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Women's Work

By: Ellen Slupe, Staff
11/01/2008

Working Women: 19th Century Quilts from the Collection of Judy Roche is on view in the Main Gallery of the Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College in Collegeville through December 7, 2008.

Out of necessity is born some of the most beautiful quilts. In the days of scarcity of fabric, thrifty women saved pieces from worn garments, frayed curtains, and threadbare table cloths to recycle into blankets that provided warmth, but more importantly provided a diary of memories that could be revisited no matter where their life journeys took them.

Selecting the color palette, piecing the pattern, setting up the quilt frame, and building the layers of batting and fabric is the process that leads up to the best part - inviting friends over to do the quilting. Quilting usually refers to the fine hand stitching of the layers. It is tedious work that requires light concentration, because, if the stitching pattern was complex, it was often drawn with chalk or pencil to assure accuracy. Every quilter had a favorite thimble to protect the finger that pushed the needle through the thickness of fabrics, up and down thousands of times a day until completed. According to the signage of the exhibit, some quilters could finish a quilt in a day.

Judging from the very fine stitching on "Diantha's Rose Bud," made by Diantha Myers in 1852 in New York, the quilting process had to have taken days to complete. As a young seamstress I learned that the better quilts had the finest stitching, meaning that the stitches were placed closer together and were very straight or true to the sketched quilting pattern, which often contrasted the appliqué pattern of the piece-work. In "Diantha's Rose Bud" dense undulating vines form the border around 35 precision appliquéd rose buds with leaves, all pieced on a white background. That is eye catching and impressive, but take a look at the quilting. It is mind boggling. The rosette medallions formed with white thread on white fabric create the appearance of being embossed. The compactness of the patterns and the tiny, carefully placed stitches tell of the extraordinary skill of the maker. When the overall stitching is so precise and uniform it indicates a solitary soothing activity.

But quilting bees, as they were often called, were also about friendship gatherings, excuses to have friends over to catch up on what was going on in their lives. An interesting point brought out in the video that accompanies the exhibit is that historically some slave women had the sole duty of making quilts. Those slaves worked side by side with the master's wife in complete silence. In complete silence? Can you imagine that? Think of missed opportunities due to entrenched social protocol. So quilting was duty, necessity, and social gathering - all resulting in beauty.

The main feeling from the selection of quilts on display is that they were from wealthier homes, due to the patterns formed from ample amounts of similar fabric. "Ohio Whig Rose," with its bold pattern in red, white, and tan is stunning with a formal beauty.

"Pennsylvania Tulip" is slightly more casual with 16 red and orange tulips on curved branches that support buds and also leaf designs with exaggerated incised margins - obviously for pattern interest rather than for botanical accuracy - all separated with wide green borders and uncontained outer perimeters. Hmmm. Very unusual, almost as if allowing for additional pieces to enlarge the quilt at a future time.



"Hair/Blood (from The Body Project)," 2004, large-format digital prints on silk gauze and silk shantung, by Christine LoFaso

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And then there is the homespun casualness of "Helena's Medallion," 1870, Bethlehem, PA. Here the subject is not the quilting but the piecing. It is a warm quilt in earthy browns, pinks, reds, and tans interspersed with flecks of blues and a myriad of other colors. Yes, "flecks" is the right word. The piecing starts out as 2" piece work in rectangular form gradually getting smaller and smaller as they approach the center of the quilt. The complexity of placing similar squares and triangles on opposite sides to keep a sense of order becomes a game of discovery. The piecework captures your attention and entertains you for quite some time, studying and figuring out the thought processes for piecing. It is not a grand and glorious quilt but one that wins hands down for individuality, wonderful imagination, and is truly a document of the person's history with fabrics containing memories of her journey.

In the Upper Gallery of the museum is *Tamar Stone and Christine LoFaso: Women's Bodies of/as Work*. Here Tamar Stone concentrates on the suffering, suffocating aspect of women as victims of suppression ranging from wearing fashion-mandated constricting corsets to victims of domestic male dominance. "Pink Corset Book (untitled)" ca 2000 is one of several women's undergarment books. This one is made from women's pink corsets embroidered with words expressing proper protocol of dressing for success and respect (stressing no visible movement of the flesh). It is presented as a precious relic confined within a clear rigid box. We can only see glimpses of the garment books and imagine the rest - a true metaphor for the job of the garments, as well.

"Redress: Gestation Corset" 1993, made of catnip stained paper, mink fur, lacing, metal grommets, and printed text from "Dora: A Case Study in Hysteria" by Sigmund Freud, is a stuffed corset embellished with detail full of metaphor that at quick glance is missed.

A series of doll-size beds, covered with sheets, pillow, and quilted (but not pieced) blankets contain computerized, machine-stitched wording in different fonts about the household tasks assumed to be women's "natural" duty and on others about the terrors associated with beds innocently designed for resting. As privileged voyeur we are shielded from the terror and bask in the security of knowing the trauma shown belongs to someone else.

Christine Lofaso's subject concentrates on a scientific investigation of the body's muscle fiber and flesh and how that knowledge, together with obsessive thoughts about our bodies, forms the basic building blocks of individual identity.

Electron Scanning Microscope imagery of human tissue is superimposed over enlarged computer generated text in the large-format digital wall hangings. They are printed on sheer silk gauze draped over similarly printed silk shantung and are part of her series titled "The Body Project." Muscle, bone, hair, and microphages (tissue-eaters) share equal space with words that reference how she thinks of her body, and also how she perceives others to be responding to her body. Sentence fragments such as 'avoiding my path pointing out imperfections,' 'several sizes too big,' 'gaining over thirty pounds,' and 'shop window and see reflections' repeat in the "Hair/Blood" piece.

In "Bone," a large red and white abstract image of blood-infused bone is overwritten with thoughts of becoming aware of the actual physical nature of her body, the actual appearance of veins and flesh. All are complex pieces that require study to decipher the wording and imagery. Take time to step back and appreciate them as abstract works of art as well.

For more information call 610-409-3500 or visit www.ursinus.edu/berman.

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