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Mary Worrall
Michigan State University Museum, worrall@msu.edu

Marsha MacDowell
Michigan State University, macdowel@msu.edu

Justine Richardson
Michigan State University, richa332@msu.edu

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The Quilt Index: Communicating Stories in the Stitches

Mary Worrall   Marsha MacDowell   Justine Richardson
worrall@msu.edu   macdowel@msu.edu   richa332@msu.edu

During the last third of the twentieth century, a revival of quiltmaking occurred throughout the world along with a concurrent emergence of quilts as a focus of documentation and study. The rise of the feminist art movement in the 1960s and a heightened national interest in American history spawned by the nation's bicentennial celebration in 1976 paved the way for a burst of interest in historical and contemporary American traditions, women's artistic contributions, crafts in general and quiltmaking in particular. Millions of individuals began making quilts, an art form that had languished after World War II. By 2006, there were over twenty-seven million active quilters in the United States and quilting had become a $3.3 billion dollar industry.[1] Thousands of individuals also became engaged in grass-roots documentation projects that yielded records of data on the technical attributes, social history, and the makers of tens of thousands of quilts. These records, housed in separate private and public collections, were largely inaccessible to users and, in some cases, were in situations that jeopardized their long-term preservation. Emerging information technologies of the late twentieth century offered a new medium to bring together this important but dispersed information into a centrally accessible resource -- the Quilt Index (http://www.quiltindex.org).

The Quilt Index (quiltindex.org), a partnership project of The Alliance for American Quilts (AAQ), MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences Online (MATRIX) and Michigan State University Museum (MSU Museum), has been developed as a comprehensive, digital library that is beginning to provide access to this extensive documentation on quilts and quiltmaking. Through the Quilt Index it is becoming possible to locate, reference, and search quilt materials easily, creating a significant resource that artists, educators, scholars, and others can use.

Quilt Documentation Projects

In 1976, Judy Martin founded the National Quilt Registry, an effort that collected photographs of quilts and utilized a standardized documentation form to collect data on a quilt's physical description and story, along with personal information about the quilt-maker. The National Quilt Registry documented sixty-six quilts between 1976 and 1977.[2] In 1977, The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill conducted a documentation of quilts in three geographic locations of North Carolina. This project documented over four hundred quilts. Evaluation of the UNC-CH project led to the idea of holding "quilt days" that asked people to bring their quilts to a public place for documentation rather than asking those conducting documentation to travel to individual homes.[3] In 1981, the Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., the first state-wide documentation project, was established using a quilt days model. The Kentucky project documented over one thousand quilts.[4] All of these projects helped to shape the concept and methodology of future documentation projects.

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[1] *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* and Quilts, Inc., "Quilting in America 2006," 19 November 2008, <http://www.quilts.com/announcements/QuiltingInAmerica2006survey.pdf>.
[2] The records of the National Quilt Registry are housed in the archives of the Michigan State University Museum.
[3] Joyce Joines Newman. 23 May 2005. E-mail communication with the Quilt Index.
[4] Zegart, Shelly, "Affairs of State," *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*. November 2004: 60.

Efforts to document quilts quickly spread. By 1984, there were eleven additional quilt documentation projects. More than thirty additional projects were started between 1986 and 1988. By 2004, over one hundred state, regional, and international projects had been implemented.[5] Although the documentation projects did not follow a standard methodology, the projects were very similar in form and process. Most used a basic documentation data form that generally included fields of information related to the technical information about the quilts, information on the quilt's social history, and information about the maker of the quilt. Each project used variations of that basic template to accommodate that project's unique needs. Each project also established their own parameters on the type and scope of quilt data collected. For example, some projects would not document quilts made after 1950 while others included contemporary quilts in their data collection. In some projects, the collection of data was done by a limited number of individuals, other projects utilized many individuals to collect information. Regardless of methodology, all documentation projects relied on corps of community volunteers for their successes. Many projects published books on the quilts in their state or geographic area.

