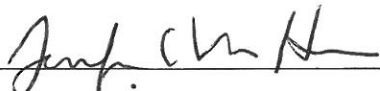

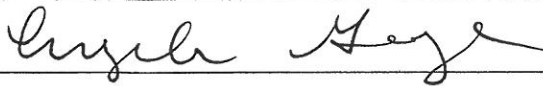


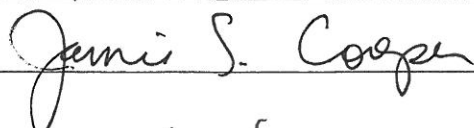
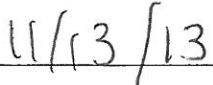


THE CUTTER QUILT FAD, 1980 TO PRESENT: A CASE STUDY IN VALUE-  
MAKING IN AMERICAN QUILTS

by

Rebecca H. McCormick  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts  
History of Decorative Arts

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Date: 	Fall Semester 2013 George Mason University Fairfax, VA

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents who made me who I am and to my husband who never asked, “So what are you going to do with that degree?”

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis would not have been possible without the tireless work and never-ending questions of my advisor, Jennifer Van Horn.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE CUTTER QUILT FAD, 1980 TO PRESENT: A CASE STUDY IN VALUE-MAKING IN AMERICAN QUILTS**

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George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Dr. Jennifer Van Horn

The “cutter quilt” fad of the 1980s and 1990s was initially rejected by contemporary quilters as well as quilt collectors because it disregarded the culturally-assigned weight placed on quilts even in poor condition as historical art objects tied to female production. Today, with the increased rhetoric of recycling or “upcycling,” the stigma of using quilts for crafts has almost disappeared.

## INTRODUCTION

At the Hotel Pierre in April 1982, Ralph Lauren premiered a fall collection for which he was justifiably proud.<sup>1</sup> The garments were the next in his series of American vignettes. Since establishing his women's clothing line only a few years previously, the self-described anti-fashion fashion designer had produced hit after hit by basing his collections on tried and true American myths. First, came the cowboys and cowgirls characterized by beat up denim, leather, and suede. Then, he had "gone west" with prairie dresses and frilled lace collars. That spring, he had pushed further to the rugged romance of New Mexico by incorporating turquoise and silver concho belts.<sup>2</sup> The fall collection was poised to be his next smash hit with inspiration taken from colonial America. The garments included sweaters knitted with sampler-style designs on the fronts. Starched cotton shirts were tucked into floor-length skirts. Most notable, however, were the skirts, vests, and jackets made from antique quilts of the 1890s.

It was one of first times that old quilts made into novelty objects and couture came to popular attention. The backlash from contemporary quilters was immediate and sustained with commentators calling the Ralph Lauren collection the "wholesale

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Hyde, "The Old Makes News: An Ode to American Folk Art & Simpler Clothes Lauren's Ode to Folk Art," *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, April 24, 1982, sec. STYLE The Arts Television Classified, C1.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gross, *Genuine Authentic: The Real Life of Ralph Lauren* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2004), 215.

destruction of the endangered species of antique quilts.”<sup>3</sup> National newspapers, quilting magazines, and newsletters showed an audience of quilters who were shocked at what they perceived as the defiling of one-of-a-kind art pieces for commercial gain by a fashion designer who was unaware of the quilts’ histories and original purpose. This reaction against the appropriation of otherwise unusable quilts, or “dead quilts,” as crafting supplies stemmed in part from the quilting revival of the 1970s, spurred by the landmark *Abstract Design in American Quilts* exhibition at the Whitney in 1971.<sup>4</sup> Yet the cutter quilt fad of the 1980s lasted into the mid-1990s and even persists into the twenty-first century in items sold at flea markets, antique shops, and online. However, with the increased rhetoric of recycling or “upcycling,” the stigma of using quilts for crafts has almost disappeared.

The cutter quilt phenomenon and its varying receptions will be used as a case study to examine changing attitudes about the monetary and nonmonetary/emotional ways that consumers placed value on quilts from 1971 to the present. Nora Ruth Roberts in her 1994 article “Quilt-Value and the Marxist Theory of Value” and Alice Walker in her seminal 1973 essay “Everyday Use” both address issues of quilts’ use value and their nonmarketable value.<sup>5</sup> In addition to their sentimental value, generated by immediate family connections, quilts also have come to be valued as handmade objects. In particular, quilts’ imagined link to their original female producers have made quilts

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<sup>3</sup> Rita Rouse, “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts,” *The Day*, September 16, 1982, sec. Living.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Kentucky Quilt Project, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Alice Walker, “Everyday Use,” 1973, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/walker.html>; Nora Ruth Roberts, “Quilt-Value and the Marxist Theory of Value,” in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, ed. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 125–133.

symbols of generations of often anonymous female art production. Though “dead quilts” may have limited use and market value because of their condition, they retain their sentimental value. By being remade into cutter quilt objects like jackets, teddy bears, and Christmas ornaments, “dead quilts” thus retain their status as sentimental objects of female production while creating a new use value. Studying the controversy over the repurposing of quilts and the strong reactions among contemporary quilters and quilt collectors to these hybrid objects will enable the thesis to analyze how quilts began to gain new culturally assigned values as historical objects tied to female production and why. In addition, the twenty-first-century focus on recycling or “upcycling” co-opts earlier scrap quilt mythology and repackages it in terms of sustainability and modern DIY crafting.

This work is divided into three chapters which utilize disparate resources including historic photographs, historic accounts, scholarly resources, national and regional newspapers, quilt and crafting periodicals, and craft and decorating books. Chapter One will first define dead quilts and cutter quilts as well as outlining their history. Then, it will discuss Ralph Lauren’s Fall 1982 collection and Lauren’s initial reaction to criticism of the collection. Chapter Two will outline the spread of the dissent and then discuss the different values assigned to quilts including historic value, economic value (including use value), and sentimental value. Chapter Three will open by discussing quilts and the authentic before moving on to discuss how quilt crafts have changed from the 1990s to the upcycling rhetoric of today.

## CHAPTER ONE: “WHY NOT WEAR THEM?”

Traditional quilts have been in the United States since its earliest settlers. These traditional quilts can be divided into three categories: patchwork (also called pieced), appliqué, and wholecloth which includes quilted counterpanes.<sup>6</sup> Though they are divided into categories and vary extensively in their appearance, quilts have the same historic purpose; they were meant as bedding or as a bed covering. Technically, a quilt is a textile made up of three parts, a top cover, interior batting, and a back piece, which are fixed together using a quilt stitch that goes through all three layers over and over to form a quilted design shown in low relief. Historically, quilts were made by people at various socio-economic levels and ranged from purely utilitarian bed coverings to complex showpieces reserved for the most distinguished house guests. From the nineteenth century through the Great Depression, people have used quilts for a variety of purposes off of the bed and out of the bedroom. From curtains to wagon covers to bandages for wounds, quilts have taken on additional uses besides that of bedcoverings.<sup>7</sup>

It was Ralph Lauren who was the first to bring quilts made in the nineteenth century to the high fashion runways. It was through his 1982 collection that Ralph Lauren

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<sup>6</sup> The term “traditional quilts” does not include art quilts but does include modern quilts made using traditional patterns and methods.

<sup>7</sup> Janet E Finley, *Quilts in Everyday Life, 1855-1955: A 100-Year Photographic History* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub., 2012), 132, 72, 71. This photograph-based book shows the many uses of quilts over a century. She uses historic photos to illustrate traditional uses like bedding as well as less traditional uses like using a quilt as a tent for camping, backdrops for staged portraits, or window treatments.

ushered in the wider trend of cutting up old quilts, both dead and otherwise, to create clothes and decorative items. Though there were people producing quilt-craft items for several years prior, without Lauren's collection, it is unlikely that the trend would have been so far-reaching or sustained.

### **Dead Quilts and Cutter Quilts**

There is no universal term for quilts that no longer have a life as a bed covering which poses an obstacle for those attempting to study them. Such quilts are often defined by stains, tears, holes, and shredded fabrics which have disintegrated over time. "Dead quilt" has been proposed as a possible term for these quilts as it references the object's life cycle. Scholars John Forrest and Deborah Blincoe in their book *The Natural History of the Traditional Quilt* examine quilts as ethnographic objects. They look at traditional quilts in terms of life cycle beginning at the maker's "conception" of the item to its "gestation" to its "life span" ending in its "death (and rebirth)."<sup>8</sup> A traditional quilt's purpose from conception through lifespan was to be a bed covering so once a quilt reached the end of a life cycle as a bed covering, we may presume that it died. The term is not meant to be pejorative but rather respectful and indicative of the textile's current life stage as a traditional quilt that's primary purpose was as a bed covering. These are quilts which have finished fulfilling the aim for they were created and which correspondingly often bear the traces and traumas of extensive use. Other terms such as

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<sup>8</sup> John Forrest and Deborah Blincoe, *Natural History of the Traditional Quilt* (Diane Publishing Company, 1995), 97, 126, 153, and 157.

“well-used” or “quilts in poor condition” have been suggested but are cumbersome and do not necessarily reflect the wider meaning of a dead quilt.<sup>9</sup>

The term “utilitarian quilt” is sometimes used but is also a misnomer; not all dead quilts began their life as utilitarian quilts.<sup>10</sup> Some quilts may have started as show-pieces or master works but have declined due to poor care or overuse. Instead of the largely decorative function that they began as, the show quilts moved into the realm of everyday use. Indeed, Forrest and Blincoe remark that “It is important to remember that the categories ‘scrap’ and ‘best’ are prototypic and not necessarily mutually exclusive.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps all the terms suggested are somewhat pejorative as they imply something less than perfect. With roots within ancient Greek and early Christian philosophy, the concept of perfection-as-excellence and perfection-as-best has propagated widely and is often an unrecognized assumption which has, at times, hindered scholarly research especially in the study of crafts.

Cutter quilts and cutters are by far the most popular terms. These terms were developed by antique dealers to describe quilts that no longer have a useful life as a quilt. Though dead quilts and cutter quilts resemble one other in their initial definition, the denotation and the implications of the terms are very different. First, the term “cutter quilt” is used mostly in a market context marketed towards crafters. As a market-specific term, it first appeared in the 1970s. With a renaissance in the popularity of quilts in the

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<sup>9</sup> A lesser known definition of “cutter quilt” is those quilts also sometimes referred to as comforters which are defined generally as primarily utilitarian rather than primarily beautiful. Several survey responses mention this definition so it should not be dismissed as an alternate meaning.

<sup>10</sup> Utilitarian quilts, like many other utilitarian objects, have generally been studied less. Though these quilts often give incredible insight into their creators, the absence of well-documented, extant examples continues to hinder research in this area.

<sup>11</sup> Forrest and Blincoe, *Natural History of the Traditional Quilt*, 153.

1970s, often known as the Quilt Revival, antique dealers and quilt dealers began to buy and sell quilts of all kinds and in all conditions. This included the purchase of dead quilts from estate or garage sales for very little money, often between one and ten dollars. These less-than-perfect quilts would then be resold as crafting materials or as an affordable gateway to quilt collecting for beginners.<sup>12</sup> Second, the implication of the term cutter quilt is that all dead quilts are waiting to be cut up. For example, Figure 1 shows a quilt that has been classified as a “cutter quilt” by the person selling it in a modern online marketplace, Etsy. The advertisement copy reads: “This beautiful blue and white quilt is probably nearly or over 100 years old. It has some stains, and is ripped and torn in many areas... It would be great as a cutter quilt.”<sup>13</sup> It has obvious stains, tears, and holes that contribute to it being sold under that label. For those purchasing quilts to make crafts, they would select a quilt like the one shown in Figure 1 and cut it apart to make a wide variety of goods from placemats to Teddy bears to pillows. The act of cutting apart the quilt leads to the term most often used by dealers still today: cutters.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the passive term dead quilt, which refers to quilts that are too worn or damaged to be used as a bed covering, cutter quilt is an active term that implies that a quilt is already designated to be cut up and is merely waiting for the active hand to finish the project. The term itself is packed with potential energy. Both terms will be employed in this paper depending upon

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Kirk, Telephone Interview with Author, September 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Kendl Correa, “Antique Blue and White Cutter Quilt,” *Etsy*, accessed June 25, 2013, [http://www.etsy.com/listing/108790787/antique-blue-and-white-cutter-quilt?utm\\_source=OpenGraph&utm\\_medium=PageTools&utm\\_campaign=Share](http://www.etsy.com/listing/108790787/antique-blue-and-white-cutter-quilt?utm_source=OpenGraph&utm_medium=PageTools&utm_campaign=Share).

<sup>14</sup> The term “cutters” also causes confusion as some people assume that it means quilts that are made of cut pieces meaning pieced or patchwork pieces that are made from cut pieces sewn edge to edge. This definition was also referred to in the survey responses and shows a weakness in the terminology.



the context in which the quilts are being used and thought about by their makers, purchasers, and users.

### **The History of Dead Quilts**

In many ways, the history of dead quilts is the history of American quilts. They have existed as two sides of the same coin for their entire existence. As a quilt was used over a period of time, it would become gradually more and more worn. It would begin to exhibit evident signs of wear from a stain that just would not come out to a hole which, even when patched, simply would not hold. A quilt which was once the piece-de-resistance to a set of fancy bed linens could fall quickly into the category of a dead quilt through a natural disaster such as fire or flood.

Historically, dead quilts were used for a range of purposes. The most obvious use for a dead quilt is re-use in another quilt. Often, this meant that the worn out quilt would be used as batting in lieu of wool or cotton batting; it would have been more stable and less likely to move around than raw cotton especially before the manufacture of cotton batting in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> This use would account for so few surviving dead quilts. Not only were they used up, but they would be utilized for other utilitarian quilts to create additional warmth for the person sleeping beneath them.

