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Quilting as a Mode of Self-Expression among Irish Women

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This paper arises from the research work of my M.A. in Women's Studies at UCC in 2005, which addresses the motivations for women's involvement in quilting. This work is supported by a scholarship from the Irish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. In this paper I will focus on the importance of disidentification for women accessing quilting as a form of artistic self-expression.

My research shows that for many women, it is the cultural invisibility of quilts and quilting, supported by the myths of frugality and functionality surrounding them, that enables women to comfortably access this medium of self-expression and to create communities that bring them support in their lives. Understanding this need to mask a creative activity and reluctance to declare a need for creative expression or an artistic outlet, becomes very important in designing and presenting programs that women are prepared to access.

Current, Irish patchwork and quilting is a gender-exclusive creative activity, involving large numbers of women, of all ages and across social classes. It is practiced as both an individual and group activity, in both competitive and non-competitive contexts, and quilters range from hobbyists to professional artists. But in Ireland there is very little cultural awareness of patchwork, and there is a general assumption that it is solely related to the domestic, frugality and a need to recycle.

There is essentially no general cultural awareness of quilts or quilting in Ireland. Unlike the U.S., where quilts can be seen to hold iconic status, or the UK were there is an awareness of a textile heritage, including quilts, in Ireland people hardly know what a quilt is – when I returned to Ireland from the States in 1993 and said that I made quilts, people assumed I was talking about 'duvets' and wondered about the feathers getting everywhere!

When I became interested in this absence of awareness of quilts I initially accepted what I was told, by quilters and museums – that there had never really been much quilting in Ireland, and what quilting there was, was brought in by, and confined to, the Protestant middle-classes (such as administrators, magistrates, ministers, estate managers, etc.), living in certain areas. So apart from the inherent invisibility of being 'women's work',

it was also not seen as being part of the broader culture. But I started digging and found quilts and quilt frames had existed all over, even in Gaelic speaking areas. Distressingly and depressingly, one of the most common replies I get, having pursued someone and extracted an acknowledgement that there had been a quilt or quilts in the family, is that they were all taken out and burned! "Those old things" is a common designation that seems to justify burning.

It shouldn't have come as any surprise that even though there is a small collection of quilts in the National Museum (mostly stored at the National Folk Life Museum in Castlebar) there is no access to these quilts. One of my incentives to go on with my studies was that I would be able to negotiate access based on a professional academic necessity! There are about 55 quilts in the collection, but there was no acquisition policy (nor is there a deaccession policy – so they currently won't accept any), many came from general dealers and for most of the quilts there is absolutely no provenance – in a Folk Life museum! I was appalled.

The quilts were folded, without tissue, and packed into boxes, sometimes four deep, and of course a big heavy wool one on the top! Leaving artefacts in the condition they were received, is common practice in a Folk Life museum and makes sense applied to furniture and the like, but some of the quilts had arrived in dirty (I don't mean grubby, I mean actual dirt crusted on them) and would have benefited from cleaning for better storage.

I sent 12 of the quilts (all red wool quilts) to the freezers for bugs. But even this wasn't the worst of it, the temperature was steady at 26 degrees (78.8 degrees Fahrenheit) and humidity was set at 66–68%, and this new purpose-built storage area has no air-conditioning or dehumidifying. These conditions are fine for many things (including the straw work!) but not textiles. I inspected, and re-folded with tissue, (I used their entire supply) every quilt, and arranged for new boxes so that there are no more than two quilts per box – the best we can hope for right now. There is no textile conservator and the facility shares a textile curator, whose expertise is certainly not quilts.

By comparison, the adjoining building is entirely devoted to the preservation and storage of Currachs (traditional boats with a linen skin and coated with tar) – not exactly one in every home! This isn't the place to explore why Irish people appear so determined to erase their textile heritage, but I think it makes clear the lack of general and official cultural awareness around quilts and quilting.

