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Ethnic Quilting Traditions in Magazine Articles 1900–1980

Colleen Hall-Patton

Abstract

Quilting, while often seen as a quintessentially American art form, has a long history throughout the world. Americans' exposure to other traditions has been intermittent, but reflects other trends in the study of ethnic arts. In the 1950s, interest in folk art overlapped with interest in ethnic art as both create an exotic "other" to readers. Before 1960, that "other" was primarily Hawaiian and European. The 1960s added Cuna molas, and the 1970s saw an explosion of interest in worldwide quilt traditions from Tibetan to Amish.

This paper is a content analysis of quilting traditions referenced in magazine articles from 1900 to 1980. The article database was derived from the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *Art Index*. These indexes provide a replicable source and describe national level magazines of (more or less) popular interest. I reviewed six categories in each index; any articles which included the techniques of applique, piecing, or quilting were included. I examined changes over time, types of magazines, the contexts where ethnic quilts were published, and the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity.

My research used magazine articles from 1900 to 1980 to examine how other ethnic quilt traditions were noted and viewed. I used content analysis to examine overall societal views of ethnic quilting. This work is an extension of my dissertation research, which examined approximately 200 magazine articles, advertisements and books published between 1940 and 1971.

Magazine articles provide a national level perspective on how quilts were portrayed throughout the twentieth century. In this paper, the articles were used to see how non-Euro-American quilt practices were described. The two indexes used for this research were *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *Arts Index*. The *Art Index* covers magazines aimed primarily at artists, collectors, and industries such as textile manufacturers, while the *Reader's Guide* covers magazines aimed at a more general public. While the indices omit specialized needle-

work magazines like *Workbasket* and *Quilter's Newsletter*, or farming and ranching magazines with homemaker columns, they do provide a consistent, accessible, and replicable index. They also provided a more popular view than specialized publications like pattern catalogs which were marketed to those already interested in quilting.

The articles were predominantly written by designers, home furnishing editors, artists, and other experts, thus skewing the articles towards idealized and marketable representations of quilting. While the articles tended to focus on culturally valued artifacts such as rare 19th century quilts, they demonstrate how quilts, quilt culture, and the role of quilts in American culture were described to the more general public, what values were applied, and what were common understandings and assumptions about quilts.

The study focused on articles from six headings: a) applique, b) bedding, c) counterpanes, d) needlework, e) patchwork, f) quilts, and g) sewing. Within these categories, I excluded titles that were obviously not quilt related, such as ones on bedframes or woven coverlets. Articles were included if they used or referenced at least one of the three main quilt methods (patchwork, applique, or quilting) and mentioned quilting or quilters outside the United States or ethnic quilters within the U.S.

The line between folk art and ethnic art has not always been clear, even in the articles themselves, where the terms were sometimes used interchangeably. I defined a somewhat arbitrary line for quilting inside the United States that included African American, Amish, Hawaiian, and Native American quilting as American grown, though part of distinct cultures, but excluded Appalachian and Pennsylvania Dutch quilting, often seen as holdovers of 19th century American traditions. The sense of 'othering' and exoticism also existed for these two quilt traditions, but there was a greater sense of looking at those traditions as 'one of ours.' The boundary was clearly made in a 1978 *Essence* article which noted the study of Pennsylvania Dutch and Appalachian quilters, but not Black quilters (Bray and Freeman 1978, p.112). In this case, Bray's criticism was supported by the fact that, through 1980, African American quilting had yet to appear in any magazines aimed at a more general population.

Overall trends

Overall, there was a huge increase in the number of articles in the 1960s, which doubled again in the 1970s (see Table 1). The impact of the quilt revival is evident in how the overall number of articles nearly tripled to 172 in the 1970s. While the 1930-1959 time period had articles on two or three ethnic groups, the 1960s mentioned four groups and the 1970s mentioned nine. Thus the increase was in both the quantity of articles and the variety of cultures described.

