PAINTED QUILTS:
STITCHING TOGETHER TWO PASSIONS
A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Painted Quilts: Stitching Together Two Passions

Statement of the Problem

Throughout the 20th century, the quilts of our ancestors have enjoyed great popularity. They have been discovered, forgotten, and then rediscovered by one excited generation after another (McMorris 23). In many families, quilts serve as a record of the past. Many quilts are made from materials that are special in some way to the quilter, or reflect the time period in which the quilt was made. Quilting techniques, the materials used, and the memories made while the quilt was in progress are the ideas I investigated during this project. I combined experimental watercolor techniques with quilting techniques to create painted quilts.

This project was inspired by my grandmother’s love of quilting. She passed away in 2001 and I have fond memories of sewing with her from a very young age. Quilting was her passion. The quilts my grandmother created were very unique in color and pattern and even displayed a painterly quality. Although I did make a few quilts with my grandmother when I was young, I did not get the opportunity to make quilts with her as an adult. With this project, I set out to marry my grandmother’s passion for quilting with my own passion for painting. This project became a way for me to honor my grandmother, as well as use her quilts to inspire my own work.

Creating these painted quilts has allowed me to look into the past for inspiration and discover a new appreciation for a traditional craft. No other craft medium could engender a longing for the past and a feeling of safety in the present like quilts (McMorris 46). I have gained knowledge in the history of quilting in America and how it
developed into art. The work I created shows a commitment to learning traditional quilt block piecing techniques. Just as quilts were made in the past to preserve a person’s memory, I too have preserved the memory and legacy of my grandmother through creating these painted quilts.

**Review of Influences/Literature**

In preparation for completing this body of work, I researched the history of quilt making in America and focused specifically on the development of the art quilt. Quilts have become a vital source for understanding women’s history and the study of quilt making gives us insight to the similarities of women despite economic and social differences.

Quilts from different time periods often tell the story of the women who made them. Early on, in the colonial era, quilt making was at its beginning stages. Many have romanticized the idea of the colonial women quilting by the hearth. Women did make quilts during this time period but they were made out of necessity and creativity was not necessarily a factor. They used a technique called Broderie Perse, which is a type of appliqué, where a flower motif or pattern would be cut from a more expensive fabric and then appliquéd onto a less expensive fabric. Colonial women were also accustomed to making whole cloth quilts, using one large piece of fabric for the front, and one for the back, and then adding some decorative stitching. It was not until 1840 that the textile industry had grown and fabric became readily available to most women. After this time, quilt making began to develop into the more traditional craft that we recognize today.
In the 1800s, quilt patterns started appearing in print and the patterns spread quickly across the regions. Prior to this, women were limited to the patterns that were passed down through their family or from women in their close circle of friends. Cotton patchwork quilts were the most common quilt made during the 1800s. Women created patterns using cut pieces of material which would be sewn into square blocks. This time period was full of experimentation and creativity as new patterns were designed and women were making creative decisions about color, pattern and fabric.

By the Victorian era, some women began to view cotton quilts as old-fashioned and preferred their quilts to be as elaborate as their décor (McMorris 26). The style of quilt that came to be during the Victorian era was the crazy quilt. These quilts were dark in color, heavily embroidered, richly textured and patterned in a mosaic or crazy design. These quilts did not follow the symmetrical patchwork designs of the mid 1800s, but were more reminiscent of the extravagant lifestyle of the Victorian period. These crazy quilts were made primarily by upper class women who had the money for expensive materials. Many women continued to make the cotton patchwork quilts during this period, despite them being considered out of style. In 1890, however, *Ladies’ Home Journal* announced that the cotton patchwork quilt was making a comeback.

The American Arts and Crafts movement was a time when patchwork quilts were, for the first time, defined as art objects (McMorris 27). These quilts were functional and used as bedcovers, but soon became appreciated for their aesthetic qualities. This movement was a shift back to a simple way of life, rejecting the Victorian lifestyle. During this movement there was a return to traditional quilting and a resurgence of
quilters making patterns by hand. Another important development during this time was the beginning of quilt collections as quilts became viewed as worthy of display and safekeeping. A 1908 *Ladies’ Home Journal* article was titled, “When Patchwork Becomes Art.” Another significant writing of the time was Marie Webster’s 1915 book, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them*, which was the first full-length book devoted to quilts. This era led into the Colonial revival, which began in 1870 and lasted until about 1920, where the enthusiasm for quilts continued to grow. This enthusiasm ensured that quilts would be handed down to future generations.