Mining the Documentation
These documentation efforts played a vital role in the awareness, recognition, and preservation of the history of American quiltmaking. Numerous publications and exhibitions resulted from documentation efforts, bringing an awareness of this history to even wider audiences. Quilts tell unique stories of individuals and communities and provide avenues to understanding heritage that sometimes do not exist through other oral, written, or more traditional archival records.

Five examples of quilts and their accompanying stories that are now accessible through the Quilt Index are illustrative of how the collected data augments our understanding of history and issues related to a wide array of topics, including humor, storytelling, women's experiences, migration and immigration stories, ethnicity, religion, political activism, memory, region, health, individual artistic expression, families, social groups, artistic movements, and much more.

> *LeMoyne Star*[6], created by Rebecca Brickley in 1866, tells a family story and serves as an example of how quilters frequently use their art to work through difficult times. In 1865, Rebecca Brickley discovered she was suffering from breast cancer. The family, which lived in Lockport, New York, had long wanted to move to Michigan. Brickley told her family this was the year that they would travel west so that she would not be left behind. They arrived in Michigan in the spring of 1866. Brickley lost her battle with cancer on October 18, 1866. As she was dying, Brickley made this quilt for her son. Following her death, the family chose not to use the quilt. Instead they preserved it as a treasured memento of a lost loved one.

> *Coat of Many Colors*[7] was made circa 1980 by members of the Martin Luther King Freedom Quilting Bee in Gee's, Alabama. This quilt provides documentation of the importance of religion among quiltmaking groups and demonstrates the translation of a religious story into an abstract visual representation.

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[5] Zegart, Shelly, "Affairs of State," *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*. November 2004: 61.
[6] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?pbd=MichiganMSUMuseum-a0a2h5-a>.
[7] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?pbd=KentuckyUofL-a0a2o8-a>.

The Sun Sets on Sunbonnet Sue[8] was created by a group of women in Lawrence, Kansas who called themselves "The Seamster's Union." This quilt not only reflects a sense of dark humor on the part of the quilt makers who presented a new feminist view of a traditional quilt pattern, but also illustrated national and international events as well as social issues that were important to the late 1970s time period during which the quilt was made.

South African Black Women Activists[9] was made in 2004 by Phina Nkosi. This quilt pays tribute to women who fought to end apartheid in South Africa. It is an example of the many ways that quilt makers use their art to deal with human rights issues. Quilts have been made and used to demonstrate solidarity with movements dedicated to advancing international human rights, to mark important events related to human rights violations, to pay tribute to those individuals who have played roles in human rights activism, to provide vehicles for the expression of feelings and memories about human rights violations, and to engage individuals in actions that will solve human rights issues.

In stark contrast to quilts that honor human rights, the *K.K.K. Fundraising Quilt*[10] was made in Chicora, Michigan in 1926 to raise funds for a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. This quilt is a significant example of how textiles are important documents of history and how objects of material culture provide primary source data for describing, analyzing, and understanding aspects of human history. The materials, construction, design, pictorial imagery, signatures, oral histories and related ephemera, and even condition of this quilt hold clues that strengthen and expand our understanding of quiltmaking, of Klan activity, and of the social and cultural history of a particular community at a particular point in time. This artifact can help us understand the roots of fear and intolerance and to serve as a powerful reminder not to perpetuate the mistakes of the past.

These quilts and their stories are but a few examples of the riches discovered through documentation efforts.