The highest number of articles were written about Cuna molas (10 articles), followed by Hawaiian (eight articles), British (four articles), and African Amer-

Table 1. Article counts and percentages by decade

Decade	ethnic articles	%ethnic articles	overall articles
1900-19	0	0.0%	37
1920-29	1	4.4%	23
1930-39	4	8.2%	49
1940-49	4	6.2%	65
1950-59	2	4.4%	46
1960-69	9	14.1%	64
1970-79	18	9.9%	172
Total:	38		456

ican quilts (three articles). Amish, Canadian, Fons (Dahomey), French, German, Indian, Irish, Native American, Samoan, Spanish, and Tibetan quilting practices were referenced in only one or two articles each.

In looking at the quilt methods mentioned in the ethnic quilting articles, over 90% of the articles described work that included applique; more than 50% included quilting. Patchwork was referenced in just over 25% of the articles, but two thirds of those were found in North America. Embroidery was also mentioned in approximately 25% of the articles. Applique has often been seen as having greater freedom of design, and thus being more art-like because its designs are curvilinear and representative rather than geometric and abstract like piecing. Like paint and embroidery, it is “applied” to a background canvas or fabric. Pictorial work, where applique was often used as another embellishment method along with embroidery, was far more prevalent than geometric designs.

I categorized the articles from both indexes by the type of magazines in which they appeared. The six types, based on the magazine’s primary purpose and/or market, were: women’s, home/shelter, antique/collecting, art/museum, scholarly, and general/other. The majority of articles were found in magazines from the home, antique, and museum categories. While home/shelter type magazines such as *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and Gardens* are primarily geared towards women, it is especially striking that, except for *Essence*, women’s magazines did not carry a single article on ethnic quilting over 80 years of publishing. The *Arts Index*, with its more cutting edge artistic magazines, had more articles on ethnic quilting than *Reader’s Guide*. The more conservative a magazine category seemed to be, the less likely they were to portray nonstandard quilt practices.

This lack of ethnic quilting articles demonstrates the conservative nature of women’s magazines. As a similar example, from my dissertation research, 34 of almost 200 articles from 1940 to 1971 questioned the status quo concerning quilting. Here also, not a single article was published in a women’s magazine, though three articles appeared in home magazines and one in a general

magazine aimed primarily at women. The absence of women's magazines from these discussions substantiates Betty Friedan's claim that magazines were a repressive force for women (Meyerowitz 1994:231). Articles on ethnic quilting followed a similar pattern.

I also categorized articles by their primary purpose. These included: a) antiques, b) how-to, c) exhibition notice/review, d) about people, e) about folk/ethnic art, and f) scholarly/industry. Some articles were coded in more than one category, such as antiques and how-to.

The greatest number of articles (almost 25%), were written to elicit interest in museum exhibits. Even when not the focus of the article, museums or galleries were mentioned in 21 of 38 articles (55%). Articles about objects identified as antiques or museum pieces were written almost exclusively between 1925 and 1950. Antique quilts were also the primary type of quilt featured in the articles on exhibitions. As was common in articles about antique quilts of any kind, even if not ethnic, quilting was seen as an idealized past practice that had either changed irretrievably or had ended. For instance, most articles written between 1940 and 1970 about American quilting described a high point in the nineteenth century without even acknowledging the 1930s revival.

The earliest article on non-American quilting found was a *House Beautiful* article from 1926. Called "Quilted Petticoats of Provence," the article recommended cutting up 19th century petticoats to recycle as quilted fabric for upholstery, pillows and jackets. The focus was on the printed fabric and the history of the fabric rather than the quilting, a common approach found in other contemporaneous articles on antique quilts. These articles largely focused on the objects as their primary interest. Petticoats and quilts were viewed as important for preserving fabric, not for themselves. In this case the authors thought the overabundance of petticoats justified their reuse.