Quilts were also cut up to create rags or towels. In Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen's influential book *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, an Oral History*, a woman recounts a story of quilt destruction in the early twentieth century:

[As] the nurse for a country doctor, I'd never had time nor need to quilt. We was often paid in quilts for services, and when I got more than we

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<sup>15</sup> Forrest and Blincoe, *Natural History of the Traditional Quilt*, 159.

needed, I'd pass them out again. One time a big tornado struck the county and some of those little towns was leveled. Lord, it was a sad mess. I went along with Doc to nurse. I had a stack of quilts in the wagon ready right then for the emergency, and I was cutting up them quilts for bandages before the day was over. Some was used for bedrolls Folks couldn't do any better than just to roll up and sleep right there on the ground so they could start rebuilding.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, the destruction of these quilts was tied to an emergency situation, but even before they were cut up, they were treated as commodities in a barter system of goods and services. The nurse brought them with her in anticipation of their complete destruction either as bandages or being used for sleeping on the ground, a practice which would destroy the design if not the fiber of the quilt.

The largest body of evidence showing dead quilts is from the Great Depression and was documented by various government agencies. There are a wealth of photographs available through the Library of Congress that show the use of textiles by the poor during the 1930s. Generally, these photographs were taken in the American South and West, and they expand our understanding of how quilts in general were used. For example, Figure 2, a photograph taken in Jefferson, Texas, in 1939, depicts a couple of textiles which may be referred to loosely as quilts. Hanging on a line in front of a ramshackle house, these quilts offer a rare glimpse into the final days of a quilt's useful life. Though they are little more than shredded fabric and raw cotton, they still serve a purpose for the destitute family. People used quilts for a variety of purposes including as a pallet on the floor, a covering for goods inside of an open wooden wagon, a door covering (as shown in Figure 3) and for a range of agricultural purposes including keeping plants from freezing or at a

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<sup>16</sup> Patricia J. Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, an Oral History* (Texas Tech University Press, 1999), 107–108.

market covering bales of tobacco so that they stayed moist, as photographed in Durham, North Carolina in 1939 (Figure 4). One can see that the quilts shown were littered with holes and areas of shredded fabric. If they were not stained previously, the tobacco likely left them with numerous discolorations. By examining these photos and others like them, it becomes clear that quilts were used for a variety of purposes outside of bed coverings. These uses likely continued as Depression-era poverty transitioned to war-time scarcity of materials including the cotton and linen fabrics generally used to make bedding. As the popularity of quilts faded in favor of store-bought blankets, quilts disappeared from public view into closets to be preserved and, perhaps, into the trash as well.<sup>17</sup>

Quilts enjoyed a surge in popularity in the 1970s which was rooted in the seminal exhibition in 1971: *Abstract Design in American Quilts* held at the Whitney Museum. It was the earliest depiction of quilts in a fine art context. *Abstract Design in American Quilts* was originally meant as a summer filler exhibition but was wildly popular and extended through the fall.<sup>18</sup> Curators hung quilts on walls as if they were the paintings, drawing a comparison between the fine and decorative arts. Although the exhibition drew criticism from contemporary feminists, it is still regarded as a touchstone of the modern quilt revival. The Bicentennial search for a truly American art form heightened the popularity of quilts even further. Not only were quilts valued as art, but they were also valued as pieces of American history. The 1982 Lauren collection rode on the coattails of this continued quilting resurgence. As a result of the exhibition, people pulled out those

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<sup>17</sup> Eileen Jahnke Trestain, *Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide, 1800-1960* (Paducah, KY: America Quilter's Society, 1998), 161.

<sup>18</sup> Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, 49.

quilts they had stored in trunks, attics, and the backs of closets since the mid-1940s when quilting fell out of popularity. While many of these quilts had been kept within families and passed down from one generation to the next, many quilts also made their way into the marketplace and began to fetch relatively high prices at auction and in antique stores.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection**

I mixed in the rich heritage of Navaho blankets and early American patchworks and blended it all together. It's like a melting pot of all the color and earthiness, and utility and optimism that is America itself.<sup>20</sup>

As he articulated in the quotation above, Ralph Lauren had a very specific perspective on the cultural weight of quilts, and one that varied tremendously from the attitudes held by previous quilt users of the Great Depression. Where they saw an everyday item, Lauren saw quilts as an entire visual vocabulary and a form redolent with cultural meaning. In the years immediately after the 1970s quilt revival and the Bicentennial search for an American art form, Lauren valued different aspects of the quilt. Indeed by 1980, Ralph Lauren had cultivated a very specific and very profitable aesthetic, which, like quilts, was seen as very American. He used Anglo-Americanism and the picture of old Ivy dress to model collections that both challenged the fashion elite and appealed to the casual observer.<sup>21</sup> In contrast with much of 1970s fashion that was aimed at a disco-aesthetic, Ralph Lauren focused on a sophisticated yet active woman who looked back to an imagined American history. After the debut of his first complete women's collection in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Lauren, *Ralph Lauren* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011), 170 and 180.

<sup>21</sup> Gross, *Genuine Authentic*, 215.

April 1977, the Fall 1978 garments made quite a splash. A Bloomingdale's director commented on Lauren's style, "He took us through Matt Dillon, Miss Kitty, the Marlboro Man, the trucker, cowboys and Indians, through riding school and pilot school and the New York City girl to get a wonderful amalgam of all-American looks."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the entire country seemed to be following the Ralph Lauren aesthetic as it moved from cowboys and cowgirls to a New Mexico-themed collection to the "Ralph Lauren, romantic" collection of 1982.<sup>23</sup> An article from that year published in the *Chicago Tribune* called Lauren "the man who started the western stampede in fashion."<sup>24</sup> The same article goes on to list the many fashion trends that he ushered from Western to "Annie Hall" to Southwestern.<sup>25</sup>

Yet Ralph Lauren, from the very beginning, was careful to cultivate an anti-fashion persona. He presented himself as the man who just happened to tap into a national zeitgeist. Though he cared little about fashion, he produced beautiful clothes. In interviews, he often said, "I've never believed in fashion."<sup>26</sup> The man who seemed to be at the forefront of the fashion world of the late 1970s and early 1980s decried even the idea of fashion. Looking at the other fashions of the era from designers such as Calvin Klein and Anne Klein who focused on acrylic fibers and pant suits, it is easy to see that Lauren broke the mold in his designs. He labeled his clothes "antistyle, untrendy" and

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<sup>22</sup> Kal Rutenstein quoted in Jeffrey A Trachtenberg, *Ralph Lauren: The Man Behind the Mystique* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 197.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>24</sup> Genevieve Buck, "Lauren Lure: It's All American," *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, July 12, 1982, sec. 2, B1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

claimed that the focus had always been on comfort and movement.<sup>27</sup> Ralph Lauren, who took home top fashion awards and was named to the Coty Hall of Fame for both men's and women's fashion, instead expressed that he merely pulled from classic American (and sometimes British) themes of dress, whether from the campuses of Ivy universities or the rugged terrain of New Mexico. In interviews, he was fond of recalling his childhood by saying, "As a kid, I never loved fashion. I wanted to be a basketball player, but wasn't tall enough. I wanted to be a teacher at one time. I never thought of money, but I always thought of loving what I did."<sup>28</sup> When discussing why he began making women's clothes in addition to menswear, Ralph Lauren pointed to a hole in the market; "I did it because there was a gap. I was aiming at the unfashionable girl."<sup>29</sup> He positioned himself and those who liked his clothes outside of the fashion mainstream. An unstated theme is that he and his customers tapped into an authentic, anti-fashion American-ness. Like the cowboys and cowgirls, the Native Americans, and the prairie women, the women and men who wear his fashions had a careless elegance, and it was this aesthetic that he created in the Fall 1982 collection that would bring him so much attention both positive and negative.

### **The Collection**

Lauren biographer Michael Gross writes that the inspiration for the Fall 1982 collection was a joint venture from the minds of Tasha Polizzi and Shari Sant, a fit model who became the design director later that same year. Together, they engineered a suede

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., B2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

skirt under a patchwork skirt made up of pieces of chintz which gave Lauren the launching point for thinking about patchwork and fashion.<sup>30</sup>

Though the collection first premiered in April 1982, it had been in development for much longer. Beginning in the late 1970s, Marilyn Kowalski, a quilt dealer who owned an antiques shop in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, regularly sold to Ralph Lauren's buying agents. She described how his agents visited her store at least once a week to purchase accent pieces which were used as decoration in Polo shops, in addition to antique items used for the designer's inspiration.<sup>31</sup> She noted that there were a network of buyers who knew just what Lauren was looking for whether it was suitcases, croquet sets, or textile items including clothing and quilts. It took several months to gather enough quilts for his needs. He required whole, unsoiled quilts in muted colors with small patterns that would translate well to tailored garments.<sup>32</sup> In all, Lauren's agents acquired approximately 350 antique quilts (dating from around the 1890s) from dealers across the northeast.<sup>33</sup> A quilt such as the 1898 Lura Watkin's Pieced Quilt in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History would have been ideal for the Lauren team's purposes. With its small-scale repeated pattern, muted tones, lack of large borders, and good condition, the quilt could have been easily remade into a number of different garments (Figure 5).

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<sup>30</sup> Gross, *Genuine Authentic*, 217.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Vogel, "Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute," *New York Times*, November 18, 1982, sec. Home.

<sup>33</sup> Rouse, "Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer's 'Wholesale Destruction' of Old Quilts."

The work of amassing quilts paid off with a very successful collection premier at New York's fall fashion week on April 22, 1982, at the Hotel Pierre.<sup>34</sup> Several weeks before the collection premiered, *Women's Wear Daily* gave the fashion world an idea of what would be walking down the runway. "All-American Ralph Lauren has been cornering the market on antique patchwork quilts to foster a spirit of colonial Americana in his fall collection. 'Folk art for me represents the integrity that is America,' says Lauren, who is cutting up vintage quilts and shaping them into jackets, vests, and Williamsburg hostess skirts."<sup>35</sup> An April 26, 1982 article was the first to include a photograph of the quilted garments.<sup>36</sup> The photograph shows a beaming blond model who strides down the runway with her hands in her jacket and a log cabin patterned quilt billowing about her legs. The caption for the photograph reads, "Ralph Lauren's Americana collection includes suede shirts under shawls and patchwork skirts made from antique quilts."<sup>37</sup>

The look of the collection was aided by the work of photographer Bruce Weber. Weber had begun working with Ralph Lauren the previous year to create a fashion editorial which appeared more similar to actors in a movie rather than models on a catwalk. The Bruce Weber photographs of the Fall 1982 collection show models wearing skirts and a jacket made of quilts. In Figure 6, model Kristin Clotilde Holby sits on the ground, straw strewn around her. Her brown hair is brushed back neatly over a green

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<sup>34</sup> Hyde, "The Old Makes News," C1.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Bonnie Leman, "The Needle's Eye," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, August 1982, 4. Trying to locate copy of original article.

<sup>36</sup> Genevieve Buck, "Fashion Rules Out the Old Categories with New Designs," *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, April 26, 1982, sec. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



suede tunic-style blouse. A red and black checkered fichu falls over her bust and is tucked into a brown leather belt. At her neck is a bit of lace tied into a bow. Her feet are covered with thick cable-knit brown socks and leather sandals. The skirt figures prominently in the composition. It is a log cabin pattern made of nineteenth-century fabrics in a range of colors including the very popular Turkey red and progressing from dark indigos to softer roses. In Figure 7, an unknown model stands in the same barn-like scene. Again the model's hair hangs long and loose as she looks past the photographer to the right. A long wool overskirt opens to reveal an ankle-length blue pinstriped petticoat. A linen fichu fits snug around her neck and is fastened with a cameo. A jacket made of an antique quilt is belted at the waist. In the model's right hand is a large basket. She appears to be taking a moment to rest before continuing the hard labor of a farm wife. In Figure 8, the same unknown model wearing a sweater modeled after nineteenth-century samplers, stands holding her skirt with a basket at her hip. The skirt, as in Figure 6, is made of an antique quilt with fabrics dating it to the end of the nineteenth century. The quilted costumes provide a vital link in the photographs by connecting a contemporary eighties woman, with her tanned skin and long hair, to American women of the past who fabricated these items. But it is clear from the photographs that quilts have begun to assume a new ideological function. These women revel in fantasies of the past; with Lauren's help they can consume Americanness rather than make it themselves. But even as he constructs a history for the models and for those who purchased the pieces, it is entirely fictionalized since they are modern women wearing modern garments constructed from 1890s quilts which are meant to recall eighteenth-century America.

Yet historical accuracy was not on the minds of the fashion industry. After the ruggedness of the Western garments, the soft delicate romance of this collection was a breath of fresh air to the fashion establishment which he carried over into his children's lines too. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Lauren's Little Darlings" discusses the Ralph Lauren Girls' Wear fall 1982 line which includes very similar garments made for girls and teens. Having actually premiered prior to the women's line, the March release likely gave people a taste of what was to come including a girl in a plaid prairie dress tied at the waste with what is described as "patchwork fabric" but is possibly a portion of a quilt.<sup>38</sup>

### **Ralph Lauren on Quilts**

Though quilts had been used previously for the variety of purposes like bandages for wounds during an emergency, covers for plants, or tossed over the bed of an open wagon, they had never before graced a high fashion runway. Never before had a designer at the highest level turned his sights to utilizing the abstract beauty of nineteenth-century quilts. Unlike the desperate destruction of quilts in the Great Depression, Ralph Lauren's agents had knowingly and systematically gathered antique quilts to be cut apart, patterned and sewn into garments for resale on the runway and high-end stores. The eye-catching patterns and muted colors fit perfectly with Lauren's early 1980s aesthetic. Rather than looking to the Southwestern United States as he did in the Fall 1981 collection which employed Navajo patterns, turquoise jewelry, and rugged plaids, Lauren dug into the imagined history of the colonial Northeast.

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy Hawkins, "Lauren's Little Darlings," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), March 19, 1982, J8.

People were quick to decry the designer; an article covering the line's unveiling stated, "Even before the first patchwork quilt skirt made it down the runway, Lauren said, he got his first hate letter, condemning him for destroying works of art."<sup>39</sup> Ralph Lauren responded by decrying, "I'm a lover of American art, not a destroyer of it...I've taken the best quilts and given them a new dimension. More people will see them and admire them. And besides, how many quilts can you put on a bed?"<sup>40</sup> In a *New York Times* article, he explained further, "Who says quilts should be confined to beds or walls? The colors, designs and handiwork are so special, why not wear them?...Though they were by no means museum quality quilts, I did pay several hundred dollars apiece for them. Had I made these clothes of new material, it would have bastardized the concept. The whole charm is in the fact that the materials are old and will continue to look beautiful with age."<sup>41</sup>

His defenses listed above can be distilled to the following: a) quilts are plentiful, b) old quilts must be used to complete the correct authentic look, c) the quilts, though not museum quality, were quite expensive, d) he purchased the quilts at a fair rate, and e) the old quilts will wear better with age.