The Quilt Index: A Tool to Preserve, Access, and Use Quilt and Quilt-Related Data
This enormous interest in quilts and quiltmaking as an art form and historical record exposed a great need to bring together the field of interest and make available more primary resources. In the early 1990s, the Kentucky Quilt Project held a broad "bibliography" conference in Louisville that brought together nearly 100 people with interest in quilt history to discuss various media for expanding access to resources for quilt scholarship. Leaders of those meetings followed up by writing an "Overview of Need" for an International Quilt Index, and began forming the Alliance for American Quilts with a Quilt Index as one of their main objectives. The newly formed non-profit AAQ board brought together individuals representing a wide range of quilt interests including scholars, authors, curators, artists, librarians, and representatives of quilt-related industry. All agreed that the power of

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[8] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?pbd=MichiganMSUMuseum-a0a0a2-a>.
[9] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?pbd=MichiganMSUMuseum-a0c9t8-a>.
[10] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?pbd=MichiganMSUMuseum-a0b5z6-a>.

quilts for understanding American culture was being limited by the scattered nature of quilt research resources, such as the vast amount of documentation accumulated through the state quilt documentation efforts. A full proposal for the Quilt Index was written by Alliance board member Dr. Alan Jabbour, then Director of the American Folklife Center/Library of Congress. AAQ partnered with the MSU Museum and MATRIX, both of whom have had representatives on the AAQ board, to develop and implement a digital repository. The result of that collaboration is the Quilt Index.[11]

The implementation of the Quilt Index project has occurred in a number of phases. Design and planning was funded in 1999 by the National Endowment for the Humanities. During this phase, a plan for the systematic presentation of quilts and quiltmaking documentation on the web was developed. The AAQ established a task force to assist the management team with issues of development, funding, and evaluation of the project. AAQ and MSU secured strategic partnerships with four institutions to become pilot contributors: the Illinois State Museum (Illinois Quilt Research Project), University of Louisville University Archives and Records Center (Kentucky Quilt Project), Tennessee State Libraries and Archives (Quilts of Tennessee), and the American Folklife Center. These initial quilt data contributors were selected based on such criteria as geographical distribution of collections, variety of size and type of collections, and institutional interest in and capacity to engage in the Index.

From 2001-2004, the National Endowment for the Humanities funded a development and deployment phase[12], focusing on creating the actual system that would bring the project to fruition. As the database structure was being developed, feedback was sought from contributors. Based on this feedback, modification and implementation of the website took place. This work included construction of a web-based interface and searchable database. To populate the database, digitization efforts were launched with the partners established in the previous phase.

During these early phases there were numerous challenges in project development that were addressed. One of these was working with multiple institutions and addressing multiple institutional needs. One of the initial tasks was to establish a set of comprehensive fields -- a set of descriptive metadata for quilts – that would be used for any and all quilt documentation projects.[13] MSU Museum staff consulted with textile and quilt history scholars from across the country and reviewed many state documentation forms and then created a set of comprehensive fields that accommodated the variations in forms that were used by the various documentation projects and anticipated possible new data fields. The team also developed a defined vocabulary by consulting with textile history specialists and by referring to existing published standards such as the Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus and pattern identification systems such as Barbara Brackman's *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns*. From these, a set of core fields was defined representing the most common and basic information collected by the contributors.[14]

With separate National Science Foundation funding, MATRIX was developing a digital repository system based on NASA's Open Archives Initiative to facilitate preservation, management and presentation of multimedia objects and corresponding descriptive metadata. The Quilt Index, with its

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[11] For more information on the history and development of the Quilt Index, including grant proposal narratives, see http://quiltindex.org.

[12] Michigan State University, "The Quilt Index, Reference Number PA-23733-01," National Endowment for the Humanities Final Report, 16 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/grants/media/NEH-QI_finalrpt2004.pdf>.

[13] The Quilt Index, 16 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/docs/QI_compfields_final.pdf>.

[14] The Quilt Index, 16 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/docs/QI_corefields_final.pdf>.

massive set of carefully defined descriptive terms for quilts, was the first major visual database set up in MATRIX's repository. The system, originally called REPOS, was an online repository system with tools for database setup, data entry, and content management. Access to the system was password controlled, with each contributor granted access to only their data. A method to teach the system to contributors via phone training was established. In 2007, the next generation of the repository was implemented and the system was renamed KORA. The KORA system allowed for rapid project development, the creation of re-usable code, backed up all data through a university server, and offered individual yet federated development.

