

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2008

Meanings and Messages: Quilts to Comfort the Families of America's Fallen in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars

Jonathan Gregory
jonathangrego@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Gregory, Jonathan, "Meanings and Messages: Quilts to Comfort the Families of America's Fallen in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars" (2008). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 96.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/96>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.



**Meanings and Messages: Quilts to Comfort the Families of
America's Fallen in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars**

Jonathan Gregory
jgregory3@unl.edu

Introduction

During the American Civil War, 1861-1865, women from the northern states made at least 250,000 quilts to supply bedding to the Union Army in the field and in military hospitals through the aegis of the U. S. Sanitary Commission. Southern women carried on similar types of relief work for the Confederate Army, though with far fewer resources to draw upon. Hundreds of red and white quilts were made as fundraisers for the American Red Cross during the First World War. And Mennonite and Mormon women from Canada and the U.S. made and shipped thousands of quilts in a massive act of relief to the war-ravaged European continent following World War II. Women of varying political viewpoints made quilts as expressions of support and protest during Operation Desert Storm in the 1990s.¹ Now, during the United States government's "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans are making quilts for wounded soldiers, children whose parents are deployed, and the families of those who died in the wars. The numbers of quilts made in these efforts are significant. Based on media reports and the data posted on quilt projects' Internet sites, over 27,000 quilts have been made and given since early 2003. This total does not include the efforts of smaller local groups and individuals that have not gathered media attention or promoted their efforts.

According to the *New York Times*, as of September 22, 2008, 4,148 American service-members have been killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom, (the Iraq War) and 587 in Operation Enduring Freedom (the Afghanistan War), making a total of 4,735 soldiers killed in action. There are three nationwide grassroots quiltmaking projects that each endeavor to make a quilt for the family of these soldiers. This means that each family should receive at least three quilts. At present, over 8,000 quilts have been presented. When beginning my research on these three projects, I found myself interested in what motivated contemporary wartime quiltmakers to take on these commitments. Specifically I was interested in what made it meaningful to them and what meanings did the quilts have? To gain insight into these and other questions, I conducted an oral history project with eleven individuals—ten women and one man—each involved in one of the projects. Represented in this group of interviewees are the founders of each project—Jan Lang of Marine Comfort Quilts (MCQ), Jessica Porter of Operation Homefront Quilts (OHQ), and Donald Beld of Home of the Brave Quilt Project (HBQP)—and eight others who are each deeply involved in one of the projects.²

¹ See Virginia Gunn, "Quilts for Union Soldiers in the Civil War," in *Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths*, ed. Laurel Horton (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1994); Nancy J Rowley, "Red Cross Quilts for the Great War," in *Uncoverings 1982*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, CA: AQSG, 1983); Nancy Cameron Armstrong, "Quilts of the Gulf War, Desert Storm: Participation or Protest?" *Uncoverings* 13 (1992).

² The names of those interviewed are Jan Lang, Sue Scheri, and Bren Pathenos of Marine Comfort Quilts; Jessica Porter, Joanne Porter, and Ellen Saccoia-Smith of Operation Homefront Quilts; and Donald Beld, Barbara Shillinger, Beverly Macbeth, Carol Smith, and Sandi Carstensen of Home of the Brave Quilt Project. Many of these interviews will be archived in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries archives and special collections.

Each of these quiltmaking projects has unique origin, quilt styles that are distinctive, and modes of organization and operation that are particular to the project. In spite of these differences, the textual analysis of interviewees' narratives reveals thematic similarities regarding the meanings of the quilts and the quiltmaking. In particular, all are engaged in a meaning-making process that spans from internal motivations to external actions and from immaterial concepts of identity and empathy to material expressions of comfort to the recipients. All of this originates within quiltmaking communities that use quilts as effective messengers of care and comfort in spite of the geographic and social isolation of quiltmakers from the grieving families.

Meanings

Almost without exception, the interviewees found themselves impelled to begin making and giving quilts because—borrowing Home of the Brave Quilt Project founder Donald Beld's words—something “hit a nerve” within them.³ For example, some, like Barb Shillinger of the Washington State chapter of HBQP, started participating because her son died of disease and she knew what it was like to lose an adult child; she also reached out to others to prevent herself from descending into bitterness. Others who opposed the war or were burdened with the consequences of war felt a strong need to respond, to “do something,” as several interviewees expressed. Women with sons were compelled by a shared maternal identity with women whose sons were killed. Each project founder stated a sense of calling to his or her project and that doing the work adds purpose and meaning to life.

