

Rocky Road to Analysis: Interpreting Quilt Patterns

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Keynote Address at American Quilt Study Group, Dallas, 10/10/03

A few weeks ago a woman from a small town in Alberta, Canada, called with two questions. The topic of discussion in her quilt shop was the role of quilts on the Underground Railroad. Her first question: “Isn’t it true that Log Cabin quilts with black centers were hung on the clothesline during the days of slavery to alert escaping slaves to the presence of a ‘safe house.’” The second question: “Were quilts read as maps to tell escaping slaves the route to safety?”¹

I gave her my standard short answer for this often-asked question. We have no evidence of quilts being used as signals or maps. The Log Cabin as a pattern dates to about 1863, during the Civil War, when a secret network of abolitionists with safe houses was no longer necessary. By 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation and occupying Union armies allowed many slaves to walk away in broad daylight. The tale of quilts and the Underground Railroad makes a good story, but not good quilt history.²

The tenacity of these two stories frustrates quilt historians and textile curators who often field nearly identical questions. How do such tales thrive? I’ve spent some time searching for their source as well as some time thinking about why such accounts persist.

The sources are fairly recent. In 1990, folklorist Dr. Gladys-Marie Fry published a book called *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts From the Antebellum South*. She surveyed quilts attributed to enslaved seamstresses in museums and in a few private

collections. Dr. Fry derives most of her information about the role of quilts in the lives of the slaves from the narratives collected from former slaves during the 1930s by interviewers working for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Her major source for these footnoted descriptions of quilting parties and plantation textile work was George Rawick's 41 volume book, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.³

A log cabin quilt from the collection of the Louisiana State Museum is described in the caption as made by "Dolly Jackson in Demopolis, Georgia 1860-1870." Dr. Fry continues, "Log Cabin quilts containing black fabric often served as signals on the Underground Railroad to identify 'safe houses.'" She includes no footnote.⁴ This caption appears to be the first published reference to the story of the log cabin as a signal quilt. She does not refer to black centers specifically or to the idea of a quilt on a clothesline.

In 1999, Jacqueline Tobin and Dr. Raymond Dobard published a popular book titled *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, in which they speculated about the role of quilts as maps and signals for the Underground Railroad. This, however, is not the first publication of the map story. A 1993 work of children's fiction, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson tells the tale of a child hoping to escape slavery who makes a quilt as a map. In interviews with Dr. Dobard and Ms. Tobin, Ms. Hopkinson said she had no "idea of where the story originated [but] remembered hearing a true story about the Underground Railroad on the radio, on which she based the story." Three years after the publication of *Sweet Clara*, Ms. Tobin heard a similar tale from Ozella Williams who sold quilts at a Charleston market. Ms. William's interpretations of quilt patterns and techniques are the major basis for the book Ms Tobin and Dr. Dobard published in 1999.

The vitality of both narratives amazes this quilt historian who can only wish the general public would take as great an interest in the number of calico printers in Philadelphia in 1780 or what happened to the quilt that won the 1933 Chicago World's Fair contest. The stories probably persist because of their connection to slavery, a vital topic in today's America. Black Americans want to hear their history in this country. Tales of slavery need to be told, an obligation Jews are reminded of each spring at the Passover Seder where the Haggadah, a communal reading, is an important aspect of the holiday meal. "Once we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord, in his goodness and mercy, brought us forth from that land with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. . . . Had He not rescued us from the hand of the despot, surely we and our children would still be enslaved, deprived of liberty and human dignity. . . . We therefore gather year after year, to retell this ancient story. For, in reality, it is not ancient, but eternal in its message and its spirit. It proclaims man's burning desire to preserve liberty and justice for all." ⁵

The combination of quilts and the Underground Railroad seems a perfect pair of bookends for stories about American slavery. The story of Black heroes risking their lives for freedom and White heroes risking their liberty to shelter them has resounding appeal. American Studies Professor James Horton has noted, "With the Underground Railroad you have a real Hollywood story. Everyone gets to be a hero." These accounts are more than stories, they are myths that help us define ourselves as Americans. ⁶

