

Unexpected Intersections: Amish and Hmong Textiles and the Question of Authenticity

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I

Before 1971 no one bothered pairing the adjective “Amish” with the noun “quilt.” Few people outside Amish settlements knew there was anything distinct about the types of patchwork bedcovers Amish families kept folded in their cedar chests or displayed on guest beds. The Amish themselves just called them “quilts” or used the Pennsylvania German word *Debbich*. But in 1997, when noted art critic Robert Hughes wrote his sweeping survey of American art history, he called Amish quilts “America’s first major abstract art,” and pictured an early 20th-century quilt attributed to Rebecca Fisher Stoltzfus from Groffdale in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.¹ (Figure 1) In a mere quarter-century, these objects had shifted in status from obscurity within a relatively closed religious community to artworks considered by a prestigious critic as precursors to great modern American abstract paintings.

Today, Amish quilts regularly appear in arenas quite distinct from one another. They hang on the walls of art museums, where curators and viewers alike treat them as works of art of the highest caliber. (Figure 2) By contrast, they also regularly appear in small country stores located in Amish settlements. Here one can find quilts stacked horizontally on beds, hanging vertically over bars like newspapers at a public library, and hung on walls like paintings. One can sift through piles of pillows, quillows (a combination of quilt and pillow), potholders, placemats, tote bags, and wall hangings, purported to be pieced and quilted by Amish women. (Figure 3) Few of these objects, also collectively called “Amish quilts,” bear much resemblance to those that hang in museums. Yet these quilts and quilted objects—marketed to tourists visiting Amish country—are also typically made by unnamed

¹ Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 43-44.

Amish makers (as well as by unnamed women of other religious and ethnic backgrounds). Does a contemporary quilt sold at Country Lane Quilts have anything in common with the work of art hanging at a museum, other than an attribution to makers of the same Anabaptist faith?

As I explored this question and many others, my research stretched from the period during which Amish women first began making quilts in the late 19th century, when they adapted commercially available patterns and innovated their own quilting styles to fit individual community standards. I placed the Amish and their quilts within a context of consumer culture, a context in which they are no strangers today, thanks to forces including tourism and reality television. However, the quilts were also products of consumer culture, made from factory-produced cloth often from commercially published patterns.

In the late 1960s, artists and art enthusiasts living in urban areas including New York City and San Francisco “discovered” Amish quilts. Before long, the Amish began catering to outsiders, making quilts in home-based cottage industries to sell to tourists visiting Amish country. The term “Amish” functioned like a brand name, adding value to quilts by signifying quality and authenticity, but unlike a trademark, whose owner can legally prevent unauthorized use of the name, “Amish” was free for anyone to use, no matter what product they sold. When it came to selling quilts, “Amish” turned into an adjective that at times had nothing to do with who made the product. As I discuss in the second half of this article, with immigrant needleworkers from the minority Hmong community of southeast Asia eventually finding work in the Amish quilt industry, Amish quilts became part of a cross-cultural transnational process that flooded the market, and resulted in consumer mistrust of the “Amish brand” and lack of recognition for the extraordinary needlework traditions of Hmong women.

If you ask an Amish woman when the Amish began quilting, she likely will tell you that they have always quilted. Today, quilts are among the objects most specifically associated with the Old Order Amish, but Amish quilting is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. For decades after many of their neighbors began making quilts, the Amish continued instead to use bedding common to their Germanic heritage—chaff bag (a homespun linen bag filled with straw chaff or cornhusks), featherbed, and

a woven coverlet.² However, by some point in the mid- to late 19th century, Amish women in settlements in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois had begun to make quilts.

Why did the Amish begin making quilts? We just don't know. Ever since Amish quilts became widely known outside of their communities of origin, people have been speculating about what may have inspired these quilts. Unfortunately, many of the details are probably lost to history. Since outsiders began paying attention to Amish quilts in the late 1960s, authors have written at length about Amish women borrowing the quiltmaking practices of "English" neighbors, about the design sources for patterns, and about the linear evolution of Amish quilts from simple to complex.³ Regardless of from whom Amish women learned the craft, it likely was an innovator within the community who first adopted the practice.

Quiltmaking probably started in earnest after Amish settlers founded new communities in western outposts, rather than originating in eastern Pennsylvania and transplanting with quiltmakers to new communities. The craft requires an excess of fabric as well as time to laboriously piece and quilt, resources abundant only after settlements on the frontier were firmly established. Amish had already founded settlements in central and western Pennsylvania by the last quarter of the 18th century. Some Amish from these newer settlements moved further west to Ohio in 1808; others came to Indiana in 1841, with additional settlements soon to follow.⁴ Many of these Amish pioneers settled in close proximity to other Germanic groups, especially Mennonites. Intermingling occurred at church, at school, and in commerce. Perhaps quiltmaking spread through a social network of German-speaking friends and relatives, or, as some scholars have theorized,

² Alan G. Keyser, "Beds, Bedding, Bedsteads and Sleep," *Der Reggeboege* 12, no. 4 (October 1978): 12-18.

³ Robert Bishop and Elizabeth Safanda, *A Gallery of Amish Quilts: Design Diversity from a Plain People* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 22; Rachel Pellman and Kenneth Pellman, *The World of Amish Quilts* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1984), 10, 26; Patricia T. Herr, "Quilts within the Amish Culture," in *A Quiet Spirit: Amish Quilts from the Collection of Cindy Tietze & Stuart Hodosh* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1996), 48.

⁴ David Luthy, *Amish Settlements Across America* (Aylmer, ON; LaGrange, IN: Pathway Publishers, 2009), 9-10, 16-18.

from Welsh, Quaker, or other “English” neighbors.⁵

By exploring how Amish communities have experienced gradual change and adaptation in other daily life practices, we can hypothesize how women adopted a new cultural practice of making quilts. Typically, individuals have been the instigators of change, pushing the community from its edges to adopt objects and practices outside its range of conformity: for example, decorative molding in a bedroom, snaps rather than hooks and eyes to fasten clothing, electric lights on horse-drawn buggies, or quilts instead of woven coverlets. These new “fashions,” however, have typically already been out of date or irrelevant to mainstream society, so they have not affected the cultural fences separating the Amish from the world. Thus, they posed no direct threat to the stability of the community.⁶ As one Amish bishop has explained, “Well, change just kind of happens.”⁷ It happens when someone on the periphery of Amish culture adopts a new practice and the practice meets little complaint; if others also adopt it, it soon becomes acceptable, perhaps even the default. Likely, an innovator within the community learned to quilt in the mid- to late 19th century, borrowing patterns and techniques either from friends or neighbors of non-Amish sectarian groups such as Mennonites or Church of the Brethren, or perhaps, as already noted, from Quakers or from the Scots, Irish, or Welsh. As other friends and relatives adopted the practice, quilting soon became common.

Yet, no one outside the Amish community really paid attention to

⁵ Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 39-40; Paton Yoder, *Tradition and Transition: Amish Mennonites and Old Order Amish, 1800-1900* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 264. Ricky Clark discusses the similarities among quilts made by various Germanic groups in Ohio, suggesting a related Germanic aesthetic among Amish, Zoarites, Moravians, Brethren, and Swiss Mennonites. See Ricky Clark, “Germanic Aesthetics, Germanic Communities,” in *Quilts in Community: Ohio’s Traditions* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 33.

