quilts of special significance.13 These quilts may have been made by one quilt maker, but they more frequently were collective projects of a group of women. Certainly the quilters would have felt warm satisfaction as a result of playing their expected role by generously contributing to these occasions. The presentation of rite of passage quilts also afforded women opportunities to actively participate in the community social life. They were able to attain a degree of recognition for their skills as quilters and to leave products of their own creative efforts to posterity. Though overt pride in her work would have been unseemly for the Victorian woman, and in spite of the fact that she probably did not sign the quilt as its artist, the knowledge that her skills as a needleworker were visible outside of her immediate family would have enhanced her sense of accomplishment in her realm. “[T]he memento becomes emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self’s capacity to generate worthiness.”14

 It is instructive to consider which rites of passage were most valued, and therefore commemorated, by women quilters in the community. Most of these events concerned landmarks in individuals’ private lives—the engagements and weddings, the births of new children, the leave-taking of a family from its home community.15 These examples of women nurturing the development of others’ personal lives is not surprising. But one type of presentation quilt, the freedom quilt, celebrated a male’s passage into the public realm of work and adulthood. Although this also fits the category of a nurturing, congratulatory gift, it is different from the other quilt presentations in that the freedom quilt celebrated situations that occurred solely in the male and not the female sphere. Perhaps the added personal benefit to the quilter in this case was in being the “woman behind the man,” playing the supportive role in order to gain vicarious pleasures which were considered off limits to women.

 Quilt makers made other inroads into the male sphere when they designed quilts to mark an important part of the political, social, or military life of the region or nation. Centennial quilts were proudly assembled, patterns named “Bourgoyne Surrounded,” the “Underground Railroad,” or “Rocky Road to Kansas” were stitched, or political leaders were com-
memorated through the use of their campaign ribbons in special quilts. Though women did not yet legally or socially participate fully in the culture they celebrated in these quilts, they did achieve a kind of indirect involvement in public life by making them. The setting of the quilting party itself provided a forum for women to communicate their viewpoints on, among many other topics, the political issues of the day. In fact, Susan B. Anthony spoke to quilting groups about woman suffrage in her travels, knowing she would find an audience which was attentive if not always supportive of her cause.

Women received more than vicarious pleasures by participating with other women in quilt making, however. In studying women's history, one encounters repeated confirmation that particularly when women have played primarily a domestic, unpaid work role, it is the female community which has typically supplied the needed nurturance in women's lives. Encouraged by Victorian society, women often established very close relationships with women relatives and friends, communicating frequently through visits or letters. "Women would get together to sew; even women with servants and seamstresses left their homes in the afternoons to join their charitable sewing circles....Women without that leisure sewed together less often, but did get together regularly for quilting bees...."

The quilting group not only provided a sense of belonging and identity to the members, but it also offered a setting in which a quilter could achieve expert status for her skills. The woman known as "the best quilter in the county" certainly felt increased personal pride because of this recognition, whether Victorian womanly reticence allowed her to express her pleasure or not. There were other opportunities
for proving one's quilt making abilities by entering quilt contests, such as those connected with regional fairs, in direct competition with other quilters. Women avoided appearing to be "manly" competitors who sought the public limelight while still taking advantage of acceptable ways to compete and experience success within their female realm. Since the domestic skills of quilt making were discounted outside of the female sphere, if anyone noticed this unladylike competition for public acclaim it was apparently not taken seriously enough to merit the wider society's scorn.

A more public kind of recognition was available to the skilled quilters who collectively produced charitable fundraising quilts. On the surface, by creating these money-making quilts women were simply meeting yet another of their role expectations, this time to volunteer their labor toward a good cause. Church related Ladies’ Aid societies represented one of many types of organizations which were well known for supplying families in need with quilts and for creating fundraising raffle quilts to benefit the community. For the quilters these endeavors resulted in a sense of increased public esteem and, in some cases, even limited financial power at a time when women rarely were in control of either the production or the distribution of income.