Idiosyncratic quilters

The greatest number of articles (25%) were related to museum exhibits, but a significant number of articles focused on individuals or groups, more than on the product. Overall, these were almost 20% of the articles, and are scattered across all decades except the 1950s. One subcategory of these articles, accounting for four of the seven articles of this type, is about idiosyncratic quilters, who were presented as having no ties to any known quilt traditions. The articles highlighted the way ethnic quilts were seen as self contained practices, where the quilters were a culture of one that still stood in contrast to all of the quilting world known to readers. They were twice removed from us: of a different culture, and outside that culture's textile traditions. The earliest example of this was a 1939 article about "Frau Rupp," a German "peasant" from Chiemgau, Bavaria. After her death, more than a hundred applique pictures were discovered in her house. The article presented seven of them that were exhibited at an art gallery in Munich. Her work was of

“strange visionary shapes,” which were “the spontaneous expression ... of her inner vision.” Her “naive” style “testif(ied) to the true artist’s urge to create” (*Gebrauchgraphick*, May 1939).

Similarly, Elizabeth Allen was discovered near the end of her life in rural England by an art student. In 1967, her work was shown at a gallery in London. The articles described her as “naive,” “prophetic,” and as possessing “an odd quasi-mystical faith of her own.” Nevertheless, this article went on to compare her to Grandma Moses, Klee, and Picasso (*Time*, June 2, 1967).

A third example of “mystical” applique came from the 1970s. That article highlighted the work of Saroj, a woman who lived in the city of Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat, India. Saroj was discovered by a noted Indian painter and folk art researcher, Haku Shah, who first exhibited her work in San Francisco in 1967. Subsequently, Saroj’s work has been likened to Matisse’s paper cuts (Sheikh 2005).

Howard Becker, in his 1984 book *Art Worlds*, posited a typology of artists which included integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists, and naive artists. Integrated professionals are trained and work within the bounds of a known art world. Mavericks know that world, but do things that go beyond its boundaries. Folk artists work within a nonprofessional art world where knowledge is learned informally and aesthetics values are implicit; he used quilting as his example of folk art.

These three quilters all fit his fourth category of naive artists because they were discovered by outsiders, were presented as having no known connection to any kind of art world, and had highly individualistic senses of aesthetics and symbolism (Becker 1982, p.246-247). The small pieces they made took the form of wall hangings, and could thus be interpreted as art made with fabric rather than canvas and paint. All three made pieces that had no discernable practical function, which allowed their work to more easily cross the border between decorative art and high art. All three women made visionary appliqued pictures, but were scattered across time and space: 1930s Bavaria, 1960s Britain and 1970s Gujarat India. Like Simon Rodia or Harriet Powers, as naive artists, their work’s value came from recognition by outside experts regardless of how they may have felt about it. Articles concerning all three women romanticized them as coming from a lower class, and thus separated from high art traditions. This categorization overlapped gender, class, caste, and expectations of naive artists. Their separation enhanced their purity because they were untainted by outside influences.

This fits the modern definition of artists based in creativity, uniqueness, and individuality, which then allowed their discoverers to categorize their work as art and bring it (but not the artists) into the high art world of galleries. By being pulled from obscurity to gallery showings, the work transcended the borders between craft and art, and western artists and peasant Bavaria or “bramble patch” England (from one article’s title).

I now will turn from looking at a genre of quilter to looking at the quilt practices of several ethnic groups: Hawaiian, Cuna, and African American. They each

highlight different attitudes towards ethnic quilting, in part because of the different decades when articles were published. Tracking the portrayal of one culture's quilting practices highlights the changes in perception across five decades of the 20th century.

Hawaiian quilting

The group most consistently mentioned was Hawaiian quilts. The first articles on them appeared in the late 1930s and appeared thereafter in every decade to 1980, with the notable exception of the 1950s. Since Hawaii became a state in 1959, one might have expected more, rather than fewer, articles. However, 1955-59 also had the fewest number of quilt articles overall between 1920 and 1980, which may explain the anomaly.

The four articles on Hawaiian quilting from the 1930s and 1940s are patronizing and focused on differences that made Hawaiian quilts and their makers less sophisticated yet exotic. The articles mention "well curved island women" (*Newsweek*, p.23, Dec. 5, 1938) making quilts that were "simple in execution" and which had "widely spaced somewhat coarse quilting" with a "distinctly Pacific character" (*Antiques*, 1939, p.223).

