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TOWARD AN ARTIFACT-FORWARD FEMINIST DESIGN HISTORY

Celeste Caldwell



Left A detail shot of a teal block quilt made by Donna Choate. See Choate, *Block Quilt, Detail*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000255/>.

Toward an Artifact-Forward Feminist Design History

Celeste Caldwell

Feminist Design History is a field abundantly sown, with lots of room for growth. This essay digs through seminal and contemporary works of feminist design history to learn how to contribute to the field most thoughtfully. I find that future scholarship must meet four criteria in order to effectively meet the goals of feminist design. The proposed research criteria are to cut across definitions of craft and design, challenge the centrality of individuals, draw from a broad pool of resources, and study objects in and outside of the public sphere. I use these criteria to advocate for design research which elevates objects previously excluded by the design canon, hoping to gain insight on the values of historically oppressed identities. A case study of a block quilt from the Library of Congress' *Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978-1996* allows for testing the efficacy of an artifact-forward research method, Prownian analysis, as a means of studying such objects. Through this case study, I discover the rich potential in highlighting dimmed design histories through subsidizing the more formal, close looking of an artifact-forward approach with the contextual information available in non-design archives.

Positionality + Transparency Statement

In acknowledgement of the fact that my positionality as an author shapes my research, I preface my work with a statement on my identity. I am an able-bodied, white woman with a college education in Art History and Studio Art. I am writing this research as a culmination of my MFA in Illustration and Visual Culture at Washington University in St. Louis

I grew up in a matriarchal family, with my grandma, mom, and sister at the center of my life. I have always viewed each of them as models of strength, whether through their accomplishments or vulnerabilities. They taught me to have pride in my womanhood, and frankly, I had no idea that patriarchy existed until late elementary school. If anything, I was raised thinking women were more able than men. This unique positionality has always pushed me to believe in my abilities and support other women tenaciously.

In my early twenties, I found a community of equal strength at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. After graduating from a very traditional ‘fine arts’ program, I attended Arrowmont over the summer as a work-study. I helped maintain their gallery and add to their archives, in exchange for room, board, and workshops. I admired the community’s egalitarian relationships between mentors and students and their appreciation for the heritages of their making practices.

This research is born out of my passion for supporting women’s craft, and my growing design practice. In the spirit of operating within a community, this essay cites many ideas of influential feminist historians and design scholars. I hope to amplify their voices in adapting their research into a succinct guide for thoughtfully contributing to contemporary feminist design history. I am diligent in citing borrowed thoughts and ideas, so as to encourage readers to engage with these sources to better understand the foundation upon which this essay was built. I particularly encourage readers to consult Cheryl Buckley’s “Made in Patriarchy” as all of my proposed priorities are outgrowths of ideas presented in her essay.

Before jumping in, I want to define the limits of my research. In honor of my priorities and for clarity of argument, I focus on how women in the western world have been and continue to be omitted from design history, particularly graphic design history. However, I firmly believe feminism is the study of power, always flexible and not limited by normative ideas of gender.¹ Therefore, I encourage future scholars to use the presented priorities to conduct research on artifacts and systems made by non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, non-binary, and other marginalized individuals.

¹ Alison Place, ed. *Feminist Designer: On the Personal and the Political in Design* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023), 2. I am struck by the eloquence and clarity with which Alison Place discusses the historical and contemporary status. I suggest reading her chapter, “On the Personal and Political in Design,” for more background on feminism and its interaction with the design field.

As feminism is the study of power, it can be used as a lens through which researchers and practitioners can unpack the complexities of how sources of power and designed artifacts shape one another.

The Four Blocks

Design is a study and practice focused on the interaction between a user and the man-made environment.² Embedded in these user-environment interactions are complicated exchanges of power. As feminism is the study of power, it can be used as a lens through which researchers and practitioners can unpack the complexities of how sources of power and designed artifacts shape one another. Alison Place, editor of *Feminist Designer*, further articulates the purposes of engaging feminism within design as “first, to examine the ways in which designed artifacts and systems as well as design processes and methods either reinforce or undermine oppression at the intersection of gender, race, class, ability, and other situated identities and, second, to propose and make space for alternative ways of doing design otherwise.”³ Building off of her ideas, I define feminist design history as a research-driven practice which seeks to understand how artifacts and systems of design have been shaped by, and continue to shape systems of power, as well as the intentional study of artifacts and systems of design which do not reinforce or undermine oppression.

I am particularly interested in elevating artifacts and systems into the canon that have not played an active role in oppressing any minority groups, but rather provide context to the values of those that have been historically excluded from design history. But how does one locate such artifacts, and ensure that they are uplifting previously marginalized voices? With these questions in mind, I turn to the work of feminist art historians, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker. In the first chapter of their 1981 book, *Old Mistresses*, they argue that “to discover the history of women and art is in part...to expose its underlying values, its assumptions, its silences and its prejudices is also to understand that the way women artists are recorded and described is crucial to the definition of art and artist in our society.”⁴

To understand how women artists have been recorded and described in design history, I will look closely at *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, the most widely distributed book of graphic design history.⁵ Its first edition, published in 1983, mentions fifteen women and reproduces the work of nine; the second edition, published

² “What Is Design?” Accessed December 12, 2023. <https://www.theicod.org/en/professional-design/what-is-design/what-is-design>.

