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## Modern Quilting: DIY Discourse

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MODERN QUILTING: DIY DISCOURSE

by

Ellen Rushman

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

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# MODERN QUILTING: DIY DISCOURSE

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University of Nebraska, 2012

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This study explores the modern quilting movement from the perspective of members of the Modern Quilt Guild (MQG), a new guild that includes both online and in-person elements. Twenty-six members of seven MQG's across the United States were interviewed. The interviews focused on the factors that draw participants into the MQG as well as how the art/craft debate shapes the experiences of modern quilters. This study concludes that modern quilting is both an attitude and an aesthetic. The attitude of modern quilting encompasses common themes among participants like the lack of rules dictating their quilting practices and an open and inviting atmosphere at meetings. The attitude portion of modern quilting was present to some degree in all participants of this study. The current aesthetic of modern quilting emphasizes clean lines, minimalism, and solid fabrics, among many other characteristics. All the participants of this study did not embody the aesthetic of modern quilting. The results suggest that all participants are drawn to the guild due to the attitude of modern quilting whereas only some participants are inclined to join due to the aesthetic of modern quilting. The aesthetic of modern quilting does not appear to be tied to the art/craft debate in that most participants did not link the differences between art and craft to their own work. The study also illustrates the excitement, motivation, and enjoyment that surrounds MQG membership for the participants of this study.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Purpose of Study.....	7
Research Questions.....	7
Definition of Terms.....	9
Scope and Limitations.....	12
<b>CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>14</b>
ART v. craft.....	15
Modern Art.....	24
Handmade/DIY.....	26
Blogs.....	29
Hobby/Leisure Activities.....	31
<b>CHAPTER THREE: MATERIALS AND METHODS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
Materials.....	32
Methods.....	32
Qualitative Analysis.....	36
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>38</b>
Demographic Information.....	38
Age.....	42
Online/Blog.....	46
Art/Craft.....	54
Functionality.....	61
Rules.....	67
Choice.....	70
Elements of Design.....	74
Drive to Sell.....	78
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION.....</b>	<b>82</b>
Factors that drew participants into the MQG.....	85
Issues surrounding the art/craft debate for members of the MQG.....	90
So, what is modern quilting?.....	92
<b>CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: Email Template.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: Interview Guide.....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: IRB Details.....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>APPENDIX E: Demographic Survey.....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>APPENDIX F: Survey Results.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>108</b>

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Quiltmaking is a longstanding tradition in America and abroad. Standard American quiltmaking encompasses patchwork and appliqué techniques, recognizable in patterns like Grandmother's Flower Garden, Log Cabin, and Flying Geese. While quilts have a utilitarian purpose to provide warmth and comfort, since the mid-twentieth century, they have been presented as art in many venues. A turning point in this progression was Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof's 1971 exhibition at the Whitney in New York City. They spent several years collecting quilts, predominantly Amish quilts, which they displayed vertically on the wall, drawing comparisons with modern pop art. Not only did this show challenge the seemingly traditional nature of the quilt, but it also inspired a wave of artists, generally trained in other areas like weaving, printmaking, and ceramics, to adopt cloth as their new medium. The studio art quilt movement developed over the next several decades to encompass a varied body of work that is easily distinguished from traditional quilts. The polarity between traditional quilts and studio art quilts is mirrored in the ongoing debate about the relationship of art and craft and their divergences. Traditional quilts are generally seen as craft, whereas studio art quilters have sought acceptance in the art world.

In between these two quilting spheres, a new approach to quiltmaking has developed. In 2009, several quilt bloggers started a group called The Modern Quilt Guild (MQG) in Los Angeles. An active network of crafters, including quilters, exists online allowing people with shared interests and aesthetics to communicate over vast distances. The in-person meetings of the MQG brought people out of their virtual quilt

environment, although they continued to track their work and meetings on blogs, both personal and for the group. The blog network quickly began to follow the original Los Angeles MQG and in a short period of time new groups were forming across the country. Currently there are over 120 MQG groups in America and abroad. The unifying force is a love of quilting, an open attitude, and for some, an interest in the developing modern aesthetic in quilting. According to Denyse Schmidt, “if you look at quilting in a contemporary light, an exciting transformation occurs. For me, that means combining my modern color and design sensibilities with the time-honored traditions of the craft, making something unexpected by juxtaposing new and old.”<sup>1</sup> The intersections of technology, design, and quilting provide a unique backdrop to explore modern quilting today.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand what draws people into the modern quilt community and how they conceptualize their place within the larger quilt/craft/DIY universe.

### **Research Questions**

To gain insight around the experiences of members of the MQG, I identified two research questions that allowed me to fulfill the goals outlined in the purpose of my study. The research questions are listed below, and each question includes a list of interview questions. The interview questions were used with participants to answer the larger research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, Denyse. *Quilts*. (San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books, 2005) p. 6.



While the online nature of communication and interaction within the MQG is an important aspect of this study, I decided not to use the word “online” in my interview questions. By focusing broadly on quiltmaking, I allowed the participants to highlight their own narrative, however, online themes did emerge throughout the interviews for many participants.

Research Question One:

What are the elements that bind members of the modern quilt community?

Interview Questions:

- How did you become involved with quiltmaking?
- How do you connect with other quilt makers?
- Why do you participate in the Modern Quilt Guild?
- How would you describe the typical modern quiltmaker?

Research Question Two:

How does the discourse about art v. craft impact the perspectives and practices of MQG members?

Interview Questions:

- Talk about your understanding of the differences between art and craft.
- How do you describe the quilts you make?
- How do you describe yourself as a quiltmaker?

## Definition of Terms

There are several ambiguous terms that require a clear definition for this study.

**The Modern Quilt Guild** is a group of guilds across the United States and abroad. The original MQG was founded in October 2009 in Los Angeles. According to the MQG website, “the online community of modern quilters is thriving and this guild grew out of a desire to also have us meet in person...through blogs & the internet word spread quickly of the fun they were having and now branches have started popping up all over the country.”<sup>2</sup> Today there are over 120 MQG’s around the world.<sup>3</sup>

**Modern quilts** represent the aesthetic embodiment of quilts that are not necessarily traditional but also not studio art quilts. Traditional quilts are generally easily recognizable and often have pattern names to describe their geometric arrangement or appliqué pattern. The studio art quilt is “different from its predecessors: it is art for walls, not for beds...original designs of cloth and thread.”<sup>4</sup> The MQG notes, “modern quilting is sometimes difficult to define because in many ways the definition is as individual as the quilter – changing from quilter to quilter. In addition to reflecting the individual personality and personal style of the quilter it also reflects the current aesthetic of the day.”<sup>5</sup> In terms of the current aesthetic of modern quilting, it was a somewhat fluid concept among participants of this study depending on their own personal preferences. Further complicating a clear definition of modern quilts, “if there were one rule in

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<sup>2</sup> [www.modernquiltguild.com](http://www.modernquiltguild.com); About Us, Accessed on 7 June 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Estimated membership of the MQG is likely several thousand people. Some guilds have over 100 members, while others are still growing. If you use an average membership per guild of 40 people for the 120 guilds that would give 4,800 participants.

<sup>4</sup> McMorris, Penny and Kile, Michael. *The Art Quilt*. (Chicago, Illinois: The Quilt Digest Press, 1996), 23.

<sup>5</sup> [www.modernquiltguild.com](http://www.modernquiltguild.com); About Us. Accessed on 7 June 2011.

modern quilting it would be that there are no rules.”<sup>6</sup> According to Latifah Saafir, co-founder of the Los Angeles MQG, “when there are no rules, you can’t be wrong, it opens up the art and craft of quilting to many who would never try it otherwise.”<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the freedom of modern quilts translates into an open atmosphere within the MQG, both online and in person.

Despite the challenges in defining modern quilts, there are clear visual similarities between many modern quilts made by different modern quiltmakers. These visual similarities help define the “aesthetic of the day.” In many ways, the preponderance of blogs dedicated to modern quilting function to maintain aesthetic similarities because modern quilters are able to see what other modern quilters are doing. Modern quilters use the inspiration found online to create quilts that relate to each other visually. The modern quilter has been described as “a demographic that combines the enthusiasm of the traditional quilter, the wallet power to back up their passion and the technological know-how to express themselves on the Internet.”<sup>8</sup> These three themes were all prevalent among the participants’ descriptions of the typical modern quiltmaker.

To help illustrate what modern quilting is the MQG recently featured a series of posts on their national blog called “100 Days of Modern Quilting.” They selected individual themes for 14 weeks to showcase elements of modern quilting. Each week, seven examples of the week’s theme were presented. The weekly themes embodied elements of design like shape, color, and composition as well as themes more specific to quilts like blocks and techniques. According to the MQG, “modern quilts reflect each

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<sup>6</sup> [www.modernquiltguild.com](http://www.modernquiltguild.com); About Us. Accessed on 7 June 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Frank, Iris. “A New World of Quilters: The Modern Quilt Guild.” *American Quilter*. July 2011. p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> “Modern Quilters: New Movement Morphs Quilt-iverse.” *Quilter’s Home*, June/July 2010, 24.

quilter's personality and personal style, and as the movement has grown, a modern quilt aesthetic, a set of principles that define and guide the movement, is beginning to emerge.”<sup>9</sup> The “100 Days of Modern Quilting” blog series and the included images illustrate the emerging aesthetic of modern quilting. In many ways this feature is “showing people what modernism is without actually saying what modernism is.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the “100 Days of Modern Quilting” feature that illustrates what modern quilts are, the MQG formulated a list of characteristics that describe both modern quilts and the modern quiltmaker. While these guidelines are not necessarily exhaustive, nor are they each represented in every quilt or maker, they provide a baseline for conceptualizing what makes a modern quilt and/or modern quiltmaker. The guidelines are listed below:

- Make primarily functional rather than decorative quilts
- Use asymmetry in quilt design
- Rely less on repetition and on the interaction of quilt block motifs
- Contain reinterpreted traditional blocks
- Embrace simplicity and minimalism
- Utilize alternative block structures or lack of visible block structure
- Incorporate increased use of negative space
- Are inspired by modern art and architecture
- Frequently use improvisational piecing
- Contain bold colors, on trend color combinations and graphic prints
- Often use gray and white as neutrals
- Reflect an increased use of solid fabrics
- Focus on finishing quilts on home sewing machines<sup>11</sup>

**Do It Yourself (DIY)** refers to how an object was constructed. The term is frequently used in the context of home renovations, although in recent years it has been adopted by

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<sup>9</sup> “*About Us.*” The Modern Quilt Guild. Accessed on 13 February 2012.

<http://themodernquiltguild.com/about-2/>

<sup>10</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>11</sup> The Modern Quilt Guild. *About Us.* Accessed on 8 March 2012.

<http://themodernquiltguild.com/about-2/>

the craft community. DIY and handmade are often seen as synonymous with one another, however DIY also references a culture. According to Faith Levine, who spent a year profiling people who have turned their passion for handmade objects into a profession, “DIY is not only a term we use, but a lifestyle we live.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Scope and Limitations**

I purposely limited the scope of this study to the experience of individuals who participate in the MQG. Originally, I considered consulting outsiders to understand their perception of the group, however, as I constructed my research questions and timeline, it became clear that a more limited scope was better suited to both my research interests and the timeline for completing this project. By focusing on members of the MQG, the insider perspectives of the participants best illustrated the lived experience rather than the outsider perception of their experience.

The limitations to my research were primarily geographic. While I did interview MQG members from seven groups across the country, since the MQG has an ever-widening reach, it was too extensive to explore fully for this project. My goal was to understand individual’s experiences as members of the MQG, so different outcomes were possible depending on who was interviewed. By using qualitative research methods to answer my research questions, this study was inherently geared towards the specific participant’s experiences, and while they suggested common viewpoints of members within the MQG, they are not necessarily representative of every member of the MQG. The resulting case study is linked only to the experiences of the participants of the study,

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<sup>12</sup> Levine, Faith. *Handmade Nation The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*. (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), p. xi.

which represent a small sample, both in terms of the number of participants and the geographic areas that they represented. This case study is also specific to seven MQG's out of over 120 worldwide. There were differences among the guilds represented in this study so there is inevitably even greater variety present within the national and international reach of the MQG.

Another limitation to any qualitative research study involves the investigator's biases. My own personal quilting practices are deeply tied to the blogosphere. For the last several years, I have been a silent observer of the craft blog community. In 2009, I started a short-lived blog to track my own evolution as a quilter. During the course of my research, I began blogging again. I am not a member of the MQG, however I have read the blogs of many current members, both before the MQG's inception and after. While these experiences provided the underlying idea for this project, I had to remember the focus of this study was not in the contents of anyone's blog, but rather in the results of the qualitative interviews. To help facilitate the focus remaining on the interviews, I stopped reading quilt blogs during the data collection phase of research.

## CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Quilt scholarship is often grounded in history, reaching back in time to understand where and when a quilt was constructed as well as details about the maker and the use of the object. Exploration tends to focus on the past, and questions are frequently not answerable due to the lack of documentation and provenance associated with old quilts. To compound the lack of answers in the quilt itself, the maker is usually anonymous and no longer living to answer questions about the quilt and his/her motivations for making it. Quilting is a complicated activity to study because “it does not easily fit into established art categories, and it is a somewhat hidden cultural activity, often occurring in the home.”<sup>13</sup> Contemporary quiltmakers are encouraged to sign and date their works so that future researchers can construct a clearer timeline and picture of the past. Members of the MQG are ensuring that there is an abundance of information about their quilting traditions through both individual blogs and collective digital documentation by each MQG. While this trove of information will be an incredible resource in the future, this study aimed to analyze the experience of individual members of this movement, which provides a more formalized unit of information. Additionally, the results of this study support that while the online component of the MQG is important to some members; it is equally unimportant to others. In some ways, the record of the participants’ who do not blog, post on Flickr, or Tweet is more valuable since it is not documented.

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<sup>13</sup> Stalp, Marybeth. *Quilting The Fabric of Everyday Life*. (New York, New York: Berg Publishers, 2007), 29.

To help contextualize this study, I reviewed literature centered on the intersection of art and craft, the history of modern art, the culture surrounding handmade and DIY objects, the history of blogs, and scholarship on hobby and leisure activities.

### **ART v. craft**

The debate surrounding the distinction between art and craft has been active for centuries, however it collided with the quilt world in the 1970s and 1980s. Howard Risatti, author of *A Theory of Craft*, compares art and craft using the terms physicality and opticality in reference to the zones that objects exist within. Quilts touch on both these terms, physicality due to their tactile nature and functional uses, and opticality in that there are endless possibilities in how the maker constructs her piece. Combining these two elements is what defines craft as “an expression of human culture.”<sup>14</sup> Many modern quilters focus both on elements of physicality and opticality as they produce quilts that are intended to be used as well as fulfill their design aesthetic.

As studio quilt artists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to differentiate their work from that of women from past generations, the conceptual rift between textile objects and the art world came into focus. The art/craft debate did not only apply to quilts but to other textile objects grouped together within the category of fiber arts. According to Elissa Auther, in the 1960s “the reasons surrounding the art world’s resistance to fiber art were complex and varied, involving the cultural connotations of fiber; popular trends in fiber crafts and gender bias deriving from fiber’s association with women and the

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<sup>14</sup> Risatti, Howard. *A Theory of Craft Function and Aesthetic Expression*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) p. 55.



domestic realm.”<sup>15</sup> Quiltmaking relates most strongly to Auther’s last element about the gendered nature of quilts and their longstanding link to home and hearth. Not only has quilting been linked to gendered biases, but as a craft, it is below art in the hierarchy of the art/craft dichotomy. According to Louise Mazanti:

craft has therefore mainly been perceived as a harmless practice, at best able to guarantee a relation to what has been lost in contemporary art and design: the privileged aesthetic object embodying notions of beauty, sensuousness, skill, and authenticity. In other words, craft has engaged with the leftovers of visual art and design.<sup>16</sup>

Mazanti’s description of what craft embodies – beauty, sensuousness, skill, and authenticity – and her implication that they are lacking in contemporary art and design illustrates her belief that craft is an important element of human culture.

Arguably the debate surrounding the distinction between art objects and craft objects has never been won, although several scholars provide important clues, perhaps even concluding that that differentiation is not necessary. Glenn Adamson, author of *Thinking Through Craft* and the editor of *The Craft Reader*, is at the forefront of current thinking on the topic, although his work centers on the traditional art/craft debate, so he does not focus on the role of DIY culture. Adamson does not seek to define craft because “craft only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people.”<sup>17</sup> Since Adamson is grounding his view of craft within the category of motion, he states “that skill is the most complete embodiment of craft as an

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<sup>15</sup> Auther, Elissa. “Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960-80.” *The Journal of Modern Craft*. Vol 1: Issue 1, March 2008: 13-18. p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Mazanti, Louise. “Super-Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position” in *Extra/Ordinary Craft and Contemporary Art*. ed. Maria Elena Buszek. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Adamson, Glenn. *Thinking Through Craft*. (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 4.

active, relational concept rather than a fixed category.”<sup>18</sup> While it makes sense to think of craft as an active practice, many people, both scholars and participants in this study, had a perception of craft that was much more related to the object itself than the act that created the object.

As Adamson explores different facets of the craft world, he seems perplexed by the amateur craft community. While motion and skill, Adamson’s main characteristics of craft, are embodied by the modern quilt community, he defines amateur crafters as those who complete “activities done in a spirit of self-gratification rather than critique.”<sup>19</sup> Quilting tends to involve a great deal of self-gratification, so according to Adamson, the maker lacks “critical distance from the object of desire” whereas “modern art...is grounded in searching self awareness.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the self-gratification present within the quilting tradition provides validation for makers rather than acceptance within the art community. However, Adamson’s presumption that self-gratification and self-awareness are not complimentary characteristics found in both artists and crafters is not necessarily illustrated by the participants of this study. Many participants did gain gratification from their quilting activities, but they were also very self aware of their motivations for making quilts, and while they were not generally grounded in making an art object, the either/or nature of Adamson’s presentation might not always be the case.

