

## Quilt Labels: Piecing Textual Textiles

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Examining the elusive nature of the genre-within-a-genre known as the quilt label, this article describes how a seemingly simple genre may be difficult to define, complicated by questions of history, culture, artistic style, and intended audience. These factors and others influence the ways in which these texts are created and how they are read by various audiences.

First and foremost, dear readers, I must address a question that some of you may be asking yourselves: What, exactly, is a quilt label? I am sorry to say that the more I think about quilt labels, the more I realize there is really no short answer to this question. In fact, I may spend my entire allotted space attempting to pin down a definition, leaving you at last with only the realization that quilt labels as a genre are as elusive, mysterious, and unique as quilts themselves. (And believe me, quilts are mysterious and unique. But that is a subject for a different day.)

A basic definition first: a quilt label is a written, textual part of a quilt, providing information such as the quiltmaker's name, the date of completion, the city wherein said quilt was created, and who the recipient of the quilt was. Quilt labels carry historical messages both personal and academic. Instructional quilting books include brief yet urgent little sections encouraging quilters to make quilt labels for their work; for example, Kaisard and Keltner in the Better Homes and Gardens *Complete Guide to Quilting* remark: "Since your quilts may outlive you, it makes sense to preserve their heritage for future generations by marking them with your

"Hmm... what does this remind me of?" you ponder, gazing into space, thoughtfully drumming your fingers. "Ah, yes!" you think, "This reminds me of citation conventions of other genres that include the author's name and publication information!"

name, your city, and the date at a minimum. Adding other information, such as a poem, a good-will wish for the recipient, a special-occasion note, or even the fabric content and care instructions, further personalizes the quilt” (16). The book then spends about one page carefully describing methods of permanently marking fabric and attaching it to the quilt. This article investigates the genre of quilt labels, examining how cultural and individual meaning, intention, and style contribute to the creative expression of this seemingly simple text.

### Quilt Labels in Historical Research

As noted in Figure 1, quilt historians are one audience for quilt labels; this particular audience will look to quilt labels for information relevant to their specific research. Quilt labels help historians research the creation and development of often-used quilt patterns, tracing changes in patterns and the routes of popular patterns as quiltmakers and gift quilts relocate about the country. Label information also indicates the



Figure 1: Image by Author, Quote by Finnegan (144)

popularity of methods and fabrics, interests and concerns of quiltmakers, and more broadly, the economic status of specific areas in specific time periods. Some information may be gained from knowledge of available textiles, outside sources, family stories or the recollection of friends, but quilt labels, when they do appear, are much appreciated for placing a quilt in its historical context. A glance through any book on quilt history reveals photographs of hundreds of beautiful quilts, each the result of creative thought and hundreds of hours of work. Look at the captions accompanying these photos, and very often you will find remarks such as “quiltmaker unknown,” or “probably Lancaster County, ca. 1880.”

### Case of the Missing Quilt Label

The caption accompanying a photo of the quilt pictured in Figure 2 reads, “*Log Cabin Variation*. Possibly New Jersey, c. 1890. Silk, hand-pieced,

hand-appliqued, and hand-embroidered, 78x62 inches. This unique quilt's 280 blocks include more than one hundred small houses and many depictions of African Americans....The fact that all the figures are black and that they are portrayed in a straightforward, uncaricatured manner strongly suggests that the artist was an African American depicting what she/he knew. The wide variety of silk used in the quilt also suggests that the artist may have been a dressmaker" (Shaw 171).

In the absence of a quilt label or other historical documentation, quilt historians can only make guesses about this beautiful quilt. Fabric dating methods help indicate an approximate time frame, and knowledge of fabric use in that time (silk for fine dresses) indicates a possible occupation for the quilter. A dressmaker, employed by well-off ladies, would have access to silk in all colors. The guess that the quilter was African-American is based on the uncaricatured representations, in contrast to many white artists' renditions of the time. Still, these identifications are guesswork. Quilt historians, as well as possible descendants of this quilt artist, would no doubt like more conclusive evidence about who this artist was.



Figure 2: Log Cabin Quilt (Shaw 171)

## Quilt Labels for Personal Memories

The other group that serves as an audience for quilt labels, family and friends, is very different from the historian group. In the future, family members may share historians' questions about quilts' origins and authorship, but in the present, family and friends know who the quiltmaker is.

A label created with this group in mind will likely be more personal, noting a special occasion or referencing some inside joke or secret. It may provide the name of the quiltmaker, but perhaps with a title beforehand, such as "Grandma Thomas" or "Aunt Martha." Some quilt labels provide more information about the recipient than the artist, such as: "May, 2009 for baby Lucy with much love." A special poem, going-away wishes, or

That copyright and publication data on the inside of your favorite novel? The part you might never read? Historians find this part of the book as gripping as the cliffhanger ending, just as quilt historians appreciate and depend on quilt labels. Indeed, discovering contextual clues could change the way we read books.