It is not only slavery, however, that inspires Americans to interpret quilt pattern and technique. Pioneering, the westward migration, also holds a mythical fascination for Americans. Mary Bywater Cross's 1993 book, *Treasures in the Trunk: Quilts of the*

Oregon Trail, links antique quilts with the western expansion. A red and green appliqué design is quilted with “wheels, a double circle with double lines across the center. . . . It is likely that this wheel represents migration and the blessing of good wishes associated with leave-taking....The quilt could very well have been a migration [quilt.]”⁷

Ms. Cross’s pioneering theme echoes earlier writers such as Loretta Leitner Rising who wrote the Nancy Cabot pattern column for the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1930s. Ms. Rising published several “Road to...” patterns with similar interpretations, such as “The Road to Oklahoma,” which “forms a continuous path across the quilt. . . certainly symbolic of the trek westward made by the hardy pioneers in the days of our grandmothers.” Another column about the same design guessed, “Perhaps the design got its name because it was created on a journey to that state.”⁸

Rising left about 2000 quilt pattern descriptions with fanciful tales of their origins and meanings. One of the most complex was “the Providence quilt block---a pattern never before printed. . . designed in commemoration of the historical incident which took place during the early days in the settling of Providence, R.I. The white center of the block represents the city of Providence; the white pointing outward, the road of the pioneers to the west; the shaded triangles, the new and unknown west toward which they were striving; the dark blocks pointing to the center, the return home of the disappointed travelers; and the small triangles of dark material next to the white center, the remorse felt by the wary citizens of the city of Providence after their forced return.”⁹

The interpretation is poetic; the facts, more prosaic. The block was submitted to *Hearth and Home*’s state capitol series between 1912 and 1916, many centuries after the Rhode Island city’s colonial origins. Rising was careful to note the block was

commemorative rather than a pattern actually made in the colonial era, but this kind of interpretation is usually read as something that happened at the time of the original event. Journalists like Rising, who were so prolific in the 1930s, undoubtedly contributed to our expectation that quilts have romantic names and interpretations.

Because I have indexed published names of quilt patterns from 1880 through 1970, I am often asked about symbolic meanings behind the pattern and its name. Among other important events in American history that lend themselves to pattern interpretation are the American Revolution, Women's Suffrage and the Civil War. An unusual question: "Is a pattern known as "Friendship" or "Mother's Oddity" a secret code for Lesbianism?" This curved shape can be viewed as a hatchet blade or axe; one of its mid-twentieth century names is Double Ax. The questioner explained that inhabitants of the island of Lesbos, the followers of the poet Sappho, wielded axes, a weapon that symbolizes Lesbianism in some circles. "Did nineteenth-century Lesbians make quilts in this pattern as a code to identify their sexuality?" The answer again is, "I have never seen any written evidence of such a symbol." The pattern itself is usually made in twentieth-century fabrics, but I have seen one example made up in fabrics that look to be from the 1870s.¹⁰

Students in quilt dating classes have shown the class nineteenth-century Nine Patches and explained with conviction the hidden meaning of a pattern error or a change in color symmetry. For example: "The one blue nine patch among the eleven red blocks means that after eleven miles there will be a river." The absolute assurance with which the interpreter tells the tale indicates her sense of entitlement to interpret the work of a long-dead, anonymous quiltmaker.

Our contemporary culture seems to feel a right to interpret a work of art, an entitlement that can be traced to the conventions of formal art criticism in Western Culture. In many cultures, art contains layers of meaning. It has long been the role of the critic to interpret art, visual, musical or written, and to explain it to a wider audience. For many centuries it was also the role of the cultured audience to interpret art in order to enjoy and learn from a painting or sonnet at several levels.

In the seventeenth century, northern European still life paintings were of a type called “vanitas,” in which moral messages to the viewer were encoded through the use of symbols. The language of flowers used there includes references to life’s temporary nature. A lush bouquet might feature decaying leaves and wilting roses to remind the viewer to prepare for death. A butterfly on a bloom meant resurrection, hope beyond the grave. Other images symbolized the futility of earthly riches and the importance of a spiritual life. Sculptural portraits from the Middle Ages often featured symbolic attributes, images to assist the viewer in identifying the saint depicted. St. James of Campostello’s attribute was the seashell; St. Peter’s the key.