There was a need for the Quilt Index to incorporate data that was currently in varying formats, including data on paper forms and data in a wide array of electronic formats. The KORA system offered a way to bring all of this data to a centralized place. Contributors with paper forms entered their data directly into the online repository system. For contributors with pre-existing databases, a crosswalk template was developed to match their fields to the Quilt Index comprehensive fields allowing computer programmers to pour the contributor's data into the repository system. Contributors also brought images in a variety of formats to the project. A set of imaging standards[15] was developed to create guidelines and instructions for digitization. The standards included guidelines for the creation of a down-sample image for storage and display on the web along with providing guidelines for the creation of preservation images. Copyright for both data and images remained with the contributor.

Using the Quilt Index
The current Quilt Index website design offers the user numerous options for searching the data. Using the "browse" option, the user is presented with categories including collection, time period, style/techniques, purpose/function, and location. Selecting an option under any of these categories will yield all of the quilts in the database matching that description. The "search" option allows the user to fine tune their searches by typing their desired search term into a text box. Search options include pattern name, quilter, quilting group, ID number, location made, time period, project/collection, and contributor/institution. The search option allows the user to enter data into multiple textboxes to refine the searching capacity. Ongoing user evaluation of the project has led to additional searching options including fiber, fabric type, fabric pattern, publications/exhibitions/contests, and religious, ethnic, and cultural affiliation. With each phase of technological development, additional searching capacities are being developed.

Reaching a Critical Mass
Once the technology was implemented, national expansion and data integration was funded from 2004-2008, by the Institute for Museum and Library Services[16]. This grant funded the completion of the digitization of entire collections from the Michigan Quilt Project at the MSU Museum and the Quilts of Tennessee. New contributors brought to the project during this phase included the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, the Museum of the American Quilter's Society, the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum, Nebraska Quilt Project records at University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, and Winedale Quilt Collection and selected quilts from the Texas Sesquicentennial Quilt Search through the Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. During this phase, the number of quilts included in the database rose to over 18,000. Along with the addition of new data, repository programming was revised and updated to integrate new collections into the Index.

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[15] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/docs/qi_image_specs.pdf>.
[16] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/grants/media/imls04_quiltindexnarrative.pdf>.

A 2006-2009 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities is supporting the continuation of national expansion and data integration.[17] This funding is allowing the Quilt Index to reach a critical mass of data. This period of work is adding data from twelve contributors: West Virginia Department of Archives and History, North Carolina Museum of History, Connecticut Quilt Documentation Project, Hawaiian Quilt Research Project, Louisiana Regional Folklife Program, Minnesota Quilters Inc., New England Quilt Museum/MassQuilts, Rutgers Special Collections and University Archives (Heritage Quilt Project of New Jersey), State Historical Society of Iowa, University of Rhode Island, Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Center, and Wyoming Quilt Project, Inc. These additions will add more than 33,000 quilt records to the Quilt Index. This phase also supports planning with the American Quilt Study Group to develop metadata and a plan to integrate its journal, *Uncoverings*, into the Quilt Index.

Beyond Quilts: Diversifying the Resource Base
With support from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the Quilt Index project team began to vigorously digitize and build a collection of additional associated objects and materials.[18] Activities included the addition of quilt-related ephemera such as patterns, early published material, journals, diaries, exhibit materials and more to provide better access to authentic and rare archival materials. Enhanced tools for utilizing the Quilt Index collections with new ways to compare, analyze, combine, and repurpose the resources are now being developed. Social networking and mechanisms for the capacity for public object submission are being created. Embracing the world of social networking occurred in fall 2008 with the piloting of the Quilt Index wiki, a place for Quilt Index users to create content and use community created resources. A national network of scholars has been assembled to develop interpretive material including curated galleries, peer-reviewed essays, and curriculum. By 2010, this new material will help the Quilt Index to build collections, increase the usability of resources, and improve the educational value of the Quilt Index.