³ Place, *Feminist Designer*, 2.

⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Repr. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 3.

⁵ Martha Scotford, “Messy History vs. Neat History: Toward an Expanded View of Women in Graphic Design,” *Visible Language* 28, no. 4 (1994): 370.

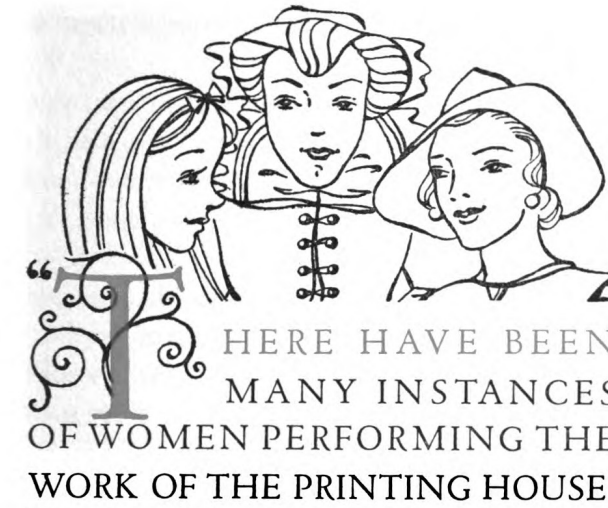
in 1991, mentions thirty-one women designers, photographers, and illustrators and reproduces the work of twenty-three. Designer and educator, Brandon Waybright, found that the sixth edition, published in 2016, included 62 women out of a total of 594 designers. However, he notes that those included often find themselves in lists with no real contextual information.⁶

These datasets from *Meggs'* tell us two things about the history of design: it is built on exclusionary practices against women and other minorities, and it focuses on the individual. These exclusionary practices can be described as cultural beliefs and barriers which forced women out of design professions, which we will discuss later, and as omissions of minority figures from recordings and historical scholarship. In the preface to the sixth edition of *Meggs'* Alston Purvis writes,

In graphic design history there have been times when collective visions emerged that cannot be ascribed to one designer. However, there have also been individual designers who clearly created new routes with innovative typographic and expressive forms and unique methods for communicating information. One objective of *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* has been to document graphic design modernization and those designers who have influenced its ongoing evolution.⁷

While Purvis acknowledges that design is tied up in cultural phenomena like the economy and technology, *Meggs'* can still very much be linked to the art historical tradition of the monograph, the “study of the life and work of an individual artist.”⁸

Feminist designers often disagree with this biography-based tradition of structuring design history. They don't see individuals as ‘agents of history’⁹ for a multitude of reasons. Focusing purely on individuals doesn't address the fact that design is inherently shaped by the conditions under which an object or system is created and experienced. A comprehensive understanding of an artifact comes from studying its formal qualities, its maker, its production, the method of its dissemination, the audience for whom it is created, their access to technology¹⁰ and, that audience's social, economic, and political identities.¹¹ In other words, feminist design history must chal-



“HERE HAVE BEEN MANY INSTANCES OF WOMEN PERFORMING THE WORK OF THE PRINTING HOUSE. The nieces of Dr. Franklin, in Newport, were expert compositors; and so were, it is said, the daughters of Mr. D. H. of Philadelphia. Mr. William McCulloch, of Philadelphia, informs me that he saw in a printing house near Philadelphia, two women at the press, who could perform their week's work with as much fidelity as most of the journeymen. As compositors, women and girls have not infrequently been employed, not only in America, but in Europe. Some printers from Scotland have assured us that the daughter of the celebrated

Figure 1 comes from “Printer Maids, Wives and Widows” written by Ruth Shepard Granniss, decorated by Hilda Schott, and designed by Helen Gentry. In this essay, Granniss self-effacingly seeks to give a bird's-eye view of women in women in printing to “help break the ground for a future, more serious, student.” For more, see “Bookmaking on the Distaff Side.”

lenge the centrality of individuals¹² by considering an object's cultural context since interaction is inherent to design.

Challenging the centrality of individuals also opens the door for us to acknowledge that design is a process of collective labor and always has been. For example, an early twentieth century book would have involved an author, editor, typesetter, illustrator, and binder at the least. There are also plenty of examples of design, omitted from histories of design, that are cited as works of collaboration. Figure 1 shows a page from *Bookmaking on the Distaff Side*, a 1937 anthology produced by about twenty professional female bookbinders, printers, typographers, illustrators, and authors documenting women's historical erasure within these production industries.¹³

Women's involvement has not only been omitted from history, but many agencies of power have actively discouraged their participation across design industries. Mary Biggs, in “Neither Printer's Wife nor Widow,” expertly details many of

6 Eye on Design. “The History Books Often Overlook Women in Design. A New One Seeks to Finally Give Them Their Due,” October 27, 2021. <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/design-historians-often-overlooked-women-in-graphic-design-new-platforms-are-giving-them-their-due/>.

7 Philip B. Meggs, Alston W. Purvis, and Philip B. Meggs, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, Sixth edition (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), VI. This preface is keenly aware of the fact that design does not occur in a vacuum, yet if you flip through the pages of the book, it is clear that it is structured upon biographies.

8 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 3. Giorgia Vasari, one of the earliest art historians, founded this tradition in the sixteenth century.

