

Is Quilting Art?
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Because the written works of dictionaries and encyclopedias seem to hold sway over society's definitions of what art is, I began research for this article at the dictionary level to see what Webster's definition of art is. What I found was not a simple explanation but a complex series of definitions:

1) "Art is the quality, production, expression, or realm of what is beautiful, or of more than ordinary significance. 2) The class of objects subject to aesthetic criteria. 3) Any field using techniques of art.

4) Illustrative or decorative material. 5) The Craft or Trade using these principles or methods. 6) Skilled workmanship, execution or agency as distinguished from nature."

And fine art is defined as: "visual art considered primarily in relation to aesthetic criteria or judgments of beauty and meaningfulness (specifically painting sculpture, drawing, watercolor, graphics and architecture.)"

On the surface it seems that art is defined by the onlooker's taste and opinions. In order to try and understand the definition of art a little better I turned to Funk & Wagnall's encyclopedia which starts out it's 13 1/2 page treatise on art with this statement:

"...designation applied in its most general sense to the products of imagination, taste and skill. Although art may refer to a skill or ability, such as the art of cooking or the art of debate, the term usually connotes the expression of beauty for its own sake rather than for some utilitarian purpose. Thus, art in its usual sense refers to the works of art produced on the basis of aesthetic purposes, by an artist who seeks to convey emotions and ideas. Art carries the connotation of quality or value, worthy of preserving. . . .Fine arts include the visual arts such as painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture, and the non-visual arts, such as music and literature. The applied arts include activities and products of crafts such as commercial art, industrial design, weaving, furniture making, glass making and ceramics. Works of applied art may be useful objects but may nevertheless be treasured and preserved as works of art in the basis of their aesthetic value."

In order to understand where quilting fits into these categories it is important to understand society's views on quilting historically, today and our views for the future of quilting. It is also important to understand the changing nature of art as society grows and changes lifestyles.

Historically quilting was a means of creating warmth in clothing and bedding as well as a modicum of protection under armor from blows received during battle. By layering pieces of fabric with filler and sewing a series of linear designs to hold them in place the creator was able to bring a measure of comfort to the wearer. Certainly at its beginnings quilting was not considered an art form. But, neither was architecture at this point.

Somewhere along the way (and it is pretty hard to pinpoint just exactly when the turning point is!) women began to add more decorative stitching and design elements to the quilting process. While still considered utilitarian during the mid-seventeenth century to mid-twentieth century the expression of emotion and political values of America became a part of quilting. During this time literature and architecture had become part of the fine arts category because aesthetic value was irrevocably part of the design. A building was only considered for purchase if it was pleasing to the purchaser's taste as well as for its ability to keep the purchaser safe, dry and hold his belongings. Literature not only had to convey information but, also had to entertain and be aesthetically pleasing to the reader.

By the mid-twentieth century blankets were being manufactured at such low cost that it became unnecessary for individuals to have to make quilts for use at home, thus relegating the making of handmade quilts to the category of unnecessary skills. However, the skills have continued to blossom at an exponential rate. Makers of quilts found new ways to express the emotions and political values of America in their needlework.

New techniques have been developed that allow quilt makers to create visually stunning pieces that defy the words craft and utilitarian value. These pieces were clearly made with skill not present in normal population. Clearly quilts are no longer viewed as ordinary!

Quilts today are an expression of beauty and ideas. Quilts convey movement, color, and most of all quilts convey a sense of personal and national values. Quilts today are thought provoking and emotional. Quilts have social significance. Quilts have been known to bring as much at auction as many paintings do thus establishing monetary value. Quilts are preserved, treasured, and placed in museums to be viewed by many who pay for the privilege of seeing them.

While some critics argue that quilting is not a part of the visual arts, it is only a matter of time before society will quell those few rumblings and declare that quilting has indeed become a part of those visual arts listed in dictionary and encyclopedias.

So when is a quilt not art? A quilt is not art when it has not been made lovingly by hands that wanted to create something of beauty to enhance someone's surroundings. I cannot ever imagine that happening, can you?