⁶ For more on how change and fashion function within Amish culture, see Abbie Gertrude Enders Huntington, “Dove at the Window: A Study of an Old Order Amish Community in Ohio” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1956), 218; and Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 69-70, 293-318. On quilting as an expression of “nonconformity to the world and its fashions,” see Patricia J. Keller, “The Quilts of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania: Production, Context, and Meaning, 1750-1884” (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 2007).

⁷ Amish bishop quoted in Kraybill, *Riddle of Amish Culture*, 297.

these quilts until the late 1960s. At that time, to young art enthusiasts Amish quilts were a “discovery”—a new, authentic art form that fit into the visual culture of modern art in which they were already well versed. The quilts’ resemblance to paintings by artists like Mark Rothko and Josef Albers, along with their convenient apartment-wall size and relatively low price, made them appealing to urbanites eager to hang a work of abstract art on the wall. When Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, a couple who assembled one of the foremost collections of Amish quilts during the 1970s, bought their first example in 1968, they were not alone in appreciating the aesthetic merits of old bedcovers. Beginning in the 1960s and increasingly in the ’70s, artists, art critics, antiques dealers, exhibition curators, feminists, and other cultural entrepreneurs reinterpreted quilts as art objects. This new perception was part of a larger cultural conversation about tradition, craft making, and aesthetics occurring among urban and rural people both inside and outside academic and art world circles.

Part of the attraction to quilts in general during the 1970s was purely an aesthetic coincidence. In the lively patchwork of a Tumbling Blocks quilt, people saw “op art” as the sixty-degree diamonds played with their eyes in a dizzying way. Repeated baskets formed from bits of red fabric running across the surface of a quilt top reminded them of Andy Warhol’s penchant for sequence and repetition. They compared Kenneth Noland’s manipulation of color—his late ’60s work often featured parallel stripes running horizontally along the width of a landscape-shaped canvas—to the visual effects achieved by repeated stripes on a Pennsylvania Rainbow quilt.⁸ These quilts—created in two dimensions on a similar scale to the large works generated by New York’s abstract artists—were typically crafted fifty to one hundred years earlier than their painted counterparts.

⁸ Susan Colgan, “Collecting Quilts: Where It All Began,” *Art and Antiques*, October 1983, 51; Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1991), 15, 17-18, 20; Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 113; Jonathan Holstein, interview by Janneken Smucker, Cazenovia, NY, November 9, 2007, Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7d513tx808>.

In 1968, during a trip through Pennsylvania's Lancaster County on Route 30, when Holstein and van der Hoof escaped from New York to the countryside, they stopped at a small antiques shop. They had begun buying old quilts because they loved their strong graphics, and the quilts looked great hanging on the walls of their New York apartment. In this shop, they spotted what they considered an unusual quilt covering the springs of a brass bed. The proprietor wanted to sell the quilt and bed as a lot, asking \$11 for the two pieces. "I said to the guy, 'You know, I really just want to buy the quilt,'" recounted Holstein. After considering for a moment, the proprietor agreed, charging the couple \$5.75 for the quilt (Figure 4). They brought it home to their apartment, and, as Holstein remembers:

We looked at the quilt in New York, at first thinking it was some extraordinary work of genius. And then, after looking at it for a week realizing that it was too precise, the materials were too consistent, the quilting was too consistent for it to be a singular example from any culture we knew anything about. . . . We carried around [the quilt] or pictures of it for a long time until someone finally said, "That's an Amish quilt." So then we thought, "How are we going to get more of these?" . . . We asked them, "Are they all like this?" "Yeah, they're like this." So I thought, "Oh my god, how are we going to find more?" So we began looking around for Amish quilts. Slowly we began to find them.⁹

Among the many quilts stitched from abundantly available printed cotton fabrics in repeated geometric block patterns that Holstein and van der Hoof would have seen, this one would certainly have stood out. Its wide borders were a lush rust-orange wool suiting fabric framing a field of alternating green and orange strips of wool fabric—which Holstein dubbed "bars" and the Amish called *Strema*, the Pennsylvania German term for "strips." Framing these strips was a narrow violet border that separated the design field from the outer border with an electric vibrancy. The binding holding the three layers of the quilt together echoed the green from the design field, sealing in what Holstein considered the quilt's perfect

⁹ Holstein, interview.

proportions: the balance between the outer border and the inner field. In the wide rust outer border, intricate stitches formed swirling feathers. This curving ornament contrasted with both the rigid geometry of the strips and the fine cross-hatched quilting stitches that covered the alternating green and orange wools. These colors, combined with the simple lines of the quilt's design, would indeed have seemed extraordinarily out of place compared to the busy prints found on most non-Amish quilts the couple encountered on their collecting jaunts. To them, this quilt was a "first clue" that led them to pursue these bed covers as art objects.¹⁰

Holstein and van der Hoof began to talk about quilts to anyone who would listen, including their artist friends in New York City, proselytizing about the aesthetic merits of old bedcoverings in an effort to convince the art world that the quilts' resemblance to paintings was not just an interesting coincidence, and that quilts were worth exploring as visual objects in their own right. In 1971, the duo used their art world connections to convince the Whitney Museum of American Art to host *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, an exhibit featuring sixty of their quilts displayed on the large white walls of the newly opened Marcel Breuer-designed space. Hanging on the Whitney's walls was that same bars quilt they bought for under \$6 in Lancaster County. The exhibit was hugely popular, praised by prominent art critics, and attended by thousands, with the museum selling out its catalog and extending the exhibit's run.¹¹

Soon, Amish quilts became highly-sought-out "cult objects" enamored equally by stylish urbanites and rural collectors. Why were outsiders so enchanted? In some ways, the quilts with their strong graphics and bold colors simply substituted for other works of abstract art. One Philadelphia dealer specializing in Amish quilts recalled that everyone upon seeing these objects "would think they'd discovered [them]: 'Oh my god, look at these! They look just like modern art!'"¹² But beyond the visual qualities, the quilts

¹⁰ Ibid. See International Quilt Study Center & Museum [University of Nebraska-Lincoln], Jonathan Holstein Collection, 2004.003.0013: www.quiltstudy.org/collections.

¹¹ Holstein, *Pieced Quilt*, 27-31; Jonathan Holstein, "The Whitney and After...What's Happened to Quilts," *The Clarion* 11 (Spring/Summer 1986): 82.

¹² Amy Finkel, interview by Janneken Smucker, Philadelphia, PA, May 15, 2008: Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt71zc7rqw4b>;

embodied a paradox of looking very modern while symbolically serving as a tangible reminder of tradition, authenticity, and rural values. Only within the context of self-conscious modernism could collectors and curators celebrate this paradox.