9 Cheryl Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design,” *Design Issues* 3, no. 2 (1986): 2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511480>.

10 Maryam Fanni, Matilda Flodmark, and Sara Kaaman, “Press On! Feminist Historiography of Print Culture and Collective Organizing,” in *Baseline Shift: Untold Stories of Women in Graphic Design History*, ed. Briar Levit, First edition (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), 125. The authors of this chapter, who refer to themselves as MMS, observe that technology changes can instigate gendered conflicts in the design workplace, as well as provide new professional roles in the industry available to women.

11 Briar Levit, *Baseline Shift: Untold Stories of Women in Graphic Design History*, First edition, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), 8. Levit quickly summarizes the ‘traditional approach to design history’ as one where history is written by the victors. She finds that contemporary design historians often expand on this traditional approach, which focuses on individuals and the formal elements of their work, with the aim of placing artifacts in the “context of the people who made them, the people who viewed and used them, these people's sociopolitical relationships, and their access to tools and technology.”

12 Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy,” 4. She mentions that feminist historians focus on ‘professional structures and modes of activity,’ rather than biographies.

13 Fanni, Flodmark, and Kaaman, “Press On! Feminist Historiography of Print Culture and Collective Organizing,” 125.



Figure 2 depicts a 'flower painting' where dewdrops and drooping tulips comment on the brevity of life. This form of symbolism embedded in still lifes is characteristic of the vanitas genre; there is argument to be made that the only reason it is not considered part of the vanitas tradition is because it was painted by a woman. See Peeters, *A Bouquet of Flowers*.

the claims made against the employment of women in typesetting from 1830 to 1950. One such argument, used over and over in the oppression of women, was that employment in printing takes women outside of their proper place, the home.¹⁴ She cites an 1854 communication from The Printer's Union in the *Philadelphia Daily News* in which the Printer's Union opposed the hiring of women to prevent their contact with a man's world, claiming that this integration would have "a very pernicious effect upon [their] morals."¹⁵ Whether such efforts to protect a woman's 'purity' and status as moral guardians of society was a true concern of Union organizers or a method of circumventing job competition,¹⁶ such exclusionary tactics often siloed women into work which occurred in private spaces. As feminist design historians, we must look at work which was created in both the private and public spheres if we seek to highlight historically oppressed voices.

Artmaking which traditionally happens in the private sphere is typically referred to as 'craft.' For much of humanity's existence there has been no separation between 'fine arts' and 'craft,' otherwise known as the 'decorative arts.' They began to form into separate fields in the Renaissance when art education shifted from craft-based workshops to academies. Academies were often associated with conceptual thinking, a skill attributed to men.¹⁷ Meanwhile, women were encouraged to participate in the decorative arts because it occurred in the home, their 'natural environment.' Additionally, it came to be commonly accepted that craft-based activities appealed to women's supposed inherent dexterity and attention to detail.¹⁸

Women's achievements in the arts and crafts have historically been undermined by the assumption that the genres which they are allowed to participate in "demand no genius of a mental or spiritual kind, but only the genius of taking pains and supreme craftsmanship."¹⁹ Parker and Pollock document how the gendered belief that men are able to be highly conceptual thinkers and women are privileged only in hand-eye coordination affect the status of artistic genres.²⁰ They first use the genre of 'flower painting' as a seventeenth century example of how as women's participation in the field rose, its regarded ability to convey thought-provoking content was quickly diminished. It became an activity producing pretty objects suited to women's natural strengths; unfortunately, craft was subject to the same fate.

Based on gendered participation, a cultural hierarchy wherein fine arts are above craft was established. But where does design fit? Design as we know it today did not truly exist until the twentieth century. Although Paul Greenhalgh points out that "due to the unstructured nature of the decorative arts...the constituencies of craft and design could never be separated out with clarity,"²¹ there is a clear difference in

14 An argument I find ironic given that the places of employment were often referred to as 'printing houses.'

15 Mary Biggs, "Neither Printer's Wife nor Widow: American Women in Typesetting, 1830-1950," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 50, no. 4 (1980): 433.

16 Ibid.

17 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 54.

18 Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy," 5.

19 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 54.

20 Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy," 5. She presents a unique example that illustrates how men and women are assumed to have sex-specific skills with the contrast between the description of Sonia and Robert Delaunay's work. She writes, "Sonia Delaunay, the painter and designer, is noted by historians for her 'instinctive' feeling for color, whereas her husband, Robert, is attributed as having formulated a color theory."

21 Paul Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft," in *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997), 40. This chapter goes into great detail on the history of the term craft and its plural meanings.

how artifacts are valued versus how those of craft are valued.