Myths of Frugality

It's not just cultural invisibility, the creative aspect of quilting is masked by a number of powerful myths that are held and perpetuated by both the general public and quilters alike. One is the myth of frugality! Quilters insist that they make a quilt for its practical function - a bedcover, couch throw, lap quilt or baby quilt, or maybe a gift. That it has a practical function is not a sufficient reason for making a quilt. When one considers that the average cost of making a quilt for a single bed is €250 for the materials alone, it is hard to justify on an economic basis. One could certainly buy a lot of functional and decorative bedding for that single bed for €250.

Early in their interviews both Margaret (MW 10–12) and Ailbhe (AC 25–37) describe their initial attempts at patchwork, which did involve using old clothes and dressmaking fabrics that they had on hand (as much from lack of knowledge as lack of fabric):

MW It was the patchwork I think. It was the patchwork at that stage, and I literally took old dresses and old blouses and things that I found at home in Dingle and I sewed them together over papers, and that was the start of it…
EF And were you making bed quilts out of them or were you making smaller items?
MW No. Just making things that grew

AC And I thought, - I'd loads of scraps, and nothing to do with them. But I must have liked the fabric because I kept everything. So I set to and I cut out millions of four-inch squares and sewed them up very badly. And my daughters were like, five and six and they helped me lay everything out on the floor. Cause I knew nothing about chain piecing or how you could order your work so that you make it on the table. This was laid out on half the floor. And it had to stay that way - until it was made.

I know from other conversations with them that they were each newly married at the time and had just moved to new locations, I would suggest that at such a time of change and adjustment, working with fabrics from your 'old life' says as much about touching one's personal history and memories as about frugality. In fact Margaret says (MW11-12) that she wasn't making bed quilts at the time, "*Just making small things that grew*." It is very common among quilters, myself included, to have tried their first piece of patchwork (or their first 'real quilt') when expecting their first child. These quilts are often made from old clothes and left-overs from sewing projects. Later Margaret (MW 276 – 280) uses the Irish word Tíosach (meaning thrift or economy) in response to a question on Folklore, and goes on to describe making a quilt from her father's old shirts after he died, but again this was more about memory.

Quilters rarely discuss the actual cost of making a quilt and even buy in small amounts (fat quarters), partly to avoid facing the full cost. All my respondents agreed that it is common to have a quilter display a quilt and with great pride announce: "I didn't buy a single thing to make this!" and the other quilters are happy to share in the 'deception', and continue with the myth that quilting is somehow frugal.

However, to actually be frugal one would leave fabric whole, every seam is 'wasted' fabric. In order to create a pattern a range of colours and values is necessary. Very quickly it becomes clear that in both new and old quilts, whether in books or museums, which are often referred to as being made of scraps, are more accurately described as being made from multiple fabrics. If there is a discernible pattern, then fabric choices have been made from a selection. Even if some of the fabrics are leftovers from other projects or are being recycled, there was none the less a desire to make a pattern that was not based entirely on issues of frugality.

Any quilt made from very few colours, or only two colours, requires large amounts of these colours to make a whole quilt. A large quilt may need as much as three yards each, of two colours, not usually a 'left-over' amount, and if the individual pieces that make up

the pattern are small, the overall quantities involved are not obvious to non-quilters who continue to assume frugality.

These discrepancies between what is actually required to make a quilt and the general perception that somehow the quilter created 'something out of nothing' persist. The myth of practicality and frugality continue in the general public, but it is also perpetuated by quilters and quilting publications.

Artistic expression

Quilters are very reluctant to admit that they might make quilts for reasons of self expression or artistic expression. Quilters often find the concept of self-expression or artistic expression uncomfortable. While they can tell you about their work, what inspires or encourages them, they will avoid words like 'Artist', 'self-expression' or 'creativity'. Martina (MK 173–176), after describing why she prefers the look and feel of hand quilting and the additional satisfaction it gives her (over machine quilting), hesitates to call it creative:

EF *and you get huge satisfaction from the actual handwork?*
MK *Absolutely. Absolutely. – I don't know does it, I don't know is creative kind of a fancy word for it?*

And Margaret (MW 182):

MW *Just to see that you're actually making something. That you, yourself are making something. Your, I suppose creating is a bit pompous but, yeah, [1]making something. There's such a feeling of satisfaction out of just making some, or do you know, the most satisfactory is coming up with your own ideas and making something of your own. That's not a copy of anything else. Or, just experimenting. There's great, there's great saiseamh in it. That's the word.*

