

Book Review

Janneken Smucker and Leslie Umberger. *Pattern and Paradox: The Quilts of Amish Women*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2024. 160 pp.

Ervin Beck

Professor Emeritus of English

Goshen College

ervinb@goshen.edu

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This splendid oversize book depicts and documents the 50 antique Amish quilts that Faith and Stephen Brown recently gave to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, along with an endowment for their conservation and a promise of 100 more to come. Compared to major collections already in the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County, the American Folk Art Museum, the Indiana State Museum, the Illinois State Museum, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, and the International Quilt Museum, the Smithsonian collection will be the “largest and most widely representative group of Amish quilts” (6) in an American museum; that is, holding quilts from Amish settlements from Pennsylvania west to Kansas. It is “a gift to the nation” (6) and “an important chapter in the American art story” (7).

“American” and “art” are somewhat contestable terms, since Amish culture, in general, strives for separation from the nation and the makers of quilts did not regard their work as “art.” Amish quilts were first collected by connoisseurs like the Browns because they saw a visual relationship between Amish quilts (c. 1880–1940) and geometric American Art, like Josef Albers’s series “Homage to the Square” (c. 1962). For the Browns to say that Amish quilters were “at the cutting edge of modern art” is odd, and an anachronism, since the connection between Amish quilts and modern art movements like Op Art, Abstract Expressionism, or Color Field painting cannot be demonstrated.

Leslie Umberger, the Smithsonian’s Curator of Folk Art, discusses Amish quilts in the context of the history of quilt-making in the United States. She makes a case for these quilts to be held by an art museum, but only cautiously stresses their relationship to mainstream modern art. Their beauty makes them art. The fact that they are women’s work and come from a “diverse” American culture enhances the Smithsonian’s representative art collection.

Umberger can claim the quilts for her discipline because of their origin: from a close-knit group who made bedcovers that served their community’s practical needs, social networks, and aesthetic tastes. The quilts could as well belong in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, which has its own collection of quilts. The “art” vs. “folk art” nature of quilts is a long-standing



discussion, but a quibble in light of their beauty, the Browns' investment in them, and the high esteem granted them by the Smithsonian.

Janneken Smucker, Mennonite quilt scholar, discusses the quilts in their communal context. She notes that the Amish *Ordnung*, or set of rules, gave no guidance on quilt-making, which enabled Amish women to work creatively with patterns and colors, intuitively knowing what their local church-community's boundaries were. One indirect boundary, of course, were rules for women's clothing, which required plain, dark material—qualities also found in their quilts. Amish quilters had “an instinctive knowledge of color theory” (35). Smucker acknowledges influences on Amish quilt-making from other cultures (Germanic, English, Welsh, Quaker) and also from American commercial developments in cloth manufacture and pattern publications. Amish quilts illustrate cultural lag compared to mainstream developments, but Amish women borrowed traditions in their own way. Smucker analyzes quilts in 25 different patterns to illustrate her points. Her special contribution is citing interviews with Amish women of today who recall conversations with ancestors that reveal how the quilters worked and regarded their work.

Umberger deals with some paradoxes and contradictions inherent in Amish quilt-making: tradition vs. innovation, cultural exclusiveness vs. American appropriation, communal expectations vs. individualized achievements, and plain style vs. “spectacular” outcome. I question whether the exquisite nature of their work violates the Amish value of humility, or that someone's variation on an established pattern represents individualism. I doubt the Amish see it like that.

Pattern and Paradox joins a handful of other deluxe volumes devoted to Amish quilts. The Browns' collection was earlier depicted in the handsome book *Amish Abstractions* (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2009). Printed in England, *Pattern and Paradox* represents the best possible reproduction of these intensely colored objects. One of the book's special features is 10 two-page close-up photographs of individual quilts, which bring out the textures of quilts and, especially, their fine stitching. The book is a worthy representation and appreciation of a unique traditional art—and perhaps a culmination of its study.

Erratum

5/3/2024: “Smiths” corrected to read “Browns” instead at top of page 106.