In addition to collectors and museums, interior design magazines promoted how to use Amish quilts to capitalize on the paradox combining modernism and tradition. *House & Garden* featured dealer Phyllis Haders's white-walled, upscale New York City apartment covered in Amish quilts (Figure 5). The magazine copy stated that "The vivid colors of Amish quilts—often the only decorating to be found in Amish homes—are all the color this modern, light-filled room needs. Hung like contemporary paintings in Mr. and Mrs. Richard Haders's city apartment, they enliven a setting designed by Melvin Dwork to show off their dazzling geometrics."¹³

Why were Amish individuals willing to sell their old quilts? Part of it was a cultural clash in values, and part of it was a change in taste and preference. First, the clash in values: Because the Amish have strived to maintain a separation from "the world," their values have often been at odds with those of mainstream society. Throughout the history of the Old Order Amish church, these conflicting values have been materially manifested through Amish choices in appropriate dress and limited use of technology. In the case of quilts, when outsiders to the community brought their values to the objects, knocking on Amish doors and offering significant sums of money for old quilts in the 1970s and early '80s, the Amish had to learn to adapt their own ideals to the situation. The Amish belief system frowns upon materialism, pride, and "worldliness" understood as the seeking of comforts and conveniences, the love of material things, and participation in self-enhancing activities. Once the values of the outside world determined that their old quilts—with high monetary and aesthetic worth—conveyed ideals that ran against the grain of these beliefs, this appraisal overshadowed the quilts' sentimental meanings derived from familial ties. As one Amish man observed of the decision to sell old quilts: "The practical function of [a quilt] was really gone. [The owners] were attached to them too much sentimentally to wear them out, because they were heirlooms, and yet they

Warren Rohrer, *Pennsylvania Quilts: One Hundred Years, 1830-1930, November 17-December 15, 1978*, Moore College of Art (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1978).

¹³ "Living With Art," *House & Garden*, October 1978, 142-43.

were uncomfortable having a \$10,000 heirloom in their house. . . . You don't keep art objects like that in your house; you get rid of them and turn them into cash and pay your debts."¹⁴

Second, Amish fashion had changed. By the 1970s when outsiders became interested in their quilts, many Amish were less enamored with the aesthetic qualities of so-called "old dark quilts" featuring solid colored fabrics in geometric patterns. An Amish man commented in the mid-'80s that people in his community "wouldn't be seen with the old quilts. They think they're ugly."¹⁵ An Amish woman said that "we just didn't like the old style."¹⁶ In addition, Amish families considered them too small for their contemporary beds and too difficult to launder. Many had moved on to synthetic blend fabrics in cheery country patterns and lighter colors, or preferred store-bought bedspreads. Yet they still had a sentimental attachment to the old quilts, which were passed on as gifts between generations and displayed on beds on Sundays when they hosted church in their homes.

Instead of holding tight to family quilts for sentimental reasons, Amish families transformed the quilts' meaning within their culture by turning the craft into a new sort of cash crop. Economic, demographic, and geographic changes within numerous Amish settlements ushered in a new spirit of entrepreneurialism in the 1970s and '80s, as many Amish families could no longer afford to farm. Rather than migrate away from established settlements in search of affordable farmland, many started small businesses.¹⁷ In the Lancaster County Amish settlement, this shift toward entrepreneurship coincided with a growing interest among outsiders in the old dark quilts. Not surprisingly, the Amish established home-based quilt businesses as a new form of livelihood, catering to outsiders' demand. As in other facets of Amish culture, changes were slow, with risk takers within the community leading the way. Eventually, making quilts to sell to outsiders

¹⁴ Benuel Riehl, interview by Janneken Smucker, Narvon, PA, May 13, 2008: Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7c599z332v>.

¹⁵ Quoted in Karen Heller, "The Fancy Quilts of the Plain People," *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, January 25, 1987, 22.

¹⁶ Barbara Beiler, interview by Rachel Pellman, February 4, 2004, Lancaster Quilt and Textile Museum Collection, Lancaster Historical Society.

¹⁷ Donald Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt, *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004), 26-29.

became an acceptable practice, spreading to other settlements, with quilt shops becoming a typical site in communities large and small.

Amish businesswomen organized complex putting-out systems, employing hundreds of additional Amish women during the peak years of the quilt market in the 1980s.¹⁸ In this typical business model, the entrepreneur tasked her employees with the various steps of the process—design, cutting, piecing, marking, quilting, and binding—with individuals specializing in the distinct steps.¹⁹ Other businesses used a consignment model, with quiltmakers offering finished quilts as inventory. And non-Amish entrepreneurs also participated, operating businesses that coordinated the design and production process while hiring Amish quiltmakers, typically producing quilts intended to look like the antique ones made early in the 20th century with solid-colored fabrics and simple geometric designs.²⁰

The resulting products from the Amish-run shops were much more diverse—made with new patterns, new materials, and new techniques. Most quilts made for the consumer market looked significantly different from those that Amish women had crafted for their families earlier in the century. When produced for retail shops, most Amish-made quilts featured contemporary designs that changed with interior decorating fashions. Amish quilt designers learned how to stay on top of these trends by reading new “how-to” books, following industry publications, and attending trade shows.²¹ One Amish businesswoman reported, “We have to keep up with what colors are fashionable so we can make the changes from one year to the next.” Retailers also needed to maintain a diverse inventory to satisfy the varying tastes of consumers. “You get all kinds of people. So we try to do all kinds of quilts. Hopefully we do a quilt for everybody,” said another

¹⁸ Ed Klimuska, “New Quilts: They Sell by Thousands, Make Work for Hundreds,” in *Lancaster County: Quilt Capital U.S.A.* (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster New Era, 1987), 27-31.

¹⁹ Sandra Gottlieb, “Mrs. Beiler’s Modern Management Turns Out Quaint Amish Quilts,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 1985; Klimuska, “New Quilts,” 28; Beth E. Graybill, “Amish Women, Business Sense: Old Order Women Entrepreneurs in the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Tourist Marketplace” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2009), 61, 130-32.

²⁰ Businesses run by non-Amish entrepreneurs during the 1980s included Amish Design from central Ohio, Mercer & Bratt Quilts from Belleville, Pennsylvania, and First Edition Quilts out of New York City.

²¹ Rachel Pellman, interview by author, April 4, 2008, Quilt Alliance, Quilters S.O.S.—Save Our Stories, <http://quiltalliance.org/projects/qsos>; Graybill, “Amish Women, Business Sense,” 181; Hannah Stoltzfoos, conversation with author.

businesswoman. Many tourists visiting Amish settlements wanted a quilt that was Amish made, but preferred other styles than the old dark quilts. To these consumers, a quilt's Amish origins signified quality, regardless of its aesthetics, and Amish businesswomen were happy to "give them whatever they want."²²

One new pattern that excited consumers had its origins in Lancaster County. In 1983 *Brides* magazine came to Lancaster to profile an old home renovation for a newly married couple. The editors decided the profile needed a custom-made quilt to take center stage in the bedroom and sought out the assistance of the Old Country Store, one of the largest fabric and quilt retail shops in the county. The manager, Rachel Pellman, and her colleague, Craig Heisey, created the pattern, featuring love birds (based on the *Distelfink*, a common Pennsylvania German symbol), overlapping hearts, and undulating vines of tulips, drawing inspiration from the iconography frequently found on Pennsylvania German decorative arts of the 18th and 19th centuries.²³

After the quilt appeared in *Brides* magazine, the Old Country Store began receiving frequent requests from quiltmakers for its pattern. Initially, Pellman's staff sold photocopies of the pattern for a few dollars before realizing that consumer demand warranted publishing the pattern and an accompanying how-to book. The staff followed up with a whole series of Country Bride patterns, including Country Lily, Country Love, and Country Songbird. (Figure 6) The design fit perfectly with the American Country aesthetic popular throughout the 1980s. And when the dominant interior design colors switched from blue and rose to salmon and green in the '90s, quilters easily could adapt the Country Bride series of patterns to follow. The success of the Country Bride quilt and its related spin-offs ushered in many romantic appliqué patterns that have remained popular among consumers coming to buy quilts in Lancaster County.²⁴

²² Unnamed Amish quiltmaker quoted in Ed Klimuska, "Tourist Business Changed the Way the Amish Make Money and Quilts," in *Lancaster County: Quilt Capital U.S.A.*, 35, 37; Amish informant quoted in Graybill, "Amish Women, Business Sense," 150.