This hierarchy is reflected in our capitalistic marketplace. Exchange value and use value, Marxist terms, are clearly adapted by Cheryl Buckley to differentiate how value is assigned to objects made in the public versus private sphere. Items which are created in the public or professional sphere, often associated with white men, are generally assigned exchange value while items created in the private or domestic sphere, often associated with women and other minority groups, are assigned use value. Exchange value is the uniform, monetary value of an item within the marketplace. Use value is infinitely varied, and relates to the practical applications of an item, or what you can do with it.²² For example, Paul Rand created a straightforward logo for NeXT, computer technology for education, for which Steve Jobs paid him \$100,000 in 1986, about \$278,000 in 2023.²³ Meanwhile, a twentieth woman carefully collects fabric and sews clothes for her children to support their ability to attend school and receives no credit or compensation. The handmade garments have multiple use values: they keep her children clothed, contribute to their social status, and allow them the ability to operate in society. Yet, her name will never be recorded, she receives no compensation, and her labor has no exchange value.²⁴ Therefore, in order to locate artifacts and systems of design created by subjugated people, we must “cut across these exclusive definitions of design and craft.”²⁵ Buckley writes that “to exclude craft from design history is, in effect, to exclude from design history much of what women designed.”²⁶

However, since craft objects haven’t been valued in the same way as ‘fine art’ or works of ‘professional design,’ they have not received the same level of preservation and attention. The artifact itself may no longer exist or may have been collected in an archive after decades of wear. Even if the craft object does exist, it may be unaccompanied by archival history or scholarly research. The contextual information needed to conduct an analysis of the object may only exist in informal recordings, like journals, oral histories, or folk histories. Thus, it is crucial that feminist design historians locate sources of alternative information and draw from a broad pool of resources.²⁷

If researchers focus their study on objects or systems which challenge the centrality of individuals, address works made both in and outside of the public sphere, cut across definitions of craft and design, and draw from a broad pool of resources, they will contribute effectively to feminist design history. They will likely form research which does not contribute to or undermine oppression and in fact, counteracts the rich history of artifacts that do. But how should such research be conducted?

22 David Harvey, “Contradiction 1: Use Value and Exchange Value,” in *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15–24, <https://search-eb-scohost-com.libproxy.wustl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=752620&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. A great article to further understand the complexities of these terms from an economic geographer’s perspective.

23 Laura Stampler, “Here’s How Much Money The World’s Biggest Brands Spent Designing Their Logos,” *Business Insider*, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-much-money-the-worlds-biggest-brands-spent-designing-their-logos-2012-8>.

24 Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy,” 5.

25 *Ibid.*, 7.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy,” 4. She writes that feminist historians “have located alternative information, such as oral sources, to counterbalance the great weight of ‘official’ documentation.”

Evaluating an Artifact's Potential

When a design object or system peaks interest, consult the list of questions below to help evaluate its potential for prompting research which challenges design history norms and promotes feminist design values.

CHALLENGE THE CENTRALITY OF INDIVIDUALS

Were their multiple designers involved in its creation?

Would you be as interested in this artifact if the maker was unknown?

Does the artifact draw from or reflect a larger cultural practice?

CUT ACROSS DEFINITIONS OF CRAFT AND DESIGN

Was this item one-of-a-kind or was it mass produced?

Did its production include methods typically characteristic of craft objects like embroidery, woodworking, papermaking, etc.?

Was its maker subject to exclusionary practices within the field of design?

VALUE OBJECTS MADE IN AND OUTSIDE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Was the artifact made in the private sphere?

Did the object never enter into the marketplace?

Was the artifact considered to exclusively use value?

DRAW FROM A BROAD POOL OF RESOURCES

Is there a lack of research on this object?

Was its initial documentation or preservation designed for use by a field other than design?

Has its maker(s) and/or their identity group been previously overlooked by groups or individuals of power?

Contextual Interrogation

After you have conducted close looking through Prownian analysis and before you begin writing an interpretive analysis, refer to questions below to prompt meaningful contextual research.

Who was the intended audience of this work? Does that differ from the actual audience?

How was the artifact produced and disseminated? Were multiple people and/or groups involved in these processes?

Does it reflect pressing concerns or values of its era?

What, if any, craft practices does it draw upon?

How did the maker learn the skills involved in its production? Does this imply privilege of some kind and/or were there limitations placed on its maker?

Does it reflect regional traditions or values? If so, how?

What was the artifact's intended use? Was it used exclusively in that way?

How does the environment in which it was made affect the the production of the artifact or the artifact itself?

What are the afterlives of this artifact? In other words, has it been reproduced or reinterpreted?

What archive or organization presents or holds information on this artifact? What are their priorities?

What other items does this archive place alongside the artifact?

Why may have this object been previously omitted in design history research?

The formal merits of this quilt may have very well been lost on us had we not followed an artifact-forward analysis, or if we had interacted with the archive as initially intended.

A Quilt-Forward Approach

I believe that an artifact-forward approach is especially well-suited for studying objects in a manner that meets the four proposed criteria. Using the object itself as evidence should prove useful as an approach to peripheral objects with limited secondary source material. If we start with looking at the object before reading contextual information, it encourages us to approach the investigation with as little as bias as possible thereby allowing us to separate an object's material quality from its maker's socioeconomic status. Lastly, by prioritizing the artifact itself we are working in line with feminist design's goal of challenging the belief that individuals are the agents of history, by regarding the artifact, the process of its creation, and its cultural coding above the biography of its maker. Therefore, it is crucial that feminist design historians locate sources of alternative information and draw from a broad pool of resources.²⁸

I will be testing the efficacy of an artifact-forward research approach by conducting a case study following the steps of Prownian analysis, as narrated by Kenneth Haltman.²⁹ Prownian analysis was developed by cultural art historian, Jules David Prown, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Prown sees artifacts, or made objects, as "historical events" which persist to the present, and which we can experience first-hand.³⁰ In this respect, they serve as vessels of communication which speak on a conscious and subconscious level. They showcase the factors of their own production and reflect unconscious attitudes and beliefs of the environment in which they were made through its style.³¹ His method thus prioritizes the artifact, encouraging close looking and a reliance on the object as a primary source. He describes the process as "[beginning] with an extended descriptive and deductive object analysis to prevent the premature, mind-closing imposition of contemporary biases. It then proceeds to the framing of questions or hypotheses, followed by the application of the perspectives and insights of our time and place...to arrive at new understandings."³²

²⁸ Ibid., 27.