It was only a few years ago that patchwork quilts made by our grandmothers were relegated to the attic, or given away, as being out of place in the modern bedroom, said the writer of a pamphlet on quilt making, but now every woman who has one packed away is getting it out and displaying it as a treasured possession (McMorris 30).

The Colonial revival was pivotal in the increase in popularity of quilts in the average American home. It was the Colonial revival that really put quilts back on the beds of mainstream America (McMorris 30). Americans looked to their past for their inspiration and quilting fell right into that philosophy. The popularity of quilt making continued during the Depression era and served as an activity for women to fulfill their creative desires while making something practical. Many women turned to quilt making as a source of income. The “Hard Times Block” was a quilt pattern created during this time period and many publications turned to reproducing quilt patterns and marketing quilt kits. The ready-made quilt kits began to take the creativity aspect out of quilting.
The Post Depression era is significant because of the shift from the straight line to the curve. An ad in *Vogue’s* April 1932 issue announced, “Spring styles say…CURVES!” (McMorris 37) Many of the quilt patterns changed with the fashion of the time and new quilt patterns incorporated the curved line such as Dresden Plate, Double Wedding Ring and Grandmother’s Flower Garden. The onset of World War II in the early 1940s marked an end to the quilt revival and popularity. Many women had to go to work in factories while the men were fighting in the war, and quilt making was no longer a priority. During much of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, quilts and quilt making were pushed aside and would not see the next revival for a few more years.

In the late 1960s, there was yet another quilt revival happening. Many artists began looking at quilt patterns for inspiration and once again quilt making was revered. No other craft medium could engender a longing for the past and a feeling of safety in the present like quilts (McMorris 46). One of the most significant events in the history of the quilt happened in 1971. Collectors John Holstein and Gail van der Hoof shared a portion of their quilt collection to the Whitney Museum of American Art. The 1971 exhibition was called “*Abstract Design in American Quilts*” and after it finished its run at the Whitney, it became a touring exhibit around the United States and Europe.

This exhibit was pivotal in opening the art world’s eyes, and the eyes of the general public, to the inherent worth of quilts as art objects of considerable visual eloquence. Arguing that “an important body of American design had been largely overlooked,” Holstein articulated the ways that quilts participated in an American visual tradition that had previously been seen as the singular contribution of
modern abstract painters. Discussing quilt makers’ creative manipulation of geometric pattern, and the optical effects they created involving both color and form in a large-scale painterly format, Holstein deduced that “quilt makers arrived at many visual results similar to those obtained by artists painting as much as a century later” (Berlo 6).

One quilter’s magazine in 1971 printed, “It seems to be official now—quilt making is indeed an art.” Quilting had come a long way from bedcovers and patchwork to being displayed in the Whitney Museum. The 1970s saw thousands of women becoming interested in quilting for the first time. Many artists such as Miriam Schapiro and Faith Ringgold incorporated quilt blocks, textiles and quilting techniques into their work. Both women investigated feminist issues in their artwork and used quilt making as a means to communicate those ideas. Miriam Schapiro said this about quilts in 1978:

> Collected, saved, and combined materials represented for women acts of price, desperation, and necessity. Spiritual survival depended on the harboring of memories. Each cherished scrap of percale, muslin, or chintz, each bead, each letter, each photograph, was a reminder of its place in a woman’s life, similar to an entry in a journal or diary (Berlo 5).

For more than two centuries, women have continued their explorations in piecework, appliqué and quilt making. Quilts have journeyed from practical necessity to artistic necessity, from beds to walls, from hands to hearts. Quilts are treasured by individuals and have finally reached the status of being treasured by the masses. Artist Sondra Freckelton sums up the significance of quilts like this, “Quilts are our visual
history…They don’t speak about wars and kings, but about life—about how we slept and ate and dreamed and lived (McMorris 55).