Adamson uses a strict Marxist perspective to illustrate the lack of uniqueness present within amateur craft. If quiltmakers makes a Grandmother’s Flower Garden quilt believing it to be more authentic than the similar product available at Pottery Barn, they are mistaken. Adamson states, “...precisely because they are made so lovingly

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<sup>18</sup> Adamson, 4

<sup>19</sup> Adamson, 139

<sup>20</sup> Adamson, 139

homemade crafts betray the degree to which their makers are integrated into the larger structure of capitalist ideology, in which commodity forms are the primary carriers of meaning.”<sup>21</sup> While DIY crafters are often viewed as subcultural, Adamson feels that even they are the antithesis of originality in a Marxist analysis because they “have their anointed media celebrities.”<sup>22</sup> Adamson notes Debbie Stoller within the knitting world, but Jenny Hart fills this space in the embroidery universe, and when considering the modern quilt community, each blogger has an audience using her work as inspiration, some infinitely more popular than others.

The strict Marxist perspective is somewhat harsh, however it does point out the inherent links between the market and handmade objects. In many ways, the modern quilt community manipulates the available commercialization possibilities to its advantage. For example, many members of the MQG are publishing books, writing patterns, and advertising on their blogs. Quilting in general is a massive industry, and many quilters, whether modern or not, look for opportunities to capitalize on their habit. It does not appear that the MQG community is attempting to gain acceptance within the art world, and it is possible that the contemporary framework of craft used by Adamson also does not fully explain the phenomenon of the MQG. Hobby, leisure, and community building may be lenses that more fully encompass the goals of the MQG.

Sandra Alföldy offers another framework to evaluate craft that she calls neocraft, which she explores in her book *NeoCraft Modernity and the Crafts*. Neocraft is where “the diverse interdisciplinary methodologies used to discuss craft are united to work

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<sup>21</sup> Adamson, 140

<sup>22</sup> Adamson, 140

together in solidifying the discourse of craft history, theory, and critical writing.”<sup>23</sup> One essay in Alföldy’s book explores the relationship between art and craft and maintains that they should remain separate. Metcalf states, “that a craft continues to be an attractive option in the age of computers and bureaucracies proves that human animals still value their hands, and that these most sensitive of instruments still modulate the world in powerful ways.”<sup>24</sup> For members of the MQG not only does the allure of working with one’s hands still hold true, but they have created a symbiotic relationship between craft and technology through the use and reliance on blogs and the online community. Adamson points out the inherent contrast present when he states, “the new crafter wave is fueled by an intriguing alliance of the oldest and newest of social technologies, the sewing circle and the blog.”<sup>25</sup> The MQG illustrates this wave of crafting exceptionally well.

Another author, Louise Mazanti uses the term *super-object* to describe “what I see as a core identity of craft and the position it inhabits in contemporary culture.”<sup>26</sup> She felt the need to explore craft because “if the term *material culture* covers all manmade objects, we could say that under this umbrella, art, design, and craft objects play different roles –roles that originate in historical, economic, political, and philosophical conditions, which are not fixed positions.”<sup>27</sup> The role of craft was what Mazanti felt needed the most explanation, which resulted from her discussion of the super-object. She said:

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<sup>23</sup> Alföldy, Sandra Ed. *NeoCraft Modernity and the Crafts*. (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007) p. xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Metcalf, Bruce. “Replacing the Myth of Modernism.” in *Neocraft Modernity and the Crafts*. (Nova Scotia: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007) p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Adamson, Glenn, ed. *The Craft Reader*. (Oxford: Berg, 2010), p. 586.

<sup>26</sup> Mazanti, 61

<sup>27</sup> Mazanti, 61

The use of the term *super-object* thereby implies that I draw a quite precise line between craft as an independent cultural practice, and craft as a process and means to make visual art or design: The super-object stands as a metaphor for craft as an independent practice, for a body of objects that grow out of design because they have a form-typological relation to functional objects.<sup>28</sup>

This framework is important in understanding the modern quilt movement because the desire to create art objects was outweighed by the participants' need to create functional objects. The linkages between craft and functionality are more applicable to this case study than the linkages between art and quilts that were stressed by the studio art quilter. Mazanti relates this to several life dichotomies when she states, "one could say that the cultural position of craft binds visual art and design together, since craft represents the ultimate response to art/life, and therefore art/design, dichotomy."<sup>29</sup> Mazanti furthers the discourse surrounding the art/craft dichotomy by breaking the issue down into smaller pieces that are more easily explored. For example, linking craft to art through life and design is a simpler task than understanding the relationship between art and craft.

While the traditional art/craft debate is an important precursor to understand when evaluating the MQG movement, within the craft community there is a divide of sorts between the traditional studio craft realm and the do-it-yourself subset. In comparing the two areas, Adamson states "if studio craft strove to achieve professionalization, the new crafters happily embrace vocationalism."<sup>30</sup> Additionally, "rather than viewing craft as pre-industrial, current craftivist practices are situated within the challenges of urbanity, globalization and capitalism in a post-industrial, technology-saturated world."<sup>31</sup> While

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<sup>28</sup> Mazanti, 62

<sup>29</sup> Mazanti, 65

<sup>30</sup> Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 585

<sup>31</sup> Black, Anthea and Burisch, Nicole. "Craft Hard, Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism in Unruly Contexts." *The Craft Reader*. (Oxford, Berg, 2010), p. 610.

the MQG grew out of a longstanding traditional history of quiltmaking, it exists in the present, surrounded by modern life.

While art and craft exist in dichotomous turmoil, design is another related category that plays into understanding the modern quilt phenomenon. According to Howard Risatti, there is a divide between the creative ideas one has in the design process and the execution of the ideas. He states, “the formalizing and even widening of this gap, very much the result of the demands of modern industrial mass production, reveals how the making of an object can be a two-part process involving ‘design-man-ship’ and ‘workmanship.’”<sup>32</sup> The pursuit of quiltmaking as embodied by members of the MQG is in some cases, the antithesis of Risatti’s description of design. Quilting defies mass production, so the creative process and the execution of creativity is closely linked. Louise Mazanti relates to the idea of mass production when she says, “‘handmade’ and the ‘human imprint’ are central characteristics in a search for authenticity that meets the needs of the alienated consumer in our industrial age.”<sup>33</sup> This description presents making handmade objects as a response to the modern world.

Risatti has an example about making reproduction furniture that relates to quiltmaking because in many cases, quiltmakers use patterns, which blur the expression of pure creativity. According to Risatti, “making such furniture is basically a matter of rote work; and, no matter how skilled the workmanship, it is never a matter of creative design.”<sup>34</sup> Arguably the issue is not as easily distinguishable in quilting because often the makers choose their palette of fabrics even if they are following a pattern. According to Yoshiko Jinzenji, a quiltmaker and author, “I am certain that if you use the abundant

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<sup>32</sup> Risatti, 166

<sup>33</sup> Mazanti, 60

<sup>34</sup> Risatti, 166

fabrics in your world and do not limit yourself to what the project instructions recommend, quilting will become a rich inspiring experience. If you begin to quilt with your own vision and your own design in mind, you will soon see your unique style taking shape.”<sup>35</sup> Jinzenji acknowledges the varying degree to which individual choice can influence quilting, in that patterns can be followed exactly, patterns can be modified, or makers can make their own patterns.

This element of choice only further complicates the conceptual issue of originality if you replace Risatti’s example of furniture with quilts as you continue to follow his argument. Risatti distinguishes between copies/reproductions and multiples. Copies and reproductions are “dependent on their original...they reaffirm the original’s existence and priority as both an object and as a philosophical concept.”<sup>36</sup> So, when a quiltmaker makes a quilt based on a pattern, she is creating an object that is dependent on the original quilt that the pattern designer made. Multiples are different, Risatti argues, because theoretically they can be made in infinite quantities. In a quilting context, multiples can be thought of as quilts made from kits – both the pattern and the fabric are provided for the maker. According to Risatti, multiples create confusion because “they not only displace the original from its position atop a hierarchy of creative objects, they dissolve the hierarchy itself and with it our traditional basis for understanding the creative act through the physical object.”<sup>37</sup> Risatti’s stance on the differences between copies/reproductions and multiples does not mesh perfectly with the reality of the experience of the participants of this study. He states, “the alliance of the designer with mass-production techniques to produce multiples makes the difference between designer

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<sup>35</sup> Jinzenji, Yoshiko. *Quilts Line + Color*. (Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 2005). p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Risatti, 174

<sup>37</sup> Risatti, 174-175

and craftsman a matter of quantities of identical objects versus the singular, unique object or set of objects made by hand.”<sup>38</sup> Quiltmakers make objects by hand, however many modern quiltmakers have their eye focused on the overall design of the object, not in terms of its ability to be reproduced, but rather the individual quilt’s ability to embody harmony in its design. Some quiltmakers, both traditional and modern, translate their designs into instructions for other makers, a step that aligns them more closely with Risatti’s description of designers, while also relating to the concepts of copies/reproductions and multiples that Risatti differentiated.

Regardless of the level of production, the area of design has been adopted by many modern quiltmakers. Design relates to the professional careers of many of the participants I interviewed. Additionally, while design is related to art and craft, it is not tangled in the mix up between the two, but rather functions as a cousin, related but not integrally linked. The concept of functionality is often at the core between the distinction of art and craft. According to Mazanti, “in regard to design, craft is conceptualized as a making approach, but it is materialized in a product culture of functional objects.”<sup>39</sup> If we replace design with art, the statement would not be as readily accepted, thus illustrating the somewhat less charged nature of the world of design. Perhaps the nature of modern quilting is less complicated than art quilting because of modern quilting’s linkages to the design world rather than the art world.

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<sup>38</sup> Risatti, 176

<sup>39</sup> Mazanti, 61



## Modern Art

Due to its name, the Modern Quilt Guild draws comparisons to the modern art movement among people seeking to understand modern quilting. In some ways this invites confusion because modern can be interpreted to reference both time and style. While the MQG exists in contemporary times, it does relate to changes in both art and the way art is perceived from many decades ago. According to Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, “one sense of modernism, as we have seen, tends towards rejection of the values of the academy, perceived by a new generation of artists as conservative and repressive.”<sup>40</sup> This viewpoint can be applied to the quilting tradition. If we consider traditional quilting to be the academy, the modern quiltmakers today are *peacefully* rejecting the traditional aesthetic and approach to quilting in favor of their own interpretation. I stress *peacefully* in this comparison because while the MQG proclaims “modern quilting has its roots in rebellion, in our desire to do something different,” they also include: “but simultaneously its feet are firmly planted in the field of tradition.”<sup>41</sup>

Similar to the issues surrounding art and craft, modernism did not necessarily include all types of art. According to Meecham and Sheldon:

‘Modernism,’ as we have witnessed, has a hierarchical bias which privileges high cultural forms and practices and excludes graphic design, commercial and industrial photography, and film. To ask meaningful questions about modernism, then, is to ask questions about cultural value.<sup>42</sup>

These ideas relate to quilting because traditional quilting is decidedly outside of the socially constructed canon of art. While art quilts have gained acceptance within the

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<sup>40</sup> Meecham, Pam and Sheldon, Julie. *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction*. (New York, New York: Routledge, 2000) p.12-13.

<sup>41</sup> The Modern Quilt Guild, About Us. Accessed on 17 February 2012.

<http://themodernquiltguild.com/about-2/>

<sup>42</sup> Meecham and Sheldon, 15

art world in recent years, quilts in general are still relegated to the realm of everyday craft. Karin Peterson describes quilts place in terms of museums when she says, “quilts that were exemplary of a particular place and time were archived by history museums along with furniture, pots, silverware, and other artifacts.”<sup>43</sup> Peterson references the 1971 exhibit of Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof’s quilt collection at the Whitney, which shifted the conception of quilts, raising their cultural value as described by Meecham and Sheldon.

Peterson uses the framework of the modern eye to understand how some quilts are transformed into art objects. The modern eye is related to Pierre Bourdieu’s pure gaze, “a concept that emphasizes how this way of seeing is socially shaped and linked to class privilege though the mechanism of distinction.”<sup>44</sup> By displaying quilts in a museum setting, on the wall, the quilt was effectively removed from its original context and transferred into a context similar to that of paintings. This was the goal of Holstein and van der Hoof in their exhibition of quilts at the Whitney. For example, “Holstein also took pains to persuade the audience to ignore the physical condition of the quilts on display, to focus instead on design.”<sup>45</sup> For contemporary studio art quilters, the quilts they make are “generally approached not in terms of the maker’s relationship to his or her family or even to the community but from the viewpoint of the professional artist and that of the detached ‘pure gaze.’”<sup>46</sup> According to Peterson, “currently, the hierarchy of value, the distinction between art and nonart, is supported by the mechanism of the modern eye,

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<sup>43</sup> Peterson, Karin. “How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form.” in *Extra/Ordinary Craft and Contemporary Art*. ed. Maria Elena Buszek. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011) p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Peterson, 100

<sup>45</sup> Peterson, 105

<sup>46</sup> Peterson, 109

a perspective that, although seemingly neutral, limits other ways of relating to, seeing, and experiencing human cultural production.”<sup>47</sup> While the concept of the modern eye can help highlight how quilts became art objects, it can also be used to understand the current wave of modern quilting because the popularity of modern quilting relates to how the participants interpret quilting as a relevant past time in their lives.

In terms of the visual linkages between modern art and modern quiltmaking, they range from an inferred link to an obvious relationship. For example, Joseph Albers, a painter and educator throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created many paintings with consecutive squares, like *Study for Homage to the Square*. Some modern quilters reference his work explicitly both in form and name, for example, Heather Jones’ *Anni Quilt*, named after Albers’ wife, is a series of pink squares presented within one another.

### **Handmade/DIY**

The do-it-yourself (DIY) trend has consumed the craft community over the last several years. Linked to earlier craft revivals, specifically in the 1970s, “the contemporary DIY or ‘crafter’ scene, which combines the expression of subcultural identities with an attempt to create anticorporate commercial opportunities.”<sup>48</sup> Faith Levine includes an extensive timeline of DIY culture in her book, starting in the mid-1990s with publications like *Stitch and Bitch* by Debbie Stoller and encompassing small groups, business ventures, and handmade festivals like Renegade.

DIY is linked to the traditional roots of craft in that the production is based within the maker’s hands. Some commentary on DIY blends the realm of art and craft by defining DIY “by the melding of functionality and aesthetic quality of the object made by

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<sup>47</sup> Peterson, 111

<sup>48</sup> Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 4

hand.”<sup>49</sup> This relates well to the quilts members of the MQG are producing because they remain functional bed pieces for the most part, but the maker also puts a lot of effort into maintaining her aesthetic vision.

Historically, there have been several waves of craft revivals that embody a lifestyle and relate to quilting. First, in contrast to the elaborate busy home fashions of the Victorian era, the Arts and Crafts movement championed simplicity with “the use of natural, unadorned materials, good workmanship and simple designs.”<sup>50</sup> While the Arts and Crafts movement did not necessarily target quilts, quilting trends shifted from crazy quilts to cotton patchwork quilts around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern quilt aesthetic is similar to the trends of the Arts and Crafts movement in that simplicity is key.

Related to the modernist movement is the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus was a movement, a worldview, and most specifically a school in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s that embodied a holistic approach to design in many different areas – architecture, interior design, typography, etc. According to Walter Gropius, “the Bauhaus was and is a movement with dynamic momentum – its object, unity in diversity and conquest of the cult of personality.”<sup>51</sup> The Bauhaus drew critical attention to the art/craft dichotomy. Gropius proclaimed, “art is not a *profession*. There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman. In rare moments of inspiration, moments beyond the control of his will, the grace of heaven may cause his

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<sup>49</sup> Clegg, Bridget Dearie. *Craftivista: Craft blogging as a platform for activism*. Miami University. May 2010. p. 5

<sup>50</sup> McMorris and Kile, 24

<sup>51</sup> Neumann, Eckhard, Ed. *Bauhaus and Bauhaus People*. (New York, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993) p. 22.

work to blossom into art.”<sup>52</sup> Unlike some of the theories explored in the art/craft section, Gropius conceptualizes the people making art and craft as the same, but classifies the leap to art as an otherworldly action. Arguably, Peterson’s concept of the modern eye is a better explanation in that the socially constructed concept of art transports objects into the art category. Like the Bauhaus, the MQG has started and flourished with great haste, and although the MQG is in the early stages of development as a national group, they are working to create an identity that is centered on quilting but includes elements of design and the general sewist identity.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Colonial Revival highlighted quilts as an important American decorative element. Historic quilts were valued and their patchwork designs and appliqué patterns were copied by quiltmakers. Despite the attention to quiltmaking that the Colonial Revival encouraged, McMorris and Kile argue that “the Colonial Revival moved quiltmaking away from originality and toward mere replication.”<sup>53</sup> Given the emphasis on the lack of rules in modern quiltmaking, one would expect a great deal of originality, however, like the Colonial Revival, modern quilts are often replicas of one another. The speed at which multiple makers can create the same quilt is increased by the presence of imagery on the Internet.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a craft revival similar to the Arts and Crafts movement was born, “both revivals were reactions against technology, industrialization, and what was regarded as the evils of both.”<sup>54</sup> The 1960s and 1970s craft revival did have a clear focus on quiltmaking, and as such, the popularity of quilting grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the United States. While the urge to create with one’s hands is often a

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<sup>52</sup> Neumann, 13

<sup>53</sup> McMorris and Kile, 30

<sup>54</sup> McMorris and Kile, 41

response to the mechanized culture we live in, the MQG movement contrasts the possibility present within people and technology. Robert Shaw, author of *American Quilts The Democratic Art*, states “the greatest and most sustained of all quilt revivals began in the 1970s and continues to this day.”<sup>55</sup> The MQG arguably represents a departure from the craft revival of the 1960s and 1970s , perhaps a new chapter in the history of the American quilting tradition.