Creating a Management Structure; Further Expansion
As the Quilt Index became a functional reality, project staff turned their attention to creating a management structure that would efficiently provide technological upgrades, content expansion, maintain ongoing evaluation, insure quality controls, communicate the availability of the tool to potential users, and expand user tools. MATRIX and the MSU Museum share in the project management of the Quilt Index and the Alliance provides ongoing content input and takes responsibility for marketing and promotion.
An editorial board has now been established to provide an ongoing mechanism for quality control over growing content and expansion. Evaluation methods have been developed, implemented, and analyzed to review the project and provide suggestions for future growth. The capacity for the integration of research journals was developed and implemented. To help guide the long-term sustainability of the project, a series of national leadership documents and protocols have now been developed.

A Community of Users Reports on the Quilt Index
With the establishment of a critical mass of content data and the growing roster of tools and resources on the Index, the resource has been attracting users from around the world who are drawing upon the Index for a range of scholarly, creative, and educational purposes. Sample comments from users include: "The Quilt Index is a great opportunity to pool information from a

[17] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/grants/media/QIP3_NEH05final.pdf>.
[18] The Quilt Index, 18 November 2008, <http://www.quiltindex.org/docs/imls07_toolsfinal.pdf>.

variety of sources in a format readily available to everyone," "I encourage [my students] to reference the Index as a guide to finer details of traditional quilt design, block size, block colour formats, and block layout dimensions and overall effect of the block combinations," "I refer students to the Quilt Index for inspiration and education in every class, especially machine quilting which is what I have taught most often since creating of the Index. I also refer pretty much anyone else who will listen to me talk about quilts and quilt history for any length of time," "Yes, I used the Index in what amounted to a cultural anthropology & art study for gifted 5th- and 6th-grade students as well as in literature classes for gifted high school students and college students," "I find this extremely valuable a reference on so many levels," "I have used the Index to search for the origin and evolution of quilt patterns and preferred color combinations."

"I have used the Index in an effort to ascertain regional characteristics of quilts and textile use. I have used the Index to provide tentative grounds for inferring contemporary access to particular textiles within regions I have used the Index to trace construction peculiarities. I have used the Index to establish migration patterns of cultural groups," "I have used the Index and am currently using the Index for my graduate thesis… framing quilts as cultural documents looking at quilts with stories to tell or that have provided a voice for a group," "As a designer I not only love just looking at images of quilts, but also the stories of how and when they were made and looking at what was going on in the world at that time and what influences the maker drew upon for design inspirations and how this was interpreted using the fabrics of the period," and "But where can anyone find such a comprehensive, easily updated, well researched data base for American quilts? As I have worked with this Index, I find myself repeatedly amazed at its very existence. I simply could not execute the necessary kind of research on a quilt pattern such as "Whig's Defeat" without the Index. It would require years to visit museums and archives across the country."

A survey conducted in fall 2008 found that even those who have not yet used it are convinced that it will be invaluable to their future work: "the Index will be my most valuable tool," "I am not using it now] but as I am working on some book outlines at the moment, I envisage there will be lots of references to the Index included so that fellow quilters can see the direction in which my work is travelling and the inspirational origins from which these new works came."

Summary
The Quilt Index has become a model project in material culture research, demonstrating that it can bring change to the way data on objects is accessed and disseminated. The Quilt Index model has the potential be developed as an online database and management system for thematic collections of other object types that are housed in repositories of diverse size, focus, and mission offering digital preservation, online collections management, and access. The Quilt Index collections form the seed of what will grow into an extensive network of digital documentation, images, and aggregate information, as well as K-12 curricula materials, online exhibits, and forums for scholarly exchange. Research has indicated that the Index has vast potential for uses that cross the fields of history, education, anthropology, geography, literary studies, rhetoric, art history, and mathematics. As a national resource, the Index is working to provide the most comprehensive and thorough representation of quilting heritage to a public that is increasingly interested in this aspect of our cultural heritage.