There is thematic similarity in how interviewees' personal and internal motivations work their way into the external social world in which the quilts are made and given. Specifically *social feelings* are followed by *social actions*. “Knowing” is a word used repeatedly in the interviews that represented this bridging from the internal to the external, from the personal to the social. Several interviewees made statements that connected their internal feelings to the feelings of the grieving family. Joanne Porter of OHQ said, “I really want them to know that their loved ones' sacrifices aren't forgotten. I want them to know that people realize what they've sacrificed, what their loved ones sacrificed. And to feel appreciated, and loved, supported. I really want them to feel that.” Joanne reads several articles about each fallen service member and her or his family and then personalizes the family's quilt based on what she learns. She said, “It's a connection that they know that we actually know about them....”⁴

The quilts made by MCQ, OHQ, and HBQP are all meant to contain and bear messages. The messages are what one would expect: those of comfort, condolence, care, love, gratitude, remembrance, support, and affirmation of the meaningfulness of the deceased's life and death. They all add up to heartfelt messages that are meant to heal the pain of loss. They are expressed in words, symbols or images, and in the quilt as a cultural medium.

Messages in Words

MCQ and HBQP quilts are full of words. Both projects have standardized their designs such that a person may contribute as little as one block if it conforms to the size and pattern requirements.

³ Don Beld, of Los Angeles, CA, Telephone interview with author, tape recording, and corrected transcript, 7 March 2007, Lincoln, NE.

⁴ Joanne Porter, of Hudson, FL, Telephone interview with author, tape recording, and corrected transcript, 23 April 2007, Lincoln, NE, 21.

And both projects ask that the maker of the block also sign his or her name, city, and state using permanent ink. MCQ goes further to encourage the block maker to add words of encouragement, thanks, scripture, or a favorite quote. All three projects use some version of a memorial label on the front or back of the quilts. MCQ's is representative: on a square sewn into the center of the quilt is printed, "In Loving Memory of," followed by the rank, name, and unit of the deceased, and then "Operation Iraqi Freedom, Marine Comfort Quilt Group". HBQP quilts are accompanied by a printed certificate that explains the project's connection to historical Civil War quiltmaking, implying that the contemporary makers are working in the spirit of those of the past. All of the projects identify themselves on the quilts, and in some cases also identify the individual makers or contributors, in addition to the names inscribed on the blocks. These various texts draw upon cultural forms of remembrance and sympathy, such as carved inscriptions on tombstones and sympathy or condolence cards. MCQ founder, Jan Lang, said, "I sometimes refer to [the quilt] as a condolence card you can wrap yourself up in."⁵

Messages in Symbols

A red, white, and blue color scheme, American flags, eagles, and imagistic references to September 11, 2001, are symbols that have complex meanings rooted in a grand meta-narrative of the nation's history characterized by vigilant struggle to create and sustain a free republic in which all people have the right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The use of symbols that borrow these meanings communicates that the fallen one's life and death were not in vain, but in the spirit of these American ideals and, therefore, deeply meaningful to the nation as a whole.

MCQ and OHFQ are intentional in their use of patriotic colors and symbols. MCQ also includes military insignia of the branch of service in which the deceased served. HBQP's use of symbols is subtler. Most of the quilts made by this project are reproductions or interpretations of cot-sized quilts made by women in the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the Civil War. Many makers use Civil War era reproduction fabrics so the quilts have a vintage look. A reproduction label on the back is very similar to the U.S. Sanitary Commission's label. Therefore, the quilt itself is a symbol of past charitable quiltmaking and sends the message that, as in the Civil War era, citizens are unified in their support of today's military personnel.