The last point is perhaps the most interesting in his justification for the use of antique quilts. Lauren argues that he could not have used new quilts that just looked like old quilts because it would have "bastardized the concept." In the 2007 visual biography *Ralph Lauren*, Lauren explains more thoroughly:

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<sup>39</sup> Hyde, "The Old Makes News," C7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Vogel, "Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute."

I love the simple charm of American folk art—samplers and old patchwork quilts. The early American homemaker had an ingenuity and thriftiness. She took scraps from her family’s worn-out clothes and sewed them together into quilts that gave warmth and color to her family’s life. I was inspired by the spirit of these crafts and made folk art sweaters and patchwork skirts and jackets that mimicked the naïve designs of these early American art forms. To me they were an expression of American heritage—clothes that were authentic and had a one-of-a-kind sensibility and character.<sup>42</sup>

The first point to mention is that although the Bruce Weber photographs of the garments are shown, Lauren makes no direct reference to them. Within the text quoted above, he is careful to say that the skirts and jackets “mimicked” the antique designs rather than actually were antique textiles. Lauren’s statement is incredibly dense and packed with meaning. He acknowledges that quilts are an art form yet qualifies that by calling them “folk art,” “craft,” “simple,” and “naïve.” In addition, he perpetuates the myth of all quilts being made from scraps by envisioning an anonymous woman using her thriftiness and American ingenuity to make a textile from only worn-out clothes. He seems to draw inspiration from these makers though; just as the quilts are symbols of American heritage, so are the clothes that he has made from lowly quilts. He is acting as the ingenious American creating something from nothing, making one-of-a-kind pieces from discarded textiles.

In terms of value, Ralph Lauren insists that he is adding to the value of these pieces through their transformation to garments. The quilts lend an intangible authenticity to the garments they help create. In return, the garments

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<sup>42</sup> Lauren, *Ralph Lauren*, 170 and 180.

give a new life to the quilts. As Lauren says, “More people will see them and admire them.” The care tag affixed to each of the quilt-constructed garments reads in part, “This heirloom quality clothing is made from an authentic quilt and should be handled with extreme care for maximum preservation of the fabric” (Figure 10).

But Ralph Lauren was selling authenticity. He was selling heritage. He was selling American-ness. And it was intoxicating. The items were mementos and family heirlooms for people who had none. The jackets and skirts made from antique quilts spoke to the desire of some to have an old-world, old-money history where priceless family-owned quilts were passed down from one generation to the next yet a rogue daughter had cut them apart to make something even better. Lauren was the best at creating fantasies and creating a dream through his styling. And the dream was seductive to many. Lauren was saying with the Fall 1982 line, as he had with all the women’s lines before, that the consumer could buy in to the fantasy. The consumer could purchase social standing and an old money feel even if, like him, he or she was the child of poor immigrants living in the wrong part of New York City. The quilt-made items originally sold for over \$1200, but the idea that he was selling was priceless.<sup>43</sup> Biographer Gross points out about Lauren’s clothes that “he’s transformed such formerly rare status symbols into commodity products.”<sup>44</sup> The quilts which were passed down amongst families wealthy

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<sup>43</sup> Rouse, “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts.”

<sup>44</sup> Gross, *Genuine Authentic*, 7.

enough to do so have jumped from family heirlooms to fashion pieces through Ralph Lauren's commoditization.

In Lauren's own words: "I present a dream. They are worlds you would like to be a part of."<sup>45</sup> Considering the idealized faux history created in the Bruce Weber photographs, it is not surprising that so many people bought into the dream by purchasing his clothes. Considering his popularity, it should also not be surprising that so many bought into the dream by imitating his garments and cutting up quilts in a similar way.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 4.

## CHAPTER TWO: QUILTS, THE ENDANGERED SPECIES

If the taste for quilts cut up into clothing had stopped with Ralph Lauren, it is possible that quilters' and quilt lovers' reaction to the collection would not have been so extreme. Instead of dying out though, Ralph Lauren's collection spawned so many other creative and entrepreneurial minds that the negative reaction of the quilting community towards the destruction of quilts grew to a deafening roar by the end of 1982 and continued for decades. The responses to the Ralph Lauren collection serve to highlight the variety of values placed upon quilts during the early 1980s. This chapter will first outline the spread of the dissent and then discuss the different values assigned to quilts including historic value, economic value (including use value), and sentimental value.

### **Quilters React**

The first hint of discontent over the collection outside of quilt media appeared in a *Washington Post* article on Saturday, April 24, 1982 entitled "The Old Makes News: An Ode to American Folk Art & Simpler Clothes." Reporter Nina Hyde discussed "old quilts made into skirts" and closed the article with a paragraph about the opposition to the Ralph Lauren collection.

Even before the first patchwork quilt skirt made it down the runway, Lauren said, he got his first hate letter, condemning him for destroying works of art. "I'm a lover of American art, not a destroyer of it," insisted Lauren, who has bought the quilts for his patchwork skirts, designed to be worn at home, from collectors and dealers. "I've taken the best quilts and given them a new dimension. More people

will see them and admire them. And besides, how many quilts can you put on a bed?”<sup>46</sup>

Evidently, those sending Lauren hate mail were not satisfied by his remarks and the outrage continued to grow. Soon entire articles appeared in regional and national newspapers discussing the collection in terms of its destruction of quilts. Perhaps most importantly, short articles appeared in the premier quilting magazine of the time, *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* edited by Bonnie Leman.

*Quilter's Newsletter Magazine (QNM)* began in 1969 in the kitchen of quilter and entrepreneur Bonnie Leman. The publication was originally meant to compliment her pattern making business, Heritage Plastics.<sup>47</sup> Instead, it quickly took on a life of its own selling out the first 5,000 copies almost immediately.<sup>48</sup> Though many publications since the late nineteenth century had included information and patterns for quilting, *QNM* was the first periodical to be completely devoted to the topic. By 1979, *QNM* expanded quickly from a black-and-white newsletter sent out of Leman's home to a full-color monthly magazine with national readership. It remains the longest running quilting publication in the United States.<sup>49</sup> It is difficult to discern who purchased the periodical however. Surprisingly, the first complete national survey of quilters did not take place until 2000, and it revealed an industry with almost twenty million American participants who spent over \$1.8 billion a year on quilting supplies.<sup>50</sup> According to the survey, the average quilter was a “fifty-nine-year-old woman with a college education and a median

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<sup>46</sup> Hyde, “The Old Makes News,” C7.

<sup>47</sup> Elise Schebler Roberts, *The Quilt: A History and Celebration of an American Art Form* (Voyageur Press, 2010), 191.

<sup>48</sup> Eleanor Levie, *American Quiltmaking: 1970-2000* (American Quilter's Society, 2004), 20.

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, *The Quilt*, 191.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007* (Sterling, 2009), 333.



household income of more than \$87,000. She (there are a few he's, but not many) has been quilting for an average of 13.5 years and enjoys both traditional and contemporary styles.”<sup>51</sup> It is unclear how similar or dissimilar the average 1982 quilter was to the average 2000 quilter. Many seem to have been younger women in their thirties from middle to upper-middle class households with the discretionary income to allow for extra money to be spent on hobbies. Generally, they had interested in historic quilts as well as contemporary textiles. As difficult as it may be to define the *QNM* readership, the magazine was the premier source for the quilting community and quilting news.

The prominence of the *QNM* no doubt influenced the reception of the April 1982 issue which prominently featured an article and graphic called “Endangered Species: Old Quilts” (Figure 11). The two-page spread included a large photo of a “Path Through the Woods” 1930s quilt collected in Colorado by the magazine editor. On top of the photo of the quilt, they added an image of a pattern for a vest as well as the image of open scissors poised to start cutting. In the corner of the image are the words, “PLEASE SAVE ME!” as if to imply that the quilt itself screamed out to be spared.<sup>52</sup> The article included a plea for readers to stop their destruction of old quilts and instead to create new patchwork blocks for garments or home decoration. Author Chris Edmonds pointed out that though the fashion world saw the garments as in vogue at the moment, they would soon be discarded once fashion changed. The magazine editor, Bonnie Leman, included a poem, “My Path Through the Woods,” which urged against taking scissors to a quilt, no matter how damaged it may be. This two-page article in *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* set the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>52</sup> Chris Edmonds, “Endangered Species: Old Quilts,” *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, April 1982, 14.

tone and the rhetoric for the dissent that followed. The July/August 1982 issue of the magazine continued with an expanded discussion of the April “Endangered Species: Old Quilts” feature by mentioning Ralph Lauren several times by name.<sup>53</sup> For the editor to devote so much attention to a topic outside of her usual Editor’s Note was unusual and likely made an impact on the subscription readers, and reinforced the perceived urgency of the situation.

The *QNM* articles likely prompted Rita Rouse, a quilter and self-described fabric artist, to write an article within the mainstream media. In September 1982, Rouse wrote a piece entitled “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts” that was republished in regional papers across the country.<sup>54</sup> Rouse continued the rhetoric of quilts as an endangered species with limited numbers that could easily be wiped out. She begins:

Lovers of Ralph Lauren clothes adore his fashions made from vintage quilts. But quilters across the United States are outraged at what they call his wholesale destruction of the endangered species of antique quilts. Since they learned of Lauren’s use of the antiques, quilter have discussed the issue at meetings of quilting groups and written, advertised and editorialized against the practice in quilt publications. Some have written letters to the designer expressing their views. They fear that because of Lauren’s well-publicized name, he will add respectability to the practice of cutting up antique quilts, although the number he is using is relatively small.

Rouse summed up the general concerns that the quilting community had with the collection: that Lauren’s collection will validate the cutting up of quilts. In addition to quoting Bonnie Leman, Rouse gathered opinions from others within the quilt industry including Sally Garouette of the American Quilt Study Group as well as a local quilt

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<sup>53</sup> Leman, “The Needle’s Eye.”

<sup>54</sup> Rouse, “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts.”

guild president. Rouse also reached out to Lauren for a comment in light of the growing controversy. Though Ralph Lauren had shared a few quick remarks with the media previously, there had been no direct reaction from the designer or his company. The September article, however, included a more formal statement from the designer via company spokeswoman Buffy Birrittella who attempted to defend the collection against the many criticisms. “Yes, we are cutting up old quilts...but we’re hand cutting them individually. We’re not just sending them out to a factory and chopping them up. And we’re adjusting the (garment) patterns so that they show off the beauty of the quilt.”<sup>55</sup> Birrittella’s comments were defensive of their practices. Here Lauren seemed most concerned with the perception that the quilts were being made in a factory context. Since he was selling the brand as handmade and authentic, the perception of factory manufacture would have concerned him beyond the singular collection to affecting the wider brand.

Unfortunately for Lauren, the story continued to gain a wider audience. After it circulated in many regional and specialty papers, the *New York Times* ran an article on the controversy on November 18, 1982.<sup>56</sup> Carol Vogel’s “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute” ran again on December 26, 1982 in the *Chicago Tribune* under the title “Can the Quilt Collectors, Designers Patch It Up?”<sup>57</sup> Though the interest in the controversy faded from the public eye by the end of 1982, it continued to be referenced in *Quilter’s*

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Vogel, “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute.”

<sup>57</sup> Carol Vogel, “Crafts: Can the Quilt Collectors, Designers Patch It Up?,” *Chicago Tribune* (1963-*Current File*), December 26, 1982, sec. N.

*Newsletter Magazine* and *American Quilter* for several years after.<sup>58</sup> Though it is unclear whether the controversy affected the sales or reputation of Ralph Lauren beyond in any quantifiable way, it led to an examination by quilters in particular about how they valued old quilts. The published reactions to the collection enabled quilters to begin to articulate why quilts mattered. Their rhetoric touched on issues of quilts and historic value, quilts and economic value including as art pieces, and quilts and sentimental value including items produced by women.

### **Quilts & Historic Value**

The first argument that underlies the outrage against the destruction of quilts in the Lauren collection concerns quilts and their historic value. Quilts have value as historic artifacts particularly of women and domestic life. The Bicentennial search for a truly American art form heightened the popularity of quilts even further. Not only were quilts valued as art, but they were also valued as pieces of American history. Edmonds hangs on this point in his plea saying “We have created a voracious appetite which threatens to devour more and more of our early quilt art. And by destroying these tangible pieces of our heritage, we are also destroying bits of our own history as quiltmakers.”<sup>59</sup> In this formulation contemporary quilters are preserving a traditional handicraft by quilting and if they allow historic quilts to be harmed they are not showing respect to the origins of their handicraft or to their American ancestors. Other authors continued this rhetoric. Leman in July of 1982 argued, “Old quilts are regarded by historians and social scientists as valuable documents. They tell us particularly the lives of the middle, working, and

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<sup>58</sup> The topic continued through the QNM November/December 1982 issue and appeared several times before its last mention in the QNM 1984 anniversary issue.

<sup>59</sup> Edmonds, “Endangered Species: Old Quilts,” 15.

poorer classes. We have no more business cutting up these old artifacts than we have shattering the pots found in archeological digs.”<sup>60</sup>

As the news of the collection spread, a wide range of people spoke out against it citing the importance of quilts as historic objects. In a September 1982 regional newspaper article, Sally Garoutte, coordinator at the American Quilt Study Group was quoted reminding, “We know quilting is a subject worthy of study... So many of these quilts need to be studied. When Lauren cuts them up, there’s no longer any chance of getting a clue as to what the quilt was like when it was a quilt.”<sup>61</sup> Garoutte’s concerns came from the burgeoning study of quilt patterns and quilt textiles. Scholars in the 1980s had just begun to examine patterns in a more organized and systematic way. Barbara Brackman’s landmark book *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* was published only two years later; it contained over 4000 pieced patterns alone with another volume published later containing appliqued patterns. There was a genuine concern among quilt scholars that original patterns and construction methods were being lost as a result of the destruction of old quilts. Harold F. Mailand, a textile conservator at the Indianapolis Museum commented in a *New York Times* article that ran in November and again in December, “Cutting up antique quilts not only smacks of commercialism...It is cannibalizing a historic object.”<sup>62</sup> Mailand leveled a serious accusation at Lauren and the others who cut up quilts: they were literally consuming the history that they said they admired. It did not matter whether Lauren’s skirt resembled the hostess garb donned by

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<sup>60</sup> Leman, “The Needle’s Eye,” 46.