²⁹ Jules David Prown, and Kenneth Haltman, eds. *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000). Please refer to this article should you desire a deeper explanation and guided narration of Prownian analysis.

³⁰ Jules David Prown, "In Pursuit of Culture: The Formal Language of Objects," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (1995): 2. In this essay, Prown provides a succinct summary of what his work is, and the driving reasons behind it.

³¹ Prown, "In Pursuit of Culture," 3.

³² Ibid.

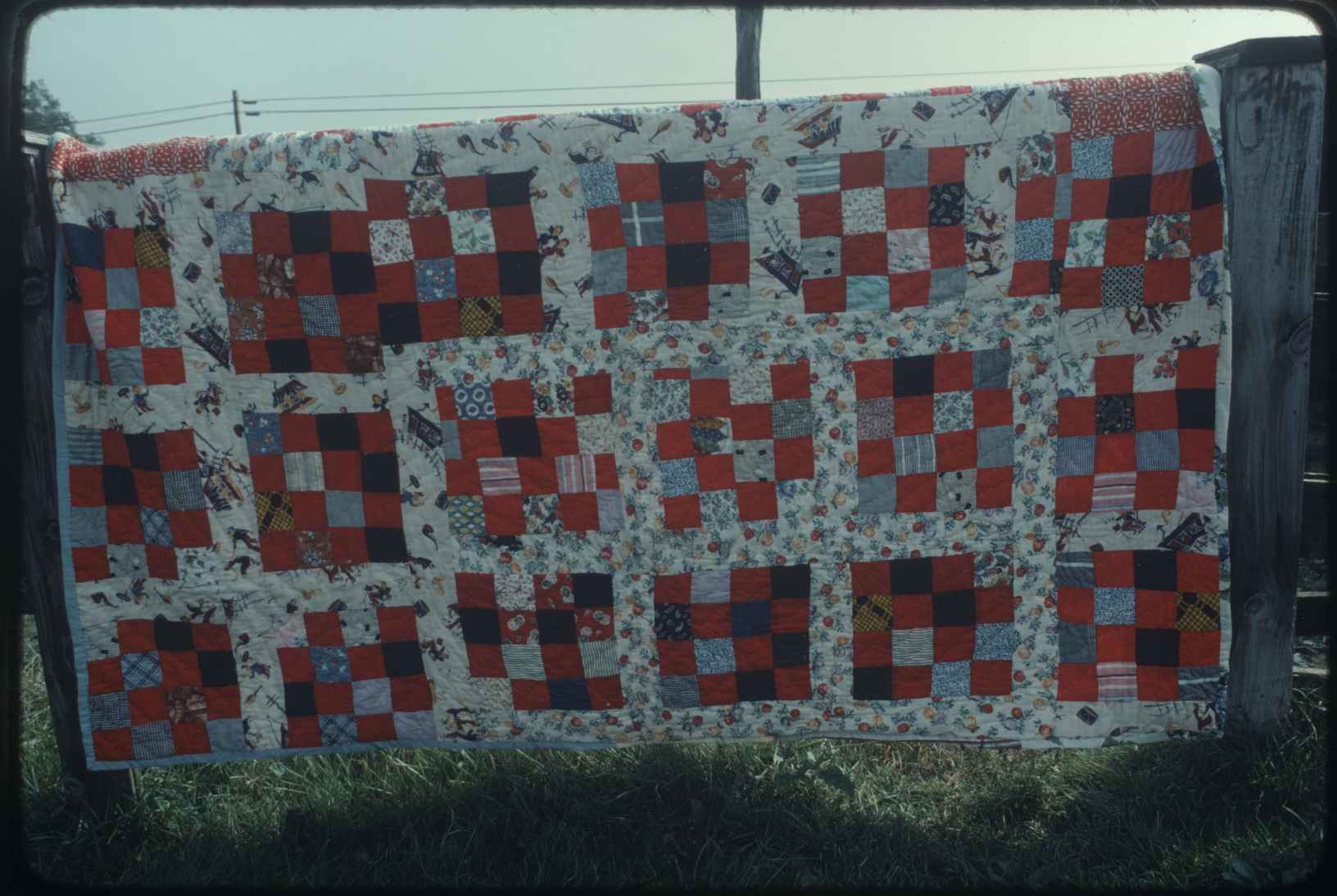


Figure 4 is a color photograph that presents a quilt, loosely following a '6-patch block pattern, draped over wooden fence rails. Power lines recede in the background and lush grass threatens to graze the bottom of the quilt. See Choate, *Block Quilt*.