"Like an enigmatic dedication page, deliciously evocative but obscure to all but a favored few?" you ask. Yes, but as I muse, it occurs to me that the quilt itself, unlike a published book, may not be meant for outsiders' eyes. "Perhaps," you suggest, "we might better liken it to a greeting card: personal, appropriate to the occasion, and coordinating with the gift."

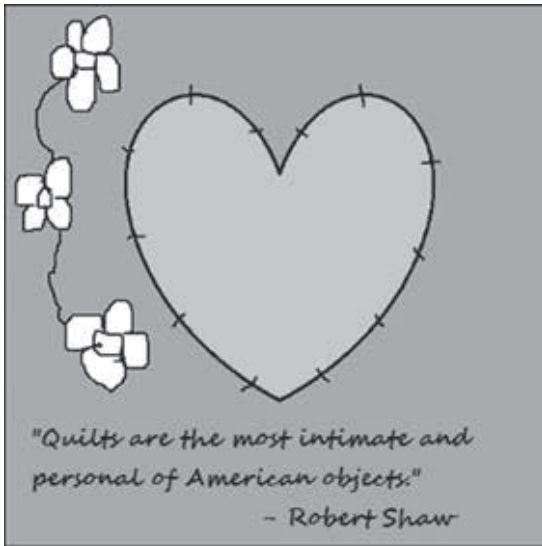


Figure 3: Image by Author, Quote by Shaw (4)

consideration because it includes the quilter's full name, the location, and the year. The inclusion of the year may also be helpful for James and William if there is ever disparity in their memories of when exactly it was that they had the chicken pox. ("It was when I was seven." "No way, 'cause I remember it was the summer I got my bike!") Unlike quilt labels that express deep sympathy, this label can be intimate in a more playful way, displaying the quilter's sense of humor as she puns "cooped up" and chooses a chicken-wire print fabric and an embroidery stitch reminiscent



Figure 4: "Cooped Up" Quilt (Burdin)

words of encouragement may all appear in a quilt label. As noted in Figure 3, quilts are intimate objects. Even the fabric may suggest intimacy, leftover bits of projects and castoff garments inspiring memories. The style will typically reflect that of the quilt. It may be simple or ornate, embroidered or digitally printed, pieced or appliqued. The label fits the quilt as well as the occasion and the quilter's style.

### A Quilter Aware of Multiple Audiences

A quilt label can also tell a story or nudge a memory. The quilt label pictured in Figure 4 seems to take historians into consideration because it includes the quilter's full name, the location, and the year. The inclusion of the year may also be helpful for James and William if there is ever disparity in their memories of when exactly it was that they had the chicken pox. ("It was when I was seven." "No way, 'cause I remember it was the summer I got my bike!") Unlike quilt labels that express deep sympathy, this label can be intimate in a more playful way, displaying the quilter's sense of humor as she puns "cooped up" and chooses a chicken-wire print fabric and an embroidery stitch reminiscent of chicken tracks. In addition to the simple historical data provided, some of the information that might seem to be of only personal value might actually be useful for cultural researchers and historians. Researchers interested in areas of study such as mother-son relationships, attitudes toward childhood illness, and humor might find a label like this of interest. The cultural and historical surroundings of a quilt label, including the intended audience, then, affect the artist's composition choices and inform our understanding of the quilt label's meaning.



Figure 5: "Merry Minis" Quilt Label Template

## Techno-Signatures

Some companies sell premade quilt labels, while others sell access to digital images. Others, like the one pictured in Figure 5, are available as free downloads. Quilters print the design on fabric, adding messages or visual images in the center of the frame provided.

Some premade or special-order quilt labels come with machine-embroidered messages and names already stitched on. Authorized by the quilter, this signature is nevertheless created by someone else. This concept is nothing new: "The development in the 1830s of a permanent ink that would not damage fabric probably contributed to the signature-quilt fad. Writing in ink on fabric was not, however, a technique that was easily mastered. Generally, one or two especially skilled writers would provide the inked names" (Warren and Eisenstat 23). Quilts created by groups of women were often decorated with the quilters' signatures. Rather than a small label hidden away in a corner or on the back of the quilt, these community-oriented pieces proudly displayed the names of the artists.

Names displayed prominently on a gift differ from a greeting card. Perhaps, dear reader, you might have seen such a commemorative gift? A matted picture frame with wedding guest signatures? A crayon drawing you created in kindergarten and signed with your teacher's assistance? A quilt label, then, may function as a permanent gift card, its presence on the gift reminding the recipient of the gift-giver.