### **Blogs**

Since the inception of the Internet, the way people share information has drastically shifted. Information can be transmitted across space and time with ease. The size of the audience one is projecting information to is seemingly infinite. Individuals can broadcast the happenings of their life via blog. The blog network allows people to share and connect with other bloggers. Blogs are a relatively new phenomenon, with the first reference to a weblog made by Jorn Barger in 1997.<sup>56</sup> While people blog about literally anything and everything, there is a very active contingent of craft bloggers. Craft bloggers are people immersed in the handmade/DIY culture who share their handiwork, whether it is knitting, quilting, general sewing, etc.

Although I did not specifically target quilt bloggers, the preponderance of individual bloggers who participate in the MQG are represented in this case study. Blogs provide people with a way of tracking their lives. People who actively blog chose elements of their existence to present in a very public forum, which suggests a level of self-awareness and confidence. One way of conceptualizing blogging is, “to blog, they

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<sup>55</sup> Shaw, Robert. *American Quilts The Democratic Art 1780-2007*. (New York, New York: Sterling Publishing Co, 2009), p. 297.

<sup>56</sup> Blood, Rebecca. “Weblogs: A History and Perspective.” *We’ve got Blog* Ed. John Rodzvilla. (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002) p. 7.

say, is to present the truth about your life or the world as you see it.”<sup>57</sup> Many MQG bloggers focus solely on their quilting pursuits within their blogs.

In a study about personality traits as predictors of blogs, Gill et al found that:

Although blogs afford their author the freedom of topic and style, in most cases the bloggers’ behavior was consistent with our predictions based on their personality type or their linguistic behavior in other media. This apparently suggests that bloggers do not generally choose to present themselves differently to the way they present in other contexts.<sup>58</sup>

While the qualitative interviews provided the data for my study, Gill et al’s research suggests that the information bloggers shared during interviews was consistent with the information they present of themselves in the virtual world. Blogs can sometimes be seen as an escapist pastime in that a fantasy world is created, however Gill et al’s research does not support this common viewpoint. Blogging is seen as an “expression of individuality,”<sup>59</sup> so it is a medium well suited to presenting quilts that also represent the maker’s individuality.

According to MQG co-founder Latifah Saafir, “many of our members live online: they are alone. They live alone. They quilt alone.”<sup>60</sup> The expression of individuality within a solitary existence suggests a void in terms of contact. The MQG has shifted the interaction into the physical world, while maintaining digital tracking devices like blogs, Flickr streams, Facebook pages, etc.

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<sup>57</sup> Rosenberg, Scott. *Say Everything How Blogging Began, What its Becoming, and Why it Matters*. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), p. 236.

<sup>58</sup> Gill, Alistair J., Nowson, Scott., Oberlander, Jon. “What Are They Blogging About? Personality, Topic and Motivation in Blogs.” *Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence*. 2009, p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> Rosenberg, 311

<sup>60</sup> Frank, 26

### **Hobby/Leisure Activities**

Marybeth Stalp conducted an extensive qualitative research project surrounding quilting, which resulted in a book published in 2007. *Quilting The Fabric of Everyday Life* summarizes the experiences of 70 women who quilt. Most of the women are middle-aged, and the focus of Stalp's work is how the women navigate the inclusion of quilting in their life. Stalp's participants are likely very different than the participants in this research project, however her work provides useful information about how women balance their lives between work, family, and hobby.

Quilting is commonly thought of as a female pastime. As such, quilting “allowed women to ‘do gender’ appropriately and traditionally as they gifted finished quilts to family and friends, fulfilling aptly their feminine family roles and engaging in gendered carework duties.”<sup>61</sup> When considering practicing craft in the DIYscape, people are attracted due to “its association with community, its Feminist overtones, and the satisfaction that can be derived from tactile experience in an increasingly abstract, artificial world.”<sup>62</sup> Despite the differences in the sampled population, I expected gender to be a common theme among participants in this case study, however, it was not a topic frequently mentioned.

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<sup>61</sup> Stalp, 129

<sup>62</sup> Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 10



## CHAPTER THREE MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Materials

This study did not require many material resources. I used a digital voice recorder to capture the interviews. I used a transcribing program called “Transcriptions” to allow me to slow down the recording to transcribe more effectively and accurately. Each participant signed an informed consent form, and they were each provided with their own copy. Each participant was asked to fill out a short demographic survey following the interview.

### Methods

This study is a qualitative analysis of the experience of members of the MQG. According to Creswell, “qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.”<sup>63</sup> This study fits Creswell’s parameters for qualitative research because I sought to understand why people joined the MQG and how they conceptualized the quilts that they made, which is likely linked in some ways to their membership in the MQG. I used in depth one-on-one interviews to understand “the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.”<sup>64</sup> My goal was to complete 20 interviews over the fall 2011 semester. I completed the data collection phase with 24 interviews encompassing the

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<sup>63</sup> Creswell, John. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2007), p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Seidman, Irving. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. (New York, NY: Teacher’s College Press, 2006), p. 9.

experiences of 26 members of MQG's from across the United States. Two of the interviews included two participants at the request of the participants to save time.

I intended to use a purposeful sampling technique to ensure that each participant had been a member of the MQG for six months or longer. While I did include this information in the correspondence I sent to guilds, some participants had not been "official" members of a guild for six months or longer. Membership in the MQG is a somewhat fluid concept for several reasons. First, the guild is young, with new branches setting up guilds all the time. While they are all centered on the modern aesthetic, the framework of each individual guild varies. Some guilds have dues, officers, and a clear meeting format while others, perhaps younger, meet under less organized circumstances as they formulate what they want their individual guild to be. So, some participants may have gone to one meeting six months ago, but they consider themselves members of the guild. Also, the online presence of the guild shifts the common perception of membership. The varying degrees of involvement on the guild's blog or Flickr page led some participants to feel more involved in the guild regardless of their level of face-to-face interaction with other members. Despite the different levels of involvement that the participants in this study had with their local MQG, they were all active quilters who were passionate about the modern quilt movement.

Contact information for potential participants is readily available online, either through MQG blogs, Facebook, or personal blogs. As I began to look at each guild's online presence, the formats between individual guilds varied greatly. In order to ensure that each member of the guild was given an equal opportunity to participate in the study, I contacted the administrator for the guild and asked her to email my request and

informed consent form to members (See Appendix A). Since I was traveling to each location on specific dates, I included this information in the initial contact, so inevitably some people were eliminated as participants based on scheduling issues.

I suspected that many of the participants would be similar to me in both age and interest in quilts, so I felt I should be cognizant of the interview relationship and avoid building too much rapport which can result in “a full ‘We’ relationship in which the question of whose experience is being related and whose meaning is being made is critically confounded.”<sup>65</sup> The commonality between the participants and me was always centered on quilts, but there were many differences that led to varying levels of similarity or dissimilarity in our lived experiences. While Seidman was sensitive to the researcher becoming too close with their participants, Creswell had a different interpretation of the researcher/participant relationship. He said that qualitative research is conducted when “we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study.”<sup>66</sup> Several factors played into minimizing a “power relationship” between the participants and myself. First, participation was voluntary and took place in a location chosen by the interviewee. Second, they were discussing a topic that they were passionate about. While some of the questions may have forced them to ponder issues they did not usually consider in terms of quilting, they did not seem intimidated by the questions.

I traveled to Philadelphia, Kansas City, St. Louis, Houston, and Austin to conduct interviews for the study. Participants represented MQG’s from the cities I visited as well

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<sup>65</sup> Seidman, 96

<sup>66</sup> Creswell, 40

as Los Angeles and Northampton, Massachusetts. Individual participants are not identified by specific guild membership to help protect the anonymity of each individual participant. All the individual MQG's represented in this study are affiliated with the national MQG. At this point, the relationship between the national organization and the individual guilds is somewhat informal. Some participants were founding members of their local guild, and they described limited contact with the national guild. While each participant was part of arguably the same organization, there were differences between each guild in terms of the structure of their guild, the organization of the meetings, and their participation in national/local challenges and swaps.

All participants signed an Informed Consent Form prior to the interview commencing (see Appendix B). Many interviews were conducted in participant's homes, but others were in coffee shops, restaurants, or other public places. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes depending on the availability and level of engagement of the participant. Generally interviews that took place in the participants' homes lasted longer because they usually shared their quilts with me. I formally met with each participant once, but several participants emailed me follow up material after the interview. I used seven questions to frame each interview, although I did ask clarifying questions when necessary (see Appendix C). Additionally, at the end of each interview I gave the participant the opportunity to add anything else she thought was important. Most participants used this to summarize their overarching thoughts on quilting, the MQG, etc.

Individual participants are not identified by name within this case study. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of each participant. Additionally, the individual participants are not linked to their geographic location. Each participant did

fill out a short demographic survey upon the completion of the interview. The information from this summary is linked to the pseudonym for each participant, to highlight some aspects of their individual identities.

I submitted a research proposal to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska Lincoln in July 2011. After preliminary review, they decided the project did not require IRB approval because it will not produce generalizable research (see Appendix D). In other words, the project will not explain why any person would join any group or organization, so therefore they label the project under the scope of “oral history.”

### **Qualitative Analysis**

After the data collection phase was complete, I transcribed all of the interviews. Transcribing provided me the opportunity for an in depth review of all the material gathered during the interview phase. From the transcription, I was able to code the data to identify themes. Seidman suggests that the researcher initially mark sections of the interviews as interesting. Since I did the transcribing myself, this phase of coding took place during the actual transcribing. I would frequently bold sections that I felt were particularly interesting.

Originally I had intended to use a computer program to assist in the coding process. After completing the interviews and transcribing, my level of intimacy with the data was such I felt that continuing the process by hand was satisfactory. According to Creswell, “a computer program may, to some individuals, put a machine between the researcher and the actual data. This causes an uncomfortable distance between the

researcher and his or her data.”<sup>67</sup> In this case, I agreed with Creswell and proceeded with the coding process by hand. I read through the material several times, each time noticing additional sections that were important, both in terms of the content and its relationship to other participants’ thoughts.

As I conducted interviews, it seemed as though most participants were explaining their reasons for joining the MQG similarly. Many themes were similar among participants, but the coding process illuminated many linkages between different themes that were not initially apparent.

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<sup>67</sup> Creswell, 165

## CHAPTER FOUR ANALYSIS

Through the coding process several themes emerged. In addition to the themes, I also had some demographic information about each participant. Overall both the demographic information and the coded data from interviews showed both the variety present among the participants as well as the similarities that bound them together as members of the MQG. Common themes that emerged include age, online/blog, art/craft, functionality, rules, choice, elements of design, and desire to sell. Each theme is explored individually below, and the results as a whole as they relate to the initial research questions are explored in the analysis section that follows.

### **Demographic Information**

The 26 participants were asked to fill out a short demographic survey at the conclusion of the interview. The demographic survey included five questions centered on gender, age, race, level of education, and occupation (see Appendix for survey and results). All of the 26 participants were female. In terms of age, the highest percentage of participants (31 percent) were between the ages of 31 and 40. Twenty seven percent of the participants were between the ages of 51 and 60, followed by 19 percent between the ages of 21 and 30. Eight percent of the participants were between the ages of 61 and 70. The majority of the participants were white. Eight percent were African American and four percent were Asian. All of the participants had some college experience. Sixty two percent had a Bachelor's degree, with an additional 30 percent holding a Master's degree or higher. Eight percent of the participants had some college experience, but no degree. The occupations of the participants varied greatly. Twenty percent stayed at

home in some capacity, either as mothers, homemakers, or they were retired. Sixteen percent identified as a quilter, quiltmaker, or quilt store owner when asked about their occupation. The remaining participants worked in a wide array of fields including software development, childcare, and graphic design.

During the fall of 2011, the national Modern Quilt Guild posted a survey on its website that explored demographic information, quiltmaking habits, and desires for the future of the MQG. While the survey targeted members of the guild, outsiders were able to take the survey as well, so it is representative of people who probably identify as modern quilters rather than only participants in the MQG. Regardless, the MQG shared the results of its survey, and the demographic information is not only interesting, but shares many similarities with the demographic information of the participants interviewed for this study. The similarities are most striking when considering age. In the 21-30 age bracket, the MQG survey results had 17.1 percent. Between the ages of 31 and 40, there were 33.2 percent of the respondents. From ages 41 to 50, the MQG found 19.6 percent of respondents in that age bracket. About 20 percent of respondents were between the ages of 51 to 59, and 10 percent were over the age of 60.<sup>68</sup> Both the MQG results and the demographic information gathered from the participants of this study show that the highest percentage of modern quilters are between the ages of 31 and 40. Both sets of survey results also show a high proportion of modern quilters who are between the ages of 51 and 60. These two sets of data both refute the common conception that modern quilters are all young. Many members of the MQG who participated in this study spoke about how the age range within their group varied greatly. These data sets do not highlight the make up of individual MQG's, but the population

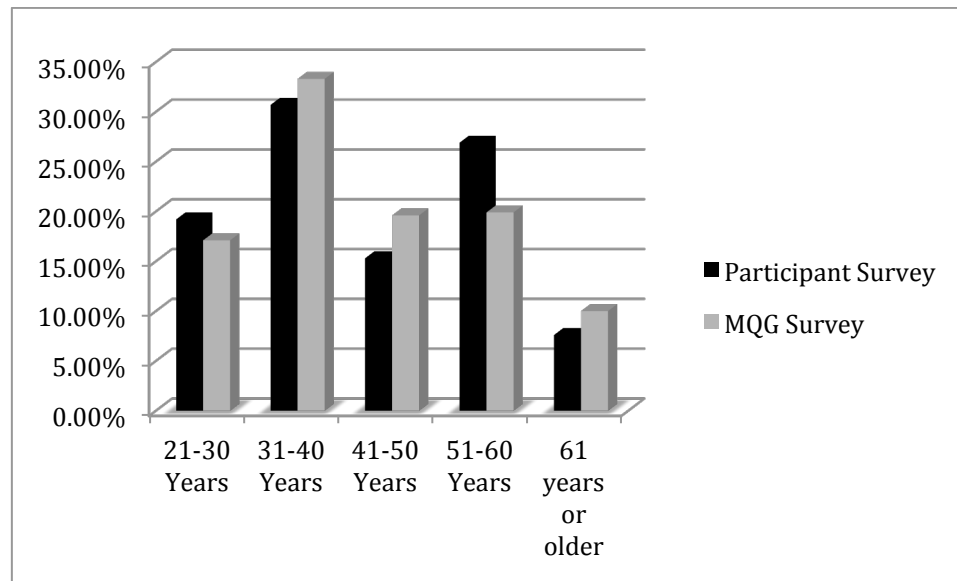
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<sup>68</sup>The Modern Quilt Guild, email message to the author, November 7, 2011.



that makes up the group is clearly diverse in age. The chart below compares the different age categories between the participants of this survey and the MQG survey.

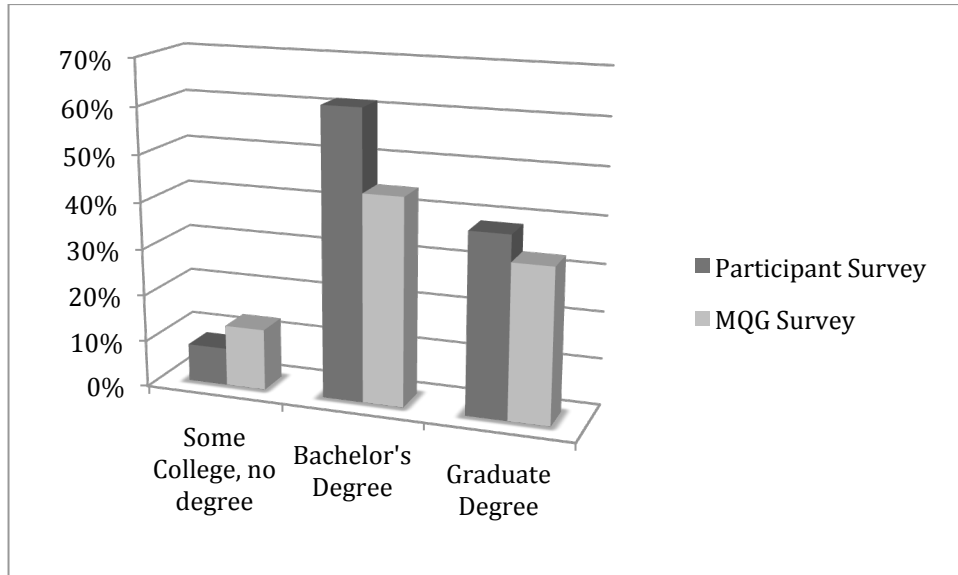
**Figure One: Age of Modern Quilters**



By comparing the MQG survey results with the demographic information on the participants of this study, we also see similarities in the level of education. About 77 percent of the respondents to the MQG survey had either a Bachelor's degree or a graduate degree.<sup>69</sup> Within the participants for this study, 92 percent had a Bachelor's

<sup>69</sup> The Modern Quilt Guild, email message to the author, November 7, 2011.

**Figure Two: Education of Modern Quilters**



There were several issues that one survey inquired about, but the other survey did not. For example, the participants for this study were asked about their race, whereas the MQG did not ask their participants about this factor. Likewise, the MQG survey had questions related to household income and family structure, whereas the demographic survey I used did not. Given the high levels of education represented by respondents to the MQG survey, it is not surprising that the household income figures were high. In many respects quilting is an expensive hobby, so a certain level of disposable income is needed to fund fabric, notions, and machinery.

While qualitative research was best suited to the research questions I was interested in exploring for this study, future inquiry into the MQG and modern quilting movement could employ quantitative research methods to go deeper into the demographics of the group. It would also be interesting if the MQG gathered survey data annually so that it can track how its group changes over time.

## Age

Age was a theme that many participants referred to throughout the interviews. A common misconception about the MQG is that it is comprised of mainly young quilters. As the demographic data illustrated above shows, the MQG has a diverse range of ages represented. Age is a factor that can create boundaries between different groups of people, but for the most part it seemed as though the participants from the seven modern quilt guilds I met with had a variety of ages represented within their groups, and the diversity in age was viewed as a positive. Age fueled interest in many people joining the guild, both in terms of participants seeking out peers and other participants seeking “new/young” energy in quilting.