The first step of this investigative process is of course, to select an artifact to study. In hoping to contribute to feminist design history, I choose an object which fulfills all four of our criteria. I allow myself to narrow down my choices by catering to my personal interests. I know that I am looking for a craft object or collection of craft objects from the Appalachian region and was made in the 20th century. I comb through archives and flip through books, until I find Library of Congress' digital collection, "Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978 to 1996."³³ I filter the archive by images and find myself most attracted to a block quilt made by Donna Choate. The quilt feels somewhat improvisational, yet rich with interesting design choices. I think this tension may set me up for a compelling analysis, so I collect all images associated with this artifact.

The quilt calls attention to itself through a bold contrast of red and blue, as it alternates eight red patches with eight patterned and or/blue patches in each block. In the shown portion of the quilt, there are three rows and six columns of blocks. Across each of the three rows, the blocks wiggle across a central, horizontal axis. Each block is surrounded by others, but seldom lines up with its neighbors on the horizontal or vertical axis. Some blocks run into their neighbor, and some are cut in half. In Figure

³³ The full digital archive can be perused here: "Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978 to 1996," Library of Congress, Accessed March 5, 2024, <https://rb.gy/kpc3dp>. It is important to note that highlights from a more contemporary collection, *Lands' End All-American Quilt Collection*, are also included in this archive; although, we will not be studying it within this essay.

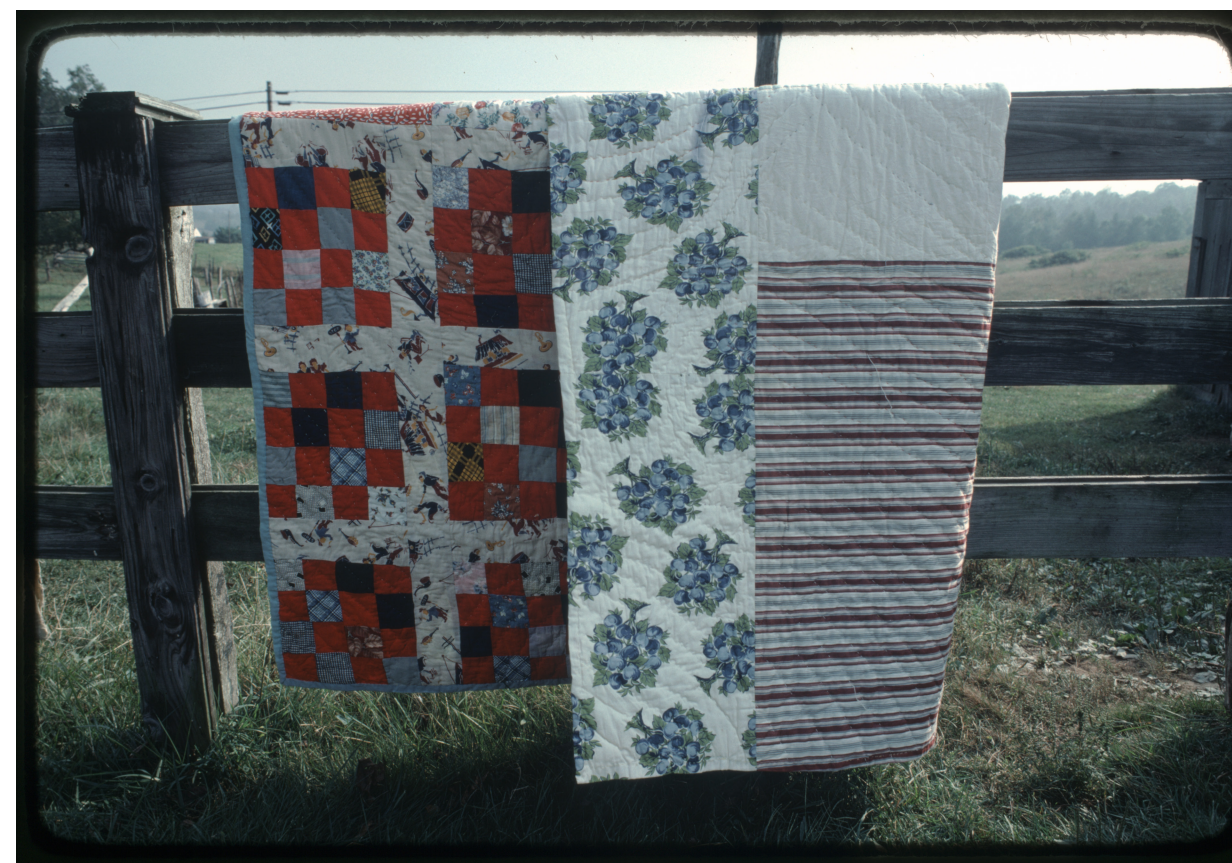


Figure 5 is an alternate view of the same quilt shown to the left. The quilt is photographed folded over itself, showing equal parts of the front and back of the quilt, and revealing more of the fence rail on which it is draped. See Choate, *Reverse of Block Quilt (16-patch)*.

6, we are given a closer look at two individual blocks. In this section alone, it looks like over 20 different fabrics are used. Some, like the red, are used in bulk while others appear sparingly.