The functional aspect of the quilt is very important to quilters, and one I feel they hide behind. Whether the function is bed-cover, couch throw, baby quilt or wall hanging, it is important that it have a function. Quilts are usually introduced with reference to their function: "It's for so-and-so's bed", "It's a wedding gift", etc. It may be for an exhibition, but this was not referred to as an important function by most of the quilters I interviewed. We do have quilters who will make specifically for exhibitions, and that, for them, is the quilt's main function. I would hold that, because the quilt has a function, it allows the quilter the freedom to make it without having to declare a creative or artistic need. A perfect example is Margaret's description (MW 200–2002) of her approach to the function of a wall quilt:

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[1] Irish word meaning satisfaction.

MW *I'll make something for an exhibition, but I'll make sure first that it suits some place in my house before I make it. I'm not going to make this big beautiful quilt that is not going to look nice anywhere in the house and that I'm just going to fold and put up on a shelf. So I make sure that there's a space. Like, the particular one I'm making at the moment now, I know that inside the hall door, when that's finished, when that quilt is finished, it'll be a nice one to hang up there 'cause it's got kind of wines and greys and things. So I don't think I would make a huge big piece specifically for an exhibition unless I knew it was going to be sold. Because what are you going to do with it afterwards? If it doesn't suit your house, or if it doesn't look nice, or if it, if it's miles too big for a small space.*

EF *So you would actually keep the function of the thing in mind?*

MW *I would, yeah. I would really, yeah.*

Margaret's insistence on function is the norm among quilters; I am using her comments as an example because she works mostly on wall hangings, which are abstract, graphic, strongly coloured and definitely contemporary. For a quilter whose work is more traditionally based, the function may be the production of a more utilitarian or practical item, such as a throw for the couch or a gift for grandchildren. This insistence that the quilt be functional somewhat belies Margaret's (MW 72 – 80) description of how she approaches her work:

MW *And I suppose then, yeah, now at the moment like, it's all, it's mainly dyeing I'm into. I dye first and then the dyeing gives me the idea of what I want to make. Rather than starting off with a pattern.*

EF *That's very much how I would describe, if someone was to ask me what you do, I would say that you let the, let the --*

MW *Yeah, the fabric prompts. Rather than picking a pattern and saying "I want to make that". I kind of look at what's in the shelf and I say, yeah, they'd be nice together. And I don't even plan what I'm doing. I just take them down, put them on the table and look at them and I could start cutting without having any idea at all. I might say, right, I'm going to end up with a wall hanging. I wouldn't even know what size it was going to be. I'll keep going till that fabric is used up. Or I would, I would just, design as I go. Which is very different from how a lot of people - who love to do it all on, on graph paper. You know? And, and that's the exciting part for them. But the exciting part for me is the not knowing what I'm going to get and just seeing what's happening. Whereas for a lot of people the exciting part is the sitting down and the planning of every little bit. And then, you know, the making of that is kind of secondary to the exciting part.*

EF *Yes. And seeing it come out.*

MW *But with me, yeah, with me, I, I just start, I look at my shelf and I start fiddling around with different pieces of fabric and I'm putting, putting them together and saying no, that's, that won't go, or else, yeah, I'll put all those together now. Now what'll I make. And it just kind of evolves. I don't plan it.*

I would consider that to be an eloquent description of how an artist approaches her work and responds to her materials, but by focusing on function, a quilter never has to make such a declaration. This statement was made as part of an interview, but in quilt group situations I have heard Margaret refer to one of these quilts: "I wanted something for the hall. I was looking at my bits on the shelf and just thought I'd cut up these wines and greys and see what I got". So for many quilters self-expression is allowed by the fact that the item is potentially useful, and most do not ever refer to any function other than the practical. A quilter never has to express her need for artistic expression to herself or in public; she can hide behind the practical function of the quilt, which is in plain view.