Ruth spoke about a reversal of sorts in terms of her participation with guilds. When referencing a local traditional guild, she said, “the few times I’ve been to it, I was a member years ago when I was doing my research, and the women were old enough to be my mother, my grandmother. I just didn’t feel comfortable.”<sup>70</sup> Now, in her mid-50s, Ruth said “it’s really interesting because now I feel like I am one of the old ladies because most of them are significantly younger than I am.”<sup>71</sup> Despite being in the position that put Ruth off years earlier, she felt as though the dichotomy between old and young was not a negative factor in her MQG.

Another participant, Amy, discussed the difference in age between members of her MQG as it is reflected in the quilts they make:

“I would say there are two types. Two types. There is my type. We are sort of just kind of, we are kind of into quilting, its cool, we do it, we look at blogs, we get excited about these things, but we haven’t been sewing for 25-30 years, you know we are sort of the younger generation modern

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<sup>70</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>71</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

quilters and we are just different. I mean, I notice a difference in what quilts we produce. And then there are the older, ‘I’ve been quilting for almost a generation and now I am sick of that quilting so I am trying something new.’ And they can also get on the blogs, but they are not nearly as proficient at it. And they still get excited about matched points, they get really excited about wonky patterns, but you can still see that it is fully calculated.”<sup>72</sup>

To Amy, the difference in age among members was evident in their quilts, as well as their use of online communication. Amy did not view differences between the two types of modern quilters in her guild as a negative. Later in the interview she cited the diversity of the group as one of her favorite parts. She said, “I like the age range and the range of what people do.”<sup>73</sup> Other participants discussed two types of modern quilters similarly to Amy. When Nora distinguished between the two different types of modern quilters that she saw, she did not use age as a distinguishing factor between the two camps. She said, “there’s the actual modern quilter who quilts in the modern aesthetic and then there’s the modern quilter who likes the idea of modernism and breaking rules and not having some old lady tell you that you’re doing it wrong.”<sup>74</sup> So, while Nora did not say that one group was old and the other young, she did use an example of an old person enforcing rules in quilting, so she inferred that participants of the modern quilt guild, whether old or young, are shying away from the traditional concept of quilting.

To some participants, the age range was surprising. When she started a MQG branch, Monica expected the members to be in their 20s and 30s, however she found “there are so many people who have totally embraced this and came with a whole bunch of new ideas who are in their 50s and 60s and I would not have expected that at all.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>73</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>74</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>75</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

The age viewpoint shifted somewhat depending on the age of the participant. Whereas Monica was surprised to have so many members over 50, Renee, a member of the same MQG said in reference to the younger members, “its just the next generation taking from the past and making it new and modern and so that’s why I like it.”<sup>76</sup>

When asked to describe the typical modern quiltmaker, Dana, a member in her 50s, stated, “my first inclination was to say they were first of all younger. I don’t know if that’s the case though.”<sup>77</sup> Likewise, Katie said, “I mean I am not going to say she’s young because its more than age, its an aesthetic choice more than an age.”<sup>78</sup> The prevailing concept among outsiders of the MQG is that the majority of members are young. The “fresh” approach to quilting is often correlated with age in people’s minds, however, the reality of the group, as supported by the demographic information from the MQG survey as well as the information from participants in this study supports that the group is very diverse in terms of age. Laura said, “there’s a lady who comes to the modern guild and you look at her and you say ‘great grandma’ and it seems like she wouldn’t even have an interest in this, but I think its fantastic because she is there, and she’s interested, and she looks at it, and she absorbs it.”<sup>79</sup> Laura’s observations highlight the appreciation of the diversity in age among members of the MQG.

Meeting a new group of people was a factor that related to age for some participants. Emily was the youngest participant interviewed, however she was looking to meet people with more mature interests. She said, “we are young, and we meet people and they want to drink and its fine, we don’t mind doing that but its not my lifestyle and

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>77</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

<sup>78</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>79</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

typically we have never really done that, so these are people [MQG members] that at least I can connect with on a different level.”<sup>80</sup> Emily associated age with the type of people she was trying to meet when she said, “I was looking for maybe a little bit of an older crowd, but not too old.”<sup>81</sup>

Another function of age for some of the participants was its role in defining some common stereotypes in the quilting world as a whole. According to Renee, “if you are a quilter, you are an old granny in a rocking chair, I mean, I am an old granny now, but not in a rocking chair yet.”<sup>82</sup> Katie echoed these sentiments stating: “people are like ‘quilter, oh, that’s cute.’ I’m always like ‘its not what you’re picturing.’ Because I always get, ‘oh, my grandma did that.’ And I’m like, ‘I don’t do what your grandma did.’”<sup>83</sup> Emily said she liked to show people her quilts so that they would understand that her quilting was different than common stereotypes. She said, “its not really until they’ve seen what I have done that they are like ‘okay, this is cool.’ So I try not to tell people unless they have actually seen what I’ve done because then they just look at me like ‘okay, you’re the crazy quilt lady.’”<sup>84</sup> Participants, regardless of their age, were quick to differentiate their quilting and themselves as quilters from associations with old age.

Many members of the MQG interviewed were also members of other guilds that they generally referred to as their “traditional” guild to distinguish it from the MQG. Nora spoke of the MQG continuing to gain relevance “because the traditional quilt guilds will start to age out.”<sup>85</sup> In terms of the quilting industry as a whole, targeting a younger

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<sup>80</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>81</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>82</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>83</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>84</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>85</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

age demographic is important according to Sally. She said, “I think the modern group is the infusion of fresh blood that the quilting industry needs to continue on.”<sup>86</sup> Sarah agreed stating:

So its infectious, it’s gathering its momentum and the younger people are such an inspiration because they see things differently than we do and to take a look at something and say, ‘okay, I don’t have to take this standard pattern and reproduce it. I don’t need to follow those rules. I can close my eyes and do a drawing and recreate that in fabric.’ It’s so liberating. It’s so cool.<sup>87</sup>

Looking ahead, according to Nora, the influx of young energy was seen as a factor that lent itself to the MQG’s “ability to bring a lot of people to quiltmaking who haven’t [made quilts] before.”<sup>88</sup> The potential to draw people into quilting, especially young people, was an exciting prospect to many participants of this study.

### **Online/Blog**

While the original Los Angeles MQG grew out of an online community, and many members of the MQG across the country are very active online, the participants of this study showed that interaction online is not mandatory to feeling a part of the MQG. That said, some participants found that participation in the guild increased their awareness of the online presence of modern quilters, as well as their use of social interaction tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. Additionally, many participants cited the online presence of the MQG as a major part of their participation in the guild. Similar to age, there was a wide range of levels of interaction online. Participants ranged from those who never used online resources, those whose use of online resources

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<sup>86</sup> Interview, November 4, 2011

<sup>87</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>88</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

increased as a function of their membership in the MQG, and those whose passion for online interaction was as steady before the inception of the MQG as it is today.

The participants who did not participate in the online community surrounding the MQG were generally people who seemed to shy away from computer use in general. For example, Sarah said, “actually nowadays when everything is so electronic and they want on-the-spot information, that’s not my forte, I’m paper pencil, I like the eraser, I can’t handle ‘delete.’”<sup>89</sup> Sarah did not want to participate online, but she said:

if I was really concerned about that, there is a resource that I could go to, but going through the different projects and group activities that I do, that gives me the connection that I need to get to know them by name, but in general, they’re just kind of like mystery folks who are so talented. You know, it’s just me, I just have this blockade on computer.<sup>90</sup>

For Sarah, she realized that she was missing out on elements of the group that play out online because she referenced other members as “mystery folks,” but she realized that this was her choice, and she was fine participating only at meetings. Sarah poked at the bloggers in her MQG by saying, “there’s one gal in our group who I think she blogs every time her kid sneezes, and I just don’t care.”<sup>91</sup> This is an interesting point, because in many ways, a lot of the online communication and interaction is not completely centered on quilting. For a group with such a wide variety of ages represented, people are at different points in their lives in terms of family, work, and spare time. This makes it difficult for all members to identify with each other across all layers of their lives, and for Sarah, the online community was not something she wanted to participate in. Sarah was not the only participant who avoided blogs entirely. Rita said, “I’m kind of old school. Give me a book, give me a magazine. I do a little email. I do a little web

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<sup>89</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>90</sup> Interview, October, 16, 2011

<sup>91</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011



surfing, but I don't know that I have ever gone to a blog. I don't tweet. I don't do any of that stuff."<sup>92</sup> According to Gail, "blogging is something that is really foreign to me."<sup>93</sup>

While Gail noted that age is a factor in her choice not to participate in the online community, she also said, "it depends on desire. I don't care about that stuff. I really don't care."<sup>94</sup> Sarah, Rita, and Gail were all in their 50s or 60s and did not participate in online activities of the MQG. Regardless all three were very passionate about the MQG, quilting, and the sense of community they felt within their MQG.

Just as the online community felt foreign to some participants, to others it made sense to look for resources and community on the Internet. Emily said:

I didn't really know about blogs or anything but I work in the web industry so I immediately went to the internet and was like 'okay, I can find tutorials, I can find free patterns, I can find deals on fabric online,' and that's when I started seeing people who were blogging and doing all this fun stuff and this whole community out there.<sup>95</sup>

For the participants who were active in the online quilting community, sometimes they already knew other members of their local MQG when the group formed because of online contact. According to Natalie, "the relationships online were already established, there was a community online, we just had never seen each other face-to-face but they were already there, so I think that's one of the things that greatly contributed to how fast it all happened."<sup>96</sup> For some participants, the online community was the first time they had any kind of community around their quilting. Lindsay called quilting solitary before she found the online community. She said:

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<sup>92</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>93</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>94</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>95</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>96</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

I would go to quilt shops and I kind of knew, they knew my name because they knew my credit card number and that was about as close as the relationship ever got because I was just in there so often, but then once I figured out just how much people do on Flickr with swaps and all the virtual quilting bees and all that kind of stuff, I really started reading blogs. And that's kind of when it became less of a solitary pursuit and more of a group aspect.<sup>97</sup>

Transferring these pre-existing relationships into the “real world” then allowed for other members to join who became aware of the group through other channels, like word of mouth, and publicity in local newspapers.

Another participant mentioned that the presence of blogging in one's life is somewhat of a divider for her guild. She said, “there's a lot of people in the guild with blogs but its kind of, there's the online community that kind of hangs out together and then there's the in person community that kind of is separate almost.”<sup>98</sup> This comment is interesting to consider in comparison to the survey results from the MQG about blogging. According to their respondents, 50 percent blogged, whereas 50 percent did not blog.<sup>99</sup> It is understandable that people who communicate online more frequently than just at the guild meetings would gravitate towards one another, but one guild had an interesting practice to encourage all members to get to know each other. For the first several meetings, everyone had to sit next to someone that they did not know to make sure everyone at least met everyone else.

Interestingly, the online resources used by members of the MQG allowed members who were unable to attend a lot of meetings to feel a part of the community. Mary was the most extreme example because she said, “so I joined, although I have never been to one of their meetings. I really enjoy browsing through the online

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<sup>97</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>98</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>99</sup> The Modern Quilt Guild, email message to the author, November 7, 2011.

communications...I feel like I know a lot of those people.”<sup>100</sup> Despite feeling like she knew members of her local MQG, as a store owner, she said, “sometimes I feel like I am on the outside looking in, and sometimes because I own this store, I need to be on the outside looking in.”<sup>101</sup> Another participant, Helen, had only been to one meeting. She said, “I have been to one, exactly one whole meeting. I pay my dues, I am an active member, active isn’t right, I am a paid member.”<sup>102</sup> Helen associated her level of involvement with the group in terms of in-person interaction, however she went on to describe her level of interaction online, which was significant. She said, “I like that idea of knowing people and it was so fascinating to me the whole blogging scenario, because suddenly you could know people without ever having meeting them.”<sup>103</sup> Helen told a story about meeting one of her online friends at a MQG event and the interaction being somewhat awkward which led her to feel that online friendships are “a different thing than actually getting to know somebody face-to-face.”<sup>104</sup> Olivia had only been to one meeting of her local MQG. She said, “we’ve had very few meetings. The only one I’ve been able to attend was the very first one and the grand total of people there were two...I haven’t been able to make any of the other meetings.”<sup>105</sup> Despite not being to many meetings, the online community allowed Olivia to feel a part of the group because “you can message each other, you can post a message on a general bulletin board and you can post photos of your work and have your own little profile.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Interview, September, 23, 2011

<sup>101</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>102</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>103</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>104</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>105</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>106</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

One of the participants, Ruth, was very active in the online craft community around Y2K doing swaps with people from around the world. Despite her high level of engagement in several Yahoo groups in the late 90s, early 2000s, she seemed less engaged with the current online scene. She said:

Some of the quilt blogs I look at from time-to-time, but there is no way to keep up with all the stuff that is out there now in terms of looking at people's blogs and pins and going to copied websites and looking at all the you know 'that would be fun to make, that would be fun to make.' You could spend all your time doing that and not actually quilting or doing anything else.<sup>107</sup>

Getting lost in the blogosphere was a concern among several participants. Maintaining a balance between online communication and actually quilting was important to many participants. When defining the typical modern quiltmaker, Katie said:

We have this balance of using the Internet like crazy but also having concrete real hands-on things we do, and I think one drives the other. I think a desire to do and feel and get away from the computer screen drives quilting a lot but then the growth of it and the inspiration is all on the Internet. We really use both equally.<sup>108</sup>

While Katie felt she used technology and sewing equally, for the participants who did not use online resources, their personal experiences were different.

One participant made an interesting distinction between types of blogs. She talked about two elements present in blogs: teaching and sharing work. According to Helen, one of her favorite bloggers, "she does very little in the way of teaching people what to do, mostly in the way of 'look what I have done.'"<sup>109</sup> To her, there was a distinction between promoting yourself as an individual or promoting the craft, quilting, as a whole. Helen explained her personal goals in blogging:

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<sup>107</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>108</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>109</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

I think I have 13 members of [Google Reader], you know, I don't know, that's not my point; you know I am not looking for sponsors. I am not looking for that, I can't do that. But I am dedicated to lifting that craft, whatever that word means, into a bigger place. And letting that be a part of who I am and how I put it out there.<sup>110</sup>

Helen was not the only participant who had issues with the individualized nature of some bloggers. Julie, who was a dedicated knitter as well as quilter, said this about a knitting blogger, “she was just too full of herself. I'm sorry, you're a knitter. I am a knitter too, and its only two stitches, you can't be that great, okay?”<sup>111</sup> In the craft blog world, there are some bloggers who are very popular among readers. When discussing the roots of modern quilting, Nora said, “a lot of the newbies don't even know who those people are, like they just see who has a blog, and that's the person they think is the greatest modern quilter of all time and I don't say that those people are bad and there's some really great people out there...well, they weren't the first.”<sup>112</sup> The history of modern quilting seemed to vary between participants depending on their personal experience, with an element being their interaction with the online community.

While some participants actively blogged, others did not. Just because a participant did not have her own blog did not mean she did not follow others. When asked how she connected with other quiltmakers, Amy said, “blogs. Blogs, the Modern Quilt Guild, that's a huge part of it you know, keeping in touch with people through that guild.”<sup>113</sup> While Amy did not blog herself, she said she read other people's blogs and spent time on Flickr looking at images. Flickr, a photo sharing website, was a popular tool for many participants in this study. Rachel said, “Flickr, you can so and so did this

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<sup>110</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>111</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>112</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>113</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

quilt, ‘ohh that’s cool, that’s not something you would see at your local quilt shop’ and I think that’s really helped to kind of explode it [modern quilting].”<sup>114</sup>

Jill noticed that she began to follow more blogs after joining the MQG. In comparing the MQG to other more traditional guilds she is a member of, she said:

I guess that is another distinction between the modern guild and some of the other ones is that they do have a big internet presence and an online community where they fully take advantage of the web 2.0 social aspect of the internet where the other guilds are definitely a 1.0, they put the newsletter up there and that’s about it.<sup>115</sup>

Other participants noted that their use of online resources increased as a result of the MQG. Dana said:

I really kind of learned more about the online community and about you know connecting with other quilters through blogging and other websites and so once I started learning more about that, I mean, I don’t blog myself, but now, all of a sudden I have a Flickr photo stream.<sup>116</sup>

She later added, “so I tweeted it. Check me out, I have a Twitter account, much to the chagrin of my two children.”<sup>117</sup>

For some participants, the online portion of the MQG community was a vital portion. Monica said, “I tried telling them that anyone who would really call themselves a modern quilter has to be involved online. They do not have to be involved in every single piece of social media, but you need to be aware and somehow involved online.” Everyone that I interviewed was aware of the abundance of online communication among many modern quilters, but participation in the online community was a choice, and those who chose not to engage were conscious of their decision and still felt a part of their MQG branch.

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<sup>114</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>115</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>116</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

<sup>117</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

For the participants who value the online community, they saw it improving over time. Amy said, “I think our Internet presence is great, and I feel like that will only get better over time.”<sup>118</sup> Sally called the MQG her “local guild and my online guild,”<sup>119</sup> so the MQG has the ability to fill many roles for its members because of the duality of its presence both online and in local communities.

### **Art/Craft**

Quilting traditions have intersected with the art/craft debate for decades. The discourse surrounding quilts as art objects was a defining element of the art quilt movement. One of the goals of this project was to gain an understanding of how the differences between art and craft impact members of the modern quilt guild. Participants were asked to describe their understanding of art and craft followed by two other questions that explored how they describe themselves as quilters as well as the quilts they make. The explanations of the differences between art and craft varied greatly among participants. The similarity in responses among the participants was grounded in the overwhelming conclusion that the debate had little influence on their quilting practices. In terms of how the participants described themselves as quilters and the quilts they make, there was a range of answers. Some participants immediately defined themselves as a modern quilter, others just a quilter, and some said artist. The most prevalent themes among the variety of thoughts on the role of the dichotomous relationship between art and craft in the participant’s quilting are explored below.