This mix of approaches and interests is also seen in a 1949 *American Home* article. It described the "weird names" of quilts, that nevertheless demonstrated a "superior native handicraft" that created an "enchanted fusion" of styles (Towers 1949, p.42-3). The article also contrasted the "angular rectitude" of the missionaries' New England style quilts with the freer design of Hawaiian quilts, and how the "very much undressed princesses... laughed like the happy children that they were" while learning patchwork (Towers, 1949, p. 110-111). The design of Hawaiian applique is described as analogous to paper snowflakes and paper dolls, suggesting yet another way that Hawaiian quilters were equated to children. That both the art form and its makers were seen as childlike is a classic approach to other cultures derived from Orientalist approaches that have pervaded Western views of other cultures for centuries (Moeran 1997, p.223). In its list of quilt patterns available to purchase, one is called "Ulei O'Kahili," translated as 'Berry forbidden to women,' which has all the connotations of Eve, the tree of knowledge, the fall from grace and loss of childlike innocence for Western readers.

After a 15 year gap, the 1960s articles still considered Hawaiian quilting to be different, but suggested that mainland quilters could make Hawaiian style quilts or throw pillows with "simple bold designs" (Miller 1964) and, by extension, be bold adaptable innovators themselves. In a striking reversal of earlier articles, rather than being fetishized as exotic curiosities, Hawaiian quilts were admired as something women might wish to emulate.

One of the words that highlighted a shift in thinking was when writers began to talk about "abstract" designs. We know this usage best from the title of the 1971 Whitney exhibit "Abstract Design in American Quilts." The 1964 *House*

and *Garden* article "Applique Pillows to Make Yourself" by Rudy Miller discussed the way Hawaiian quilters adapted mainland American quilting to Hawaiian aesthetics, the contemporary appearance of Hawaiian abstracted natural designs, and the way these patterns could be adapted for contemporary homes (Miller, 1964, p.94). The 1965 article "Island Quilting is Different" further emphasized the modern attractiveness of the quilts by portraying the Hawaiian quilt in a bedroom furnished with modern furniture (*Sunset*, June 1965, p.123-124). In this article, "different" meant that the style was more like decorative art than patchwork was, and thus contemporary quilters could be more art-like by making such quilts.

While all the articles saw Hawaiian quilts as having historic value, they also defined a peak period of quilting that ended in the early 1930s, before the first article appeared. The quilts could then be admired at a distance in time as well as in cultural and physical space from the American mainland. Contemporary Hawaiian quilting was subsequently seen as being degraded or rare; only the 1972 *Fiberarts* article portrayed quilting as a contemporary practice by showing a woman quilting with a hoop. A more typical combination of time and space was found in a 1979 article. It emphasized the historicity of Hawaiian quilting and its similarity to American quilting by using a 65 year old picture of a 1933 Hawaiian quilting bee.

Before 1979, most of the articles had highlighted quilt folklore, such as the importance of personal design, personal ownership of quilt patterns, and pride in one's heritage as evidenced through the use of insignia and flags referencing Hawaiian royalty. The 1979 article was the first to note that the designs were adapted from tapa cloth, and to contextualize the flag and Hawaiian crown quilts as a protest against colonization rather than just signifying pride in one's heritage. It noted the "creative merger" of traditional and "imposed" forms (Alonzo, p.77, November 1979). This article also demonstrated how the women's movement changed interpretations of cultural practices, questioned grand narratives of imperialism, and offered new ways to value the quilts.

Cuna Molas

The ethnic tradition with the most articles written about it came from the Cuna, or San Blas Indians, who live off the coast of Panama. Beginning in 1960, over the next two decades there were ten articles on the panels, originally created as the front and back of women's blouses, which are called molas. Some of the awareness in the United States was due to intentional marketing by cooperatives fostered by Peace Corps members in the 1960s, similar to the creation of Mountain Artisans and the Freedom Quilting Bee in the U.S. from VISTA volunteers' efforts (*Aging* April 1971).

