

ART VS CRAFT: EXPLORING THE CATEGORIES OF
“ART” AND “CRAFT” THROUGH QUILTING

by

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A THESIS

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This project aims to explore the similarities and differences between the categories of “art” and “craft” in the creative world through research and personal practice. As a multimedia artist, I have found myself fascinated by the noticeable differences in the way my peers, academics, and other professionals in the visual arts space speak about “art” as opposed to “craft.” I have observed that “art” is often preceded by value judgments like “fine” or “high” that essentially position “art” as something esoteric, valuable, and exclusive (Tompkins). “Craft,” on the other hand, seems to be more of a catch-all category for creative works that serve a more practical purpose, require specific skills to produce, and can be re-created by following a set of instructions (Wentworth Galleries). I have noticed that “art” tends to value the process behind creating the piece, emphasizing expression, whereas “craft” seems centered around the final product, emphasizing craftsmanship (Davies).

While these two categories seem clearly defined at first glance, I have observed through my own practice how certain creative works transcend or overlap “craft” and “art,” specifically fiber arts— a genre that has historically been left out of professional and academic art spaces due to its associations with femininity, poverty, and utility (Brooklyn Museum). I intend to explore the differences and similarities between these categories by first understanding how academics in

the space define “art” and “craft” and examining recent discourse about the subjectivity of these classifications (Markowitz). I will simultaneously research the rich history of quilting in the United States of America over the past two centuries to more thoroughly understand the symbolism and significance of different quilt squares, patterns, and styles. I will then apply my research to create my own quilt while documenting and reflecting on my process to answer the question: *Can craft be art?*

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking my primary thesis advisor, Kym Rohman, and my Clark Honors College representative, Nicole Dahmen, for taking the time to work with me on this project. After meeting with my thesis team for the first time, I learned that both Kym and Professor Dahmen have deeply personal connections to quilting, something I was not aware of when I reached out to them to work with me on this project. I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to work with these two incredible women who not only understood my thesis topic, but truly cared about it as well, and I look forward to sharing about our future quilting projects together.

I would also like to thank my mom, MaryLea Harris, for instilling within me a deep appreciation for all forms of creative expression and for encouraging me to always try new media and techniques in my art. She is the most creative and talented artist I know, and I am forever thankful for her insight and guidance, both in the studio and in my personal life. I love you so much!

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis project to all of the artistic women in my family who came before me, many of whom were quilters, seamstresses, and fiber artists who utilized their medium as a form of creative expression and freedom in a world that has historically undervalued the contributions of women. To all of them, thank you for inspiring me to carry on this beautiful tradition.

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Introduction

Throughout my childhood, my mom worked as both a professional artist and a children's crafts blogger, applying her past experience as an elementary school art teacher to help parents and teachers incorporate creativity into lesson plans and everyday activities. I spent many hours with her in her art studio, watching her create beautiful paintings for gallery shows and helping her make samples of crafts to photograph and post on her blog. Fabric, yarn, and pom-poms sat on shelves next to high-quality acrylic and oil paints in her studio, and I was encouraged to use them all— as long as I asked her first. Looking back, I think the juxtaposition of materials traditionally associated with fine art and classic craft supplies in her studio instilled in me a sense of equality between “craft” and “art” from a young age, and her unwavering support of my creativity inspired me not to limit myself to a singular medium and consider all creative endeavors worthwhile. Further, her ability to build successful careers in both the professional art world and the DIY space showed me that there is value in crafting and in creating fine art.

However, I have seen through my own experience as an artist how “art” and “craft” tend to be considered separate categories, each with different connotations, associated media, and perceived value. When discussing works deemed “art,” I have noticed that more subjective, open-ended conversations ensue, focusing on the creative merit of the artist and the profound ideas or emotions expressed through the work. Inversely, I have observed how conversations about “crafts” tend to be much more objective, focusing on the technical skill of the craftsperson or the material usefulness of the piece. Existing literature regarding the divide between “art” and “craft” reinforces this idea, as Stephen Davies, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, asserts that “The crafts are directed at the useful functions that their products can serve. By contrast, works of art are not mere means to ends but are ends in

themselves. Their value lies within them, not in benefits and applications that come with their effects” (4). Associate Professor Sally J. Markowitz of the Department of Philosophy at Willamette University builds upon this in her essay *The Distinction Between Art and Craft*, explaining how “craft objects often have what are loosely called practical or utilitarian functions, while paintings and sculptures... [have] no use at all, only an aesthetic use... Perhaps, then, the ends of art involve contemplation, while those of craft involve more mundane physical activity” (57). This ongoing discussion, bolstered by my own observations and experiences, led me to the questions I hope to answer through this thesis project: Why are art and craft considered to be different categories when works of “art” can be precise or methodological, and “craft” pieces can be expressive or process-based? Ultimately, is it possible for craft to be art?