²³ Pellman, interview; "Do-It-Yourself: Renovating a Home of Your Own," *Brides*, July 1983.

²⁴ Cheryl Benner and Rachel T. Pellman, *Country Bride Quilt Collection* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1991); idem, *The Country Love Quilt* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1989); idem, *The Country Paradise Quilt* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1991); idem, *Country Lily Quilt* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990); Craig N. Heisey and Rachel T. Pellman, *The Country Bride Quilt* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1988); Pellman, interview. On the "American Country" aesthetic see Mary Ellis Emmerling, *American Country: A Style and Source Book* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1980).



Figure 1. Center Diamond. Rebecca Fisher Stoltzfus, dated 1903. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Collection of the American Folk Art Museum. Photo credit: American Folk Art Museum/Art Resource, New York.

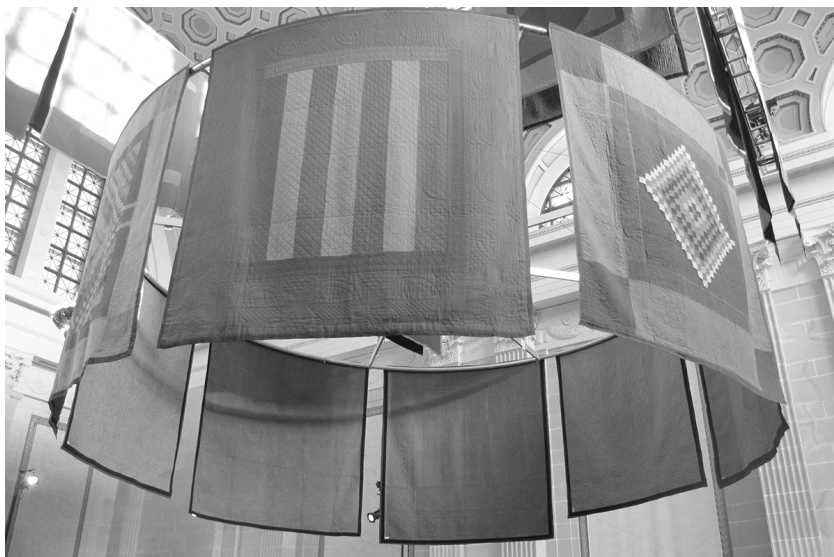


Figure 2. Installation at Lancaster Quilt and Textile Museum, 2012. Photograph by author



Figure 3. Amish Quilt shop, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, 2010. Photograph by author

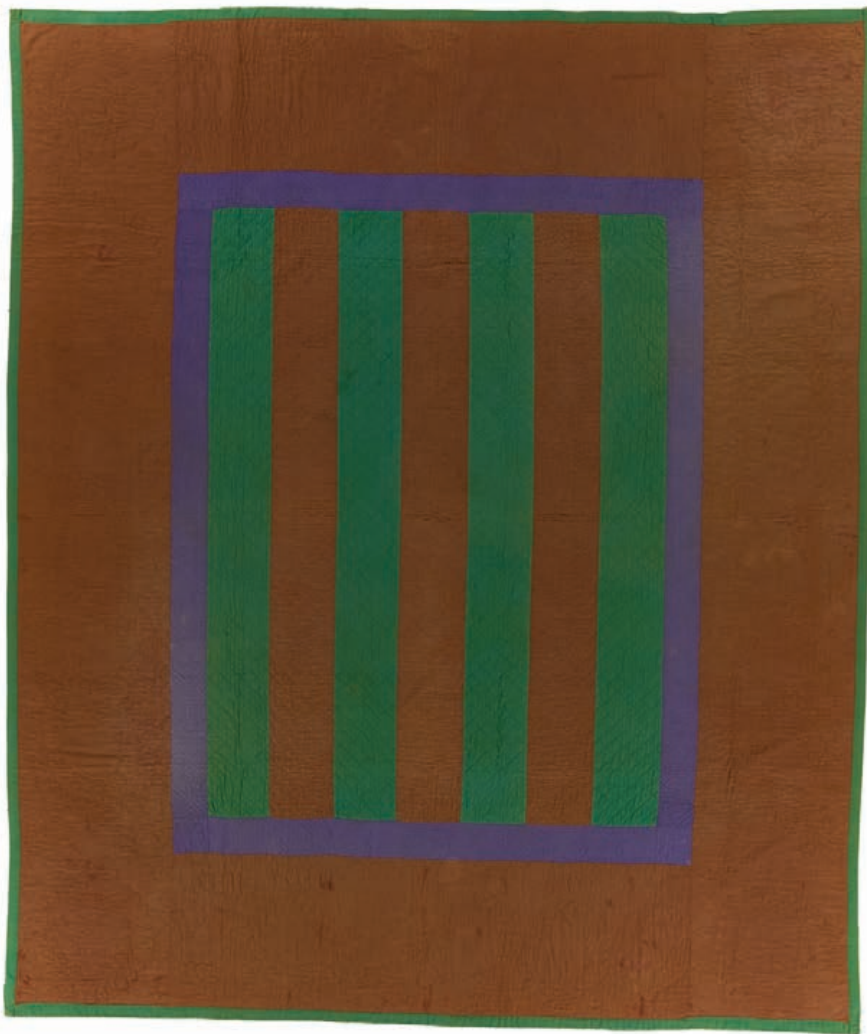
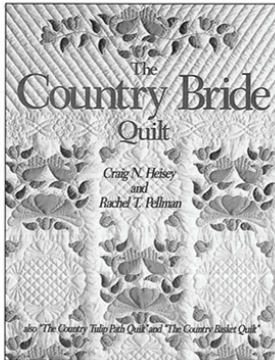


Figure 4. Johnathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof's first Amish quilt. Bars, unknown Amish maker, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, c. 1880-1910. International Quilt Study Center & Museum (IQSCM), University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003.003.0013. Image reprinted with permission of IQSCM, fee generously waived.



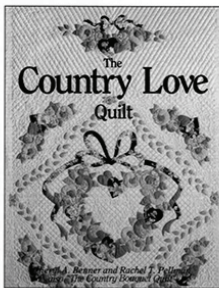
Figure 5. Richard and Phyllis Haders's New York City apartment. Photograph by Ernst Beadle. Originally published in House and Garden magazine, October 1978. Current rights holder information unavailable.

Other Books in the Best-Selling Series



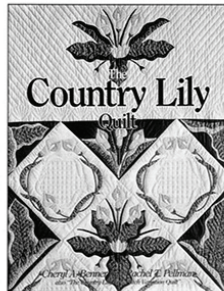
Exquisite in its simplicity, The Country Bride Quilt will become one of the heirlooms every woman of the 21st century will wish had been passed down to her!