The 1960 article "Applique of San Blas" was the first I found to discuss Cuna molas (*Craft Horizon* Jan. 1960). All three articles published in the 1960s were

in special interest magazines (two in *Craft Horizons*, one in *American Fabrics*) and described how molas were made and why. The molas were presented as available to readers as panels or framed pictures, but not as something a reader could make.

The 1979 article "Dazzling Folk Art of the Cuna Indians" in *Horizon* (1979, pp.63-64) magazine epitomizes the way that ethnic quilts were seen as attractive, but exotic. In it, the blouse panels (molas) were "dazzling," "peculiar," "strangely cryptic," and evoked a "subtle magic" in one of those "rare cultures in which the pictorial art is dominated by women." The art form could occur because of the "leisurely pace of tropical sea island living."

Few articles on the Cuna described the impact of the new market of tourists on blouse making, though they described the insularity and control in Cuna culture which only let tourists and buyers in in controlled doses. Many articles, such as "Madison Avenue's Secret Conquest; Designs taken from advertisements by Cuna Indians" (*American Heritage*, June 1974) and "Molas: jungle view of civilization" (*Smithsonian*, Nov. 1975) commented on the impact of Western design and advertising. Outside sources such as political cartoons, lettering and advertisements made acceptable design motifs once they had been stripped of their original meaning. Readers and tourists were somewhat equated with adapted designs as both were stripped of influence and meaning.

To compare the views of Hawaiian and Cuna quilts, we can see where they were published, whether they were replicable, and how they were presented. Of the articles on Hawaiian quilts, six were in home magazines or magazines written for the general public. The other two were in antique and art magazines. In contrast, only one of the articles on Cuna quilts was in a home magazine, none were in antique magazines, six were in art/museum magazines, and three were in journals written for the textile industry. Based on this positioning, Cuna molas were treated as a more serious art form than Hawaiian quilts.

How-to articles, which give instructions so the reader may replicate a depicted item or practice a particular technique, were found in less than 20% of the ethnic quilt articles. Of all the various nationalities described, only Hawaiian quilts and Cuna molas had how-to articles written about them. Four of eight articles on Hawaiian quilts had "how-to" information while two of ten articles on Cuna molas had "how-to" components. Instructions for Hawaiian quilting were found from the 1940s to the 1970s, Cuna molas from the late 1970s on. Part of the difference between the two may have been the size of the quilts and the way they were marketed. Though the mola panels and Hawaiian pillows were of similar size, the complexity of Cuna applique may have made them more intimidating. Cuna molas were sold as framed panels, ready for hanging on one's wall; Hawaiian quilts were bedquilts or pillows. While some of the articles marketed kits for Hawaiian quilts, no kits were advertized for molas.

In looking at the intended audiences for articles, those on Cuna molas and Hawaiian quilts were written for the general American public, not for those ethnicities. In some of the magazines, however, it is clear that writers were describing

a quilting subpopulation to a larger group of the same people. There is a sense of identification with the history, people, and practices described that closes the distance between the reader and the quiltmakers. This was true of the articles on Canadian quilting, and some of the articles on British quilts.

A third example was articles about African American quilts. The first article was in the 1954 *Negro History Bulletin* about a wall hanging made by a History Quilt Club as part of learning Black history and fostering civil rights and interracial cooperation. The next articles appeared in *Essence* magazine in 1978, so no articles about African American quilters and quilts appeared in magazines primarily marketed to non-Black readers during this study's time.

Until the late 1970s, the articles seemed oblivious to the paradox of describing aesthetics as indigenous or local when the historical origins of the quilt traditions in the Americas, Ireland, and Hawaii were imported forms from missionaries, English aristocracy, and slave owners. With the exception of the articles on molas, quilt practices were often described as a pure form, untainted by modernity or Western influence. In the later 1970s, articles on Hawaiian quilting and African American quilting began to discuss an insider's view of the contradiction in influences. For example, the 1978 *Essence* articles specifically discussed how "slave art" had been reclaimed as African American art through emphasizing the perceived African elements of strip quilts and free form design versus the "tight and ordered symmetry of Euro-American designs" (Bray and Freeman 1978, pp.112-114). The articles defined for their audience the ways that African American quilting and quilters had been suppressed by having to "struggle to survive," being labeled as "primitive, wild, or unimportant," their "contributions...cast aside." Rather than being ignored, belittled, and separated, the writers suggested seeing "all our culture as valuable," as "unsung artists," and as "underestimated talent" (Bray and Freeman, 1978, pp.112-114).