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<sup>118</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>119</sup> Interview, November 4, 2011

Several participants drew connections between art and originality. This generally resulted in a discussion of the use of or absence of patterns. Mary described people who do not use patterns as having “a little bit of an attitude”<sup>120</sup> associated with their supposed originality of design. Mary’s thought was that if you are making a simple pattern that has been around for years, like a nine patch, it was not saying anything that you did not use a pattern. Natalie also looked at originality as a defining characteristic between art and craft. She said:

my view is that, especially specifically talking about the modern quilt world, that an artist is one that takes more freedom with the design, they either design their own patterns or they are really great at altering and making patterns their own. A crafter is more akin to buying a pattern and making it and just the process of making a quilt is what makes them happy but the art is finding joy in creating and making their own.<sup>121</sup>

Like Natalie, Olivia felt like patterns were the antithesis of originality and that when using a pattern, the work would stay in the realm of craft. As she continued to talk about the distinction between art and craft, she came up with an example that challenged her viewpoint. She said, “so crafts were like you get out your popsicle sticks and the glue. That actually doesn’t fit my definition of craft, it fits my definition of art unless you used a pattern and followed the instructions for the log cabin, which was craft. So I don’t know where to draw the line there on the craft, but its interesting.”<sup>122</sup> For Ruth, she saw the use or absence of patterns as related to age. She said:

I’ll look at a pattern and I may adapt it, I may modify it significantly, but I at least start somewhere with a pattern. Which I think is one of the biggest differences I see in them...much more looking at a picture I guess, or they see something online and they say ‘I’ll just draw it, sketch it, copy it, whatever.’”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>121</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>122</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>123</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011



The intersections of inspiration, originality, and pattern were different for different participants. Judith noted, similarly to Ruth in that she referenced the modern quilter as outside of herself, “it also doesn’t seem to matter to them if they are making other people’s patterns. I have seen that Joelle Halverson color wheel quilt, so many people have made that, and that’s okay.”<sup>124</sup> While Judith did not use patterns, she had no problem with others using patterns.

To May, the distinction between art and craft was not as important, but she stressed the difference between good art and bad art, which to her had many intersections with originality. May said, “you can follow a pattern, you can paint by number, you can buy a kit for a quilt...there’s just anything that a person makes is art and they may have the spark of creativity to take it beyond the ordinary and then that is where it becomes good art.”<sup>125</sup> Many participants talked about moving away from the use of patterns into their own designs. Leah said, “I’ve tried lately to always use a pattern that I am designing myself rather than something from a magazine, which I have done, and that’s fine, but just the further that I go, I’d rather it all be from me.”<sup>126</sup>

Some participants recognized the presence of the conflict between art and craft in the quilting world at large. Mary said “I think there’s a connotation with quilters and crafters that doesn’t appeal to modern quilters. They don’t want to see themselves as that person. I certainly can understand that.”<sup>127</sup> Other participants pointed to the documentary *Stitched* as an example of the different groups present in quilting, who often struggle to find common ground. Lindsay said, “it made very clear distinctions between

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<sup>124</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>125</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>126</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>127</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

their styles and it kind of just put lines in the sand in terms of ‘I am this kind of quilter’ and ‘I am this kind of quilter’ and you can’t come over here.”<sup>128</sup> May said, “the traditional ones...they came off looking really small and small minded and bitchy.”<sup>129</sup> These stereotypes and groups are similar to what Mary was describing as something modern quilters try to differentiate themselves from. Dana did not relate to the art/craft debate at all, but she did say, “I will say this, we have ben reminded many times by both [her local guild leaders] that modern quilting is not art quilting, is not I guess verging into that area of really contemporary art stuff. So they do continue to remind us of that, and they continue to remind us of not venturing into the area of traditional quilting.”<sup>130</sup> These distinctions illustrate that while the art/craft dichotomy may not be familiar to members by name, similar challenges exist in distinguishing their work from traditional quilts and art quilts. As with any distinction, the possibility of alienating some participants with boundaries is possible.

For some participants the differences between different types of quilting are so minute, they did not want to get lost in the small distinctions. For example, Emily said:

a lot of the modern themes you see are based on traditional quilts, wonky log cabins. Log cabins being the most traditional you can get and wonky log cabins are considered modern and it’s really just a block with a couple non-straight edges...I am definitely not concerned with the difference between them.<sup>131</sup>

Emily was wary about describing herself as a specific type of quilter. She said:

I don’t know if I would even want an identity [as a quilter] because you can get stuck in that and I just kind of want to do what I want to do in the moment because there is so much stuff out there to do...I just kind of like

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<sup>128</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>129</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>130</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

<sup>131</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

being a quilter. And I don't, right now, yeah, I really like modern quilting, but I don't know if later I will get into more traditional quilting.<sup>132</sup>

Many participants did not actively identify as modern quilters. For both Emily and Julie, they did not want to align themselves too closely with any definition that might limit them in the future. Julie said, "I don't think I have a voice as a quilter, but I am also not going to try to find it because I think its always going to be a surprise for me."<sup>133</sup>

Many participants had very open interpretations of what art is and what qualities make an artist. Several described everyone as an artist. Ruth said, "everybody has that artist in them. You have to think of yourself as an artist, you have to value what you do enough to consider it to be art."<sup>134</sup> Her conception of being an artist was how you perceived yourself as a maker. Ruth's description of art was focused on the maker, while Helen had an equally open interpretation of art, although it was focused on the object itself. She said, "you can look at anything and see it as art, you can lift it. Art is taking what is here and thinking of it in a lifted way."<sup>135</sup> Part of Helen's idea of lifting art related to her placement of art within the world. She said, "art is not something extra. Art can never been something that is extra. We need art in the same way that we need food."<sup>136</sup> For people who are making a living as an artist, like Judith, she said, "I think it's very nice that some of them are like 'everyone's an artist' because that's very nice and inclusive and it's kind of a nice attitude to have, but I don't think they would really

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<sup>132</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>133</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>134</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>135</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>136</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

expect to see their work shown in a gallery. They're not that kind of artist."<sup>137</sup> Judith identified as an artist who makes quilts. She said:

Even though they are starting to be more functional, I still think of them as art because each one, I only use my own fabric, so I start with white and I dye everything. Sometimes I screen print it. So each quilt is totally one of a kind. And I only use my own patterns that I make up for each quilt, so I still think of myself as a quilter as an artist.<sup>138</sup>

Judith talked about her perceptions of the MQG before joining and how they have changed over time.

There's just a small group of people that are making quilts that I think are actually art and I kind of saw the Modern Quilt Guild as an extension of the hobbyists, but now that I have been in it longer and actually talked to them and looked at some of the blogs, I've sort of realized that they aren't anywhere close to the art quilt genre, they're doing their own thing and its totally different motivations and totally different aesthetics than art quilters. And I just think that for me, that's really refreshing because they don't care about the art versus craft debate, they just want to make quilts, and I think that's really nice.<sup>139</sup>

Judith seemed to be relieved to be around a group of quilters who did not get overly concerned with the semantics of what makes each different "type" of quilter. She said:

I think for me as an artist sometimes quilting is looked at as 'ohh, you are one of those, you're an art quilter' and its not really taken seriously so its always been this pressure to be taken seriously as an artist. But joining the [modern] quilt guild has been this totally other group of people that are so supportive. They don't really care what you call yourself, they just want to be excited and make quilts.<sup>140</sup>

Another participant Jana, a professional quilter, used the distinction between the customer's work and her work to differentiate between art and craft. She said, "when I am quilting for other people, it's a craft and when I am doing my own, it's an art."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>138</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>139</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>140</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>141</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

Jill described a stance on the differences between art and craft that she did not necessarily agree with. She said that someone told her the distinction was that:

if you had gone to school to study art then you could consider yourself an artist, but I know a lot of people that I would consider artists that never went to school, so I think it's a, I don't know what the distinction is between art and craft and I don't know that it really makes a difference as far as my work or what I do or what appeals to me on a broad level.<sup>142</sup>

While there was a great deal of variety in terms of how participants described the differences between art and craft, there was more continuity in their responses concerning the lack of importance of the distinction to modern quilters. Julie said, "I think for 95 percent of people in our guild, it's not about making art, it's about making yourself happy."<sup>143</sup> Gail agreed that it does not matter what her work or anyone else's work is considered when she said, "I don't care if it does [qualify as art], I mean, it's like, it may, you know some. But I have a feeling that most of them don't care because it's almost like anything goes."<sup>144</sup> Some participants put a little more emphasis on art in their responses. Katie said, "I think the art of it has become more and more important to me as I become more and more confident in my design abilities and focus on that."<sup>145</sup> Others had a different way of conceptualizing the category that modern quilters best fit into. According to Nora, "I think it's a little different. With the art quilters are artists, the regular quilters are crafters, whereas I think modern quilters are designers in terms of industrial design or graphic design."<sup>146</sup> By categorizing modern quilters as designers, the inherent drama of the art/craft debate is somewhat avoided.

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<sup>142</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>143</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>144</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>145</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>146</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

The variety of views that the participants had regarding art, craft, and modern quilting function to reinforce the tenuous relationship between art and craft. It is a difficult distinction to make and apply to all examples. According to Laura, “art to you is probably different than art to me or art to anyone is probably different.”<sup>147</sup> Gail’s definition of art was based on the communicative abilities of the work itself, so she built in room for interpretation among viewers. Gail said, “my definition of art is this: if what I do as a unique individual speaks to you as a unique individual, then it’s art...I think the communication part of what happens during and after the creation of the thing is what makes it art.” The communication aspect of art was important to Gail, so she identified herself as an art quilter “because again, the bottom line for me is to connect with whomever, if you can connect with it, and if not, that’s okay too.”<sup>148</sup>

### **Functionality**

Functionality was a prevalent theme across the participants. While many participants struggled to clearly define what made a quilt modern to them, functionality was a factor that the majority of participants concluded was a vital element of their quilting and therefore a unifying force across the modern quilting movement. Dana said, “I think there is more of a functional component to modern quilting.”<sup>149</sup> Helen compared quilts to jeans in that quilts are “meant to be used and savored and fit right and all that sort of stuff.”<sup>150</sup> Functionality was thought of in an everyday manner in that the participants expected their quilts to be part of daily life in their use.

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<sup>147</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>148</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>149</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

<sup>150</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

The importance of quilts being used was something that many participants were adamant about. When discussing the differences between art and craft, Julie said, “Is a quilt on a bed art? I don’t know, I think it is more than that. I think it is better than that. I think being functional and something that keeps you warm is a higher aspiration to me than art.”<sup>151</sup> The traditional hierarchy of art/craft places art at the top, but for Julie she felt that functionality superseded art. For Judith, the intersection of functionality and art changed as a result of her participation in the MQG. She said, “before I joined the guild, I would have never used one of my quilts as a quilt, they were always on the wall.”<sup>152</sup> Despite the shift, she did not see functionality as a disqualifier for an object being considered art as some other participants did. She said:

right now my work is changing a lot and its going more the functional route and I think that’s partly because of joining the Modern Quilt Guild and sort of realizing that that’s okay and its becoming so much more acceptable. And so I feel like some of my work, I would consider it fine art, but this new work is really bridging the gap between functional and fine art...I think it’s really helped me kind of relax and just be more like ‘whatever, it’s a quilt, you can use it.’ Not be so uptight about how people define my work.<sup>153</sup>

For other participants, functionality defined their motivations for quilting. According to Natalie, sometimes the beauty of the quilt can intimidate people from using the piece. She said, “Its important to create a beautiful piece and sometimes people are hesitant to use really beautiful pieces, but they are made to be used. They are made to be used, and loved, and thrown in the washing machine, and curled up with on the couch and taken to the park.”<sup>154</sup> Emily agreed, stating:

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<sup>151</sup> Interview, October, 16, 2011

<sup>152</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>153</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>154</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

I hope its gets some sort of use rather than just sitting in a closet somewhere and only bringing it out to look at. I get that if you put a lot of work into it, but even then, what's the point if you just look at it. I guess you can argue that's what paintings are for, but their purpose is to look at. I guess quilts, there are some quilts that their purpose is just to look at them but at least they are displayed. I mean, we use all of my quilts, even the one my great grandma made me.<sup>155</sup>

Like Emily, Renee said, "I have grandchildren, and I would rather that they use the quilts and tore 'em up and stained them painting, whatever they want to do, than put them in a closet."<sup>156</sup> Dana also liked thinking of her quilts being used in the future. She said, "so years from now, the things that I make for family or for others, I would like to see them worn, I really would. I would like to see the worn threads from being washed over and over and used again. I think that's a sign that its loved."<sup>157</sup> Dana was not the only participant who realized that years of use would eventually destroy the quilt's functionality. Allison's family had a history of quilting, and old quilts were frequently used as the batting for new quilts. She said:

my quilts are all usable and I want them to be machine washable and dryable and if they fall apart, that's okay...I would rather see you use it so much that it falls apart, you can always put it in the middle like my grandma did. So that's kind of my philosophy, if its going to fall apart, its going to fall apart.<sup>158</sup>

Size was another theme that related to functionality for many makers. For Katie, making small quilts didn't qualify as function. She said, "sometimes I'll test a technique and make a mini quilt, but not often. I find personally, I totally get why people make mini quilts and they are cute and whatever, but personally I find them useless."<sup>159</sup>

Another participant, Allison, said that she had never made a quilt smaller than a queen

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<sup>155</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>156</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>157</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

<sup>158</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>159</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011



size because “that was what was practical and that’s what you would use on your bed. Over the last two years I have probably started making more lap quilts or more embellished baby quilts but I am still very practical.”<sup>160</sup> To Allison, the linkages between size and practicality related directly to functionality. Julie talked about making large quilts without even trying, “my greatest challenge is not making an enormous quilt, they are always huge. The wedding quilt I made, it was a full queen size, I thought it was going to be a throw, I don’t know what happened.”<sup>161</sup>

Some participants talked about using the quilts that they have made, but carefully storing and coveting old quilts that family members made. For example, Amy said, “I use the quilts I make. We have one quilt that we don’t use and it is because it was made by [her husband’s] great grandmother and we’re terrified of using it. Everything else we use.”<sup>162</sup> Another participants, Lindsay described a quilt her great grandmother gave her, “she would give them out to family members like they were gold medals. You had to do something pretty spectacular to get one of her quilts because they are hand pieced, hand quilted and take her months to make just one.”<sup>163</sup> While her great grandmother intended for her to use the quilt, Lindsay said, “I am putting it in a museum quality archival box and I am going to pet it lovingly once a year and then put it back in the dark corner so it doesn’t fade.”<sup>164</sup> Both Amy and Lindsay’s personal goal of creating functional quilts did not translate into using their old family heirloom quilts.

A few participants did not stress the importance of functionality in their quilts.

Functionality seemed to be linked to quilters who described themselves as product

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<sup>160</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>161</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>162</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>163</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>164</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

quilters. Each item that they made was to be used. The alternative is process quilters who are more involved in the steps and techniques as individual building blocks of the quilt, which when finished, might be used or not used depending on the maker. May said, “I just love sitting at my sewing machine and combining two different colors of fabric and as they go under my presser foot I think ‘ohh, those look really pretty together’ and ‘ohh, those two are my favorite, no these are my favorite.’ So, it’s a process for me.”<sup>165</sup> Despite identifying as a process quilter, May said she had made “more quilts that I’ve kept than I have in all my life because I am making more. Because of Flickr and the blog and all.”<sup>166</sup> Rita’s feelings were similar to May’s, she said functionality was not important to her when making quilts, but that it was “personal enrichment, it’s feeding the soul.”<sup>167</sup> Rita had one day per week she dedicated to sewing, she said, “like today is sewing day Monday and I’ll start about ten o’clock and then I’ll sew until I’ll fall over, which is usually about two or three in the morning.”<sup>168</sup> This embodies process sewing. Mary used the process versus product distinction to differentiate modern quilters. She said, “I enjoy the process and I have no need for the product. If you have need for the product, it’s a baby gift or it’s a wedding gift, you have to move right along. But I like to have something that just kind of takes me forever, and I’m here. And they [modern quilters] don’t seem to be in that place.”<sup>169</sup> The way that Mary worded her thoughts illustrates that she doesn’t necessarily identify as a modern quilter, but rather she is an observer of the modern quilters in her MQG. For Julie, she compared her knitting and quilting habits in terms of process and product. She said, “when I knit, I don’t care if I

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<sup>165</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>166</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>167</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>168</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>169</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

finish a project...I am definitely a process knitter, but when I started to quilt, I really wanted to get it done. I really wanted to use it, so I was a product quilter.”<sup>170</sup> Product quilting generally results in a lot of finished quilts, which for some participants was difficult to understand. Rita said, “that’s a little bit of a daunting pressure too, I feel like if they can do this, why am I not doing it because some of these people are working, some of them have kids, and I have neither, so I don’t know.”<sup>171</sup> Rita did not necessarily link the differences in production to process versus product sewing, rather she used time as a comparative factor, which did not highlight why differences exist in different makers’ level of productivity.