I plan to investigate these questions by first learning more about what defines “art” and “craft” as separate categories and how these may overlap or contradict each other. I will then research the rich history of quilting in the United States to understand the often-overlooked nuance, creativity, and symbolism present in traditional quilt patterns, compiling my research into an index I can then arrange by date. Finally, I will document my own process of creating a quilt inspired by my findings to determine if quilting neatly falls into the category of “craft,” “art,” or exists in a liminal space between the two. I chose to focus on quilting for this project, as it is a creative medium I have not yet tried and one which challenges the binary of “art” and “craft” as categories. Quilting, in recent decades, has shifted from a practice of practicality to one of creative expression, with more individuals considering their quilts “art” rather than “craft.” “For many modern quilters,” educator and fiber artist Carolina Oneto states, “the act of creating a quilt is a deeply personal and intimate process. Each stitch, each choice of fabric and design, reflects the quilter’s unique perspective and creative vision. In this way, quilting becomes a

medium through which individuals can communicate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences.”

I intend for this project to thoroughly examine what is “art,” what is “craft,” the significance of quilting, and how this creative medium challenges these categories through research, reflection, and the creation of my own quilt.

Art vs. Craft

Where the boundary lies between “art” and “craft” has been the subject of academic debate for centuries, as the distinction between the two stems from an array of historical, cultural, and philosophical perspectives. How creative works are categorized as “art” or “craft” primarily focuses on the process, purpose, and perceived social value of a given piece. Between the 16th century and 16th century, during the Enlightenment movement, the idea of what is considered a “craft” or an “applied art” and what constitutes “fine art” was formalized “under the influence of specific socio-economic conditions that did not obtain elsewhere or in earlier times” (Davies 9). Fine arts were considered to be intellectual endeavors of expression, while crafts were seen as a form of manual labor rooted in utility (Markowitz). Practices like painting and sculpture were considered “fine art,” primarily because these practices were taught in academic institutions, while woodworking, weaving, and quilting were considered “applied arts” as these were often created for a practical purpose and learned through less formal means (Tompkins). This formalization of categories built a framework for artistic classification that has, for the most part, persisted since.

However, experts have suggested in recent years that these categories are far more subjective than perhaps the masters of the Enlightenment believed and, oftentimes, intersect or overlap with each other. Professor Sally Markowitz asserts in *The Distinction Between Art and Craft* that the idea of “art” and “craft” as separate concepts stems from the philosophical concept of normative dualism, the idea that the immaterial and material are distinctly separate and the immaterial is more valuable. If “crafts” are considered works of material emphasis and “arts” are seen as intellectual pursuits or the expression of abstract concepts, normative dualism upholds this divide. “This dualism,” she writes, “has shaped the way we regard morality, politics,

gender; now we must ask as well how it has shaped our view of art. It is no accident that the work of marginalized groups often counts as craft” (66). Markowitz challenges the idea that “art” and “craft” are separate, however, by pointing out how “people from craft traditions have produced work that encourages interpretation and so confounds the art-craft distinction” (65). As discussion continues about how these categories were initially defined and what truly characterizes each, the crafts have seen more formal recognition and acceptance as “art.” Author Tanya Harrod writes in her book *Craft*, “Craft is currently being viewed on a much broader front, going beyond the studio crafts to embrace every kind of making,” emphasizing the shifting nature of these categories (16).