<sup>61</sup> Rouse, “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts.”

<sup>62</sup> Vogel, “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute.”

Colonial Williamsburg interpreters if Lauren harmed the understanding of women in the past in order to create his historical pastiches. The tension between the inherent commercialism in Lauren's project and the attempt by others to conserve history was apparent.

Aside from a few humorous responses, neither Ralph Lauren nor a representative had responded to the criticism until September 1982. A company spokeswoman, Buffy Birrittella, defended the collection and addressed specifically the concerns about the destruction of history. "They (quilters) say we're destroying a valuable part of our heritage, but we think we're making consumers aware of their heritage. We're using old quilts in a manner they were meant to be used, not hung in a museum," said Birrittella.<sup>63</sup> The concerns about a destruction of heritage may have felt particularly damning towards Lauren's credibility. As a peddler of authenticity and heritage, the idea that Lauren was, in fact, destroying heritage would have appeared antithetical and two-faced to many consumers.

### **Quilts & Economic Value**

An important undercurrent of the dissent over the use of quilts by Ralph Lauren is the complicated issue of the economic value of quilts. Quilts have historically been seen as tradable commodities.<sup>64</sup> Acknowledging quilts as economic goods that have a monetary worth does not divorce them from the many other ways that they are valued which will be discussed below. The following sections will discuss how quilts hold

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<sup>63</sup> Rouse, "Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer's 'Wholesale Destruction' of Old Quilts."

<sup>64</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3. In his essay, Appadurai defines commodities as objects of economic value. This definition will be used.

economic value as bed coverings, collectables, saleable art items, and as craft supplies or remade craft objects and how those economic values affected the reaction to the Ralph Lauren collection.

### **Economic Value as Bed Coverings**

As has been acknowledged previously, the primary use of a quilt is as a bed covering. Though traditional quilts have been used for other things, the presumed function at the time of creation was generally as a textile for sleeping. There was a general assumption in the rhetoric of dissent over Lauren's re-use that the intended place for a vintage or antique quilt was as a whole textile as a bed dressing. For example, in the original *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* two-page layout, the magazine's editor Bonnie Leman included a poem called "My Path Through the Woods" referencing a quilt shown on the opposing page. The poem tells the story of the author who buys a tattered and dirty quilt for only ten dollars with the intent of making a jacket out of it, but once she is poised to cut into the piece with her scissors, she has a change of heart. The poem ends:

I unpinned my pattern and put down my scissors,  
Folded the quilt at the foot of my bed.  
I think it can comfort one more generation  
Before its link to [the creator's] life must be forfeited.<sup>65</sup>

The undertone is that by cutting apart the quilt to make a new object, she would be making it less valuable than it is as a whole quilt. Indeed, the only economic value of a quilt prior to the rise in quilt collecting was its use value as a bed covering. Once the quilt could no longer be used for bedding, it would be used as a whole or in parts for other tasks. Like in the account of the tornado recounted by Patricia Cooper and Norma

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<sup>65</sup> Bonnie Leman, "My Path Through the Woods," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, April 1982.

Bradley Allen, quilts were often used as a commodity in a barter system. Like food or clothing, warm bedding is a key part of human survival. Because of the basic structure of a quilt with a back, batting, and front all connected with a quilt stitch, it is an ideal for bedding in much of the United States. Those who had quilts were able to use them for bedding themselves, sell them to others for the same purpose, or barter with them for services rendered as described above. Those who took part in the initial dissent recognized that the primary use of most quilts had always been as bedding and that, even though the quilts have economic value as art items, they have a primary economic value as bed coverings.

### **Economic Value as Collectables and/or Saleable Art Items**

Chief dissenters Bonnie Leman and Chris Edmonds appealed to the reader to recognize the economic value of quilts as collectables and art items in imploring that they save them. They built on the wild success of *Abstract Design in American Quilts* at the Whitney Museum and the subsequent quilt exhibitions which had toured the country from 1971 through to the 1980s. The public at large had become more accustomed to understanding quilts as important objects with color and graphic appeal.

But, just as Leman and Edmonds wanted the public to view them as art objects worth studying, Lauren presented quilts as art objects in a market to be bought and sold. Lauren commented in the *New York Times*, “Though they were by no means museum-quality quilts, I did pay several hundred dollars apiece for them.”<sup>66</sup> Lauren seems to state, very clearly, that although the pieces represent an artistic tradition, they were also being

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<sup>66</sup> Vogel, “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute.”



sold on the open market as economic goods. He acknowledges that some quilts are museum-worthy artifacts which should be held assumedly for perpetuity without being intentionally damaged or destroyed. He also notes that he has served as the judge to decide that these quilts do not fit within those criteria as museum-quality. Instead, the quilts passed from the possession of the quilt or antique seller who sold them as collectibles or art pieces to his possession where they arguably remained art objects. But Lauren did not classify his own reworking of the textiles as a destructive act. As was uncovered in his earlier quotations, he seemed to think that he bestowed new life upon the items. He considered them “American folk art,” and his own reworking was a reworking of that art in his hands. He seemed to see a cyclical nature to his creation: the women had made the quilts out of scraps of clothing while he was making clothing out of pieces of quilts.<sup>67</sup> Though Lauren presented himself as the designer, he seemed also to enjoy donning the cloak of the naïve housewife/quiltmaker. Though he recognized that some quilts belonged in museums, he would likely say that so do some of his garments. Rather than ruining the quilts by reusing them, he elevated them with an artist’s touch.

In the same *New York Times* article, the director of the Museum of American Folk Art Robert Bishop seemed to support Lauren’s sentiments: “Just because something is old doesn’t mean it’s valuable. I’d like to think that people are only making these objects out of otherwise useless fragments, which is fine. We seem to forget that there is also a question of economics involved here...In today’s market it would be impossible to profit

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<sup>67</sup> Lauren, *Ralph Lauren*, 180.

cutting up quilts that are worth thousands of dollars.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the market for whole quilts in good condition was particularly high in the 1980s. Residual interest from the Bicentennial morphed into a full-fledged quilting movement which helped to sustain interest in quilt collecting. While several significant books about quilt history had been written since the first in 1915, a boom in publications began with the 1970s and continued unabated through the 1980s and today. Bishop’s argument that one could not possibly profit from cutting up more valuable quilts would generally have been the case for the majority of individuals and companies making items from quilts. However, because of the high prices of Ralph Lauren’s elite fashion line, the quilts purchased for several hundred dollars were made into garments retailed from \$380 for a vest to \$1200 for a hostess skirt.<sup>69</sup> In addition, unlike Bishop’s claim that the items were made from scraps, Lauren’s garments were made from whole quilts in good condition.

*QNM* editor Bonnie Leman expressed a sincere concern in her writings that no quilts would remain once the fad had run its course. The provocative discussion of “endangered quilts” sprang from a sincere concern that there would be no more quilts left. Public assumption at the time seemed to suggest that there were not many old quilts in existence and that they could all be destroyed if no one spoke out. Her most direct statement on the topic is a question directed to the fashion designer. “This quilt lover asks you, Mr. Lauren, how many old quilts, outside of museums, will be left when next season’s fashion fad is over?...You’re a trendsetter, Mr. Lauren. What you do this fall

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<sup>68</sup> Vogel, “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute.”

<sup>69</sup> Rouse, “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts.”

will probably be copied next winter. All available old quilts could be wiped out!”<sup>70</sup>

Though the tone verges on hysterical, it conveys the genuine concern shared by many quilters and quilt collectors that the fad for cutting up quilts could be all-consuming. In a quote for a regional paper, Leman expressed worries along the same lines stating, “He’s making the idea (of creating clothes from antique quilts) so popular that before you know it, there won’t be any old quilts left.”<sup>71</sup>

The article continues by sharing contemporary thought about the number of quilts in existence. “Quilts from the certain periods already are in short supply, said Ms. Jarrell, the Charlotte quilter. In the 1930s and 40s, quilting died down when women began working outside the home and bought machine-made bed covers. Most that exist are from the 1900s or early ‘50s, made by rural women at home.”<sup>72</sup> Though the first half of the twentieth century is now recognized for its wealth of extant quilts, the rhetoric of the time suggested that quilts were art objects to be revered and saved before it was too late. They worried that the economic value of quilts as craft supplies would begin to outweigh their value as collectable and art objects.

### **Economic Value as Craft Supplies & Remade crafts**

To the despair of many quilt collectors, during the 1980s quilts began to be valued in a wider market as craft supplies. While Lauren was constructing garments for the runways, other quilts were cut apart and made into jackets, skirts, vests, pot holders, Christmas ornaments or stockings, Teddy bears, children’s toys, and pillows. In the same articles which discuss Lauren’s reuse of quilts, the reporters also interviewed several

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<sup>70</sup> Leman, “The Needle’s Eye,” 4.

<sup>71</sup> Rouse, “Endangered: U.S. Quilters Outraged by Designer’s ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Old Quilts.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

vendors who created such items like pillows and shower curtains ranging in price from \$35 to \$200.<sup>73</sup> The concern that a quilt's value as a remade craft would be the only value left was of great concern to many quilt lovers. Chris Edmonds stated the fears most directly in the original article "Endangered Species: Old Quilts":

Don't contribute to the destruction of old quilts and to the demise of our heritage. Don't murder them with your scissors or encourage their destruction by continuing to buy the articles made from them. Don't be enticed by the almighty dollar sign to produce or commission such articles for sale. There *are* other things more important.<sup>74</sup>

The rhetoric references the imminent destruction and eventual extinction of quilts by a naïve and uncaring industry. According to Edmonds, it is the "almighty dollar sign" at work. Those making cutter quilt crafts benefitted from the destruction of heritage. His provocative use of the word "murder" is arresting, and, indeed, it is meant to arrest the crafter from cutting into a quilt or a shop-keeper from stocking the items.

Bonnie Leman in her editor's note just a few months after her initial plea to preserve quilt heritage, warns that more than immediate economic gain is at play.

In the early 1970s The American Patchwork Quilt was rediscovered. Since that time thousands of old quilts have been brought out of the attic into the spotlight, where they have been enjoyed and admired, discussed and analyzed, bought and sold, copied and recopied, resulting in a quilting boom that has fattened wallets everywhere... This quilt lover asks *you* shop owners, are the scissor-wielders killing the goose that laid the golden egg? What will we have to link us to our patchwork past when the old quilts are gone? <sup>75</sup>

Similar to Edmonds, she demands that the reader self-reflect on the impact of these cutter quilt crafts. When the original antique quilts are gone, Leman argues, there will be

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<sup>73</sup> Vogel, "Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute."

<sup>74</sup> Edmonds, "Endangered Species: Old Quilts," 15.

<sup>75</sup> Leman, "The Needle's Eye," 4.

nothing to sustain the fad so popular at the moment. The crafts had become so successful, that they threatened to kill the golden goose that birthed them.

### **Quilts & Sentimental Value**

Despite the various types of economic values discussed above, not all types of value are monetary. Indeed, the majority of quilts are valued in non-monetary ways such as through sentimental value. This type of value is expressed often through families. In that case, a quilt is valued because it was stitched by the owner's mother or because it contains pieces of a dress worn by a relative who has long since passed away. Quilts also have sentimental value in a more abstract sense. Many people treasure quilts because they see them as representative of years of often-anonymous female production. In this case, a quilt is valued because it was made by a woman's hand even if that woman is not known by the current owner.

Alice Walker's 1973 seminal short story "Everyday Use" showcased the sometimes-adversarial relationship between use value and the sentimental value of quilts. The story revolved around an adult daughter returning home to her rural mother and sister. The mother-narrator welcomed her daughter and her new husband home but is surprised by the changed attitude of her daughter who rather than being called by her given-name Dee, now goes by the chosen name Wangero as an expression of her new-found African identity. After finding some quilts in a trunk, Wangero demanded to have them as her own. They were made by family members and include scraps from dresses and even Civil War uniforms. Wangero was horrified to find out that the quilts had already been promised to her sister. "'But they're priceless!' she was saying now,

furiously; for she has a temper. ‘Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!’”<sup>76</sup> The narrator asked quizzically how they would be used if not for being put on a bed. “‘Hang them,’ she said. As if that was the only thing you could do with quilts.”<sup>77</sup> The mother refused to give them to Wangero. Instead the mother offered some newer quilts that she had made herself, but Wangero rejected these and stormed out of the home exclaiming that her mother and sister did not understand their own heritage.

### **Sentimental Value as Objects of Family History**

Walker’s short story is very much a product of the time it was written. Penned in 1973, just after the Whitney *Abstract Design* exhibit had concluded, it suggests the changing attitude as a larger audience began to consider quilts as art. An even wider audience cast their gaze under beds and into attics to look for quilts made by grandmothers and great aunts. Like Wangero, who years before had seen the quilts as old-fashioned and out of style, people now recognized quilts beyond aesthetics and as tangible pieces of family heritage. The mother and sister were less overtly aware of quilts’ associations with family. Unlike Wangero, they saw the quilts first and foremost as useful bed garments; they did not see the devolution of the quilts to rags as a negative thing. Instead, the mother said that the daughter had the ability to quilt and could rework them and make them anew. It was not that the two women did not value the textiles as family items. In a way, they honored the maker’s original intent by using them to keep sleeping bodies warm at night. They lived with their physical heritage on a daily basis

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<sup>76</sup> Walker, “Everyday Use.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

instead of placing it reverently on a wall. Bonnie Leman wrote along the same lines.