In other periods, times which allowed more latitude in socially acceptable behaviors than the nineteenth century did, one would expect that women would not have needed to seek their opportunities for supportive friendship, competition and rewards for their skills, entrance into public life, or financial control in the ways some Victorian women did through quilting or other indirect avenues. Comparative investigations of different eras employing the uses and gratifications approach can be very instructive, since when women respond to their role boundaries by pursuing "male" rewards in the female sphere, or by pretending to be members of the male sphere themselves, it is a clear measure of gender role dissatisfaction.

It is informative to compare this essay's nineteenth-century example with women's roles and behavior in the current women's quilt culture. Present-day American society still places quilt making in the set of traditional activities which are more appropriate for women than for men. However, the society no longer heavily conditions women to be excellent seamstresses and needleworkers, so fewer women have these skills today. For example, we are now bemused by the nineteenth-century expectation that a young woman should have made thirteen quilts for use in her married life by the time she had become engaged. And rather than learning these needle arts as part of her upbringing, the contemporary quilter has more than likely taken a class in order to acquire the knowledge necessary to practice this art form. Women most typically join contemporary quilting groups in order to enjoy the friendship of other women while collaborating in a creative process. Many mention the value of quilting as "therapy," saying it finds comfort and relaxation while also expressing their personal artistic vision. The group members either make quilts to benefit a charitable cause, or they help complete the quilts of individuals within the group.

One can conclude from this brief comparison that, while the cultural prescription for women to engage in quilt making and the societal approval for those who do quilt have greatly diminished since the nineteenth century, when women of today make quilts, their motivations are similar to those of Victorian women. Women still seek friendship, creative expression, relaxation, and a sense of worth resulting from helping others. However, since fewer women now choose to quilt to meet those personal needs, it follows that there must be more alternative sources of basic need fulfillment for women in other areas of today's culture than there were in the nineteenth century. In addition, the lines between our traditional gender-specific spheres of activity have blurred significantly since Victorian days. Because our economic expectations require many middle class women to work for wages, they have
less time to quilt, at least in groups. More importantly, their paid work provides a significant opportunity for need fulfillment which was unknown in the nineteenth century. And thanks in large part to the last twenty years of the women's movement, the blurring of gender role lines has begun to allow the appreciation of both female and male contributions to both the public and the private realms. Our former stereotyping of the genders into strict, exclusive roles is far from eliminated, but it is diminished.

Today we find quilts in art museums, quilt techniques used in "fine art" projects, and fine art images used in contemporary quilts. We find a world of artists who are more inclined to use their experiences and traditions as women in their art works, and a world of quilters who experience their work as art.

These changes in the culture since the nineteenth century reflect the relaxation of Victorian gender roles and signal a time when women can reach satisfaction in life more directly, without feeling pressed into pretense or subversion as much as they have in the past. In short, we find a world more inclined to acknowledge the contributions women have made to cultural life in the past and to recognize women and their creative work with more appreciation and less resistance in the present.

NOTES

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1. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 1980). Embroidery traditions probably were as well developed as those of quilting, at least until modern times. Parker's book is an extended and critical history of British embroidery amidst changing views of "femininity."

2. David C. McClelland, "Achievement and Entrepreneurship: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1 (April 1965): 389-92. McClelland has identified achievement, affiliation, and power as the three basic learned needs, other than one's basic drives, which motivate people.


5. Pat Ferrero et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society* (San Francisco: Quilt Digest Press, 1987); Marsha MacDowell and Ruth D. Fitzgerald, eds., *Michigan Quilts: 150 Years of a Textile Tradition* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1987). These are two examples of such material culture studies among many others.


9. While it is impossible to separate a discussion of gender discrimination from that of class discrimination in American culture, for the purpose of this essay, the focus will remain on American women of any class who participate in quilting.


17. Such households include all those besides the absolutely destitute ones or those in the most undeveloped new frontier areas.


24. Group interview, Quilt Patchers, University United Methodist Church, July 20, 1988, Kansas Quilt Project, Kansas State Historical Society [hereafter referred to as Project, KSHS].