Messages in the Medium

Each participant was asked why he or she thought quilts were the right gift to give to the families of the fallen. Most had difficulty providing an answer. Of those who did attempt an answer, one referred to quilts as a unique American craft and another to the historic tradition of making and giving quilts at significant points in persons' lives. Another spoke of quilts' meanings as warmth and love. These answers revealed that quilts have meanings within American culture, but these meanings are embedded within cultural objects and practices, are complex, and defy easy description. Nevertheless, I offer that the quilt form contains inherent cultural meanings that became part of the messages sent to the families of fallen soldiers.

Quilts have a long history in American culture, but rose to iconic status in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. During the Colonial Revival, quilts became iconic of "homespun"

⁵ Jan Lang, of Valley Park, MO, Telephone interview with author, tape recording, and corrected transcript, 22 March 2007, Lincoln, NE, 29.

republican virtues, and represented women's domestic and family-oriented contribution toward the creation of a great nation. In American culture, quilts also are associated with concepts of economy, warmth, comfort, and love. They are understood as objects most often made and given within valued familial, religious, and community relationships and in recognition of major life events from birth to death. An individual quilt, therefore, often has strong associations to one individual's life, and quilts, as a result, are valued as heirlooms that provide an ongoing connection to previous generations. In addition quilts have historical associations with women's speech and advocacy for religious, social, and political causes such as abolition, temperance, political parties and candidates, and war.

Another set of inherent meanings resides in the quilt as a versatile cultural form that accommodates a number of uses and purposes. Quilts may be created as objects of utility or luxury, thrift or extravagance; they may be large or small, thick or thin. Makers draw from a virtually unlimited range of design possibilities, choosing from a variety of materials and construction techniques. Quilts offer a vast range of creative possibilities. One or many persons may make them. In fact, quilts are one of few cultural forms that are enriched by having many hands in the making. Quilts are inclusive objects, as it were, offering space by the square foot for anyone to occupy with his or her needlework. For example, quilts are appropriate objects for those who wish to give a group gift in that they allow individual contribution and preserve individual identity, yet the individual contributions are only effective when combined into the whole. The visual diversity of a quilt made with blocks from many hands catches one's attention, as does a MCQ quilt for example. The visual diversity of a group quilt seems acceptable and part of its charm, but would be considered odd to be the work of one person: less diversity is expected from the work of a single hand. The nature of quilts made by HBQP and MCQ as collective works becomes part of their message of comfort to families. The mother of one slain service-member told Beverly Macbeth of HBQP, "On the really bad days I go home and I wrap myself up in this quilt that these people gave me. And it has all these names on it and I think of how these people reached out to me."⁶

A quilt, as a cultural medium, is associated with expression of affection and, therefore, well suited within American culture to convey messages of love and care. According to Laurel Horton, the quilt historian and folklorist, because of their high costs in time and materials, quilts do not function well in a market economy. Rather, quilts generally are exchanged in a gift economy where ideas of value are determined on factors other than economics and forms of exchange are not monetary.⁷ Sue Scheri, when she spoke about making quilts for military families that she didn't personally know, used terms that resonate with Horton.

Our goal is for that person that's wrapping themselves in that quilt to feel the love that we put in that quilt. That's our goal.... You make a quilt for someone; you're telling them you love them. It's a time consuming thing. It's a decision on what you're going to do and how you're going to put it together, what colors you're going to use. It's a process you go through because you think about the person that you're making that quilt for.

⁶ Beverly MacBeth, of Grafton, OH, Telephone interview with author, tape recording, and corrected transcript, 26 July 2006, Lincoln, NE, 11.

⁷ Laurel Horton, *Mary Black's Family Quilts: Memory and Meaning in Everyday Life* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 157.

What are their favorite colors? What kind of designs would they like? Well, we don't know that in this case really, so we give a piece of ourselves.⁸

Quilts also possess human-like physical qualities. To touch a quilt, a layered structure of batting secured between top and bottom layers of fabric with quilting stitches, is to touch something that is soft, cool but not cold, and that yields gently to pressure and rebounds. These sensations are very similar to those experienced when touching another's arm or face or when holding someone in a hug. Quilts are grounded in human scale and proportions. They are of sizes that conveniently cover or wrap the human body. Baby quilts are smaller, adult quilts are larger. They reference, in an abstract way, the form of a reclining person.