Another participant, Gail agreed with Rita that the functionality of her quilts was not important. She said, “mostly I do issue pieces...as well as documenting history and so there really isn’t a whole lot of function to that unless you want to put it on the wall.”<sup>172</sup> She went on to elaborate on the functionality of her quilts, and her thoughts illustrate that the interpretation of functionality varies among participants. She said, “if it functions to have people talk about it, create a conversation, or to think about it, or to completely say ‘ohh no, this is not a reality, this is unbelievable,’ then that’s fine with me.”<sup>173</sup> For most participants functionality was linked to the use of the quilt on a bed, or a couch, for snuggling or staying warm, but Gail’s interpretation of functionality was much more open, referencing communication, a theme she also linked with her definition of art. Jill also said that functionality was not important to her as a quilter, but she said she could see its influence over modern quilters. She said

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<sup>170</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>171</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>172</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>173</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

I think its inherent that quilts are made to be used. Because I think the pieces tend to be a bit bigger, they go together a little bit faster, you are not spending three months or three years making an applique quilt that you are going to hand quilt, they are really meant to be used, so you do see a lot of quilts that are just meant to be used.<sup>174</sup>

## Rules

When asked to describe the typical modern quiltmaker, many participants pointed to the freedom and lack of rules associated with modern quilting as a defining characteristic of modern quilting. While modern quilters were quick to mention the lack of rules, many individuals were still motivated by perfectionism in that quilts do have to fit together, so while they did not follow rules according to matched points, they were concerned with the overall aesthetic look and translation of their vision in the final product. Helen said, “I am moderately precise, but not a perfectionist. I believe in that sort of Native American, ‘if its perfect, its made by God’ and that’s impossible so...imperfections are inevitable in all things.”<sup>175</sup> Not only are imperfections inevitable, but for many, they did not seem to conceptualize certain traditional faux pas as an imperfection. Amy said, “I actually don’t care about matching points that much. I know its awful, but I don’t!”<sup>176</sup> Part of Amy’s disregard for rules that were adhered to by past generations of quilters was a willingness to try new approaches and techniques that might not always work out. For example, she said, “I am better at sort of winging certain things. And just being like ‘ehh, we’ll see how this works.’ But I am totally not afraid to fail, so I’ve made a few quilts where I’ve been like ‘this is a failure.’”<sup>177</sup> Some participants talked about this fearlessness in reference to other guild members, but not

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<sup>174</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>175</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>176</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>177</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

necessarily themselves. For example, Ruth said, “they aren’t afraid. If they don’t like it, they’ll trash the project and start something new...its kind of whatever makes you happy is good.”<sup>178</sup> By referencing adventurous quilters as “they,” Ruth infers that she does not personally relate to the concept of trashing a project.

For Rachel, the lack of rules drew her into the group. She said, “I like that they aren’t all about following rules. Most of the people there understand that there are rules and they are okay if you decide to break them and I think that’s good. I think that’s what’s going to keep quilting going.”<sup>179</sup> Lindsay echoed these thoughts when she said, “I like that everything is kind of learn as you go, do what you want, to hell with the rules.”<sup>180</sup> When asked what drew her to the MQG, Renee said, “I guess the freedom of modern quilting...I don’t like to be confined by a pattern or accuracy or anything like that, so the whole freedom of improvisational piecing and just trying things and it’s new and fresh, that’s what I like about it.”<sup>181</sup>

For others, like Leah, she strove to find a balance between no rules and her own personal preference for a “plan.” She said:

Sometimes I just want to start piecing something together and let it be improvised as I go and not really think about it and see what happens, but then me, my degree is in graphic design, so that is all about colors and perfection and clean lines and negative space and then my OCD, I want it to be exactly perfect. So then I need to plan and I have to go sit and draw it out, but I kind of find the balance in between there.<sup>182</sup>

The lack of rules defining what members of the group create leads to an individualized experience. Many participants referenced the pleasure they gained from the act of

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<sup>178</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>179</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>180</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>181</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>182</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

making and creating quilts. Ruth described the quilts she makes as “they aren’t to make anybody else happy unless I am making it for somebody else in which case I am making it to make them happy which is going to make me happy.”<sup>183</sup> Ruth’s description of how she enjoys quilting relates to several elements from the act of creating to gift giving.

The concept of rules and the lack thereof came up frequently when participants were describing what they perceived to be the typical modern quiltmaker. Emily said, “I don’t think there is one because the idea of modern, it’s not typical, it’s you don’t follow any rules...you do whatever you want and whatever you think looks good and if it’s not what everybody expects, that’s perfect.”<sup>184</sup> Even though one of the defining characteristics of modern quilting for many participants was the lack of rules, some people felt that the idea of modern quilting was too defined. The MQG has a list of characteristics of modern quilts and quilters that is fairly specific (included in the Definition of Terms section). One participant, Julie, said some members of her MQG were “very opinionated about what a modern quilt is and that kind of put me off because I think a modern quilter is someone who does things their own way.”<sup>185</sup> Gail was also concerned that defining modern quilts too specifically could be a negative. She said, “why do you have to write that down? It doesn’t make sense to me, that’s what politics does, they write things down. ‘This is the way you have to be...well, why?’”<sup>186</sup> Regardless of the participant’s feelings on the degree of definition surrounding modern quilting, it was a recurring theme for many participants working towards understanding what modern quilting is.

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<sup>183</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>184</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>185</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>186</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

In many ways, the lack of rules in modern quilting relates to the next category, choice. Due to the lack of rules, modern quilters are freer to make different choices, leading to an acceptance of the differences between makers and quilts. According to Julie, “so I think the modern quilter is just someone who does things the way she wants to and she doesn’t really care what anyone else thinks.”<sup>187</sup>

### **Choice**

For some participants, the abundance of imagery and information present online was the source of inspiration that spurred their move towards making modern quilts. According to Helen, “you know all of these things that I went, suddenly I went, I had a huge, huge exposure to so many different thoughts and styles. And then I realized that I was able to choose.”<sup>188</sup> From choosing what type of quilts to make to how you apply your binding, Helen said, “they are personal choices and thank god we all have these different personal choices.”<sup>189</sup> Katie felt that some people look at the minimalism and simplicity in some modern quilts and immediately think easy. She said:

there’s going to be people who are like ‘this took them two hours to make’ or whatever because no its not hand appliqued with 1000 different pieces but that’s a design choice not a skill...I don’t have kids, if I wanted to make [technically complex] quilts, I could, but my personal taste is more minimal and minimal doesn’t mean easy or simple, its still difficult design.<sup>190</sup>

Julie related to the difficulty of creating minimalist designs when describing the quilt she made for the Robert Kaufman challenge. She said, “it surprised me because I didn’t know that was inside of me...I know I love it and I am so proud of it but maybe its

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<sup>187</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>188</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>189</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>190</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

almost so modern that it scares me kind of because I didn't think I was that kind of quilter. I didn't think I was the kind of person that would come up with that."<sup>191</sup> In terms of the aesthetic of quilting being a choice, May said in response to the quilts on display at Quilt Festival, "there's precious little among those exhibited quilts that just really reaches out and grabs me...simple graphic quilts speak more loudly to me than all that applique and little roses and all that kind of stuff. Rhinestones. I could go the rest of my life without seeing another rhinestone."<sup>192</sup>

Many participants started quilting in a more traditional context. Whether that meant the quilts they made were traditional, they were members of a traditional guild, or both, many participants were either in the process of transitioning as a quilter, and some seemed to have completely changed their identity as a quilter. Amy started hand piecing and making traditional blocks like Drunkard's Path before discovering modern quilting. Helen said that she liked to make quilts that tell a story. She said:

I got really into, early on in my quilting, in the first ten years of my quilting until about five years ago, the Civil War quilts, the Underground Railroad, what's the quilt trying to tell you? And very classic designs. And then like suddenly as soon as I went online and realized there's this whole sort of modern quilting thing, the jump from the very literal story to a more abstract story made a lot of sense to me.<sup>193</sup>

For Laura, her love of fabric and color was always put off by having to use a pattern. She said, "But I never knew that you could just not work with patterns. I know that sounds stupid...I have a really hard time with patterns still. I really can't follow patterns."<sup>194</sup>

Using a pattern or not is a choice in all types of quilting, but the open atmosphere and

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<sup>191</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>192</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>193</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>194</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011



lack of rules in modern quilting allowed Laura to embrace quilting more than she had previously.

Some participants had been quilting for years, however they had never joined a guild because of their impression of traditional guilds. Gail said, “my impression of traditional guilds is that it’s the one-upmanship kind of thing where people try the hardest pattern that they can and count stitches like my grandmother did and its all about perfection for them.”<sup>195</sup> Allison investigated guilds in her area prior to the MQG, however she felt, “they are huge, but I have never been to any of their meetings and they just seemed really intimidating and it wasn’t something that I necessarily had time to do and it didn’t interest me as much.”<sup>196</sup> One issue that several participants mentioned was that when meetings are scheduled during the day, the guild becomes a non-option for them because of work. The MQG’s represented in this study scheduled meetings either in the evenings or on weekends so that it was accessible to members who work.

Another issue that came up when participants discussed their experience with other guilds was a lack of openness. The open nature of the MQG was a factor that was key in the participants’ enjoyment of the MQG. May went to meetings of traditional guilds in her city and said, “cause I went to guilds and no one spoke to me, not a single soul spoke to me.”<sup>197</sup> May also said, “maybe we’re as snotty to newcomers as those guilds...once the cliques are established its really hard to penetrate. I guess because we have been part of the birth of this guild, it’s I don’t know.”<sup>198</sup> For May, while she found the acceptance she had been seeking within the MQG, she did note that things change

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<sup>195</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>196</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>197</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>198</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

over time, and as relationships grow stronger, the ability for new members to break in can be compromised. May said that their group “was so welcoming towards anyone because we were all kind of the misfits.”<sup>199</sup> Other participants had been members of other guilds for years, and maintained their membership in addition to their new membership with the MQG. Several participants in this study were members of two to three guilds. Gail had an interesting comparison between quilt guilds and churches. She said, “just because you are in one [a quilt guild] doesn’t mean you have to stay, it’s like churches. You join a church and if it doesn’t fit what you need, you can go on to another one.”<sup>200</sup>

The element of choice was recognized by participants in many contexts, from choosing what type of quilts to make to choosing what type of fabric to use. Part of the open, accepting environment of the modern quilt guild was related to choice for some participants in that they were aware of respecting the choices in quilting of other makers.

For example, Leah said:

you should be able to make what you want to make and everyone likes different fabric. I’ve seen a little bit on blogs, maybe a few months ago, people were being really opinionated about what fabrics they like and what fabrics they don’t like and it was getting kind of catty in the blog world or whatever, which is weird, but I should be able to say this Habitat fabric isn’t my favorite and not worry about it, everybody likes different stuff.<sup>201</sup>

Many of the participants actively chose to describe themselves as modern quilters, while others were less specific in describing their love of quilting. For example, Sally said, I am very enthusiastic about it [quilting], I love all of the different kinds of it.”<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>200</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>201</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>202</sup> Interview, November 4, 2011

Committing to modern quilting forever was a challenge for some participants, however a generalized love of quilting was present in all participants.

### **Elements of Design**

Many participants referenced elements of design as integral to the modern quilting aesthetic. Some participants were more detailed than others in their description of the design elements present in modern quilts. Nora had a very detailed description of several elements of design that play into what makes a modern quilt. She said:

There's certain compositions of design that modern quilting highlights, like one thing that can make a quilt modern is color. You can take a really traditional block and put it in hot pink and grey and its modern. Another thing is scale. You can take a block and blow it up and make it look really modern. And the other thing is negative space, the use of white space. I say white space, but it really can be any color. And then the other thing is kind of off setting your point of focus, like it isn't a centered design always, it can be off a little bit. And some of it's improvisational, which I think kind of combines all those things.<sup>203</sup>

As Nora continued to discuss these elements, they started to sound like ingredients. She said that if you are only using one element, you have to be more cautious than if you included all the elements, because together they are more likely to communicate the modern aesthetic.

Nora was able to break modern quilting down into elements of design, but other participants struggled with that level of detail. Helen said, "I think a modern quilter is much more in tune with the muscular, the visceral, what moves you in a way that you can't necessarily explain."<sup>204</sup> She described several examples on blogs where people talk

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<sup>203</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>204</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

about how much they love certain color combinations or patterns because of the way it made them feel.

Like Nora, Rita also broke down modern quilting into smaller pieces, but she had a difficult time relating to it personally. She said, “they seem to be often without pattern, it’s intuitive, it’s out of the box, and being rather conservative by nature because I am the oldest, I have a hard time. I like to be organized, and everything has a line that you stay in, and so I have a little bit of a hard time thinking in that way.”<sup>205</sup> Despite being unsure of the aesthetic, Rita was planning to make a quintessentially modern quilt.

One of the integral elements of design in a quilt is the fabric itself. Many participants talked about being drawn into quilting because of all the different colors and prints on the market. Amy said, “once I started realizing there was more pretty fabric and cooler designs, I started getting more and more into quilting.”<sup>206</sup> Monica had an equation that she used to describe what makes a quilt modern, and fabric was an integral piece. She said, “modern fabric, modern pattern is modern. Traditional fabric, modern pattern is not. Modern fabric and traditional pattern can still be, so its more about the fabrics in general.”<sup>207</sup> For Monica, the maintenance of a clearly modern aesthetic within the MQG was very important. Despite limited contact with the national MQG, Monica felt that the purpose of local MQG’s was to stay true to the look of modern quilts. She said, “because we are part of this umbrella, we have to, I kind of think of it as a brand, like we kind of have to stay true to what they are representing as well.”<sup>208</sup> Another participant, Renee described the stress of modern quilts in her guild. She said, “they are very picky about

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<sup>205</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>206</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>207</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>208</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

‘this is a modern quilt guild and we only, we want to stick to showing modern quilts,’ so that’s a really interesting thing because at the other guilds you can bring anything and show anything, its whatever you do.”<sup>209</sup> Renee’s viewpoint suggests that in some ways a strict interpretation of modern quilts can result in an atmosphere similar or even more extreme than that of traditional guilds.

While some guilds seemed to view the maintenance of the modern aesthetic as important, most did not actively stress maintaining the modern aesthetic. For some guilds, it was not an issue. For example, Katie said, “we have been really lucky in [her city]. We have not struggled at all with keeping our guild modern that I know a lot of other guilds have struggled with.”<sup>210</sup> Some participants did not view this as a struggle. For Allison, she was part of the group that founded the MQG in her city. She said, “we were just trying to get people to come to meetings, we didn’t care if you were a modern quilter or if you were just a quilter who was interested in coming and you wanted to show what you had.”<sup>211</sup> For another participant, Natalie, it is a balancing act to maintain the modern images and the open and accepting environment. She said, “it’s important for us to maintain a modern quilt guild. But it’s also, one of the major components of what we try to do is maintain on a local level, an environment of openness and inclusiveness and non judgment and all of that. So it’s somewhat of a fine line.”<sup>212</sup> Natalie went on to elaborate on why traditional quilters are drawn into the MQG. She said, “they are attracted to the fact that it’s new life in quilting and some of them are still comfortable in their traditional aesthetic but a lot of them are embracing and trying to learn and

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<sup>209</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>210</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>211</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>212</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

understand what modern quilting is so they can do it as well. I mean we definitely never want to have where that's not welcome."<sup>213</sup> Another participant, May stressed that maintaining an open environment was key. She said, "you do naturally gravitate to people that think and create the way you do, but to intentionally exclude people because they don't, I think you yourself are the poorer for it because that person might have something really valuable."<sup>214</sup> Many participants in this study were still exploring what modern quilting is. Judith said, "I don't really know what modern quilting is, I know it when I see it, but I didn't know if there was a definition or a description anywhere."<sup>215</sup> Another participant, Rita had a different perception of what modern quilting was before she joined her local MQG. She said, "when I heard modern quiltmaking, my first thought was art quilt, which to me is certainly modern when you compare it to traditional so my understanding in the group and what I am seeing is not art quilts."<sup>216</sup> For the participants of this study, some had made modern quilts and others had not, however, the process of learning and participating in the guild was very important to all of them.

Improvisation as a tool for modern quilters was embraced by some participants and feared by others. Dana said, "I have trouble with the improvisational piecing. For me, when I look at it, it just doesn't appeal to me. I like something that is a little more, I guess exact and planned. So that is something that I am trying to be more open to, but I am working on it."<sup>217</sup> Despite not really liking improvisational piecing personally, Dana was making an effort to understand the appeal, which illustrates the open mindedness of many modern quilters.

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<sup>213</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>214</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>215</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>216</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>217</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

## Drive to Sell

Several participants in this study were marketing elements of their quiltmaking. From selling quilts to patterns, there was a desire among several participants to create financial gains from their love of quilting. Some participants embraced their ability to capitalize on their skills or work, while others were not interested in entering the commercial arena for fear of their enjoyment of quiltmaking diminishing.

Etsy, a website that allows makers to sell their work in online shops, was a popular venue for marketing work among the participants. Helen sells her quilts on Etsy and she said, “I make sure that for every three or four quilts that I sell, and I totally low ball my quilt prices, I make sure that I give, like if somebody’s having a baby, I give them a quilt. If somebody’s getting married...the point for me is to make doing what I do, and working and playing with fabric...and having tactile satisfaction to be a joy.”<sup>218</sup> Helen actively maintained a balance between her work that she sold and the work that she gave away. Helen linked the price of her quilts to their intended use. She said, “I have had people say ‘you should sell your quilts for more than you do’ and I’m like, that’s where I draw the line. I am not interested in an art quilt. And I tell people all the time, ‘please do not frame my quilts, they are meant to be used.’”<sup>219</sup> This relates back to the importance of functionality in quiltmaking for many of the participants.

Rachel started designing patterns recently, which altered her quiltmaking. She said, “I also got hooked up with a fabric company here in town about a year ago and they have me design patterns and stuff for them. So that has, if they’re paying you to do it,

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<sup>218</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>219</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

your productivity goes way up.”<sup>220</sup> Other participants had been working in the quilting industry for longer. Olivia said, “I did it as a hobby for a while and then I finally got a job in a quilt shop which started my more professional side of doing quilting.”<sup>221</sup> Several participants had a full time career within the quilting industry.

Another participant, Laura, was not actively involved in selling her work, but she was considering starting. She said, “I don’t have a job right now, so it would be nice to actually make some money but its tough for me because I am pretty critical of what I do...also I haven’t done commissioned pieces because then people want to tell you what they want and I don’t work like that.”<sup>222</sup> Despite wanting to sell her work, Laura’s independence as a maker may threaten her ability to be successful in the commercial marketplace.