—Quilting Today



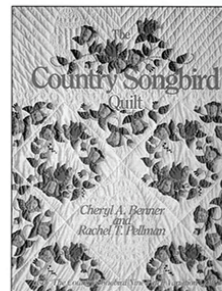
If traditional applique is what you have in mind and you're looking for a lavish pattern to inspire you, have a look at The Country Love Quilt!

—Book Page



Once more Good Books has scored with a how-to book for lovers of applique quilts—a lovely new design which follows the graceful lines of the Calla Lily.

—Bookends



The fourth graceful design in this series, The Country Songbird Quilt features birds among wreaths of tulips, berries and clovers, topped off with a quilted bird cage.

Figure 6. The Country Bride Quilt series [back cover of publication] (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, ca. 1988-94), out of print. Image reprinted with permission.



Figure 7. Hmong in traditional dress, Bac Ha Market, Vietnam, 2010. Image licensed by Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic Creative Commons license. Photograph by flickr.com user avlxyz.



Figure 8. "Harmony A-Hmong the Cultures" quilt integrating Hmong paj ntaub into a traditional quilt setting called "Garden Maze." Photograph by author.

II

Demand for country style appliqué quilts was high among consumers, but not enough Amish seamstresses were skilled at the intricate hand stitching required. Luckily for Amish quilt businesses, the Hmong, new residents in the Lancaster County area originally from Southeast Asia, had the necessary sewing skills, experience selling their own textile arts, and a knack for learning and adapting others' cultural practices. The Hmong are a minority ethnic group, historically based in present-day China, Vietnam, and Laos, with a tradition of fine needlework skills. Hmong women had long decorated ceremonial clothing, baby carriers, and funeral accouterments with embroidery, appliqué, and batik, three textile practices collectively known as *paj ntaub* (pronounced "pa ndau" and translated as "flower cloth"). (Figure 7) While practices differed among the clans, they shared precise geometric forms, fine detailed stitching, and bold coloring. Traditionally, young girls learned *paj ntaub* techniques from watching their mothers, developing appliqué and embroidery skills along with abilities in manipulating symmetry, proportion, and color.²⁵

Hmong refugees began immigrating to the United States in 1975 following the end of the Vietnam War. As part of its involvement in Southeast Asia in the years leading up to and during that war, the US had provided financial and logistical support to what became known as a "CIA Secret Army" consisting of Hmong and other minority groups from the highlands of Laos who fought against the region's communist armies, including the North Vietnamese. When the communist government declared victory in Laos in 1975, just as the US military left the region, the Lao People's Democratic Republic began to target Hmong people, rounding them up into concentration camps because they had fought on the side of the Americans. Many Hmong attempted to escape Laos by crossing the Mekong River into refugee camps in Thailand. Many died trying. From these camps, the

²⁵ Lauri Linch and Alice Schmude, "Hmong Needle Treasures," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, October 1984, 18-19; Marsha MacDowell, "Old Techniques of Paj Ntaub, New Patterns of Expression," *Folk Life*, 1993, 26-27; Sally Peterson, "A Cool Heart and a Watchful Mind: Creating Hmong Paj Ntaub in the Context of Community," in *Pieced By Mother: Symposium Papers*, ed. Jeannette Lasansky (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project of the Union County Historical Society, 1988), 35-38.

refugees awaited asylum, with tens of thousands resettling in the US during the late 1970s and the '80s. Others found asylum in Canada and Western Europe, although many have continued to live in Thai camps.²⁶

In the refugee camps the Hmong came to rely on their traditional textile art as a primary source of income. They were accustomed to outsider interest in *paj ntaub*, having sold it to French colonials in the 1940s and to American governmental advisors and missionaries working in Laos in the '50s and '60s. During the '60s, prior to the mass exodus of Hmong refugees from Laos into Thailand following the war, a few nonprofit and Thai government-sponsored agencies began marketing art made by hill tribes, including the Hmong. With the establishment of refugee camps in the '70s, aid agencies and missionary groups cultivated craft production among refugees in hopes that outsider interest in *paj ntaub* might provide families with a modest supplemental income. Aid groups then brought *paj ntaub* to urban markets in Thailand and exported pieces across the globe.²⁷

The Christian and Missionary Alliance established Camacraft in 1976 as part of its relief and development arm, Compassion and Mercy Associates (CAMA). Camacraft developed self-help projects enabling refugees to earn income while living in Thai camps.²⁸ A few entrepreneurial Hmong had made their own efforts at selling textile pieces to camp workers and the occasional Thai tourist. The American founders of Camacraft believed that Hmong

²⁶ Eric Crystal, "Hmong Traditions in the Crucible of Social Change," in *Michigan Hmong Arts: Textiles in Transition*, ed. C. Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha MacDowell (East Lansing, MI: Folk Arts Division, Michigan State University, 1984), 74; Nancy D. Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1994); Peterson, "Cool Heart," 39; Keith Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People* (Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington Univ. Press, 1995), 213-24; Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993).

²⁷ Sally Peterson, "From the Heart and the Mind: Creating Paj Ntaub in the Context of Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1990), 331-37.

²⁸ Christian and Missionary Alliance, founded in 1887, established Compassion and Mercy Associates (CAMA) as its relief and development wing in 1972. Originally working with displaced persons during the final years of the Vietnam War, CAMA now works with refugees worldwide. See "About," *Compassion and Mercy Associates*, December 18, 2013, <http://camaservices.org/about/>; "The History of The Christian and Missionary Alliance," *Christian and Missionary Alliance*, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.cmalliance.org/about/history/>; "About CAMACRAFTS," *CAMACRAFTS - Handicrafts from the Lao P.D.R.*, accessed April 3, 2017, www.camacrafts.org/about_cc.htm; Peterson, "From the Heart," 334-37.

seamstresses needed assistance with product development and advised them to make objects familiar to Westerners, such as aprons, potholders, coasters, and Christmas ornaments. Some Hmong women had already begun making bedcovers by stitching together squares of *paj ntaub*, separated by strips of cloth much like an American-style quilt. Camacraft encouraged production of this form, instituting standardized sizes that could appeal to Western consumers. Marketers also dictated what colors and fabrics the women should use, suggesting color palettes that would be pleasing. Hmong women of different clans living in the camps learned from one another and integrated new techniques and designs, priding themselves on being able to quickly adopt techniques and styles. In a practice that paralleled the way Amish women chose which quilt patterns to make for the consumer market, designs that sold well soon spread among the Hmong seamstresses working in refugee camps.²⁹

Church organizations sponsored many of the first Hmong refugees to the US. In 1978 the Mennonite Central Committee began resettling refugees in the US and Canada, with thirty families finding new homes in and near Lancaster County. Other Hmong families resettled in nearby Philadelphia. As these immigrant communities grew, with individuals becoming naturalized US citizens, kin remaining in refugee camps were also able to emigrate.³⁰

With poor English language skills and little transferable work experience or education, Hmong immigrants faced a difficult adjustment. Making *paj ntaub* to sell naturally emerged as a viable means for the women to contribute to their families' meager incomes, a practice they could fit in around other domestic responsibilities. Hmong immigrant communities across North America organized cooperatives and associations, often with the guidance of women volunteers from sponsoring church or aid agencies, that helped build consumer markets for *paj ntaub*. Those living in southeastern Pennsylvania soon realized that a thriving market for handcrafted textiles already existed. Rather than shoehorn their tradition

²⁹ MacDowell, "Old Techniques," 27; Peterson, "From the Heart," 335-39.