A white patterned fabric, the width of about one column of patches, divides most blocks. In the photos above, we can observe two of these white sashing fabrics, one with figures and instruments and one with a tight botanical pattern. The botanical pattern is clumped in the mid-right bottom section of the quilt, surrounded by the figural pattern. Each of these sashing strips also contains blue, red, and yellow fabrics as accents. Half of the quilt has a light blue trim and half has a patterned white and blue trim. A close inspection of Figure 5, which shows half of the quilt folded horizontally over itself, reveals that the trim is in fact a continuation of the backing. In the section of backing visible in Figure 5, there are 3 different fabrics pieced together. One is a white and blue floral pattern, one is plain white, and one has blue and red stripes against a white background.

Upon inspection of Figure 6, the selection of fabrics appears to be somewhat random. There is a yellow plaid that looks like it would be used for apparel, and a vegetable pattern that one would see in kitchen curtains. The array of fabrics chosen, in combination with the varied positioning of them, leads me to believe that the maker was using scraps or leftover materials from other projects. Maybe this means that the maker was of low income, or maybe they were just thrifty. They were most likely not going to the store and buying new fabrics for this quilt.



Figure 6 is a detail shot of the quilt, centered on two of the blocks seen in *Block Quilt* image. We can see two blocks run into each other at the top of the image. Two different sashing fabrics meet in the middle of the photo. See Choate, *Block Quilt, Detail*.

Regardless, they employed their scraps very strategically. The fabrics they had bigger pieces of were used as a sashing fabric or backing fabric, allowing the checkered boxes to hold the most visual weight. They also had a wealth of solid red fabric, which sewed into half of all the blocks. This red helps the blocks hold prominence, outlining their shape and unifying them as a visual language across the quilt. The block quilt loosely follows a 16-patch pattern. The blocks aren't aligned and bump into each other across the surface. This could lead us to believe that the quilt was sewn somewhat improvisationally, without a physical pattern or directions, and/or that the quilter themselves was not very concerned with symmetry.

In Figure 5, we can see a couple pulls of white thread hanging off the back of the quilt. Similarly, In Figure 6, a large black stain appears on the white vegetable patterned fabric. These details could indicate that the quilt had been in use and wasn't hung on the wall as an item of pure decoration. Maybe this is why the quilter wasn't too concerned about having utmost symmetry in the design, or maybe they were rushing to complete it before winter.

It is worth discussing the documentation of the quilt since I am studying photographs rather than a physical quilt. It is interesting how the quilt is shown in both *Block Quilt* and *Reverse of Block Quilt(16-patch)* hung over a distressed, wooden fence rail. The fence and the grassy, tree-filled background indicate that the photo was taken in a rural area. Perhaps the photographer chose this placement to directly

associate this quilt with a country landscape and lifestyle. The setting also indicates that the quilt was coming from a domestic space; it clearly wasn't part of a gallery or institutional archive.

The recycling of fabrics, careful composition of such fabrics, and unique pattern of the quilt indicate a great level of thoughtfulness by the maker. Buying new fabrics to use in a store-bought pattern seems easy in comparison to the mental labor of making an attractive piece out of whatever you may already have. The design seems to take a higher level of creativity and planning, which makes me feel extremely cared for as the vicarious receiver of this quilt. It's comparable to getting a homemade gift vs a store-bought one. However, this is just a hypothesis—I must gather more contextual information in order to fully make the claims that the constraints on this maker encouraged her to make a quilt of such compelling formal design elements.

In the digital archive, *Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978 to 1996* there are audio recordings and photographs from 1978, which contextualize the work and life of the block quilt's maker, Donna Choate. When asked by the interviewer, Geraldine Niva Johnson, to introduce herself, Donna says "Well, I was born near Baywood Virginia, in 1909. My parents were James and Lucindy Greer. And my grandmother was a slave. Yes, my grandmother was a slave. My mother was raised, white people raised her, from a child up to her marriage. She was raised in North Carolina."³⁴ She goes on to explain that her public education ended when she was 13, in seventh grade, as high school education was not available to black residents of Sparta, North Carolina at the time. In later years, she was employed doing 'housework'³⁵ and was taught how to quilt by her mother.

Donna quilted in her living room, where the interview took place, describing how she draped her quilts across four chairs— "and that door would be closed. And maybe move a piece of furniture in front of the door and if anybody came they'd have to come into the kitchen."³⁶ She describes using mostly cotton scraps, that she collected from making clothes for her daughter and granddaughters to build her quilts.³⁷ She also used dyed feed sacks for quilt linings before she stopped quilting in her 60's due to an arm injury and the mere fact that she didn't have a utility for more quilts. Between housing updates like storm windows and carpeted floors which helped to insulate her home, she "just kept enough quilts, if somebody, if I have company, I can take care of the beds. But these big stacks of quilts up to the ceiling, I don't do it."³⁸

The oral histories included in this archive confirm that Donna had limited social, financial, and material resources, but also that she was extremely thoughtful about her design choices. She always used white thread because she "always watched [her] colors pretty well," meaning that she didn't want her thread color to compete or distract from [the] color palette formed from the fabrics.³⁹ When asked what she

34 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *My Grandmother Was a Slave*. (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000036/>.

35 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *My Mother Learned from White People*. (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000040/>. In this interview, Donna implies that her mother had learned to quilt from "these [white] people she worked for."

36 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *I Did All My Quilting Right Here in This Living Room*. (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000053/>.

37 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *You've Got a Quilt without All That Piecing*. (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000051/>.