**Description of the Artworks/Process**

Before executing the painted quilts, I spent time looking at quilt block patterns and translating them to watercolor paintings. I tried various watercolor papers and finally decided to settle on 140 lb. and 90 lb. Arches cold-press paper. This paper was the best for piecing and sewing and creating seams that could easily be folded down. Another part of the experimentation process was deciding the order in which things would be completed, whether by cutting and sewing painted paper together, or painting the paper after it had been pieced together. In the end, I used both methods. There are some paintings where the pieces were cut from painted pieces of paper, and also some where I cut and pieced unpainted paper, and then painted it last. I preferred using the painted pieces like fabric and then piecing them together like a quilt.

For visual reference, I looked at books of traditional quilts from the late 1800s, Victorian crazy quilts, and contemporary art quilts. From these quilts, I gained inspiration from the traditional patterns and the way colors and values were used in each quilt. I also studied the fabrics and how they were used to create variety in each of the quilts. Other visual references used were the quilts made by my grandmother. Her quilts were small in scale and utilized contemporary fabrics. The quilts ranged in size, the smallest being about eight inches by twelve inches, to the largest which measured twenty-four inches by thirty-six inches. The patterns used in her quilts include double four-patch, snail’s trail, and a few variations of the heart pattern and traditional star patterns.
To begin the painting process, I created fabrics by painting a large sheet of watercolor paper. I chose a color scheme for each painting and used layered washes, backwashes and patterns to create an interesting surface. After the paintings were finished, I selected a quilt block pattern and then cut the painting into the appropriate sized pieces. I then arranged the pieces into the quilt blocks and began to sew the pieces together. Two pieces were laid with right sides together and then fed through the sewing machine. After the pieces were sewn together, I folded them apart and pressed the seam to one side. I continued this process until the entire “quilt” was sewn together. After finishing the quilt blocks, I added a three inch border. Once the quilts were pieced together, I went back in with watercolor paint and enhanced some areas. I added different colored washes over some of the pieces and others I layered with patterns until the piece was balanced and the traditional patterns were easily identified.

In discussing the works, the process was similar with each piece and many were created using pieces from the same painted fabrics. I have selected a few artworks from the collection to discuss in further detail. The first work I have selected is titled *Fading Lonicera*. This artwork is made up of two inch square patches and after being sewn together, measures approximately sixteen inches by sixteen inches, including the border. The squares for this piece were cut from many different paintings of various colors and values. I then arranged the squares in order according to value, ranging from light to dark. The value shift is subtle, but is reminiscent of a common practice used in American quilt making of the past. The square patch pattern was created originally as a way for women to use up small scraps of fabric as to not waste anything. The colors in the square
patches of the quilt range from light oranges and tans, to medium shades of violet, and ends with dark values such as dark blue and a faded black. The border was cut from a painting and then I added a viridian green wash over the painting, to mute the patterns. Lastly, I looked at scientific drawings and photographs of the Lonicera plant, commonly known as a Honeysuckle flower. I chose this image because it reminds me of times spent with my grandmother when I was a child. My grandparents had many flowers and plants around their house, so each time my family would visit, my grandmother would take us around and point out each plant. They honeysuckle plants were especially memorable because they were edible and both my sister I would pluck a bloom and pop it in our mouths. I layered the border with contour drawings of the honeysuckle flowers in a way that makes them appear faded and ghostly. I wanted them to represent memories and how oftentimes they begin to fade.

Another piece that I will discuss in depth is titled Indiana Puzzle. This piece is based on the traditional quilt block pattern known as Snail’s Trail. This pattern originated in the 1920s and 1930s and is also known by the names Indiana Puzzle, Monkey Wrench, Friendly Hand and Chinese Corn. I chose this pattern because I have a quilt made by my grandmother made in the same style. I was fascinated by the tessellating patterns and wanted to try it with my paintings. I sewed four, seven inch squares using this pattern and two contrasting colors. The contrasting colors add to the spiral effect of the pattern. Sewn in between the pattern squares are solid seven inch squares cut from paintings. After sewing the squares and rows together I added a three inch border. The border is again cut from existing paintings and then I applied a blue
green wash over the border on the sides, and a red orange wash over the border on the top and bottom. This painting is made like a traditional quilt but is very bold and unique with the colors I chose. The Snail’s Trail, or Indiana Puzzle, pattern was a challenge and confronted my own personal issues with craftsmanship in my work. The pieces had to fit together perfectly in order to make the tessellating pattern. This undulating pattern and contrasting colors create a rhythm in this piece that draws your eye in a circular movement about the entire piece.