“Emotional attraction to quilts is stronger than to other crafts because quilts were central to the heart of the home—the beds, where primal events in life take place: conception, birth, illness, death.”<sup>78</sup>

In exploring the topic of quilt value, Nora Ruth Roberts discussed how her grandmother’s quilt which was in poor repair would fit into a Marxist theory of value. She first noted that though the item had no market value because of its bad condition, it had almost illimitable value for her.<sup>79</sup>

The quilt itself is cotton, made of scraps and bits of dresses my grandmother wore every day to work on the farm, and blouses my favorite young aunt wore to high school. In my mind’s eye, I can see both women when I look at the quilt... Yet I must face the fact that my most prized possession would not fetch twenty dollars on the open market. To anyone outside the family, its only use-value is as a covering or perhaps a quaint curiosity.<sup>80</sup>

She recognized that her quilt that she prizes so much was almost worthless as a commodity. Though it still has use value as a bed cover, the primary value is sentimental. Its ties to her grandmother, her aunt, and her mother sustained the connection.

One can assume that because the quilts used by Ralph Lauren had already made it to market, the familial ties that perhaps once bound them had been severed. The quilts he used, which had been purchased directly from dealers, were separated from their value as pieces of family history. This did not stop those critics who saw it as a dangerous precedent. People eager to profit from the trend would soon turn out their closets and hand over pieces of their family history, they feared. A reader responded to the *QNM*

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<sup>78</sup> Leman, “The Needle’s Eye,” 4.

<sup>79</sup> Roberts, “Quilt-Value and the Marxist Theory of Value,” 125.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 126.

article by saying “It is folly to think you can stem the tide of economic gain with sentimental pleas.”<sup>81</sup> Bonnie Leman referred to the cutter quilt trend as “the peril to Grandma’s handwork.”<sup>82</sup> But she does not refer to her own grandmother, she refers to the anonymous grandmothers which ties to the next point of nonmonetary valuing of quilts: as objects of anonymous female production.

### **Sentimental Objects of (Anonymous) Female Production**

Just as quilts began to gain recognition as female-created art items, they were being destroyed. “What would happen to Grandma’s quilts?” American quilters and collectors worried. In addition to holding sentimental value as objects with a family history, many quilts that lacked a family history were appreciated as objects of female production. Although historic records support that men and boys made quilts, generally quilts were and are seen as products of women’s hands.<sup>83</sup>

In particular in the 1980s fight over Lauren’s collection women were the assumed creators of these anonymous works. In the articles there is an overwhelming feeling amongst quilters that we (i.e. modern people either male or female) do not have the right to cut-up/destroy a woman’s handiwork. This sentiment is a direct result of the feminist art history movement which had gained traction in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Shortly after the seminal Whitney exhibition was taken down, Patricia Mainardi wrote a scathing response called “Quilts: The Great American Art” which was originally published in *The Feminist Art Journal* in the winter of 1973 and later as an independent book of the same

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<sup>81</sup> Leman, “The Needle’s Eye,” 4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Catherine Morris, ed., *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts* (Brooklyn Museum, 2012), 30.



name. Mainardi, like many other feminist art historians saw a great void when they attempted to search for great women artists. Instead, many began focusing on the alternative artworks created by women in the form of useful crafts like basket weaving, rug hooking, embroidery, and, of course, quilts.<sup>84</sup>

Quilts came to represent the essence of American women's artist abilities and even the woman herself. Indeed, the Bonnie Leman poem reads:

A realization  
Of what I was doing crept into my mind.  
I looked at the patchwork and thought of the woman  
Who had made it with stitches and feelings entwined.  
This was not simple fabric manufactured for clothing,  
But a tangible part of her life force, now spent.  
Should I cut the threads that were left of her efforts,  
Or restore and preserve her accomplishment?<sup>85</sup>

The narrator concludes that she cannot cut apart the quilt as doing so will literally cut out the female creator's connection to the piece. Leman assumes that the person who created the piece is female and sees something sacred in the "life force" that she has bestowed upon the object.

The 1980s quilt supporters appreciated these textiles for their imagined history in place of an actual provenance. Though in many cases the maker of a quilt was not known, this did not dissuade the now-owner from making assumptions about the creator and her motives. This sentiment goes past the general attempt to place a quilt in the matrix of quilt history; instead, it often verges on imagination and fantasy shown in the poem above. The now-owner risks severing some sort of cosmic force by cutting a quilt. Leman

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 19–20.

<sup>85</sup> Leman, "My Path Through the Woods."

and others have succeeded in fetishizing the objects along Marxist lines. She is communing with the object as if it can speak back. Indeed, the quilt pictured on the previous page is literally yelling out, ““Please save me!””<sup>86</sup> The object has been endowed with a life of its own and can build its own relationships.<sup>87</sup> Because the quilts are alive in this context, they can also be killed as Edmonds had previously worried when he referenced their “murder” at the hands of scissor-wielding opportunists.<sup>88</sup> The quilts are in danger of imminent death and destruction.

### **Competing Values Systems**

Despite the vocal arguments presented by both sides, there was no clear winner of the debate. Unfortunately, for those concerned with the destruction of quilts, it did not stop with Ralph Lauren’s 1982 collection. Cutting quilts up for garments and household items had taken hold and continued unabated through the end of the twentieth century. Just as critics feared, the Ralph Lauren skirts, vests, and jackets made from quilts all but disappeared to the backs of closets or the charity bin with only a handful making it to the market in recent years.<sup>89</sup>

The quilters argued that Ralph Lauren did not know the history of quilts or their use. They saw Lauren as a man coming into a women’s art form and destroying works of art and history, but Lauren’s numerous responses show that he did know the history of

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<sup>86</sup> Edmonds, “Endangered Species: Old Quilts,” 14.

<sup>87</sup> Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Smithsonian Books, 1993), 83.

<sup>88</sup> Edmonds, “Endangered Species: Old Quilts,” 15.

<sup>89</sup> There are records of only two objects coming to the market including two skirts and one vest. One skirt was put up for a starting bid of \$199.99 on Ebay from May to June 2013 before the listing expired without any bids. The same skirt with a matching vest were listed together for \$3600 on Etsy in September 2013 before the listing expired.

the textiles and, in fact, that is what made them so special to him. How could the two sides look at the same information and arrive at two disparate conclusions? A more full discussion of authenticity will be covered in the chapter ahead, but already a difference in values is clear. The quilters seemed to think that their knowledge of the historic side of the craft was superior. They treated Lauren as an interloper who was driven by wanton greed, but the worst that can be said of Lauren in this circumstance was that he blundered into a hornet's nest he naively did not know existed. Lauren, as a designer, was driven by the aesthetics and cultural weight that quilts offered. He understood that quilts were a cultural touchstone of sorts which to many Americans represented a history that ran long and deep. He failed to embrace the quilters' idea that by cutting up the whole quilts, he was destroying them completely. Perhaps, naively, he saw his work as a new incarnation of the artwork which would last and be passed down for generations.

On a mass cultural level, again there were no clear winners in the debate. While individuals and companies continued to make use of quilts as craft materials, the quilters did make their mark as well. After the debate, all quilters and crafters knew that to cut up an undamaged quilt would lead to industry backlash. The groups appear to have come to a tentative and largely-unspoken agreement that dead quilts were allowed to be used and repurposed but that whole, undamaged quilts should remain whole. Although the quilters could not hope to turn the tide against all cutter crafts, they were able to mitigate the damage to only dead quilts which were already "lost" in most people's eyes. Today, the demand for objects made from quilts remains and is satisfied by a group of crafters and craft suppliers who are shielded from most scorn by the anonymity of selling online.

### CHAPTER THREE: QUILTS, BUYING AUTHENTICITY

Marian Parsons is known throughout the DIY world as Miss Mustard Seed, which is the name of her blog and the name of her own brand of milk paint. Though she is only one of many modern DIY bloggers, the site garners over 900,000 views per month, and she is regarded as a shabby chic Martha Stewart.<sup>90</sup> In August 2010, she posted a well-received post entitled “A Happy Marriage?” which answered the question, “Can a chair from the 1900’s and a quilt from the 1800’s come together in a happy union?”<sup>91</sup> Through her typical format of before, during, and after shots, she shows how she transformed a stripped-down wood chair and a “cutter quilt” into a new object entirely (Figure 12). The late nineteenth-century quilt (or quilt remnant) was used to upholster over the sprung seat of the chair. The comments section of the article, which affords both immediate feedback and anonymity to the writers, was full of encouragement. Instead of being full of derisive comments, all 23 of the comments left were positive, calling it “a perfect marriage” and “a marriage made in heaven.”<sup>92</sup> One commenter named Teresa included “I also love the chair!! Being a textile conservator, I love to see old textiles used. It is even more special that you are sharing these beauties with others.”<sup>93</sup> The reaction could not be more different than the way Ralph Lauren’s collection was received. Though Miss Mustard

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<sup>90</sup> Miss Mustard Seed, “A Happy Marriage?,” Blog, *Miss Mustard Seed*, August 7, 2010, <http://missmustardseed.com/2010/08/happy-marriage/>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Seed is not nearly as popular as Ralph Lauren was (and still is), she represents a prominent and well-regarded DIY institution. What had occurred between 1982 and 2010 that led such a contrasting reaction? Though separated by time and aesthetics, why are Miss Mustard Seed's and Lauren's viewpoints so similar in how they used quilts?

Ralph Lauren as well as modern crafters emphasize the “authentic” elements of quilts. They fetishize the quilts as physical objects tied to a past, a kind of souvenir. They use them to create a look of authenticity rather than recognizing and valuing them in the ways outlined above. In addition, the twenty-first-century focus on recycling or upcycling co-opts earlier scrap quilt mythology and repackages it in terms of sustainability and modern DIY crafting.

In addition to the rise of DIY, other factors have influenced how cutter quilts are received and used. This chapter will briefly outline some of the major influences that occurred since the 1980s including the Shabby Chic fad, the rise of Ebay (which led to a deflated quilt market) and a better understanding of the large numbers of antique and vintage quilts that still survive.

### **Quilts and the Authentic**

“Had I made these clothes out of a new material it would have bastardized the concept because the whole charm is in the fact that the materials are old and will continue to look beautiful with age.”<sup>94</sup>

“I was inspired by the spirit of these crafts and made folk art sweaters and patchwork skirts and jackets that mimicked the naïve designs of these early American art forms. To me they were an expression of our American

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<sup>94</sup> Vogel, “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute.”

heritage—clothes that were authentic and had a one of a kind sensibility and character.”<sup>95</sup>

When Lauren faced criticism over his use of old quilts in his designs, one of his first defenses hinged on the authenticity of the garments. Lauren saw his garments as expressing something uniquely and authentically American. The two Ralph Lauren quotations were written almost thirty years apart but share the same vision. Lauren excelled at creating reality from dreams. He exploited the public’s nostalgia for classic American eras, and quilts were the ultimate prop in creating that authentic world. The quilts acted as souvenirs that represented something much larger.

The first level of interest that Lauren has for the objects is that they are old. The quality of “old” which is often a source of revulsion in the up-to-the-minute world of fashion is instead the quality which holds so much power. David Lowenthal explores the valued attributes of antiquity including how the past is valued by its very remoteness. “Sheer inaccessibility enhances the mystique of the very ancient past...Distance purges the past of personal attachments and makes it an object of universal veneration, lending the remote a majesty and dignity absent from the homely, intimate good old days just gone.”<sup>96</sup> Because America does not have a “very ancient past,” Lauren must gather inspiration from the earliest Anglo-Saxon colonial period. Lauren even states that the “charm” of the pieces comes from their age.

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<sup>95</sup> Lauren, *Ralph Lauren*, 180. It’s important to note that Lauren does not mention that he in fact did not make the patchwork quilts but cut up old ones. It is likely that even many years later when this book was published, he was still sensitive of the controversy the collection caused.

<sup>96</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 53.

David Trend focuses the discussion of the past on objects in his article “The Politics of the Ordinary: Tradition and Change in Folk Art” sees quilts and other folk items as nostalgic icons which “reference an attraction for an aesthetic of the commonplace, but not the commonplace of today.”<sup>97</sup> Trend sees Ralph Lauren’s clothing lines as the culmination of generations of establishment usurping cultural otherness. It began with fine artists like Gauguin, Braque, and Picasso and their search for and exploitation of the naïve, the folk, and outsiders and culminated in the fashion, housewares, and fragrance lines of Ralph Lauren.<sup>98</sup> Trend argues that folk art must be consumed through the lens of sophisticated high society before being presented as art.<sup>99</sup> These artists, as well as Lauren, see the past and the objects from it as somehow more authentic and more real than contemporary society. “Folk art carries associations of traditional gender roles, family structures, and the heroism of the white settler. Former ways are often considered more ‘authentic’ or ‘natural,’ while modern society is seen as out of touch with history and values.”<sup>100</sup> His sentiments almost directly echo Lauren’s discussion of quilts representing the ingenious female home-maker quoted above.<sup>101</sup> Through Lauren’s invocation of that image, he evokes a time when women worked from the home implying a family structure and gender roles that were very different from the early 1980s.

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<sup>97</sup> David Trend, “The Politics of the Ordinary: Tradition and Change in Folk Art,” *Art Papers* (December 1992): 20.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>101</sup> Lauren, *Ralph Lauren*, 180.

Trend, however, overlooks the mutual relationship between the folk object and the modern artist/designer. Trend focuses on the legitimacy granted by the designer. By Lauren using old quilts, he placed his mark of approval that quilts are a legitimate source of inspiration for modern fashion designs. Items that, in Lauren's opinion, could never have made it into museums were instead appreciated and reused by him. He granted them "new life" so to speak through resurrection. Indeed, Lauren gives legitimacy for the quilt to be appreciated as an art object perhaps only once it has been remade into a skirt, jacket, or vest. But the folk object—in this case a quilt—gives legitimacy to the recreated Lauren design as well. The two are dependent on one another. The quilt carries with it an amount of cultural weight. It is appreciated for its age, its handmade production, its female production, as a piece of American resourcefulness, and as physical evidence of a different way of living when blankets could not be bought at a store.

