Framing quilts/framing culture: women’s work and the politics of display

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Abstract
Quilts are a unique medium that is deeply layered with meaning, highly gendered, intimately tied to social and cultural communities, and richly interdisciplinary. Though quilts are utilitarian in origin, their circulation and display take them far beyond the home-to art galleries, history museums, state fairs, quilt shows, and philanthropic auctions. As they move, individuals and institutions make significant intellectual and emotional investments in how quilts are classified, judged, and valued. In this highly politicized work, individuals and institutions shape public culture through debates about quilts' utility, workmanship, and aesthetics; they create and display quilts to further their cultural heritage, manifest their faith, delineate aesthetic values, reinforce disciplinary boundaries, and elevate their artistic status.

This project uses four representative case studies to demonstrate the cultural work that women and institutions conduct using quilts and to explore what is at stake in that work. Through research into the Iowa State Fair quilt competition and the Michiana Mennonite Relief Sale Quilt Auction, I reveal how women employ their quilts and quilt displays to promulgate their values and shape their communities. In case studies of larger institutions—the Smithsonian Institution and the American Quilter's Society—I investigate how quilts intersect with other artistic and historic objects in their creation, interpretation, and display. Each chapter includes historical research, observations from site visits, and evidence from qualitative interviews—research that provides a historical view of each institution and an analysis of how they currently categorize, judge, and display quilts. Together, these case studies reveal that individual efforts at quilt display intersect in broader public culture, where conversations about how to value and interpret quilts are also essential conversations about aesthetics, community values, disciplinarity, and the value of women's work.

Keywords
Iowa, Mennonite, Museums, Quilts, Smithsonian, Women

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Bibliography
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In essence, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning. The most common use of frames is in terms of the frame the news or media place on the information they convey. They are thought to influence the perception of the news by the audience, in this way it could be construed as a form of second level agenda-setting – they not only tell the audience what to think about (agenda-setting theory), but also in the social sciences, framing comprises a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives on how individuals, groups, and societies, organize, perceive, and communicate about reality. Participation in a language community necessarily influences an individual's perception of the meanings attributed to words or phrases. Politically, the