## The Semi-Anonymous Quilt Label

As is suggested by the awareness ribbon in Figure 6, quilting clubs and guilds put in hours of collaborative work creating quilts for charities and fundraisers. For example, Gems of the Prairie Quilt Guild, which is a guild for Peoria, Illinois area quilters, donates about 300 tiny quilts each year to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at OSF Medical Center. They also donate quilts to St. Jude Research Hospital and the Center for Prevention of Abuse (Gems). Quilts such as these are often the work of several quilters. One might purchase fabric and measure out the amount needed, another might cut and piece the quilt top, and yet another might quilt the layers together. Besides the work of putting the quilt together, clubs and guilds often have members in charge



Figure 6: "Mothers and Daughters" Quilt Label

of coordinating these efforts and making sure that all materials used are appropriate for the intended recipient (fabric content might be important, for example). Rather than create individualized labels for each quilt with the names of every single person who worked on the project, many such groups opt for a standard label stating the group's name. For collaborative, quilting community efforts such as this, serving as donations to people who likely would not recognize the names blazoned across the quilt top, it makes sense to stitch on a label that simply states the quilt was donated by the Gems of the Prairie Quilting Guild.

### When the Name on the Quilt is Not the Artist's

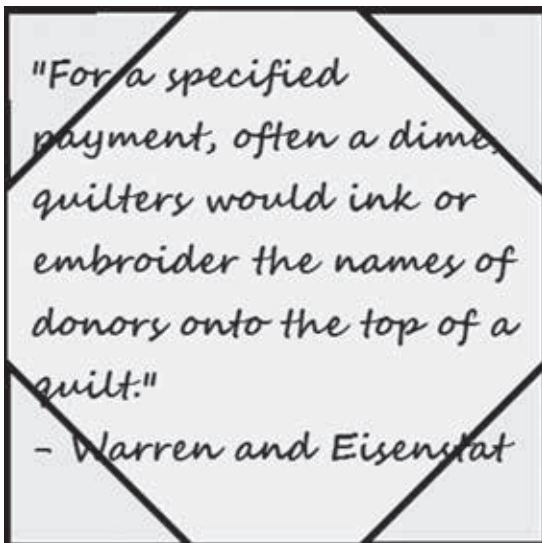


Figure 7: Image by Author, Quote by Warren & Eisenstat (35)

Fundraising quilts may be auctioned or raffled off in order to raise money for charity. Some art quilts are created with designs promoting a social justice concern or in memorial of an event or loved one. In cases such as those mentioned in the quotation in Figure 7, what appears to be an album quilt or signature quilt with quilters' names may in fact turn out to be a fundraising quilt. Names of donors, rather than quilters, appear on the quilt top, which has become a giant quilt label. Some names of individuals may appear, but names could be those of organizations or local businesses who donated toward the fundraiser.

### And Now, to Finish, We Bind the Edges of Our Quilt

We return at long last, dear reader, to the question we began with: What is a quilt label? Similar to many genres, this multiplicity of similarity renders it unlike any other genre but itself. Despite all our discussion and your insightful suggestions for comparison, I find that the answer is still elusive. The information I have shared with you is only the snowcap on top of a mountain, the steam rising from my teacup. A writer of quilt labels must consider the immediate audience—the recipient of the quilt. She must also consider whether or not to take into account the further trajectory of future quilt historians. The quilt's purpose will affect the label, as well as the style

and materials of the quilt itself. The quilter's own preferences will also be of use in designing a label. Technology choices come into play, as do decisions regarding whether the label is actually made by the quilter or by someone else. Quilt labels are not even definable by size or location, as they may be any size between a few inches wide or the entire quilt top, on the back or the top of the quilt. In fact, quilt labels may even be significant in their absence.

In my home, I have a quilt my grandmother gave to me. It is a lovely purple silky fabric, beautifully quilted. Some relative made it, I was told as a ten-year-old, but I have forgotten who. Probably I will never know. My interest in family history makes me feel a bit sad about this, but at the same time, not knowing imparts an intriguing air of mystery to this family artifact. What is a quilt label, after all? It is a communication across time, a signature, a story. It is a work of creative expression and artistry, of the written word sewn to a visual text, a memory often forgotten.

One might describe a donor quilt label as an acknowledgement, such as one sees gracing the walls of museums and libraries, listing donor names. You interject, "The lengthy dedication pages in some books and music records are similar! Thanking all who have contributed or supported a project." Very like, indeed. In fact, I would like to take this moment to thank my mother, who taught me to sew, the GWRJ staff for their helpful suggestions, the vast circle of the quilting community past and present, and my husband, for supporting my sewing and my writing.

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**Shoshanna Van Tress** likes reading old books, baking cookies, and sewing quilts for her tiny nieces and nephews. One day, she will have a quilting studio to work in and her husband will have a woodshop in the next room. She is currently working toward her Master's Degree in English at Illinois State University.