Disclaimers

Quilters habitually avoid any declaration of artistry or ability and will hide behind disclaimers: "I'm only a beginner", " I only…" but the big word among Irish quilters is "just". 'I just…" can be added as a disclaimer to any, and every, achievement. Recently Kay showed me a quilt she had made since I'd seen her, only a couple of weeks before. She opened it up and described how she'd 'just' needed a quilt for a grandchild, (this was a large single bed quilt) and thought she'd 'just' try dying some fabrics (this in reference to 8-10 beautiful fabrics, which were the feature of the quilt) and she wasn't happy with the fabric she had on hand for the background, so she'd 'just' turned it back to front because it worked better. Then she'd 'just' blown-up (i.e. scaled up) an 'ordinary old' Flying Geese block (to an unusual size, with great graphic effect) and 'just' made it up in strips. Then she had 'just' quilted it (referring to her beautifully executed quilting). I don't have pictures because she never thought to photograph it, or sign it, before sending it away. Interestingly, the term is most often used in direct association with the physical evidence.

'Just' was so ubiquitous that at one point I threatened to 'ban' its use in my regular classes. I do try to curtail its use somewhat when students are showing their work, but I eventually decided that it was too pervasive and too necessary to quilters as a prop. In effect, it allows quilters to display their achievements and abilities with a degree of comfort because they can feel that they are not bragging. I don't think this is entirely confined to Irish Quilters!

Invisibility

I have argued that quilts are invisible to non-quilters in Ireland, but I find that this invisibility is double-edged. On the one hand, quilts are (or have been) invisible to scholars and indeed to feminists, and their lack of cultural presence in Ireland means they are invisible to the general public and officialdom. But this very invisibility is part of what frees most women to participate. Quilts become an acceptable outlet for self-expression because they are invisible. Invisibility allows women to participate who otherwise would not have the courage or self-confidence to be involved in a more 'public' activity. For ex-

ample, to declare oneself a painter is a much more 'public' statement, and one which quilters who are artists are very unlikely to make.

The mask of functionality allows women to spend large amounts of time and money making quilts; because of the invisibility, the quilter can control the public/private nature of the exhibition of her work. For example, a quilt on a bed is on display but bedrooms are not public spaces. A quilt on a bed in a guest room is a slightly more public statement. In the public areas of a house a quilt awaits the notice of the visitor, so the need for the quilter to comment is only in reply to an observation, and one could assume that the observer has some interest or knowledge to have noticed the quilt.

Sharing quilts with fellow quilters can also be done on a number of levels: there is the small group, 'show and tell' with a larger group, local exhibitions, large non-juried quilt shows and juried shows. The audience is mostly quilters until you get to exhibitions. All my interviewees were happy to exhibit work, but for most, strictly on the basis of showing something that they had made for some other purpose.

This non-threatening access appears to work very well for the majority of quilters, most of whom are quite clear that they do not want to be categorized as artists (even when their approach to the work is that of an artist). However, it poses the reverse problem for artists who work in quilts as a medium, already stigmatized by the gendered nature of textile work and the domestic placement of textiles.

Virginia Wolfe's call for a room of one's own requires self-confidence and a declaration that ones work is of value – we are a long way from that. Even Ann Fahy, internationally know textile artist, whose medium is quilts, admitted to being terrified on the acquisition of a new studio – the pressure of 'where are all the quilts?" doesn't arise if one is working from the dinning table!

This insight has changed my approach to teaching, especially with relatively new quilters. For example, I no longer use samples, they are often only a distraction and can be a source of stress or frustration, and even a cap on creativity because they are a stated 'end result'. I avoid words that needlessly frighten people, like 'design' and substitute euphemisms such as 'arrange' or 'choose or 'decide'. It's more about encouraging confidence and teaching skills in a medium that women are prepared to access because textiles are seen as non-threatening.

I began this work 'bristling' with the invisibility of this women's activity and the lack of cultural awareness of quilts in general. But having looked more closely in the course of this investigation at what women gain by this invisibility, I am less sure. It appears that it is this very invisibility of quilts and quilting, supported by the myths surrounding them, that enables women to comfortably access this medium of self-expression and to create communities that bring them support in their lives.