“Vanitas” and saintly attributes are systems of symbolism requiring both artist and audience to understand the same code. The audience’s obligation was to obtain a cultured education to learn the conventions of the code. Even today, an education in the humanities requires literacy in the codes of the past. Educators agree that a basic high school education demands serious critical reading so students can determine the theme and interpret the symbols in classic classroom literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Graduates of American high schools are expected

to recognize the layers of meaning in the letter pinned to Hester Prynne's chest and in the optometrist's billboard that Jay Gatsby passes on the road.

The code in our culture changes over time. Each generation learns the code of the past and adds its own symbols. My generation knows the symbolism of an albatross hanging around the neck of an old sailor plus a contemporary code that Samuel Coleridge, were he back on earth, could not understand. We know that Stephen Jobs named his computer company Apple as an echo of the Beatles music corporation. The regulars at my neighborhood bar, Rick's Place, are aware that the name conjures up a romantic image of Casablanca in World War II. We like to think Rick's is almost as glamorous as Humphrey Bogart's establishment in the film *Casablanca*.

But, of course, symbols so obvious in a specific time period lose meaning as a generation dies out. Nineteenth-century Americans had their own codes. While the donkey symbolizes the Democrat Party to us, the party of James Polk's era used a rooster and the opposition Whigs used a raccoon, animals often found on quilts and sometimes misinterpreted too literally as cats or mere barnyard imagery. In studying regional warfare on the Kansas/Missouri border of the 1850s, I've read about several symbols that seem to have been completely lost to today's culture. The word "goose" was often used in describing a political candidate's qualifications. A man who was "reliable on the goose question" was known to be in favor of the Kansas Territory becoming a slave state. Men who were "sound on the goose" communicated that loyalty nonverbally by wearing a small hemp yarn tied to a waistcoat buttonhole. Hemp, an important crop in Missouri's slave agriculture, implied an approval of the extension of that agricultural system into

Kansas and also the threat that any free-state sympathizer might be lynched with a hemp rope.¹¹

Those of us who hope to analyze works of art and literature of the nineteenth century, including antique quilts, need to share the nineteenth-century code. Without a wide knowledge of the context, it would seem that we cannot accurately interpret the piece.

In saying this, I assume a logical argument that in a world of art based on layers of meaning, both artist and audience must be familiar with the code. An ignorant viewer loses a layer of meaning in looking at a painting such as a Dutch “vanitas,” in which roses are seen as merely “pretty” rather than analyzed as an allegory for life’s too short passage. Today’s average museum-goer without a Renaissance point of view must be content with such a surface aesthetic.

If the essential formula to successful interpretation is an artist/audience pair with shared knowledge of the code, we might also look at the opposite imbalance, an artist unfamiliar with the code that the audience uses to interpret her piece. A viewer who adds layers of meaning to a novel or painting that the artist never intended might be characterized as foolish or wrong headed. The situation is much like a Rorschach test in which people interpret inkblots for psychiatrists. Such interpretation tells us more about the viewer than the picture.

Or---we might call it the “new criticism.” Over the past thirty or forty years, dialogue about literary criticism has centered on literary theory. Relatively recent methods of teaching reading and writing are tagged with names such as semiotics or deconstructionism, forms of a new criticism. Critics throughout the twentieth century

added political levels with Marxist analysis and more recently Feminist criticism and Afro-centered criticism. Twentieth-century psychological theories include Freudian and Jungian criticism, both focusing on universal symbols generated at an unconscious level.

These diverse branches of art and literary criticism have one significant aspect in common. The audience (the reader, the viewer) is seen as equal to the maker of the work (the writer, the artist.) The audience has been given a license to interpret the work that goes beyond the intent of the maker. For example, artist Georgia O'Keefe painted numerous paintings of flowers, which some Feminist critics have interpreted as representations of female human genitalia, intent that O'Keefe denied. Her denials have been dismissed as irrelevant to the interpretation. The critic's right to interpret is equal (or possibly superior) to the artist's right to add a layer of symbolism to her work.¹²