It is also important to note that creative practices done by women have often been relegated to the category of “craft.” In *The Philosophy of Art*, Stephen Davies writes, “Women’s efforts as artists have been traditionally undervalued, and the kinds of artifacts traditionally produced by women – for example quilts, needlework, weaving, and pottery – have been relegated to the diminished categories of crafts or “decorative arts” (52). Markowitz furthers this idea, stating, “We have been reluctant to recognize that some art is made by white women and people of color; instead, we tend either unfairly to label this work as craft or to ignore it altogether” (67). Recent efforts to reconceptualize “craft” work as “art” take this into account, sparking conversations about patriarchal and euro-centric norms in the institutionalized art world, which has, for centuries, placed greater value on the work of educated white men and cast the work of women and other marginalized groups aside. By critically challenging the existing ideas of what is “art” and what is “craft,” a more inclusive, equitable view of diverse creative practices can arise, which I hope to explore through my quilting journey.

Creating the Quilt

For the creative portion of my thesis, I chose to create a quilt comprised of 45 total 9-inch by 9-inch squares, measuring five squares wide by nine squares long. I initially planned for this quilt to serve as a precise timeline of historical American quilt patterns, with half of the quilt based on patterns from the 1800s and the second half inspired by 1900s patterns, but I realized during my research process that there were many more quilt patterns invented in the 1800s than in the 1900s and this plan wouldn't be possible. To work around this issue, I decided to make the 5 by 9 grid I wanted my quilt to resemble on Adobe Illustrator and filled it in square by square with the patterns I had saved during my research process. I utilized various online quilt pattern databases and websites specializing in historical quilting to create the quilt pattern index, making sure to take notes on the time period and unique historical context each square originated from. I then sorted this database chronologically and filled in the 5 by 9 grid.

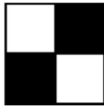
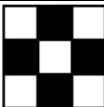
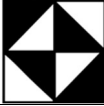
Thankfully, I already had a plethora of sewing supplies on hand, many of which are necessary for quilt making, including a sewing machine, rotary cutter, cutting mat, ruler, pins, and lots of scrap fabric. Much of the fabric utilized in this quilt came from my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother's fabric collections, which I feel like adds a personal touch to the quilt and represents the generations of women artists who came before me.

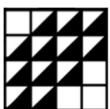
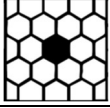
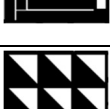
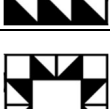
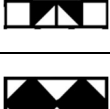
I then began the laborious task of creating each quilt square, and I chose to film this entire process using a tripod attached to my sewing table. I worked my way through the quilt plan I had made for myself, often revisiting the document to change where I wanted certain colors or patterns depending on how much material I had left. Once I finished all of the quilt squares, I stitched them together lengthwise, divided by thin solid borders of dark fabric to draw attention to each individual square. I attached a border to the finished top of the quilt for

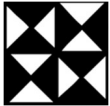
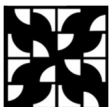
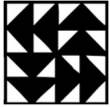
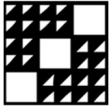
cleanliness, but I did not add batting, backing fabric, or top stitching yet as I want to wait until my quilting skills are more advanced before taking on such an endeavor that could essentially “make or break” my quilt.

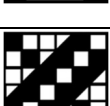
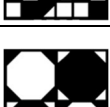
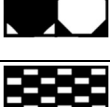
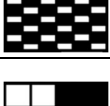
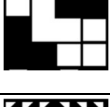
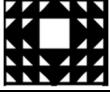
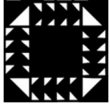
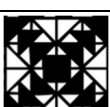
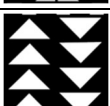
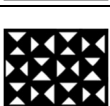
I next edited together all the time-lapse footage I filmed over the course of my quilting journey into one final video representing the unseen hours of labor that go into the quilt-making process. Despite filming my progress in time-lapse format, I still had to increase the speed of each clip by about 200% to 400% to condense 96 clips into a 10-minute-long video. In addition to showing how the physical quilt was created, this video also serves as a look back at how my skill as a quilter improved gradually. Many mistakes and imperfect moments where I pieced a section of a square upside down, messed up a seam, or changed my mind on a fabric choice are all captured in this video, and I think it was a great way to document my learning curve of quilting in real-time. I presented this final video alongside my finished quilt during my thesis defense (see “Supplemental Materials” for both).