38 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *I Just Keep Enough Quilts to Take Care of the Beds*. (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000045/>.

39 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *About All My Quilts Was Quilted with White Thread*. (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000052/>.

thinks makes a quilt pretty, Donna responds,

Well, I would think the design, would be the main thing about a quilt. Because if you just piece up a strip, just uh, in any form or matter and it doesn't harmonize, it's not going to be very pretty. I'd rather, I'd rather piece my pieces, make squares and put 'em together. Now a lot of people'll have strip, a strip of this cotton, a strip of they go to the store and buy remnants, you know. And make quilts. And they have all kind of colors. But mother taught us to use designs.⁴⁰

It would seem that my initial hypothesis that this compelling quilt was born out of strict limitations is correct. Donna had to take great care in thinking through the best way to utilize each and every scrap in order to create the best design possible. Not having a strict pattern to follow also encouraged a unique composition, which further accommodated the use of leftover fabrics. These limitations placed a greater challenge on the designer, urging them to think independently of any existing material or genre 'rules.'

The formal merits of this quilt may have very well been lost on us had we not followed an artifact-forward analysis, or if we had interacted with the archive as initially intended. The structure of Prownian analysis worked pretty much as desired; it allowed us to approach this quilt without preconceived judgements based on the conditions of its making or the background of its maker. Close looking and attention to detail also allowed us to make varied deductions and formulate potential research questions. It encouraged questions like how was this made? Under what conditions was it made? How did people interact with it? What might these object-person relationships indicate about the values and beliefs of its maker and their surrounding cultural environment? Therefore, I find Prownian analysis to be a useful tool for conducting research on artifacts previously overlooked that do not participate in the subjugation of minority groups. It is still crucial that other forms of research are conducted outside of the object's formal analysis in order to develop multi-faceted arguments less limited in scope than my presented case study.

This artifact-forward approach also supported the research of an artifact not documented by design professionals or within the context of a design archive. The digital collection from which it comes, *Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978 to 1996* is a marriage of material samples from two different projects, *Blue Ridge Quiltmaking in the Late Twentieth Century* and *The Lands' End All-American Quilt Contest*. The block quilt discussed came from the *Blue Ridge Quiltmaking* portion of the collection, which is comprised of representative objects digitized from the Blue Ridge Parkway Folklife project.

This field study was conducted in 1978 by the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center and the National Park Service.⁴¹ Twenty-one folklorists, photographers, Park Service employees, and interns involved with the project worked to "identify and document practitioners of traditional customs in the communities of North Carolina and Virginia along a section of the Blue Ridge Parkway." These researchers were looking to document 'authentic mountain culture,' collecting data from a primarily elderly audience that had been in the area since the 1940s or earlier.⁴² The digitized objects from this project are all linked to one of six individuals, said to represent a cross-section of the quiltmakers studied in the fieldwork.⁴³ Each quiltmaker featured is a woman born between 1900-1920

40 Donna Choate and Geraldine Johnson, *What Makes a Quilt Pretty?* (Sparta, North Carolina, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/qlt000055/>.

41 "Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978-1996: About this Collection," Library of Congress, Accessed March 3, 2024, <https://rb.gy/uk0mrp>.

42 Laurel Horton, "Blue Ridge Quiltmaking in the Late Twentieth Century," Library of Congress, July 1999, <https://rb.gy/6adebx>.

43 Library of Congress, "Quilts and Quiltmaking in America, 1978-1996: About this Collection."



Figure 8 depicts the small-family home Sabe built in the 1930s, which he and Donna lived in at the time these photographs were taken in 1978. See Geraldine Niva Johnson, *The Choate Home*.

and who has lived her whole life in communities in North Carolina and/or Virginia along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Geraldine Niva Johnson, the researcher involved with the quilting portion of the project, writes about the urgency of capturing regional quilting traditions amongst the oncoming wave of revival in her essay "'Plain and Fancy': The Socioeconomics of Blue Ridge Quilts."⁴⁴

With this knowledge on the goals of the archive which contains *Block Quilt*, the bias of the project can be immediately seen throughout the objects presented. It is now clear why Geraldine Niva Johnson, field researcher, prioritized the inclusion of the rural landscape in her photographs rather than the entirety of the quilt itself. While this present bias is in some ways limiting, as we are unable to study the quilt design in full, it also provides contextual information that may have not been included in a more sterile, object and monograph focused design archive. *Quilts and Quiltmaking in America's* sociological framing includes photographs and rich oral histories which detail the conditions under which the quilts were made, how they were used, and the personal histories of those that interacted with them. Through subsidizing this contextual information from alternative archives with the close-looking and independent thinking inherent to Prownian analysis, feminist design researchers can shed new light on dimmed histories.

44 Geraldine N. Johnson, "'Plain and Fancy': The Socioeconomics of Blue Ridge Quilts," *Appalachian Journal* 10, no. 1 (1982): 13.



Figure 7 shows Donna Choate, and her husband Sabe, on their property in Alleghany County, North Carolina which Sabe purchased from his grandfather who was a farmer and blacksmith. See Geraldine Niva Johnson, *Sabe and Donna Choate Standing in Front of Quilt Draped on Fence*.

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Right A detail shot of a worn star quilt made by Donna Choate. See Choate, *Star Quilt, Detail*.