Conclusion

Like the hierarchical evolutionary schemes of nineteenth century social theorists (Langness, 1974, p.29), the articles on ethnic quilting created a distance of both time and space between the readers, the quilts, and their makers. Quilts were exoticized by context, location, designs, techniques, and the bodies that made them. An example of this exoticizing is a picture in a 1975 article of a Cuna woman smoking a double pipe while wearing a mola, headscarf, and nose ring (Vandervelde *Design* Winter 1975, p.10). Another example of how women's bodies were exoticized, as well as their quilt forms, is seen in the 1926 article about Provencal petticoats. The writers spent considerable time evoking a country dance with the women "reminding us of goddesses, with their proud carriage and classic features.... Their brunette coloring, luminous big brown eyes, and abundant dark hair (that) are typical of the South" (Jackson and Jackson, 1926, p.163).

Through more than 50 years of quilt articles, I found an increase in the diversity of cultural practices described and a decrease in negative stereotyping and exoticizing of an ethnic "other." In general, articles became less patronizing, though old usages lingered. For example, Cuna women were still portrayed as homemakers and mothers practicing a "primitive creative art" well into the late 1970s (Holz 1979).

Before the 1970s, ethnic quilters' were spoken about or spoken for, but their voices were largely silenced. The quiltmakers were unknown through the veils of time, while their quilts were generalized as cultural traditions, such as the oft noted private ownership of Hawaiian quilt designs (*Newsweek*, Dec 5, 1938; Towers 1949; Miller 1964). This silencing is a standard practice, similar to Edward Said's note that colonial administrators would never even think of having the natives speak for themselves (Said, 1978, p.33). Writers spoke with authority, defining a "we" that observed, appreciated, and exoticised a silent "them" (Said 1978, p.45).

Even so, writers in the 1970s began to acknowledge the oppression that ethnic groups and women experienced. Several articles in the 1970s talked about how Amish women were "subordinate" (Janos 1977), while other articles noted how Hawaiian quilts merged indigenous and "imposed" aesthetics (Alonzo 1979). This acknowledgement reflected the increased emphasis on cultural relativism, the women's movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the questioning of imperialism's legacy that were part of the change in consciousness that began in the late 1960s.

In this way, the interpretations of ethnic quilting say as much about the writers' cultures and time periods as the societies they described. As Clifford (1993, p.45) noted, "cultural or artistic 'authenticity' has as much to do with an inventive present as with a past, its objectification, preservation, or revival."

The changes in viewpoint in the 1970s were similar to developments in the fields of history and literary criticism that took issue with portrayals of non-Western peoples and cultures and critiqued an "Orientalism" that defined an other separated by time and space (Said, 1978, p.43). Orientalism itself was based on an idealization of cultural unity, naturalness and "childlike wonder" (Moeran 1997). Said noted how exotic others were "lamentably alien" and linked in western societies to women, delinquents, the insane, and the poor (1978, p.207). Especially given that the quilt forms described here were almost exclusively done by women, it also encompassed the sense of 'othering' that Simone de Beauvoir described in *Second Sex* (1952, p.xxiii). The equation of women with nature and children was clearly described by Sherry Ortner (1974) in her pathbreaking article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture." This is yet one more area where these larger cultural trends and their effects can be traced through the everyday world even in such seemingly unrelated areas as quilting.

From 1920 to 1980, magazine articles described more than a dozen different ethnic quilt practices, almost half of them new in the 1970s. I found a significant shift in how ethnic quilt forms were discussed. Instead of being an exotic other, quilters were more likely to be seen as of equal value, and, by the 1970s, more indigenous voices described their own cultures.

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