³⁰ Elmer Neufeld, "Mennonite Central Committee United States," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1987: www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4659.html?searchterm=mcc; Kathleen Parrish, "A Way of Life Woven from Misery for Hmong Quilters," *The Morning Call* (Allentown), April 24, 2006; Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*, 219.

into the established marketplace, some seamstresses decided to adapt their skills to fit the booming quilt market.³¹

As Hmong women in the Lancaster area recount, in the early 1980s one seamstress learned—perhaps from an Amish or Mennonite friend met through a local church sponsorship—how to construct the types of quilts local shops sold. When she started earning money for her fine appliqué skills, friends and relatives wanted to learn the practice too.³² Amish quilt businesses had no qualms about hiring these newcomers. As one businesswoman said, “We’re all God’s creatures. I’ll take a chance with anyone.”³³ The reverse appliqué technique used to make *paj ntaub* was easily adaptable to the new sorts of appliqué quilts sold in Lancaster County’s many quilt shops. In fact, Hmong women found making quilts easier than *paj ntaub*, as the technique was less intricate.³⁴

As the Hmong women’s reputation for fine appliqué work spread among Lancaster County shops, these seamstresses found more employment available as part of the complex putting-out system of crafting thousands of quilts for the consumer market. By one estimate, Hmong women in southeastern Pennsylvania and their relatives in Asia did 99 percent of the appliqué work sold in county shops by 1987. When asked about the difference between the work of Amish and Hmong seamstresses, an Amish quilt entrepreneur said the Hmong product was much better. They were also faster stitchers than their Amish and Mennonite counterparts. Some particularly skilled Hmong women strove to make quilts from start to finish—including cutting, piecing, appliquéing, and quilting—within a week, a pace most Amish women did not attempt. Like their Amish counterparts, most Hmong

³¹ Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, 88-112; Jean Henry, “Hmong and Pennsylvania German Textiles: Needlework Traditions in Transition in Lancaster County,” *Folk Art*, Summer 1995, 43; Linch and Schmude, “Hmong Needle Treasures,” 19; MacDowell, “Old Techniques,” 28; Elaine Markoutas, “A Proud People Carry on Folk Art of the Life That Was,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1982; Parrish, “Way of Life”; Peterson, “From the Heart,” 392-400, 411-12, 417; Peterson, “Cool Heart,” 42-43.

³² Parrish, “Way of Life”; Peterson, “From the Heart,” 412.

³³ Quoted in Peterson, “From the Heart,” 414-15.

³⁴ Carol Morello, “Hmong Are at Home with Country Quilts,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 5, 1989; Peterson, “From the Heart,” 412, 414; Houa Yang, interview by Heather Gibson, August 22, 2003, Quilt Alliance, Quilters’ S.O.S.—Save Our Stories, Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, <http://quiltalliance.org/portfolio/qsos-interview-with-houa-yang/>.

quiltmakers earned far below the minimum wage, but they preferred sewing to factory work, the alternative employment for many. They liked working at home, the flexibility of fitting quilting around other activities, and involving children and grandparents in the activity. According to some estimates, by the late '80s nearly all Hmong women in the Lancaster County area worked on quilts for the market.³⁵

Making quilts paid better than making *paj ntaub*, and was less laborious than doing traditional needlework. Furthermore, with the thriving market for Amish quilts, Hmong seamstresses had little economic incentive to establish a local market for *paj ntaub*. In 1989 a journalist reported that one Hmong woman earned \$250 a day marking quilting designs on appliquéd quilts at \$25 apiece, while another woman stitched *paj ntaub*, rather than quilts, spending a week on an intricate wall hanging she hoped to sell for \$25. For this sort of reason, many southeastern Pennsylvania Hmong seamstresses had all but abandoned working on *paj ntaub* in favor of more lucrative quilting, even teaching their daughters to make Country Bride and Double Wedding Ring quilts instead of creating elaborately decorated ceremonial clothing.³⁶

On the surface, Hmong quilting practices appear to be a heartwarming example of adapting one's skills to new surroundings and creating culturally hybrid quilts. Yet there was an ongoing tension. While Amish and Mennonite businesses were eager to employ Hmong seamstresses to do skilled appliquéd work, often they were not so quick to acknowledge Hmong contributions to their customers. Businesses in Lancaster County recognized that the Amish identity of the quiltmakers was a huge part of the appeal to consumers. Amish origins signified "authenticity"—even if it was only an imagined idea. Defining authenticity in any genre is challenging, and in quilting even more so. While many North Americans regard quilting as a traditional, old-fashioned craft—the sort of "primitivism" various modernists have celebrated as authentic—in reality it has long been

³⁵ Peterson, "From the Heart," 414; Morello, "Country Quilts"; Patricia Dane Rogers, "New Twist to Amish Quilts," *The Washington Post*, Washington Home section, March 19, 1992.

³⁶ Heather Gibson, "Embroidered History and Familiar Patterns Textiles as Expressions of Hmong and Mennonite Lives" (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 2006), 46; Henry, "Needlework Traditions," 46; Morello, "Country Quilts"; Peterson, "From the Heart," 416, 418; Peterson, "Cool Heart," 43.

dependent on consumer culture and industrialization, requiring an excess of factory-produced cloth and relying on commercially published patterns.³⁷ Although many quilts are derivative, drawn from such patterns, consumers sought them out in a modernist quest for authenticity.³⁸ The Amish, and likewise their quilts—widely perceived as a pre-industrial enigma preserved intact in the late 20th century—seemed to represent perfectly the imagined authenticity consumers sought. Authenticity became a selling point, even if most quilts sold in Amish shops were based on commercially published patterns following interior decorating trends. Authenticity directly correlated with the identity of a quilt’s maker.

Most stores labeled the Hmong-appliquéd quilts as “Amish Made,” even if Amish women contributed only the quilting. Other labels read “Made Locally,” a true statement yet still a means of disguising Hmong contributions.³⁹ Although journalists and scholars had written about the relationship between Hmong and Amish quiltmakers, most tourists visiting the Amish no doubt had trouble imagining that quilts could be made by anyone other than the Amish. Authentic quilts in Lancaster County were Amish quilts, no questions asked.

In the late 1980s, Hmong quiltmakers were caught between wanting credit for their contributions to the popular appliqué quilts sold in shops and fearing public acknowledgement could jeopardize their relationship with local businesses. In addition to seeking acknowledgment as a matter of ethnic pride, some women wanted to be free agents able to negotiate pay rates on their own terms, and to sell directly to customers rather than through Amish or Mennonite businesses profiting from their skills. These

³⁷ On the relationship of modernism, primitivism, and authenticity, see James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 89-214. As early as the 1840s, urbanites regarded quilting as old-fashioned. T.S. Arthur bemoaned the loss of the old-fashioned quilting bee in “The Quilting Party,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* [Philadelphia], September 1849. For more on quilts as old-fashioned, see Barbara Brackman et al., “Quilting Myths and Nostalgia,” in *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts*, ed. Catherine Morris (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, 2012), 26-30.

³⁸ For more on late 20th-century modernism and the quest for authenticity, see Daniel Joseph Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 21.