In Susan Stewart's *On Longing*, she explores the idea of the antique as souvenir saying:

The double function of the souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present. The present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. This referent is authenticity. What lies between here and there is oblivion, a void marking a radical separation between past and present. The nostalgia of the souvenir plays in the distance between the present and an imagined, prelapsarian experience, as it might be "directly lived." The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic. The antique as souvenir always bears the burden of nostalgia for experience impossibly distant in time.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press Books, 1993), 140.



The consumer of Lauren's remade garment appreciated it not because it is a quilt *per se* but because it is a souvenir which conjured nostalgia for an imagined past. No matter what, the consumer is separated from the past by time and space. It is impossible to reach that other reality except by proxy of a souvenir object which proves the materiality of that past once existing. Stewart uses the term "exotic" which is apt because like the exotic, the past is similarly reconfigured and repositioned to suit the present. The quilt is the past, the authentic, the ambassador to an unknowable time. It "plays" in the liminal space, and the quilt bestows the remade object with that ability.

Yet the souvenir not only creates a link to a past; the possession of this souvenir creates a very personal connection to the object. Someone who may have always wanted a family history which included a transmission of quilts from one generation to another may instead purchase such an heirloom. The narrative of the object morphs into the narrative of the possessor.<sup>103</sup> By taking possession, the owner has reached back to correct the past and created an heirloom. The context of the quilt and even the remade object's origin is no longer as important as the "secondhand" experience of the eventual owner.<sup>104</sup> But that does not negate the original authentic experience in which the quilt was made. Lauren argued that using new material would have bastardized the concept of the collection, and indeed, the meaning would have been entirely different because the quilt's language of authenticity depends on its role as a souvenir for a destination which cannot be returned to: the past. The consumer of the garment cannot go back into the past to

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 135.

create an heirloom for herself to be passed down generation to generation. Instead, she may choose to literally buy into the heirloom produced by Ralph Lauren.

When looking at the pattern and yearning for the authentic, Lauren can also be compared to another icon, Wallace Nutting. Similar to Lauren, Nutting turned himself into a trademark for furniture, photographs, calendars, and books.<sup>105</sup> Just as the prairie dress was synonymous with Ralph Lauren, the entire look of Old America was associated with Wallace Nutting. They both offered objects with an idealized history which offered “the stability provided by history and tradition.”<sup>106</sup> Nutting preferred to define himself and published an autobiography while simultaneously destroying early business records which could dispute his claims.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Lauren’s autobiography did little to shed light on his early life or career, and he does not make his records available to interested researchers. Just like the items they each produced, they preferred their own idealized histories to the truth. Both specialized in marketing the authentic to wide swaths of the American public. Both offered items which created a fictionalized history for the person consuming it. Lauren’s pieces were only the latest in a long line of pieces harkening back to an imagined past.

A rare example of a Ralph Lauren Blue Label skirt survives in a private collection (Figure 9). Additional photographs of the garments reveal interior construction as well as a label suggesting care for the piece as well as confirming its production from an old quilt. The item label reinforces the idea of heirloom manufacture with its first line, “This

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<sup>105</sup> Thomas Andrew, Nutting, Wallace, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Exhibition Denenberg, *Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 3 and 5.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 7.

heirloom-quality clothing is made from an authentic antique quilt” (Figure 10). Using the exact language, the care tag reinforces the timelessness of the piece and the authenticity of its creation. It continues by saying, “We recommend gently airing in the traditional nineteenth century manner.” Again, the label refers to the historical nature of the object. The word “traditional” carries heavy weight. Even by cleaning the garment, the consumer is carrying on a tradition of how women (assumedly) have cared for quilts for centuries. The possessor, through purchasing, has become part of the larger authenticity narrative created and promoted by Lauren.

### **Crafting with Quilts, the 1990s**

The narrative that quilts represent the authentic did not stop (nor start) with Ralph Lauren. Just as he was producing his garments in 1982, other companies were creating baseball jackets, pillows, and Christmas decorations from old quilts.<sup>108</sup> Shabby chic styles originated in Britain in the 1980s but later took hold in the United States in the 1990s. The style which incorporates an eclectic mix of old, new, and old-looking was a perfect marriage between chipped painted furniture, faded chintzes, and patchwork quilts both old and newly made.

Rachel Ashwell, the owner of Shabby Chic Brands which owns the trademark on the term “shabby chic,” has written many books on the popular design fad. In addition, she has licensed to large retailers including Target under the brand Simply Shabby Chic which includes home décor items especially bedding in pastel shades with ruffles and patchwork designs including the Simply Shabby Chic® Ditsy Patchwork Quilt Collection

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<sup>108</sup> Vogel, “Altering Old Quilts Causes a Dispute.”

in pink.<sup>109</sup> Yet before Ashwell created designs for new quilts to be made new, she used old quilts in her decorating. In two of her earliest books, *Shabby Chic* and *Rachel Ashwell's Shabby Chic Treasure Hunting and Decorating Guide*, Ashwell uses quilts in whole and in part to help create the shabby chic look. Similar to Miss Mustard Seed, she illustrates an old quilt used as a cover for the seat of a wicker couch. The pink pinwheel pattern quilt fits beautifully with the painted white wicker and the effusive chintz fabrics of the pillows (Figure 13). Ashwell says of the piece: "To avoid the expense of reupholstering, laying and tucking an old quilt as Andrea has done complements the wicker perfectly."<sup>110</sup> Here, the focus is on the aesthetics of the quilt and how it fits into the larger look. Ashwell aims to "turn the trinkets from the past into the treasures for today."<sup>111</sup> The pieces are not appreciated individually but in unison. The wicker couch, the faded quilt, and the chintz pillowcase that had previously been a window covering all work together to create Ashwell's signature shabby chic look which mixes items "to include a balance of complements and contrasts, a display to the effects of time, traces of real life, and a merging of gilt and grit."<sup>112</sup>

With the publication of a shabby-chic style book *Reader's Digest Crafting with Flea Market Fabrics* in 1998, it was clear that cutting up quilts had become mainstream. The book by Deborah Harding had an entire chapter focused on using quilts for crafting. The chapter begins:

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<sup>109</sup> "Simply Shabby Chic® Ditsy Patchwork Quilt Collection," *Target*, accessed September 27, 2013, [http://www.target.com/p/simply-shabby-chic-ditsy-patchwork-quilt-collection-pink/-/A-14339396#prodSlot=medium\\_1\\_33](http://www.target.com/p/simply-shabby-chic-ditsy-patchwork-quilt-collection-pink/-/A-14339396#prodSlot=medium_1_33).

<sup>110</sup> Rachel Ashwell, *Rachel Ashwell's Shabby Chic Treasure Hunting & Decorating Guide* (New York: Regan Books, 1998), 60.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, Dust jacket. .

<sup>112</sup> Rachel Ashwell and Glynis Costin, *Shabby Chic* (New York: ReganBooks/HarperStyle, 1996), 10.

Antique quilts should never be cut up! They're a tangible connection with previous generation, pieces of our history. However, their tattered, stained, and fragmented younger sisters are worth a second look. Individual blocks, unfinished and remnant quilts are handmade 'fabric' that is perfect for creating your own easy-to-make heirlooms.<sup>113</sup>

This short paragraph not only sets the tone for the pages ahead, but it also summarizes the thoughts about cutting up quilts at this point in time. Harding recognizes that *antique* quilts which would generally be defined as quilts one hundred years or older i.e. made prior to 1898 should never be cut up. She includes the reasons previously discussed including their connection to ancestors and potentially the original maker. In addition, the antique quilts represent pieces of "our history" which could be seen as a national history of the United States, a regional history, or a female history but is not specified. Harding, however, draws a line in the sand by stating that more recent, non-antique quilts which she calls "younger sisters" do not have the same protection. According to Harding, quilts that are "tattered, stained, and fragmented" may be used as the crafter wishes. The paragraph even concludes with the revelation that the crafter soon will have an heirloom of his or her own.<sup>114</sup>

The section "Shopping for Damaged Quilts" is one of the few times the word "cutter" is seen in published literature. "You will come across tattered quilts that are stained or otherwise damaged beyond repair and most people simply pass them over. These are referred to as 'cutter' quilts."<sup>115</sup> Harding advocates giving these quilts a second chance, that one could "rescue these orphaned quilts" and use the undamaged portions for

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<sup>113</sup> Deborah Harding, *Reader's Digest Crafting with Flea Market Fabrics* (New York: Reader's Digest, 1998), 48.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 53.

various projects.<sup>116</sup> The chapter includes fourteen different projects that use old quilts or quilt tops. They range from the relatively common like teddy bears, rag dolls, and Christmas stockings to the unusual like a quilted collar, duffel bags, and a window valance with shade. The duffel bags in particular were both made from an old quilt top which the author dates to the 1950s (Figure 14). The caption for the photo notes, “I think that this anonymous 1950s stitcher would be pleased to know that the quilt top she never finished was put to good use after all.”<sup>117</sup> It is interesting that the author, like many authors sought an affirmation from the likely creator. They hoped that their work was blessed by the original creator even though that blessing is impossible to receive. Harding hoped that a finished product would satisfy the original maker. In a similar way, she suggested making a window shade with a balloon valance from another quilt top with a Grandmother’s Flower Garden pattern (Figure 15). Across from the image, the author again invokes the original anonymous quiltmaker. “Take a moment to think about the original quiltmaker and how satisfying it is to be able to appreciate her creation and yet experience of transforming it into something that your family will now be able to enjoy for generations to come.”<sup>118</sup> Although one could argue about the heirloom quality of a plush toy or Christmas ornament, it is unlikely that window treatments would pass down from mother to daughter. Still, the book represented an interesting attempt at coming to terms with the cutting up and reusing of quilts as well as show how quilts could be used outside of a traditional quilt context. It proved again that old quilts did not appeal only to

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 57.

quilters. Though the book is typical of craft books in the mid to late 1990s, it is important to note that the publisher, *Reader's Digest*, has mainstream distribution rather than a craft- or quilt-specific publication. More and more though, quilters and crafters were moving online for sources of information.

By 2006, the Quilting in America survey showed that 89% of quilters owned a personal computer with 73% of them visiting quilt specific sites.<sup>119</sup> One of the primary reasons quilters listed for going to quilt websites was to shop for quilting supplies.<sup>120</sup> Online craft and quilter presence grew throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s with sites like eBay. The new online auction website greatly influenced the quilt market. A California internet startup founded in 1995, Ebay was able to create person-to-person sales which had previously been reserved for in-person exchanges like at flea markets, antique shops, or estate sales. H. Jason Combs in his 2008 article for *Material Culture* argued that, "The Internet is substantially impacting the trade of Americas past. Not only has the Internet, specifically eBay, broken down geographic barriers but the volume of available items is significant."<sup>121</sup> Though he uses Northwood glass and Roseville pottery as examples, the statement is just as true when applied to quilts. Items that were previously thought to be very rare spilled onto the online marketplace. Nancy Kirk, a quilt dealer during the 1980s, said in a recent phone interview:

You used to think of quilts as rare. In the 1980s, really great 30s quilts were pretty rare. They were still heavily within families of the makers. Ebay changed all of that. When Ebay first started, people started putting

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<sup>119</sup> Quilts, Inc. and Quilter's Newsletter Magazine, "Quilting in America 2006 Survey" (ckMedia, December 2006).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> H. Jason Combs, "Trading America's Past on eBay: The Case Study of Northwood Carnival Glass and Roseville Pottery," *Material Culture* 40, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 41, doi:10.2307/29764434.

really great quilts up for sale, and one would fetch \$800 or \$900 because everyone thought they were rare. Then, the bottom dropped out of the quilt market. All of a sudden there were 500 Grandmother's Flower Gardens online each week. The myth of the scarce quilt was gone... It was not until I saw that happening that I started doing the math over how many need repair and how many are perfect. And I realized that it was all a myth. It has nothing to do with the reality of American quilt making but the market place suddenly revealed the reality of the situation. We, the dealers, had really believed that we were dealing in American art. We believed that we were on the great hunt for American art objects... With the advent of Ebay, the nature of dealing changed.<sup>122</sup>

The reverence that quilters and quilt collectors reserved for quilts in the 1980s diminished by the mid-1990s. The disillusionment voiced by Kirk was symptomatic of the paradigm shift in the market. Quilt dealers were no longer needed. As Combs referenced, the geographical barriers had been knocked down so that it was not necessary to crisscross the country picking up available textiles. Instead, a buyer could use a search engine to find something that meets her needs or wants. Most importantly though, Kirk references the bottom falling out of the quilt market. The high prices that Lauren referenced for “museum-quality” quilts no longer applied. By 2000, a late nineteenth-century quilt in very good condition could easily be found for under \$200. Just as prices at the top of the market fell so did the bottom portion of the market. Instead of only damaged quilts, more and more unblemished quilts fell into an affordable category where they could potentially be used for crafts.

### **Quilts & Upcycling**

The shift to an online presence for crafts has escalated exponentially. In the last five years there has been a resurgence of DIY cultivated by platforms like Etsy and

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<sup>122</sup> Kirk, Telephone Interview with Author.



Pinterest which provide new outlets for entrepreneurial craft people and a new generation of do-it-yourselfers. The upcycled quilt items then return to the market with a new, increased market value. They are no longer worthless in the market since. In addition, through re-creation they have the opportunity to become heirlooms once more similar to how Lauren has imagined.

Generally, oven mitts are not the focus of scholarly research, but in the case of an oven mitt sold by Etsy seller ITSYOURCOUNTRY, it represents the direction of twenty-first-century quilt reuse known as upcycling (Figure 16). Oxford Dictionaries Online defines “upcycle” as a verb meaning to “reuse (discarded objects or material) in such a way as to create a product of a higher quality or value than the original” and as an adjective (i.e. “upcycled furniture”). In short, it involves making something out of an item that would otherwise be discarded. This could mean a wide range of items like a piece of broken glass refashioned as a necklace pendant, a bicycle tire made into a fashion belt, or a whiskey barrel made into a coffee table. The obvious root of the term comes from recycling, but rather than turning glass into more glass as recycling does, they frame their work as elevating the object to even better than it was before. Instead of glass recycled into glass, glass is upcycled to create jewelry. The term upcycling has also been used for quilts or objects made from quilts. Instead of the term “cutter” which invokes a destructive act, sellers, like the one selling the oven mitt, are increasingly using the term “upcycled” which implies rejuvenation. Instead of destroying an item that was once useable, modern DIYers are creating something new and granting a new useful life

to objects. The quilt which could not be used because of its holes and stains is upcycled to create an oven mitt which is not only beautiful but functional.