Julie felt that because of blogs more people were aware of the modern quilters who had achieved success in the form of a book deal. As a result of all the information out there, Julie felt like “it makes you feel like you can do that, but not everyone can do that, and then you see people trying and its not going anywhere and its really sad.”<sup>223</sup> Jill did not feel that there was necessarily more of an emphasis on commercialization within her MQG as compared to the other guilds she was a member of, however she did say that members of the MQG were “just more open to talk about it, they are young and excited and they are on the Internet and they are talking about it.”<sup>224</sup> The openness surrounding commercial opportunities led to many of the participants being able to comment on the topic.

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<sup>220</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>221</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>222</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>223</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>224</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011



Some participants were adamant that they wanted quilting to remain a hobby in their life. Emily said, “I would love to quit my job and quilt full time, but I probably wouldn’t love it anymore. That’s why I wouldn’t do it.”<sup>225</sup> Lindsay talked about prize winning quilts, however felt there was a disconnect between the amount of time it takes to make a show quilt as compared to the prize money. She conceptualized this type of quilting as a job and said, “that’s what makes it even more like a job. You don’t even like it. ‘I gotta go to work today, make another block.’”<sup>226</sup> The separation of quilting and work was an important boundary for Emily and Lindsay.

Somewhat related to the drive to sell was the awareness of the participants of their place within the larger quilt marketplace. Many participants could identify specific pieces that they actively supported financially. For example, Sarah said she had her quilts professionally quilted by a long arm quilter because “I do want to keep them in business, so I support them financially.”<sup>227</sup> Additionally, as a former quilt shop owner, Sarah said, “I do respect shop owners and I try my darndest to buy things from them instead of the big stores because I know how much it takes and they are such a resource.”<sup>228</sup>

Some participants talked about a shift in the industry surrounding quilting as the awareness of the modern quilt movement increased. Natalie said, “the industry is really excited because for the first time in many, many years, they are getting a massive influx of new money.”<sup>229</sup> She went on to describe that these shifts are not always seen at the retail level, however for the shops that are taking note of the modern quilter, they “are

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<sup>225</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>226</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>227</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>228</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>229</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

doing really well because they are tapping into that.”<sup>230</sup> Lindsay discussed a fabric designer who tried to sell her work to companies three years ago and was met with resistance, but today her line is very popular. Lindsay said, “the whole industry is taking a 180.”<sup>231</sup>

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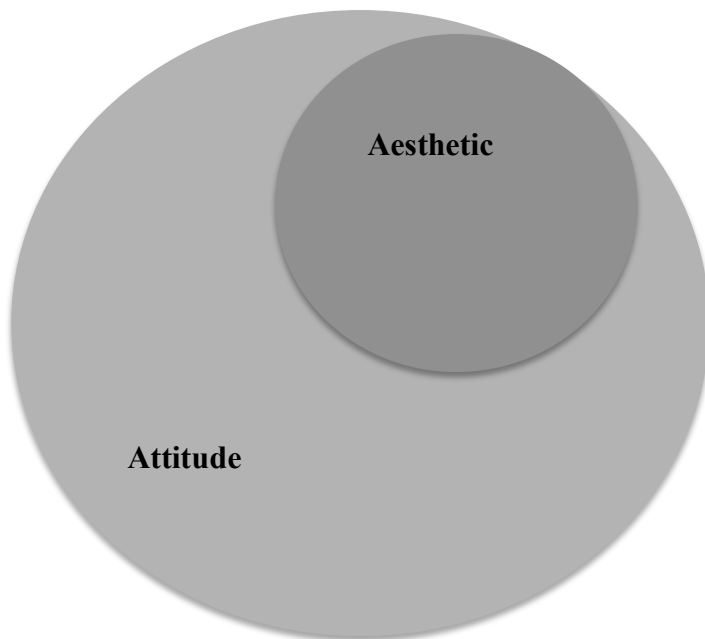
<sup>230</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>231</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

## CHAPTER FIVE INTERPRETATION

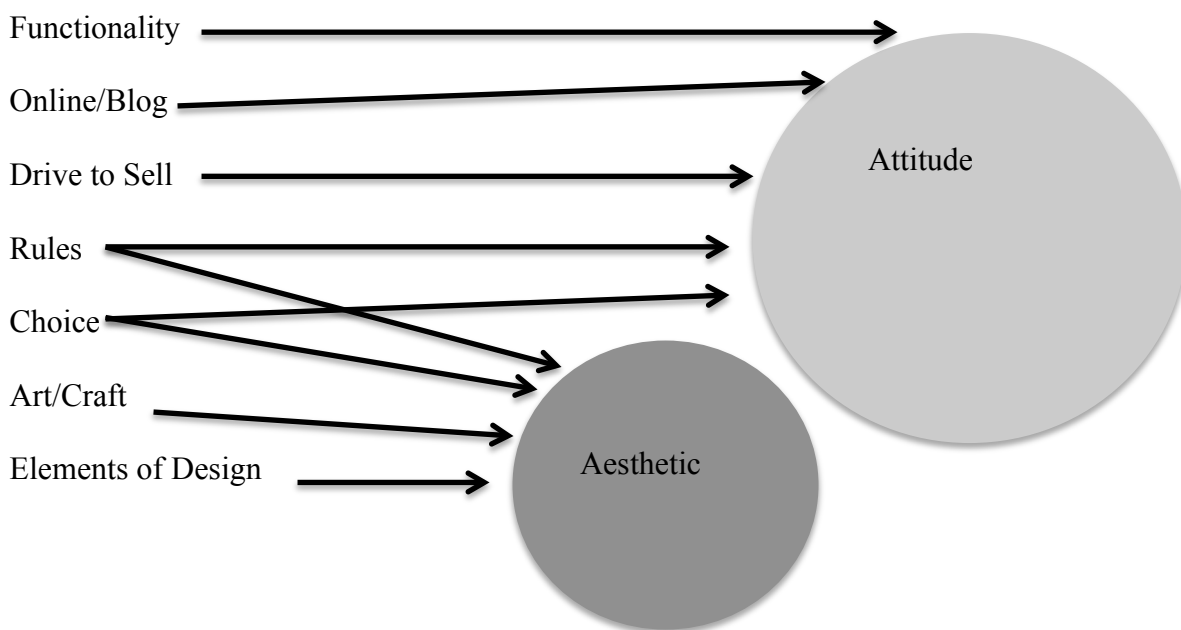
The conclusion of this study is that modern quilting is both an attitude and an aesthetic. The attitude of modern quilting is embodied by an open mind and lack of rules that dictate quilting for modern quilters. All of the participants of this study were drawn into the guild because of the attitude of modern quilters, and therefore all of the participants embodied this attitude to some degree. Some participants of this study embodied the aesthetic of modern quilting as defined by the MQG (see list in the Definition of Terms section). The graphic below illustrates the all-encompassing attitude of modern quilting with the smaller subset of modern quilters who embody the aesthetic of modern quilting. The graphic is not scaled to represent actual numbers or percentages, but rather show the concept.

**Figure Three: Modern Quilting Is...**



From the outset, this study aimed to answer two questions regarding the MQG. First, what are the factors that draw people into the group? Second, how does the art/craft debate impact the perspectives and practices of MQG members? Both of these questions are addressed through the conclusions of the study. All participants are drawn into the MQG because of the attitude whereas some participants are also drawn into the MQG due to the aesthetic.

**Figure Four: Role of Themes in the Attitude and Aesthetic of Modern Quilting**



The illustration above shows how each of the themes discussed in the previous section relate to the proposed attitude and aesthetic categories. Interestingly, two of the categories, rules and choice, have an effect on both the attitude and aesthetic of modern quilting. For example, the concept of the lack of rules in modern quilting is a defining characteristic in modern quilting, but it also plays into the variety of types of quilts that modern quilters produce, including quintessential modern quilts. When looking at the

concept of choice, the lack of rules allows members to make choices, some that relate to the attitude of modern quilting and some that relate to the aesthetic of modern quilting. For example, the drive to sell one's work was a factor that varied among participants. Choice was a part of the environment that allowed the differing attitudes towards commercialization of personal quiltmaking. Choice is also part of the attitude of modern quilting because it is the underlying force that allows all quilters to define their aesthetic.

Although part of my conclusion is that all the participants in this study embodied the attitude of modern quilting, several of the individual themes in the illustration above had different meanings for different participants. When looking at the online/blog category specifically, there were several different types of Internet users among the participants, from never using the Internet to always using the Internet in conjunction with quiltmaking. Also, the drive to sell category ranged from participants who worked full time in the quilting industry to those who wanted quilting to remain a hobby. Even the functionality category had some fluctuations in terms of the importance of functionality to makers. Regardless of their relationship to the theme, the participants did have a clear conception of how it did or did not relate to their quiltmaking, so the range of answers are all part of the attitude of modern quilting. For the rules and choice categories, people's descriptions were more unified, and since those categories also link to the aesthetic of modern quilting, perhaps they are the unifying force among members of the MQG who make aesthetically dissimilar quilts.

In terms of the impact of the art/craft debate, it did not influence the participants of this study in a meaningful way. For most participants, functionality was the meaningful lens through which they defined their work. Throughout the interviewing

process, it also became apparent that the issues surrounding the definition of modern quilting were very real and confusing for many participants. In addition to the two research questions that I began with, I am also going to elaborate on what modern quilting is according to the participants of this study.

### **Factors that drew participants into the MQG**

The participants identified many individual reasons why participants joined the MQG, and many can be categorized under the attitude and aesthetic categories identified in this study. The attitude category had the biggest effect on participants in that all of them could relate to elements of the modern quilting attitude. These elements include many of the themes discussed in the analysis section including online/blog, choice, and lack of rules. Specific examples of factors that attracted participants to the MQG are discussed below.

The sense of community at guild meetings was a major factor in drawing people into the MQG and capturing their interest. Judith described an interesting phenomenon at her MQG's meetings,

I always have this weird thing happen where while I am there I just feel so good about everybody and what they're all making and then on my drive home I'm like 'most of those were pretty ugly' or 'I've already seen them before' but this weird thing happens where you just feel so supportive towards everybody and so excited.<sup>232</sup>

The community feeling was important to Judith, she continued to say, "I have never really made a modern quilt...I go to it more for that community feeling, and talking about quilts in general and thinking about them in a different way."<sup>233</sup> Gail agreed saying that

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<sup>232</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>233</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

she enjoyed “getting to know people and just getting to share the camaraderie.”<sup>234</sup>

Natalie said, “the importance of the Modern Quilt Guild to modern quilters is the community aspect of it. You find people who have similar interests and you connect on some, creating beautiful things, that’s why we come together.”<sup>235</sup> Several participants said they were not exactly sure what the guild was about prior to going to their first meeting, however they were taken by the community after attending a meeting.

According to Jill, she said, “I wasn’t quite sure what modern meant, but I went to the website and their quilts are all new and fresh and I went to the meeting and there’s lots of younger people and it was just a very vibrant fun community.”<sup>236</sup> For some participants, their perception of the guild was what drew them in, however the reality of the group was not the same. Jana did not like her individual MQG, however she said, “I like the concept and the idea as a whole, as a general whole.”<sup>237</sup> She elaborated on her individual guild when she said, “I feel like the people in our group don’t have a vision, they are trying to figure out what they want to be in the quilting world and they don’t fit into the traditional guild so they’ve started the Modern Quilt Guild even though I don’t think what they are doing is modern.”<sup>238</sup> One factor in the composition of individual groups was size. Olivia felt like her MQG was very small so the effect of each individual member was great. She said, “we have some very strong personalities.”<sup>239</sup> The overall ideal of the MQG is appealing to many, the local interpretation can be dominated by people who do not necessarily embody the ideals of the national organization.

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<sup>234</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>235</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>236</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>237</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

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<sup>239</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

For many the MQG meetings led to social opportunities outside of the guild as well. Julie spoke about bonding with a guild member: “I don’t have family in town and it turns out neither did she, so we’ve been hanging out quite a bit...and I never would have met her had we not had this connection.”<sup>240</sup> Another participant, Monica, talked about the MQG helping her open up socially. She said, “I am generally not a, if I am talking about quilting like I am right now, but generally I am like in the corner, I will not talk to anybody, I mean you get what I am saying, so this was a big leap for me, but it has helped tremendously.”<sup>241</sup>

The MQG was described as a very open and accepting environment by the participants. Gail said, “I am not good at following directions. I am not good at being like anybody else, I like wild thoughts, and yeah, that’s just who I am, and you can be who you are and I don’t care. It’s really cool.”<sup>242</sup> Jill described when a new quilter brought her first quilt into the MQG for show and tell. Despite being pintucked down the back, everyone “gave her a standing ovation. It’s just embrace your pintucks.”<sup>243</sup> For Dana, the open inviting atmosphere of the group was a factor in new quilters becoming involved. She said, “this whole modern quilt movement has enticed other people to get involved and if it’s those simpler patterns or the improvisational stuff that gets people in than so be it. If that’s where their creativity lies, I think that’s wonderful.”<sup>244</sup> There are some challenges to maintaining the atmosphere as the group grows. Katie said, “there’s four or five new people at every meeting, so its hard to always make everyone feel

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<sup>240</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>241</sup> Interview, October 18, 2011

<sup>242</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>243</sup> Interview October 17, 2011

<sup>244</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011



included, but we work at it.”<sup>245</sup> As individual MQGs continue to grow, they are attracting people who are entirely new to quilting. According to Leah, the MQG should have more education opportunities. She said:

I really would like for us to be learning more from each other, more techniques, because I know there is a ton of stuff that I don't know how to do and sometimes I forget that some of those people are new to quilting, like they don't know what jelly rolls are and when we got those donation fabrics and everyone made a block for the donation quilt, some of them, they are just ironing is horrible and they aren't squared up and I forget [some people are new].<sup>246</sup>

Although not in reference to formal education opportunities, Amy felt like she had completed a lot of quilts that she might not have made if not for her membership in the MQG. Specifically centered on different challenges, Amy said, “I definitely would not have done it if I wasn't in the Modern Quilt Guild.”<sup>247</sup>

One participant related the openness among modern quilters to politics. Katie said, “I would say she's open minded. I am not necessarily going to say she's liberal because I am sure there are Republicans who are modern quiltmakers, I really haven't met any, but I am sure they're out there.”<sup>248</sup> The participants' political leanings were a topic that neither my study nor the Modern Quilt Guild survey examined.

Overall the MQG is a very organized group, and this appealed to many participants. Julie called her branch of the MQG “a well oiled machine, I mean these women do not mess around.”<sup>249</sup> This was in contrast to a knitting group she used to be a part of that “just kind of imploded the way groups of women do.”<sup>250</sup> The level of

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<sup>245</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>246</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>247</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>248</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>249</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>250</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

organization was refreshing to many participants. Laura described their approval of the budget as “it wasn’t three pages that everyone had to look at, it was a big piece of paper at the front and it was just boom, and we went through it. We’re trusting the officers to take care of it, we don’t get involved in that whole minutia of detail because what we’re there to do is share and learn.”<sup>251</sup> Jill observed that the professional lives of many of her MQG’s members were a useful set of skills for the group. She said:

we also have a lot of young professionals in the group, there’s lawyers and engineers and graphic designers and people that do this, some aspect of quilting in their real life job so that reflects in their hobbies and we have class A marketing materials, and for the quilt show we had a graphic designer, a real graphic designer, make up the fliers and the press, we had a formal press release, very professional, very competent.<sup>252</sup>

Although many participants liked the informal nature of the meetings, Katie stressed the importance of the MQG being an official guild. She said, “the reason we call ourselves a guild is because we want it to be official and last, we didn’t want to be a bunch of chicks at a coffee shop who eventually didn’t hang out anymore.”<sup>253</sup> In addition to the official status as a guild, according to Natalie, “I think it’s something that really means something to us in our lives...I think we are still in the beginning stages of the movement if you will and I think this group that’s in it now will continue to grow and have some sort of relationship for years to come.”<sup>254</sup> By working towards a more defined national presence, the MQG is seeking to remain a formal element of today’s quilting landscape.

Although not necessarily unique to the MQG, many participants described show and tell as one of their favorite parts of the meetings. Allison said, “I really like that we

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<sup>251</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>252</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>253</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>254</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

are able to get together and see projects and show and tell, I really like that.”<sup>255</sup> One guild had show and tell first to ensure that everyone got to share their projects. Then during snack time, they were able to converse with people about their work. At many guilds, show and tell is the last portion of the meeting, so some people have left, and it can become rushed. Laura compared the MQG show and tell to her traditional guild’s show and tell. She said at the MQG:

we share that and we get that energy going and then during the break you can go over and look at people’s pieces and talk about it whereas at the traditional guild we do it at the end and you lose people, and I am not only 85 in my hobbies, but I get tired. I get up at like 5:30 in the morning and I am exhausted and I go to bed at 9, like an old lady, so sometimes I can’t make it until show and tell.<sup>256</sup>

Amy also enjoyed show and tell saying, “I really like seeing what everyone else is making and what is inspiring to them. What they do with their time, how they’re expressing themselves. That is definitely my favorite part about the Modern Quilt Guild.”<sup>257</sup> A huge part of the sense of community at MQG meetings was centered on the positive elements of show and tell.