Lastly, I will discuss the painting titled, *Home Sweet Home*. This painting is made up of four, seven inch blocks that utilize the Log Cabin pattern. This quilt block pattern is one of the most common and perhaps the oldest known quilt pattern. Some historians claim it dates as far back as the mid 1700s in Europe. Others say that it gained much popularity in the early 19th century when the world was fascinated by all things Egyptian after the discovery of King Tut’s tomb. The pattern can be compared to the patterns created by cloth wrappings on a mummy. The name, Log Cabin, refers to the popularity of this pattern in pioneer America. This pattern starts with a center square and then strips of fabric are sewn around the sides of the square in sequence. This pattern was definitely my favorite pattern to create. What I enjoyed was that I didn’t have to cut the pieces and lay them out first. This pattern starts with just a square, and strips of fabric and the pattern is created as you go. Each square is slightly different in color and value and ranges from bright shades of red orange, deep crimsons, and cerulean blue washes. The dark areas are contrasted with strips of a light golden yellow. The three inch border was cut from a painting and then washed over with a transparent layer of cerulean blue.
The title of this piece is related to the title of the quilt block used, the Log Cabin, which evokes feelings of a home and safety.

**Conclusion and Exhibition Statement**

Traditional quilts were assembled on tables, in laps, on quilting frames and therefore on the horizontal; they were normally displayed on beds. At a certain point, however, they began to be hung on walls like paintings. One supposes that this “artifaction” of quilts began in the twenties, when quilts became collectible. The art quilt has emerged, and it heralds a dramatic and fundamental change in the history of quilts (McMorris 22).

This project, creating the painted quilts, has provided me with an opportunity to challenge myself to learn a new skill in quilting. Quilting requires a degree of craftsmanship, which forced me to confront my own struggles with it. I have a new found appreciation for quilt making, for my grandmother’s quilts and for all of the quilts that have been made throughout history. Each quilt was worked on for hours upon hours, touched by many hands, and then passed down through generations. I wish I would have been able to share in quilting more with my grandmother, while she was living, but I am thankful that she did introduce me to sewing at a young age. As an adult, I have been longing to try my hand at quilting, and this project gave me the chance to explore and experiment with a new technique. Making these painted quilts has inspired me to make quilts out of fabric and continue what my grandmother was so passionate about.

These painted quilts represent experimentation, trial and error, and a refining process. In looking at these paintings, my process in learning a new skill is apparent,
sometimes blatant. I struggled with piecing paper together and using the sewing machine to create something that is usually made out of fabric. In the end, I am pleased with the painted quilts and feel they have a genuine innocence about them. The beauty of these quilts lies in the process, each stitch and the selection of each fabric. I feel this is the same quality that we appreciate about quilts. Each piece was deliberately cut from a piece of fabric, placed together with other pieces, and stitched together to make a new pattern or design.

When these painted quilts are exhibited I hope they evoke a sense of familiarity in the viewer. Everyone has some connection to a quilt, whether they own one that has been passed down from their family members, or have one on their bed. I hope the viewer recognizes the traditional quilt block patterns and is able to make connections to the quilts of their past. The subtle meanings of the symbols and images used in the painted quilts are personal recollections of my childhood, but I hope viewers can make connections to images and memories of their own childhood. This project has inspired me to pursue quilt making even further and to continue exploring how I can integrate painting into the process. Researching the history of quilts, their development over time, and recognition as an art form, has been very rewarding. These painted quilts are a symbol the stitching together of two passions, quilting and painting, and have preserved the legacy of my grandmother and her quilts.
References


Appendix

Artwork List

Fading Lonicera
15 inches by 17 inches
Watercolor

Honesty Plant
21 inches by 21 inches
Watercolor

Indiana Puzzle
27 inches by 27 inches
Watercolor

Home Sweet Home
22 inches by 22 inches
Watercolor

Threads of Lunaria
19 inches by 19 inches
Watercolor

Roman Lonicera
17 inches by 17 inches
Watercolor