³⁹ Peterson, “From the Heart,” 417.

women wanted to band together to strategize on how they could be treated better within Lancaster's quilt industry. But many other seamstresses did not want to risk losing their important source of income. According to some Hmong quiltmakers, Amish and Mennonite businesses warned them against starting their own businesses selling quilts, implying that it would somehow be illegal.⁴⁰

Frustrated with this situation, one entrepreneurial Hmong quiltmaker decided to disregard these warnings and opened her own retail outlet to sell both quilts and *paj ntaub*. In 1990 Lo Mao Moua established Pennsylvania Hmong Crafts in Intercourse, Pennsylvania, the center of Amish-focused tourism in Lancaster County. Moua and her sister in Wisconsin appliquéd many of the quilt tops and then contracted with Amish and Mennonite women for the quilting. Now the tables were turned: a Hmong entrepreneur hired Amish women. "I tell my customers the truth," Moua told a journalist. "The quilt top is done by me; the quilting is done by Amish. Sometimes they already know. Sometimes they don't care."⁴¹ In addition to quilts and small quilted objects, she also stocked *paj ntaub* made either by elderly Hmong women in Pennsylvania and other communities or by Hmong in Thailand. Sometimes she integrated *paj ntaub* blocks into quilts. However, Moua discovered that running a retail outlet had its challenges, including overhead costs. Paying rent in Intercourse dictated that she charge more for her quilts while making less profit. In 1997 she closed her shop, deciding to run the business from her home as many Amish seamstresses did, and continuing to sell quilts at craft shows on the East Coast.⁴²

Other women, including Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk, similarly stopped working directly for Amish quilt businesses in favor of selling or consigning completed quilts to retailers or at craft shows where they could keep all the profit.⁴³ She also wanted to publicize Hmong contributions to the popular

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁴¹ Quoted in Kathleen Parrish, "Prosperity Amid New Set of Troubles," *Morning Call* (Allentown), April 25, 2006.

⁴² Lo Mao Moua, interview by Heather Gibson, July 23, 2007, Quilt Alliance, Quilters' S.O.S.—Save Our Stories, Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, <http://quiltalliance.org/portfolio/qsos-interview-with-lo-mao-moua/>; Parrish, "Prosperity."

⁴³ Trish Faubion, "The Amish and the Hmong: Two Cultures and One Quilt," *Piecework* 1 (1993): 34.

quilts sold in Lancaster County, and she even exhibited an Amish-style Rose of Sharon wall hanging in a Philadelphia gallery. The exhibit label read, “Many times we made things and Amish people never said so. I just want people to know that I made this.”⁴⁴

Even more than Amish women, Hmong women were accustomed to adapting traditions. Many Hmong quiltmakers became adept not only at using fine stitches to appliqué the motifs of Country Bride quilts but at creatively modifying popular patterns with individual touches or inventing their own patterns. Lo Mao Moua added pieced corner elements to the Country Bride pattern to create what she called the “Country Bride Combination.” Houa Yang copyrighted her Grape Galore pattern, a stylized wreath of grapes.⁴⁵ Some quiltmakers even combined aspects of *paj ntaub* with patterns that the Amish had employed for their “old dark quilts”; Tong Lor used purple squares of intricate *paj ntaub* reverse appliqué to form the central motif of her Center Diamond quilt, flanking it with rich red and blue fabrics in this favorite Amish design of the early 20th century.

Quilting may not have been Hmong women’s traditional textile art, but neither was it a tradition among the Amish before they adopted it in the 19th century. Quiltmakers from both cultures found ways to adapt the practice of making quilts into both a personal expression and a saleable commodity. Unfortunately, many consumers visiting Amish country perceived a hierarchy of authenticity: Amish made authentic quilts, they thought, while Hmong made inexpensive knock-offs. As Lo Mao Moua later told a journalist, “Because I am Asian, they think I sell cheap imports.”⁴⁶

During the 1990s and 2000s, inexpensive factory-made quilts—true cheap imports—and an apparent decline in consumer demand brought down the prices of quilts sold in Lancaster County shops.⁴⁷ By the early 2000s some Hmong working in the county’s quilt industry had become disappointed with the decreasing profits. If consumers no longer sought out Amish quilts

⁴⁴ Philadelphia Folklore Project, “We Try To Be Strong: 28 Years of Hmong Textiles in Philadelphia,” *Philadelphia Folklore Project*, www.folkloreproject.org/programs/exhibits/hmong/index.php; accessed March 1, 2010.

⁴⁵ Yang, interview; Moua, interview.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Parrish, “Prosperity.”

⁴⁷ For more on factory outsourcing, see Chapter 12 in Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013).

in great numbers, seamstresses could no longer consider stitching away on “Amish quilts” as a viable source of income. Some Hmong women began to outsource quilts themselves in hopes of earning more profit. Quiltmakers in Pennsylvania now sent patterns and fabric to relatives and friends still living in Asia, then resold the finished products to wholesalers and auction houses in Lancaster County. In contrast to quilts made in the county by either Hmong or Amish women, which cost around \$400 to make, in Thailand quilts could be made for as little as \$65 to \$80.

The practice of American Hmong outsourcing needlework to Hmong in Thailand was not novel. Entrepreneurial quiltmakers like the aforementioned Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk from Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, had since the 1980s made buying trips to Thai refugee camps, where they bought *paj ntaub* to sell to American consumers. Sirirathasuk had tutored Hmong seamstresses on how best to make products to appeal to Americans and earn the most profit, and also taught them to assemble *paj ntaub* into American-style quilts.⁴⁸

However, outsourced Hmong needlework sold not as *paj ntaub* but as locally made Amish quilts was a different matter. As the Allentown, Pennsylvania, *Morning Call* reported in 2006, no one knew for sure how many foreign-made quilts had been sold in Amish country. Rather than end up in one of the popular Amish-run quilt shops, many were sold at the New Holland Quilt and Craft Auction, held every two months in Lancaster County. There quilts were sold on consignment, and buyers—mostly shop owners seeking an inexpensive means to supplement their inventories—had no way of knowing if quilts were made locally or overseas. The auction manager told a journalist that the flooded auction and the resulting prices—as low as \$60 for an intricately appliquéd quilt top—were causing tensions between Hmong and Amish trying to survive in the industry. Amish entrepreneurs blamed local Hmong quiltmakers for inundating the market, not necessarily aware that many of these items were actually made overseas.⁴⁹ Other auctions, like

⁴⁸ Kathleen Parrish, “Imports Buoy Thai Villages, Hurt Lancaster County Sales,” *Morning Call* (Allentown), April 26, 2006; Parrish, “Prosperity”; Philadelphia Folklore Project, “We Try To Be Strong: 28 Years of Hmong Textiles in Philadelphia.”