Etsy is one of the main internet marketplaces for handmade goods. Until October 2013, all items sold on the website were required to meet the standard as handmade or vintage.<sup>123</sup> As of October 14, 2013, over 280,000 individual products on the site were listed as upcycled with the oven mitt being one of them (Figure 16). The title to the listing is “Patchwork Oven Mitt Country Cottage Folk Art Hand Quilted Potholder Chic Upcycled Cutter Quilt Hot Pad.”<sup>124</sup> In this case, the seller has used both “upcycled” and “cutter quilt” most likely for optimum search results. The text of the ad reads: “This cutter quilt oven mitt is cut from an old hand quilted vintage cutter quilt made in the 1940's. This is a repurposed item made from partially from [sic] recycled materials. There are lots of great flour feedsack prints from this cutter, hand-quilted quilt that allows a piece of the past to live on.”<sup>125</sup> Again, the Etsy seller mentions the term “cutter quilt” but focuses on the recycling of materials to create something new which will allow “a piece of the past to live on.”

Though Etsy is considered the leading online handmade marketplace, Ebay sells many upcycled products as well including a Christmas stocking made from an old quilt (Figure 17). The item is listed as “Handmade Upcycled Quilted Christmas Stocking

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<sup>123</sup> Barbara Ortutay Associated Press, “Etsy’s ‘Handmade’ Policy Will Let Sellers Hire Staff, Use Manufacturers - TODAY.com,” *TODAY*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.today.com/money/etsys-handmade-policy-will-let-sellers-hire-staff-use-manufacturers-8C11325923>.

<sup>124</sup> “Patchwork Oven Mitt Country Cottage Folk Art Hand Quilted Potholder Chic Upcycled Cutter Quilt Hot Pad Itsyourcountry,” *Etsy*, accessed October 15, 2013, [http://www.etsy.com/listing/128165846/patchwork-oven-mitt-country-cottage-folk?utm\\_source=OpenGraph&utm\\_medium=PageTools&utm\\_campaign=Share](http://www.etsy.com/listing/128165846/patchwork-oven-mitt-country-cottage-folk?utm_source=OpenGraph&utm_medium=PageTools&utm_campaign=Share).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

Vintage Country Style Angel Lace.” In this case, the seller has taken a blue, black, and white quilt pieced in a checkered pattern and used it as the main medium for creating a country-style Christmas stocking. She has added an angel, buttons, and lace to finish off the look.

The Ebay seller’s use of the old quilt is very similar to an item posted on the sharing site Pinterest in March 2013 (Figure 18). Pinterest describes itself as “a tool for collecting and organizing things you love.”<sup>126</sup> Users are able to select images from any website to add to their Pinterest boards. The selected items are referred to as pins. A March 2013 pin to the board “Upcycle, Upcycle, Upcycle!” was of a outdoor swing with a seat cushion covered in an old patchwork quilt. In addition to the quilt, the crafter has also attached doilies and created a pillow out of the same old quilt. The creator of the Pinterest board remarks about the photo, “Great upcycle for those old quilts lying in the closet with no use. Make a porch swing quilt cushion! Beautiful idea!”<sup>127</sup> The image had originated from a 2010 posting to the blog *Smile and Wave* written by Rachel Denbow, a mother of two who works from home. In her post about the project, she refers to the original quilt as a “cutter quilt” and shows pictures of the tears and holes which were later covered by the doilies.<sup>128</sup> She even acknowledges the potential pushback against the design by stating, “As you can see (and maybe I’m a little worried that some of you quilt

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<sup>126</sup> “What Is Pinterest?,” accessed October 15, 2013, <http://about.pinterest.com/index.html>.

<sup>127</sup> “Upcycle, Upcycle, Upcycle!,” *Pinterest*, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/198862139768464878/>.

<sup>128</sup> Rachel Enbow, “Smile and Wave: I’m A Little Bit Country...,” *Smile and Wave*, December 26, 2010, <http://racheldenbow.blogspot.com/2010/12/im-little-bit-country.html>.

lovers are still going to hate me for cutting into this!) the quilt had been well loved to the point that there were dark stains, worn edges, and holes in a few spots.”<sup>129</sup>

Though they all incorporate different styles, all of the products above facilitate a change in value of the objects. Unlike the Ralph Lauren pieces which focused on creating an heirloom and thus changing the status of an anonymous quilt to a treasured item with a new history ready to be consumed, these products focus more on a shift in market value and use value. The sellers have converted what could be seen as a waste material with no monetary value into a saleable artifact. A near-worthless cutter quilt has now been made into several oven mitts which are being sold for \$21.99 each. In addition, a quilt which could no longer be used on a bed, may now be used to hold hot pans or remove a dish from the oven. By upcycling the quilt, these sellers gave the quilts a new useful life.

It is difficult to track the motivations of those who purchase these items. Unlike Ralph Lauren, these sellers do not have advertising campaigns or photo shoots with models that help to sell an idea. Most do not articulate the importance of the quilts. Unlike Lauren who was able to explain the purpose of his collection through numerous interviews, the online sellers generally chose not to discuss the use of quilts beyond what was described above. In addition, the anonymity of online sales makes it difficult for sellers to know the motivations behind their client’s purchases.<sup>130</sup> It is possible that buyers liked the “look” of the item as it appealed to their country-style aesthetic. It is also possible that the buyers were influenced by the idea of having a tangible piece or history,

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Research including survey responses and individual email interviews from 28 quilters and quilt and craft sellers conducted from September to October 2012.

their own personal heirloom or souvenir of the past. Without further study, the reasoning behind these purchases relies on conjecture.

Though never referenced directly, the Scrap Quilt Myth likely influenced the perceptions of both sellers and consumers as upcycling as applied to quilts repackages the previous myth for contemporary consumers. Though it is true that some women created quilts using fabrics found in their everyday lives including other bedding or clothes of family members, the quilts now referred to as scrap quilts were likely appreciated more for their graphic beauty than for the economy of their manufacture.<sup>131</sup> Though many surviving pieced quilts especially those from the 1930s or early 1940s may be described as “scrap quilts” the term does not accurately describe the vast majority of quilts produced. From the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, wholecloth and appliqué quilts were much more popular and well-regarded than pieced quilts.<sup>132</sup> Though there had been scrap quilts made during the Great Depression and into World War II, they were unlikely to be saved and the vast majority of those existing today do not fit into the Scrap Quilt Myth that was built around them.<sup>133</sup> Indeed the Scrap Quilt Myth gained most of its validity during the Great Depression when low-income women made quilts out of old clothes and feedsacks.<sup>134</sup> The romance of the myth where American women who, when forced out of necessity, either through poverty or war, made useful and, often times, beautiful quilts and clothes out of a lowly feed sack, a byproduct of consumer culture that is reborn in the hands of thrifty and ingenious American women, is a powerful story

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<sup>131</sup> Ellen Pahl, *The Quilters Ultimate Visual Guide: From A to Z--Hundreds of Tips and Techniques for Successful Quiltmaking* (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 1997), 212.

<sup>132</sup> Shaw, *American Quilts*, 23.

<sup>133</sup> Morris, *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts*, 27–28.

<sup>134</sup> Shaw, *American Quilts*, 234.

which bled retroactively to color our understanding of nineteenth-century quilts especially crazy quilts which were made by middle and upper class woman as decorative throws rather than utilitarian blankets.

The validity of the myth has not affected its popularity and the message continues to evolve. Instead of phrasing reuse in terms of economy or thriftiness, modern day crafters frame it in terms of economic sustainability. Just like the women who took scraps from worn out clothes which would otherwise have been thrown away, modern crafters are taking old quilts which would otherwise be thrown away and making them into a host of useful items.

## CONCLUSION

It took Ralph Lauren almost seven years to return to quilts for inspiration. Once more, it was late-nineteenth-century quilts which captured his attention, but this time it was not to cut them apart to make garments. Instead, Lauren had just launched his first Polo Country Store which he imagined as an idealized dry goods general store.<sup>135</sup> The boutique was housed within the larger Madison Avenue Polo store and opened in September 1988. Lauren explained the concept in an article published the month after opening: "People who go antiques are always looking for out-of-the-way old shops. What we have done here is to present the experience of shopping for country antiques and clothes in a single environment."<sup>136</sup> Antique rocking chairs, old egg baskets, new socks, and cotton flannel shirts were all included in the small store, but most prominently featured were the quilts.<sup>137</sup> All of the grainy, black and white photos of the Polo Country Store include pictures of quilts neatly folded, covering a bed, or hanging on hooks all for between \$575 and \$825.<sup>138</sup> As another article from the same year reports all the quilts

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<sup>135</sup> Suzanne Slesin, "Urban Rustic: A New Gimmick for the Ralph Lauren Boutique: Return to the Past," *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, October 2, 1988, sec. 15, N20, <http://search.proquest.com.mutex.gmu.edu/docview/890168354/abstract/1411FB13A39665604F8/1?accountid=14541>.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.; Patricia McLaughlin, "Love of Country: Polo Sells Small-Town Style at Big-City Prices," *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, December 25, 1988, sec. Section 6, F5, <http://search.proquest.com.mutex.gmu.edu/docview/890220513/abstract/1411FB268F45361E707/2?accountid=14541>.

<sup>138</sup> Slesin, "Urban Rustic," N20.

were “suitably worn, faded patchwork.”<sup>139</sup> Though Lauren’s urge to cut up quilts had passed, the nostalgia and the “look” behind them still appealed to him.

Whether it is an over mitt sold by a crafter through an online store or a piece of couture clothing sold by an internationally-known designer, the objects made from quilts are full of meaning to those who buy them. It is difficult to tell whether this meaning is as developed with cutter items as it is with a quilt in its entirety. Are these quilts given new life through their recreation? Are they bestowed a new usefulness and meaning while at the same time preserving the quilt that they once were? Or instead, are they an un-dead object neither wholly dead like the quilt that made them nor alive like a newly-made quilt? The answers likely depend on the possessor of the item.

Many crafters use quilts from their own family to use in projects. It could be lack of knowledge about quilts that drives this desire. Also, it could be the knowledge that an expensive restoration of a damaged quilt just is not feasible. Generally, restoration is not advised if more than ten percent of the quilt is destroyed.<sup>140</sup> That leaves many quilts that cannot be restored to what they once were. Does the owner of this sentimental textile then have the burden of keeping the quilt which will continue to degrade? Should the owner continue to use it knowing that it will exacerbate the condition further? Or should the owner salvage the usable portions for a project that could highlight the former creator? If a grandmother made a quilt for a grandson so that he was comforted while he slept, is it so big of a leap that the worn quilt be made into a stuffed animal that can comfort yet another generation? Some people would say that the original intent of the creator was

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<sup>139</sup> McLaughlin, “Love of Country,” F5.

<sup>140</sup> Kirk, Telephone Interview with Author.



preserved even though the whole garment has not. No doubt the owner of the cutter item sees the stuffed animal in the same terms as the original dead quilt. Perhaps, the item is even more meaningful as it can be used by another generation in a way that the dead quilt could not.

The same thing may not be said for a quilt picked up at a flea market without a history. Unlike the grandmother's quilt passed down through a family, the purchaser of an anonymous quilt has no idea of the original intention of the piece. Restoration professional and quilt critic, Nancy Kirk argued that it is impossible to know what someone else's "grandmother" wanted and without that permission, it is impossible to cut up a quilt, dead or otherwise.<sup>141</sup> Yet, Kirk is obviously in the minority as cutter quilts and cutter quilt crafts continue to abound. Is it really better to have millions of dead quilts sitting unused in closets or filling landfills than for them to be remade into upcycled novelties? No doubt people will continue to address dead quilts in a variety of ways. Though "dead quilts" may have limited use and market value because of their condition, they retain their sentimental value within families and a marketable authenticity on the open market.

But in many ways, Lauren and the upcycling crafters come from a similar position. First, both Lauren and the crafters ultimately would like to profit from their endeavors. Lauren constructed a women's clothing line that he believed would be successful on the open market. He wanted women to buy (and, ideally, wear) the garments. Crafters ultimately wanted the same; they want to sell the quilt-made items. In

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

addition, both Lauren and the crafters opted to use an old quilt instead of a new quilt or cheater cloth which looks like an imitation of a patchwork pattern. Though, it would likely have been cheaper for Lauren to import newly-made quilts that looked old, instead his agents searched for old quilts that suited his needs. Similarly, crafters could make items appear to be patchwork, but instead they felt compelled to use old quilts for the reasons explained at length above. The need for authentic quilts to complete the product was so strong that both Lauren and the crafters that they were willing to go out of their way to maintain the concept.

Yet Lauren remains unique in voicing his position on why he used quilts. Most commercial crafters do not explain at length or sometimes at all, why they use old quilts. It is possible also that Lauren did not think twice about using quilts prior to the uproar. He likely had no idea about the possibility for conflict prior to releasing the works, but he was able to articulate the reasoning behind the collection even if it served to placate only a small portion of the angered quilters. Through his comments, it becomes much more obvious that, unlike the crafters, he has a grander intention of reshaping or perhaps just reinforcing his consumers' ideas about American history. He was not just making a garment, he was creating a portal to an idealized past. He offered a woman a costume which she could don and become the star in their own colonial fantasy; she could move through her 1980s home in a hostess skirt made from a nineteenth-century quilt and fashion herself Williamsburg high-society. Whether this reuse constitutes granting a quilt a new life is certainly debatable. Considering how few garments appear to survive, perhaps the quilts new life was ultimately short-lived. The quilters, though, were justified

in their concerns. Vendors were already using quilts to make cutter items, but perhaps without Lauren's eloquent justifications, the fad would have died out entirely.