### **Issues surrounding the art/craft debate for members of the MQG**

As for the aesthetic category of modern quilts that appealed to some participants but was not relevant to others, this relates to the ideas of functionality and elements of design as they were described in the analysis section. Subscribing to the aesthetic of modern quilting was not dictated by an understanding or attribution to the art/craft debate. Many participants were able to discuss their perceived differences between art

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<sup>255</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>256</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>257</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

and craft, however the debate seemed to have little bearing on their personal quilting. After discussing their perceptions of the art/craft debate, the participants were asked to describe themselves as quilters and the quilts that they make. The responses were very individualized, and illustrated that modern quilters are not aligning themselves with the art quilt world or the traditional quilt world. Natalie summarized the distinction when she said, “they are creating for themselves, not necessarily for outside acceptance.”<sup>258</sup>

Part of the difficulty in gaining acceptance in the art world for studio art quilters was related to gender. Quilting is usually grouped with other textile arts in the category of women’s work. Although all of the participants in this study were women, the topic of gender was not mentioned frequently. When describing the typical modern quiltmaker, several participants mentioned that they are female and that their individual guild had either no male members or one male member, often the spouse of a female member. Laura said, “it’s super important to be able to connect with other ladies, or men I guess, not to be sexist, but I don’t know any male quilters to be honest.”<sup>259</sup> Only one participant delved into the complicated history of gender and its relationship to craft. Natalie said:

We were chatting earlier about the fact that we no longer have to, as women, we no longer have to fight, this is what our parents fought about, like feminism and quilting, as women’s work and we don’t have to do that anymore, our parents fought that fight, and quilting kind of skipped a generation for the most part so all of a sudden we were like, ‘ohh yes, we are professional women and we do this.’<sup>260</sup>

When participants discussed themselves as quilters, their motivations for quilting illustrate that the art/craft debate is not a factor in their quilting. Helen described her friend’s description of quilting that inspired her to start making quilts:

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<sup>258</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>259</sup> Interview, October 16, 2011

<sup>260</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

she was like ‘it’s easy, you take this piece and you put this piece and you put this piece and you put them together. And look, there’s these patterns and you can make your own patterns and it’s you put the pieces of the pieces together.’ And for some reason, its just really made a lot of sense to me...I wanted to learn how to be patient about things. And I’m sure that was part of it, a sort of intellectual piece of it, but really it just made sense for me to continue that thing that I know I do innately which is to put pieces of the puzzle together.<sup>261</sup>

Jill said, “I think for me it’s [quilting] an expression of who I am. It’s the one place that I can do my own thing without anybody else’s opinion...it’s a good creative outlet for me.”<sup>262</sup> Natalie talked about where she found inspiration for her quilts. She said, “my inspiration in quilting comes from everywhere...I love a challenge in my work. I like to try something new. I quilt like I cook. I never like to make the same dish twice, I like to always bring something new. It’s hard for me to make the same quilt twice.”<sup>263</sup> For these women, quilting was an important piece of their personal identity because they related it to elements of their personality. From piecing things together to expressing herself to focusing on originality, these participants found meaning in their quilting outside of categories like art or craft.

### **So, what is modern quilting?**

The identifying characteristics of the modern quilting movement as embodied by participants of the MQG are encompassed by the conclusion of this study, specifically that modern quilting is both an attitude and an aesthetic. One participant used similar groups to define the modern quilter. Lindsay said, “there isn’t a template for the modern

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<sup>261</sup> Interview, September 24, 2011

<sup>262</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>263</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

quilter. It's an aesthetic more and an approach."<sup>264</sup> Part of the reason that there were many interpretations of modern quilting among the participants is that while they all embodied elements of the attitude of modern quilting, only some were taken by the aesthetic. Nora described the divide between modern quilters when she said, "Like I feel like there's two different people in the guild."<sup>265</sup> She described the two different modern quilters in her guild as:

its either someone who's new to quilting or jaded from traditional quiltmaking and they don't want to follow rules and they want to just kind of be able to explore their own thing, kind of fresh and happy, not a lot of cares in the world. And then there's the modern quiltmaker who has a design sensibility, who really looks at design and how it functions within the world as being a key part of it.<sup>266</sup>

For Nora, the distinction between the two types of modern quilters was explicitly stated as being an aesthetic distinction. Although the results of this study support her statements, it is vital to contextualize the attitude as an all-encompassing factor that binds the group together regardless of aesthetic choices and preferences.

Many participants recognized that modern quilting is not an entirely new phenomenon, rather it has developed out of the quiltmaking tradition. Nora said, "today some modern quilters do not recognize the history of quiltmaking. 'You know what, you are not the first ones on the scene, I hate to tell you.'"<sup>267</sup> She later summarized by saying, "we're not reinventing the wheel, we did not invent the wheel, we are just rolling it down a different hill."<sup>268</sup> Conversely, according to another participant, Mary, "there's sort of a

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<sup>264</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011

<sup>265</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>266</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>267</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>268</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

reinventing the wheel thing going on.”<sup>269</sup> She felt as though the modern quilter was not seeking out help and assistance from more experienced quilters, but rather using a process of trial and error to learn how to quilt. Another participant, Sally, said:

if I showed you a whole bunch of pictures of what you would think of as modern quilting or quilts, you’d be shocked at how many were actually from the 1800s and the 1910s. And the 1920s and so I think personally that these young women who have, who think that this has never been done before. Crap. Its all been done before.<sup>270</sup>

One of the first modern quilters to market designs and patterns was Denyse Schmidt. Her name came up frequently among participants. Katie said, “I remember the moment opening Denyse Schmidt’s book and being like ‘quilts can be like that, whoa.’ And it just called my name, like hard core called my name.”<sup>271</sup> Like Katie, Nora said, “so I remember watching Martha Stewart one day and the Denyse Schmidt section was on...she made me look at quilting in an entirely different way.”<sup>272</sup> Nora went on to make one of Denyse Schmidt’s quilts that was featured as one of the early quilts in the Flickr group “Fresh Modern Quilts.” Nora also stressed the importance of the organizer of that group, Rossi. She said, “I always say Denyse Schmidt was the one who influenced us all, but Rossi was the one, how do I say this, Rossi is the one who corralled everyone, she was like the modern quilt wrangler.”<sup>273</sup> Very few participants talked about the beginnings of modern quilting outside of their own personal beginnings with modern quilting.

Many participants had a difficult time articulating the qualities that make a quilt fit into the modern category. Two participants had an interesting way of describing

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<sup>269</sup> Interview, September 23, 2011

<sup>270</sup> Interview, November 4, 2011

<sup>271</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>272</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>273</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

modern quilts. Both Katie and Nora said, “someone gave me this great saying as to what a modern quilt is, ‘modern quilting is like porn, you know it when you see it.’”<sup>274</sup>

Similarly, Renee said, “I might be able to look at something and say ‘ohh, that’s modern’ but if you ask me why, I might not know why.”<sup>275</sup> Other participants had a clearer interpretation of modern quilts. According to Katie, “oftentimes if I am talking to a quilter who knows those quilting categories I often say our aesthetic isn’t either [traditional or art], but we are a mix of traditional and art quilting in that we make functional quilts like traditional quilters...like art quilting came up in the ‘80s, we are a new movement, we are the new aesthetic.”<sup>276</sup>

Several participants mentioned that they are not sure modern is the right term for the movement. Katie said:

Its unfortunate, the word, I almost wish it was a different word that came to be because modern...maybe its because of Week’s and Bill’s first book *Modern Quilt Workshop*, I don’t know why that’s the word we’ve used, but it is...because it’s a word that means not dated, I think a lot of people assume that when we say ‘that’s not modern quilting’ we mean ‘that’s dated quilting’ where that’s not what we’re saying. What we are saying is that’s not modern quilting because the definition is different.<sup>277</sup>

Another participant, Lindsay, agreed that the word modern does not quite fit. She said, “all these vocabulary terms already have a medium or a style or a time period that they are already exclusive to and now we are trying to morph them into quilting so there’s no happy medium because you are trying to change one thing into something else and we can’t come up with a new word to describe it.”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

<sup>275</sup> Interview, October, 18, 2011

<sup>276</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>277</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>278</sup> Interview, November 3, 2011



Part of the definition of modern quilting at the moment seemed to be centered on solid fabrics for many of the participants in this study. Natalie said, “I have always said ‘I loved to work with solids before solids were cool’ because now they are like all the rage.”<sup>279</sup> According to Natalie, “I think you can hear your own voice through solids more than through using a lot of prints.”<sup>280</sup> For the participants just starting to make modern quilts, solids seemed to be part of that transition. Jill said, “I never owned solid fabric before last year and I never bought a piece of white and I think I bought seven yards this summer and used it all.”<sup>281</sup> Like Jill, Dana said, “prior to being in the Modern Quilt Guild, I really didn’t give solids a look and now I am starting to look at solids a little bit more, not just as an accompaniment to quilting, but how I can start to feature more solids.”<sup>282</sup>

According to Gail, “I think there’s power in this [modern quilting]. Its like other art forms in terms of history have been very powerful in making things happen.”<sup>283</sup> Part of the idea that there is potential for power in modern quilting is related to the number of people who are engaged in modern quilting. Natalie proposed several reasons why people are drawn to the modern quilting movement. She said:

I think it has a lot to do with the climate of our society now and where we are and the fact that we are so engaged in technology and computers and iPhones and I pads and all this other stuff that we need to be able to touch and feel. And it’s also more of a focus on family and home and the fact that quilts, it’s really this great combination of you being able to stimulate yourself creatively in some way or form or fashion and as well as to create something that is going to give someone warmth and love, we make quilts for babies and friends.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>280</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

<sup>281</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>282</sup> Interview, October 19, 2011

<sup>283</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

<sup>284</sup> Interview, October 30, 2011

The individual reasons for why people are drawn into modern quilting are numerous, which lends itself to the multitude of people who are drawn into modern quilting and the MQG.

## CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

The opportunity to document the experiences of a movement within quilting as it continues to grow and change is vital to the documentation of the history of quilting. Traditional quilting is an activity that we will always have unanswered questions about. The studio art quilt movement is well documented, providing researchers with important first hand information for the future. I hope that my exploration of the MQG will be useful to quilt scholars in the future as they work to understand the quilting landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study includes a level of detail in the documentation of the beginnings of the MQG that would not be present if the participants were interviewed years later.

This study is a glimpse at the beginning stages of the modern quilt movement as it is centered around the MQG. The findings illustrate that modern quilting is both an attitude and an aesthetic. Although all the participants in this study embody elements of the attitude of modern quilting, only some clearly embraced the aesthetic of modern quilting. It is important that continued data is collected from modern quilters as the idea of modern quilting continues to grow and develop. According to Gail, “you have to let people become who they are becoming in their own way and the group is going to be doing that.”<sup>285</sup> Specific to the MQG, as their national presence continues to grow and develop, tracking the impact of formalization on the attitude of participants will be interesting. Hopefully the MQG continues to conduct annual surveys to gather data on the growing population of modern quilters. In the future, it could be interesting to try to understand how the communities of several online craft sites relate to the MQG. For

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<sup>285</sup> Interview, October 17, 2011

example, are modern quilters most active on Craftsy, Etsy, Spoonflower, or do the different communities have limited interaction? Although survey data is easiest to collect, further qualitative inquiry across a broader geographic range may highlight other themes or categories that relate to modern quilting. The MQG is hosting a quilt conference, QuiltCon in February of 2013. Creating some sort of recording booth or informal interview site could allow for a large and varied sample of the MQG community. Clearly the presence of craft as a creative force in one's life is important to many people, and continuing to explore the nuances of the relationship between craft, quilting, and the MQG will further explain the importance of making in peoples' lives.

Although this study was focused around the MQG, my exploration of writing on craft shows that there is a lack of scholarly inquiry into craft as it functions in the DIY or hobbyist realm. The body of literature reviewed for this study related in some ways, however it did not fully explain the phenomenon of the modern quilting movement. Studio craft is also an important phenomenon to study, less formal interpretations of craft are prevalent in our culture. Understanding what drives people towards craft pursuits, what creative crafting means to them, and how community develops around the DIY or hobbyist craft sector is important.

The MQG has a key role in the continuation of quilting as an activity that people enjoy. Many participants cited the ability of the MQG to continue to draw in new quilters. Although different types of quilters can often disagree on their aesthetic vision, this study shows that open-minded quilters of all types can come together around the creative spirit of quilting.

Institutions in the quilting world need to focus on further promoting an open, accepting environment so that quilting, whether modern or not, can continue to thrive. Sometimes the divisions between different “types” of quilters can breed contention, while there are lessons to be learned among different quilters everywhere. Nora said, “I learned how to do binding in the most revolutionary way. Its totally traditional, but I learned some serious stuff and I think that a lot of modern quilters don’t give traditional quilters credit for that, they can learn a lot from them.”<sup>286</sup> Furthering the attitude of modern quilting to embrace quilting in all forms will ensure a rich continued history of quilting and an appreciation of the joy all quilters experience through making.

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<sup>286</sup> Interview, November 2, 2011

**APPENDIX A: E-mail Template**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ Modern Quilt Guild,

I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln studying textile history with a focus on quilt studies. I am completing a thesis project centered on the experience of members of the Modern Quilt Guild.

I will be in \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_, and I am interested in meeting with members of the \_\_\_\_\_ MQG who have been members for six months or longer. Participation would involve a one on one interview for approximately one hour.

Feel free to forward this email to guild members, or if you have an email list, I would be happy to contact people individually.

Attached is the informed consent form for you to review. Please let me know if you are interested in participating, or if you have any questions.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Ellen Rushman  
Graduate Student  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Department of Textiles, Clothing, and Design  
[802.522.6766](tel:802.522.6766)

## **APPENDIX B: Interview Guide**

The following seven questions provided the framework for the interview process:

- How did you become involved with quiltmaking?
- How do you connect with other quilt makers?
- Why do you participate in the Modern Quilt Guild?
- How would you describe the typical modern quiltmaker?
- Talk about your understanding of the differences between art and craft.
- How do you describe the quilts you make?
- How do you describe yourself as a quiltmaker?

## **APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form**

### **Title of Project:**

Modern Quilting: DIY Discourse via Blog

### **Purpose of Research:**

The purpose of this research study is to understand what draws people into the modern quilt community and how they conceptualize their place within the larger quilt/craft/DIY universe. Information gathered will be reported in a thesis, journal articles, and presentations at professional meetings. You are invited to participate in this research because you are a member of the Modern Quilt Guild.

### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require no longer than two hours of your time for the interview. The interview will be audio taped with your permission. The tape will be transcribed by the researcher. You may select the location of the interview. The interview will focus on your experience as a quiltmaker and member of the Modern Quilt Guild.

### **Risk and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks involved in participating in this study.

### **Benefits:**

You may gain new insights to your experience as a quiltmaker and member of the Modern Quilt Guild. You will be part of a meaningful contribution to scholarship on quilting, widening the scope of this body of work.

### **Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office. The data will only be seen by the investigator during the study. The information obtained in this study will be published in journals and/or presented in meetings, but the data will be reported as aggregated data. The audiotapes will be erased after transcription verification is deemed accurate.

### **Compensation:**

None.

### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask questions concerning this research at any time. Contact information for the investigator and the investigator's advisor is listed below. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965.



**Freedom to Withdraw:**

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent; Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Name and Contact information of the Investigator(s):**

Ellen Rushman  
Graduate Student  
Department of Textiles, Clothing, and Design  
[ellenrushman@gmail.com](mailto:ellenrushman@gmail.com)  
802-522-6766

Michael James  
Department Chair  
Department of Textiles, Clothing, and Design  
[mjame1@unlnotes.unl.edu](mailto:mjame1@unlnotes.unl.edu)  
402-472-2911

**APPENDIX D: IRB Details**

Below is the email stating IRB approval is not required:

Dear Ms. Rushman and Dr. James,

Thank you for submitting IRB protocol #11865 titled, “Modern Quilting: DIY Discourse via Blog.” Based on 45 CFR 46; we have determined that this project is not human subjects research which does not require IRB approval.

Project #11865 does not fall under the IRB definition of “generalizable knowledge”. Generalizable knowledge is designed to draw general conclusions where knowledge gained from a study may be applied to populations outside of the specific study population. This knowledge informs policy or presents generalized findings.

Based on this assessment, the project will be administratively closed. Should the scope of your project change, please contact the IRB office at 472-6929 to discuss future procedures.

Cordially,

Rachel Wenzl  
Research Compliance Services Specialist  
Human Research Protection Program

**APPENDIX E: Demographic Survey**

Please answer the following questions by circling the response best suited to you:

## 1) Gender

- A. Male
- B. Female

## 2) Race

- A. Asian or Pacific Islander
- B. Hispanic
- C. African American
- D. White
- E. Other

## 2) Age

- A. 20 or below
- B. 21-30
- C. 31-40
- D. 41-50
- E. 51-60
- F. 61-70
- G. 70 or above

## 3) Level of Education

- A. Less than a high school degree
- B. High school degree or equivalent
- C. Some College
- D. College Degree
- E. Master's Degree
- F. More than a Master's Degree

## 4) Occupation

**APPENDIX F: Survey Results**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Mary	female	white	51-60	college degree	quilt store owner
Ruth	female	white	51-60	master's degree	media manager
Helen*	female	white	41-50	college degree	actor
Laura	female	white	41-50	college degree	homemaker
Sarah	female	white	61-70	some college	homemaker "domestic engineer"
Amy	female	white	31-40	more than a masters	attorney
Julie	female	white	21-30	college degree	freelance writer/editor
Judith	female	white	31-40	master's degree	assistant professor, writer
Rachel	female	white	21-30	college degree	freelance designer
Rita	female	Asian	51-60	college degree	domestic goddess
Gail	female	African American	61-70	master's degree	retired
Jill	female	white	51-60	college degree	executive assistant
Emily	female	white	21-30	college degree	IT Project Manager
Monica	female	white	31-40	college degree	designer
Renee	female	white	51-60	college degree	Freelance instructional designer/writer
Dana	female	white	41-50	master's degree	Speech Language Pathologist
Katie	female	white	31-40	college degree	modern quilter, author, and blogger
Natalie	female	African American	31-40	college degree	project coordinator (software)
Allison	female	white	31-40	college degree	software engineer
Nora	female	white	31-40	college degree	SAHM
Leah	female	white	31-30	college degree	nanny
May	female	white	51-60	master's degree	collections manager/Museum of Natural Science
Lindsay	female	white	21-30	master's degree	registrar at a natural science museum
Olivia	female	white	41-50	more than a masters	quilt designer, teacher
Jana	female	white	31-40	college degree	quilter
Sally	female	white	51-60	some college	certified professional legal secretary

\*Participant did not fill out the demographic survey. Information that could be extracted from the interview transcript was used.

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