⁴⁹ Parrish, “Imports”; Hometowne Auction LLC, “Hometowne Quilt Auction,” www.hometownequiltauction.com/index.php, accessed October 23, 2009.

the annual Gordonville Fire Company sale in support of the community's volunteer fire company, began limiting the number of quilts individuals could submit to seventeen, because some Hmong women were consigning what the auction deemed excessive numbers. Some entrepreneurs felt that Hmong were "trying to take over a historical thing that's associated with Amish and Mennonites," despite the reality that most Amish and Mennonite quilt businesses had begun only twenty to thirty years earlier.⁵⁰

A backlash occurred at some shops that in the past had accepted quilts on consignment. With knowledge of the influx of foreign-made quilts growing among entrepreneurs, businesses wanted greater control over their product and began to commission more quilts on contract rather than accept undocumented consignments or wholesaled quilts. While this meant more work for the shop proprietors, it was a means of guaranteeing that quilts were indeed locally made.⁵¹

When the Allentown *Morning Call* published a series of articles investigating outsourced quilts flooding the market, many readers responded with outrage. One reader called these quilts "counterfeit"; another proposed an "industry standardized label to identify the real German-Amish-Mennonite quilt," because he did not want his "quilt money subsidizing slave like labor kapos overseas." Ironically, he did not identify quilts as American but as German, an attribution that overlooked the American origins of Amish and Mennonite quilting traditions.⁵²

Once again, the imagined ideal of authenticity seemed to be at the forefront of how to value quilts. Wrote one *Morning Call* reader in a letter to the editor, "I'm shocked! My vision of sweet Amish women sitting in a quaint living room having a quilting bee has been destroyed." The reader considered Amish quilts authentic only if they conformed to her imagined ideal of how they were made.⁵³ Peter Seibert, director of the Lancaster Quilt and Textile Museum, which collected old dark Amish quilts in simple graphic patterns,

⁵⁰ Parrish, "Imports". Todd Reinhart quoted in same.

⁵¹ Ibid.; Barbara Garrett, conversation with author, November 12, 2009.

⁵² "Transcript of Chat with Peter Seibert," *themorningcall.com*, April 26, 2009, www.mcall.com/news/local/all-quilt=seibert-transcript,0,4037315.story, accessed May 8, 2009. These comments were posted by readers Joan Gullett and Roland Nachtigall Jr.

⁵³ Jacqueline Leonardi Alburdis, "Shocked to Learn Quilts Aren't Made By Amish," *Morning Call* (Allentown), April 25, 2006, A8.

complicated the issue in the newspaper's online forum, questioning what exactly made an "authentic" Amish quilt. He pointed out that Amish living in mid-western settlements produced some of the quilts sold in Lancaster County. He asked, "Is that an authentic Lancaster quilt?" He also described quilts Amish made for their own use as undesirable to consumers: "Most people would never own them. They incorporate fabric markers, crocheting, quilting, shiny modern fabrics, etc. This is not the country aesthetic that we associate with their quilts."⁵⁴ As Seibert implied, perhaps these quilts—undesirable to consumers yet made entirely by Amish according to Amish taste for use in Amish homes—were in fact the most authentic Amish quilts. If so, it seemed consumers would rather own ones made in Thailand, or purchased from a mail order catalog, that at least conformed to their imagined ideals.

Out of the conflict and controversy over Hmong contributions to quiltmaking in Lancaster County, one entrepreneur attempted to find harmony. Old Order Mennonite quilt proprietor Emma Witmer began to sell what she called "Harmony A-Hmong the Cultures" quilts in the 1990s. (Figure 8) These quilts celebrated Hmong needlework, acknowledging both the seamstresses' skills and the beauty of traditional Hmong designs. These quilts were sold in the oldest quilt shop in the county. The bed-sized quilts, which Witmer describes as a combination of Amish and Hmong styles, featured squares of *paj ntaub* stitched by Hmong women in Thai refugee camps and sent to stateside relatives, or sometimes by Hmong women in the US. She began acquiring these embroidered and reverse appliquéd squares from some of her local Hmong seamstresses in 1995. They convinced her that by purchasing these squares, which took refugee women six to eight weeks to make, she would be helping Hmong living in the camps, a prospect that suited her religiously-driven ethic of service. Witmer designed the quilts in a commonly used setting for a repeated block quilt, with neutral-colored sashing separating the *paj ntaub* blocks.

Unlike many Lancaster quilt entrepreneurs, Witmer never hesitated to acknowledge the Hmong women's contributions to the quilts she sold, saying that they did all of the appliqué work. She valued her "Harmony" quilts not only for their fine needlework and great composition but also

⁵⁴ "Transcript of Chat with Peter Seibert."

for representing the union of two cultural practices in a constant state of adaptation rather than of unchanging tradition. Customers who have bought these quilts were not art collectors who loved old dark quilts or casual tourists who were looking for souvenirs; they were consumers who valued quality needlework, no matter the ethnicity of the maker.⁵⁵ While these quilts make up only a fraction of what Witmer sells in her shop, she has trouble keeping them in stock, reflecting their persisting appeal to consumers.⁵⁶

In March 2016, I attended the annual Gap Fire Company Sale, an auction benefitting the local volunteer fire department in a small community on the edge of Lancaster County. The quilt hall was filled with spectators sitting in folding chairs and standing along the aisles. Racks displaying quilts carefully folded with their item numbers were equally full. There was no shortage of quilts for sale. Yet only a few of the auction goers were actually bidding. Many plain-dressed Amish and Mennonite women watched intently, noting the sale price of each quilt, like meticulous baseball fans keeping track of strikes and balls, inning by inning. But these women did not bid. The out-of-town collectors who would have swarmed similar sales during the peak-market days of the 1980s were notably absent. In those days, buyers came from out of state, purchasing quilts and marking them up as much as three times their sale price when they returned to their urban shops, reflecting the cachet of the Amish brand.⁵⁷ But in Gap on that chilly Saturday, all the prices were deflated, and hundreds of quilts—many within a same small subset of patterns and styles—were auctioned off in a day, ensuring a flooded market. The same is true in many small quilt shops dotting the landscape in settlements including Lancaster County. Quilts, made by Amish and Hmong alike, are commodities subject to the whims and rules of the marketplace, including supply and demand, changing fashions, and labor costs.

We do not like to think of quilts in such terms, because we want them to reflect the values with which we imbue them—tradition, craftsmanship, simplicity, authenticity. We want them to be made with love. As quilts sold by Amish businesses have dropped in price and sometimes in quality, consumers

⁵⁵ Emma Witmer, interview by Heather Gibson, October 20, 2003, Quilt Alliance, Quilters' S.O.S.—Save Our Stories, Library of Congress, American Folklife Center; Emma Witmer, conversation with author, June 30, 2008, New Holland, PA.

⁵⁶ Emma Witmer, conversation with author, June 2016.

⁵⁷ Klimuska, "New Quilts," 30; Mrs. W. Troyer, "Clymer, NY," *The Budget*, November 13, 1985.

increasingly have found it hard to distinguish them from factory-made quilts abundantly available from department stores, mail order catalogs, and e-commerce sites. To the sophisticated enthusiasts who loved the old dark quilts, both varieties have seemed more like kitsch than authentic pieces of design and craftsmanship.⁵⁸ To them, quilts have become something cheap, both in price and quality. Today's quilt entrepreneurs have to fight against those perceptions while struggling against deflated prices, flooded markets, and a globalized labor market. Amish quilts—once a coveted art object and later a sort of newfangled cash crop—now are neither.⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ Susan Delagrange and George Delagrange, interview by Janneken Smucker, Jeromesville, OH, October 3, 2008: Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt79cn6z0589>; David Wheatcroft and Eve Granick, interview by Janneken Smucker, Westborough, MA, September 19, 2008: Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt73r20rtt00>.

⁵⁹ This article draws on material from Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013). Reprinted with permission of Johns Hopkins University Press. The author delivered a version of this article as part of the Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel University College on February 5, 2016.