After examining the reaction to the Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection, it becomes clear that their attitudes and the values placed on quilts are continually changing. The collection was a particular touch stone as it involved a male designer co-opting female-made objects and then repurposing them for his own uses (i.e. for sale). In a social climate primed to see injustice towards women and the products that they produced, the reaction against the collection should not have been a surprise. The quilts, which were seen as full of so much potential value whether it is historic, economic, or sentimental, were seen as objects worthy of protection from a designer whose intentions seemed less than pure. The complex construction of value systems around quilts led to an inevitable clash of ideals between designer and quilters, crafter and quilt collector, and even quilter to quilter at times. Because they continue to gain meanings over time rather than losing them, conflicts around quilts will likely unabated.

## FIGURES



**Figure 1. Blue and white quilt, first quarter 20th century.**  
**Damage includes tears, holes, staining, and discolorations. Listed for sale on Etsy September 2012. *Photo courtesy of Kendl Correa.***



Figure 2. Dead quilts hanging on a line to dry, 1939.

“Quilts of family on relief near Jefferson, Texas”, March 1939. Photograph by Russell Lee. LC-USF34- 032721-D. *Photograph courtesy of Library of Congress.*



**Figure 3- A quilt used as a door hanging.**  
**Photograph by Russell Lee. "Quilt hung across doorway which separates living quarters of two families of white migrants. Berry pickers near Hammond Louisiana", March 1939. LC-USF34-032881-D. Photograph courtesy of Library of Congress.**

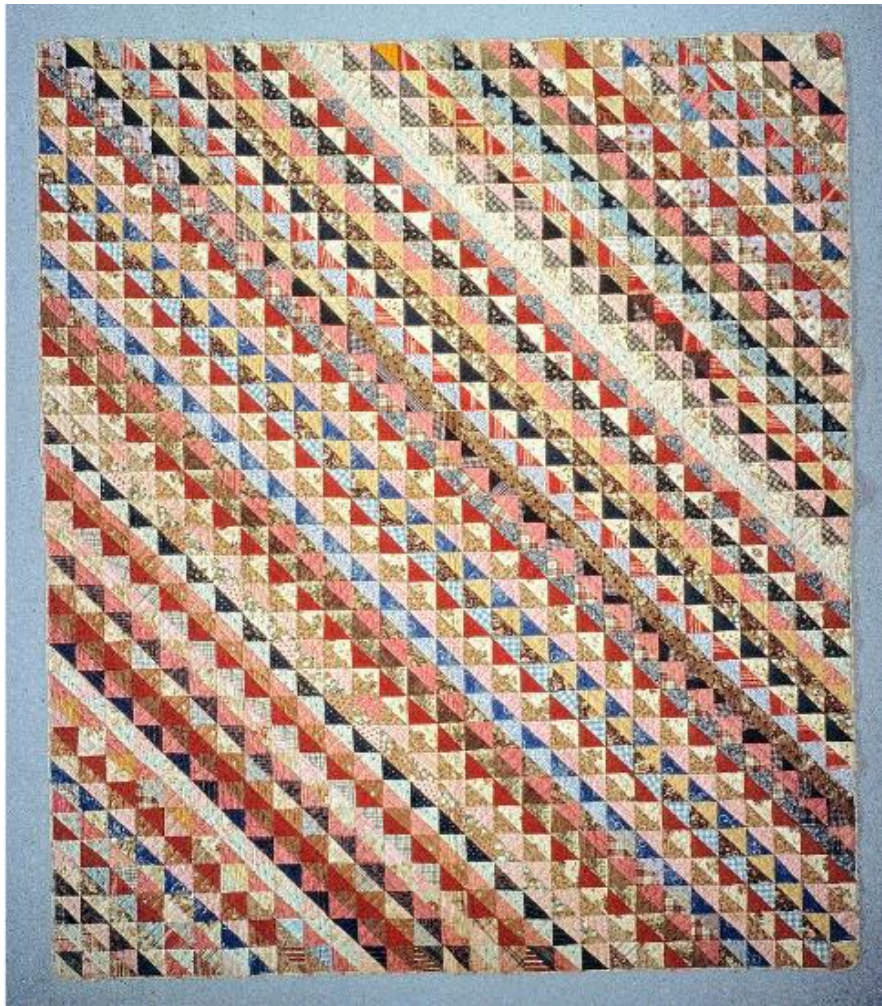


**Figure 4- Dead quilts cover tobacco bales, 1939.**

**Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott, "Old quilts and sacks are used to keep tobacco moist and "in order" while waiting for auction sale in warehouse. Durham, North Carolina", November 1939. LC-USF34-052357-D.**

*Photograph courtesy of Library of Congress.*





**Figure 5- 1898 Lura Watkin's Pieced Quilt**

**A quilt made by Lura B. Thomas. Gift of Mrs. Lura Woodside Watkins. 197232. *Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.***





**Figure 6- Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection quilt skirt.**  
A fashion photograph by Bruce Weber of a skirt made from an antique quilt in the Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection. *Photograph courtesy of Ralph Lauren.*



**Figure 7- Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection quilt jacket.**  
A fashion photograph by Bruce Weber of a jacket made from an antique quilt in the Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection. *Photograph courtesy of Ralph Lauren.*





**Figure 8- Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection quilt skirt and sample sweater.**  
A fashion photograph by Bruce Weber of a jacket made from an antique quilt in the Ralph Lauren Fall 1982 collection. The sweater is based on nineteenth-century sampler designs. *Photograph courtesy of Ralph Lauren.*



**Figure 9-** A Ralph Lauren Blue Label skirt made from an antique quilt. *Photograph courtesy of Pattysoblessed.*



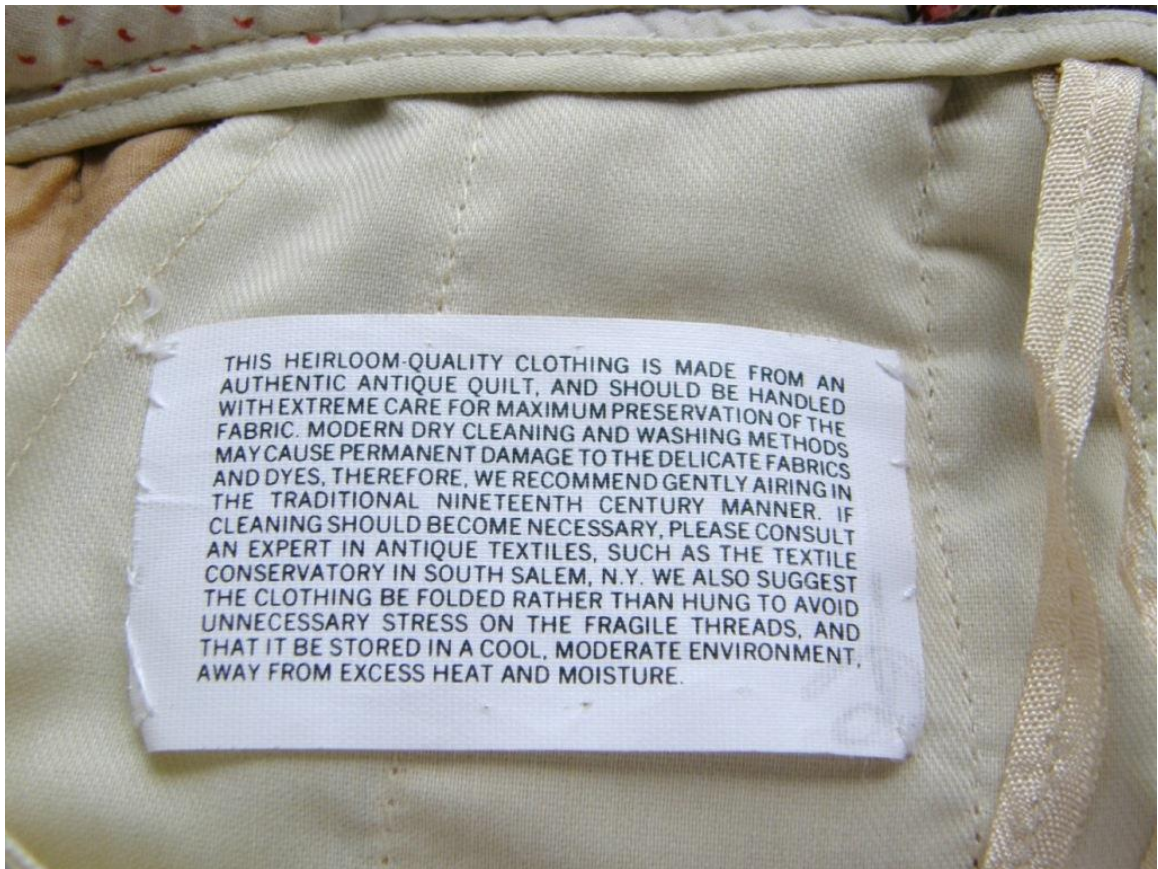


Figure 10- Close up of the label for Figure 9. *Photograph courtesy of Pattysoblessed.*

# ENDANGERED SPECIES: OLD QUILTS



HELP STOP THE DESTRUCTION OF OLD QUILTS WHICH ARE BEING CUT UP TO MAKE GARMENTS AND PILLOWS. ENCOURAGE, INSTEAD, THE CREATION OF NEW AND ORIGINAL PATTERNS OR THE RE-CREATION OF TRADITIONAL PATCHWORK FOR FASHION AND HOME DECORATION.

**PRESERVE OUR HERITAGE**

14 QNM Apr/82

Figure 11- *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, April 1982.



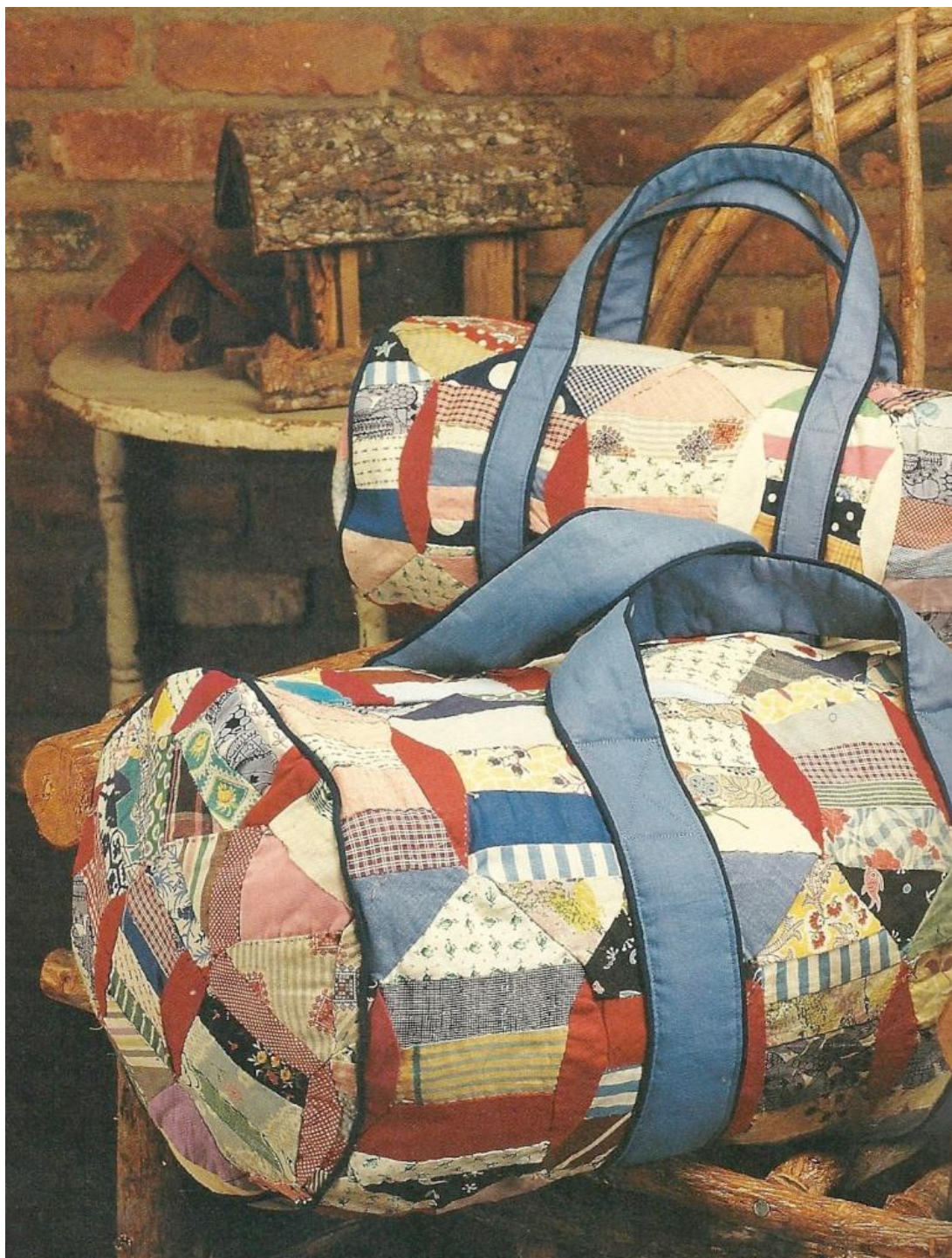


**Figure 12- Chair upholstered by Miss Mustard Seed with an antique quilt, 2010.**  
*Photograph courtesy of Miss Mustard Seed Blog.*



**Figure 13-** A couch seat covered with a pink pinwheel quilt.  
Published in *Rachel Ashwell's Shabby Chic Treasure Hunting & Decorating Guide*, 1998. Photograph courtesy of Rachel Ashwell.





**Figure 14-** Two duffle bags made from a quilt top.  
*Photograph courtesy of Deborah Harding.*





**Figure 15-** A window valance and shade made from a quilt top.  
*Photograph courtesy of Deborah Harding.*



Figure 16- An oven mitt made from an upcycled cutter quilt.  
*Photograph courtesy of ITSYOURCOUNTRY.*





Figure 17- Christmas stocking made from a quilt.  
*Photograph courtesy of Don Adders.*



**Figure 18- Pinterest Pin of an old quilt covering a porch swing cushion.**  
Pinned in 2012 with the caption “Great upcycle for those old quilts lying in the closet with no use. Make a porch swing quilt cushion! Beautiful idea!”

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

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