The footnote to the example of O'Keefe is drawn from a 1993 book *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*. I am pleased to have a group quilt I helped organize on the cover of the book. *The Sun Sets on Sunbonnet Sue*, made in 1979 by a sewing group we call the Seamsters' Union, depicts Sunbonnet Sue in twenty fatal accidents, such as a lightning strike or a python attack. The assumption by many analysts is that our quilt was a masterpiece of feminist coding. However, three of the makers recall no such intent. "Rather than being a statement about feminism, it was a rejection of sentimentality in quilts," summarized Carol Gilham Jones who made two blocks. We also recalled a disgust with the manner in which several women we knew treated the figure as a person. If it were indeed a person, we wanted her dead. If we were going to speak of feminism, we would have given Sue a meaningful job, a decent wardrobe, a sense of self-

respect, which later quiltmakers have done. In our view, it isn't a person, it isn't a woman; it is a sentimental cliché and we wanted it out of our view.¹³

I realize now, after twenty years of explanation, the futility in describing our intent. A 2003 paper interpreted our thinking: "In the 1970s feminists used the Sunbonnet Sue figure to challenge traditional perceptions of female childhood. By creating quilt blocks illustrating Sue's death...they intended to kill off Sue as a means of contesting female images of passivity, conformity and propriety." Feminist critics, like other political and psychological critics, feel an entitlement to analyze an image regardless of the artists' intent.¹⁴

It should be no surprise to quilt scholars that once the culture began interpreting antique quilts as art, we created an opportunity for liberal analysis of the artist's meaning. If today's art quilters express themselves through their quilts, we begin to assume that quiltmakers in the past used quilts as a means of expression. Western culture defines an educated person as skilled in interpreting layers of meaning. Our educational system rewards flights of fancy in reading literature. Once we become aware of such centuries-old cultural traditions we can, if we wish, view the quilt as a map to understanding the important contradictions between critical interpretation and quilt history.

¹ Telephone call to the author from Connie McNair, owner of Wood Lily Quilts, Claresholm, Alberta, Canada. October 16, 2003.

² Virginia Gunn, "Quilts for Union Soldiers in the Civil War," Sally Garoutte, editor, *Uncoverings 1985*, Volume 6 (Mill Valley California: American Quilt Study Group, 1986) Pg. 108. My summary of this

argument is on pages 14-20 in Barbara Brackman, *Quilts From the Civil War* (Lafayette, California: C & T Publishing, 1997)

³ Gladys Marie Fry, *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts From the Antebellum South* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1990). George Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 Volumes (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972, 1977)

⁴ Fry, page 52.

5. Deborah Hopkinson, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (Bantam Books, 1999) pp. 32, 92.

⁵ Martin Berkowitz, *Haggadah for the American Family: A New Seder Service* (Merion, Pennsylvania: H. Levitt Publishing Co., 1958) Pg. 8.

⁶ James Horton, quoted in Tony Horwitz, "Department of Tourist Education," *New Yorker*, June 14, 1999, pg. 30.

⁷ Mary Bywater Cross, *Treasures in the Trunk: Quilts of the Oregon Trail* (Nashville, Tennessee: Rutledge Hill Press, 1993) Pg. 102.

⁸ Loretta Leitner's Nancy Cabot columns from the *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1937 and November 11, 1933, reproduced in Edna Van Das, *Dutch Girl Quilting Scrapbook*, Volume 5, Number 54, May, 1981, pg. 2.

⁹ Loretta Rising, "Early Incident of Providence Told By Quilt Design," *Chicago Tribune*, .

¹⁰ Barbara Brackman, *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (Paducah, Kentucky: American Quilters Society, 1993) Mother's Oddity is pattern number 185.

¹¹ The Atchison (Kansas Territory) *Squatter Sovereign*, March 13, 1855, described legislative candidate R.L. Kirk as "reliable on the goose."

¹² Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser, "Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures," *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993) Pg. 8.

¹³ Interview with Carol Gilham Jones and Georgann Eglinski, September 29, 2003.

¹⁴ Carla Tilghman, "The Life, Death and Resurrection of Sunbonnet Sue," *SAQA, the Newsletter of the Studio Art Quilt Associates*, Volume 13, # 3, 2003. Pg. 17.