Beverly Macbeth of HBQP spoke metaphorically of quilts as humans when she told a story of shipping boxes of finished quilts to the families for whom they were made. She said, "As I was driving to the Post Office with these boxes, this horrible dread came over me because I realized that they were like small coffins in my car. Small coffins! That these soldiers were in my car and I was taking them to the Post Office...."⁹

Possibly the most powerful quality of the quilt form is that quilts inhabit our private spaces. Quilts are often used in the privacy of our bedrooms and beds, nurseries and cribs. Quilts cover our bodies and touch our naked skin. Quilts protect us in a cold wintry night, cover the sick, and drape coffins. They move within the spaces where we are most ourselves, most unguarded, most mortal.

Interviewees received thank you notes from some of the families. Some wrote that they wrapped themselves in the quilt and "felt close" to those who made and gave it or, more frequently, felt close to their fallen son. One mother told Jan Lang when she received her quilt it was as if she felt her son saying, "Mom, I'm okay. Every thing's gonna be all right."¹⁰

Other heirloom-type objects beside quilts are being made for families who have lost someone in the current wars. One family makes oak flag cases. They are handmade and personalized with labels and messages of care and concern. An artist creates a portrait of each one who died. Again each portrait is personalized, and to memorialize one's likeness is a gesture of honor. However, flag cases and paintings are not as easily invested with messages in text and symbol as a quilt, and do not represent cultural forms that are as rich and versatile. They do not possess iconic status as objects that represent a long history of feminine and maternal love, deep associations with the human body, nor an ability to dwell in one's intimate spaces. Sue Scheri of MCQ summed it up: "There are a lot of groups doing a lot of things; some of them do pictures, some of them do drawings, some of them do whatever, but you can't wrap yourself up in those.... It's [our] care and concern and we want the family to feel that and what better way for them to feel that than for them to be able to wrap themselves up in it?"¹¹

⁸ Sue Scheri, of Spring Valley, IL, Telephone interview with author, tape recording, and corrected transcript, 19 April 2007, Lincoln, NE, 15.

⁹ MacBeth, Interview, 25-26.

¹⁰ Lang, Interview, 22 March 2007, 23-24.

¹¹ Scheri, Interview, 19 April 2007, 15.

Interpretation

What can be made of all these meanings, those specifically intended by the quiltmakers and those that draw upon the culturally defined meanings of the quilt as an iconic and adaptable cultural form? My interpretation is that each quilt made by the many individuals in Marine Comfort Quilts, OHFQ, and HBQP serves as a memorial narrative of the life and sacrifice of a soldier. Whether consciously intended by the quiltmakers or not, the messages form a chorus of individuals who speak in their assembled rows of inscribed blocks, the personalized memorial inscriptions, heat transferred photographs, the colors of America, and the symbols of freedom. All compose and proclaim a narrative whose thesis is that this death was not in vain. The story acknowledges the tragedy that left a gaping wound in the survivors' lives; it values the sacrifice, assigns meaning to it, and crafts a heroic identity of the one who perished; and it offers lasting and intimate memorial space to comfort and instruct, a space that may be visited often, lain under, or wrapped up within.

Conclusion

To move a step further, I suggest that the 8,000 or so quilts made by MCQ, OHFQ, and HBQP, as a body of culturally produced works, may be thought of as a collection of memorials that narrate the nation's collective loss. Like the Vietnam "Wall" they honor each life equally by name; like the World War II Veterans Memorial on the Washington Mall they connect the individual losses to notions of the nobility of struggle and sacrifice for American ideals. By telling and re-telling the story, life-by-life, these textiles imbed a narrative of meaningful sacrifice into American memory.

However, this is a contested narrative. And members of these quilting communities are aware of it. They must negotiate the tension between working together to comfort families when some of their ranks support the wars and others adamantly oppose them, and when some of the families they comfort are bitter toward the American government. But, as Jenny Edkins of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, has described, the stories of individuals and of their community and nation—the personal and the social—are intertwined; individual identity cannot be severed from the larger group's identity."¹² As such, the thousands of quilts of comfort made by the hundreds of volunteers across the nation reflect the cultural reality that any memorial, whether collective or individual, granite or quilted cloth, will remain a contested space.

¹² Jenny Edkins, "The Rush to Memory and the Rhetoric of War," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 31, no. 2 (2003): 238-242.