Quilt Pattern Index

Pattern	Name	Time	Notes and Facts
	Simple 4 Patch	1800 or earlier	One of the earliest forms of patchwork quilting done by pioneer women and children. Most young girls were taught to quilt before they learned to read and could piece a simple quilt block quickly by age 5 or 6.
	9 Patch	1800 or earlier	Used by pioneer women and children to quickly make a warm and useful quilt from scrap fabric. This pattern works up easily and efficiently.
	Broken Dishes	1800s	A simple pattern comprised of four half-square triangles, a very common quilt building block.
	8-Pointed Star	1800s	The star is a very common quilting motif, and settlers used the star as a sign of inspiration traveling West and for religious significance.

	Pinwheel	1800s	Similar to “Broken Dishes,” this simple pattern utilizes half-square triangles to create a basic geometric design of light and dark fabric.
	Corn and Beans	1800s	This pattern reflects the deep agricultural roots of America and how most early settlers relied on crops like corn and beans for survival. Typically made with green and yellow fabric.
	Ocean Waves	1820s	When assembled in a full quilt, this pattern resembles ocean waves ebbing and flowing in a mesmerizing pattern. Often made with different shades and patterns of blue fabric.
	Bear's Paw	1820s	This pattern was either called “Bear's Paw” or “Duck's Foot in the Mud” depending on where in America this quilt was made and what animals were common in folklore or daily occurrences.
	Churn Dash	1830s	Many pioneers took inspiration from their surroundings when designing quilt blocks, and this pattern resembles the top of a butter churn.
	Grandmother's Flower Garden	1830s	This pattern utilizes many small hexagon patches sewn together and was re-popularized during the Great Depression with fabric scraps.
	Flying Geese	1840s	One of the most iconic quilt blocks, “Flying Geese” is suspected to be a sign in the Underground Railroad Quilt Code signaling to escaped slaves which direction to travel to safety.
	Shoofly	1850s	This pattern represents a small hole in a home's exterior through which a fly could enter and was also rumored to be a sign of a safe home or family in the Underground Railroad Quilt Code.
	Log Cabin	1850s	One of the most popular quilt patterns, this block is constructed in a similar way to how log cabins are created, with strips of fabric laid over each other around a central patch.
	9 Patch Half Square Triangles	1850s	This pattern utilizes nine half-square triangles to create a simple yet beautiful block, often made with one dark fabric and one light fabric.
	North Star	1850s	The “North Star” block is suspected to be a part of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, encouraging escaped slaves to follow the North Star to freedom in the Northern United States.
	Crossroads	1850s	“Crossroads” is rumored to represent Cleveland, Ohio, in the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, as that was where multiple routes to freedom in the North intersected.

	Bow Ties / Hourglass	1850s	This pattern is ideal for scrap fabric, as the hourglass shapes can be pieced from small scraps of leftover fabric to create a nice design.
	Ohio Star	1860s	This beautiful nine-patch design was very popular with early American quilters, especially Amish quilters.
	Drunkard's Path	1860s	The wavering pattern of this block inspired the name "Drunkard's Path," and was rumored to signal to escaped slaves to not travel in straight lines as a part of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code.
	Crazy Quilt	1860s	"Crazy Quilts" are made from scrap fabric sewn together in an organic, unpredictable way. Enslaved women used scrap fabric to create colorful blocks like these, as they did not have access to other forms of creative personal expression or an abundance of fabric and sewing materials.
	4 Point Star	1860s	This pattern was often used in "Friendship Quilts," with the names or signatures of loved ones embroidered in the center squares. These quilts provided comfort and connection for women who were married off or moved away from their communities.
	Dutchman's Puzzle / Wheel	1890s	This pattern goes by different names depending on location, but all blocks include four patches of two flying geese pointing counterclockwise.
	Sawtooth Star	1890s	Another classic star pattern, this block was first published by the <i>Ladies Art Company</i> in 1897 by the name "Evening Star," but has most commonly been called "Sawtooth Star" since.
	Cut Glass Dish	1890s	The jagged appearance of the many small half-square triangles in this patch are reminiscent of cut-glass dishes of the time, hence the name.
	Roman Square / Rail Fence	1890s	This pattern is either called "Rail Fence" if made from solid fabric or "Roman Square" if made from patterns, with strips arranged to create continuous zig-zag designs across the quilt.
	Toad in a Puddle	1890s	"Toad in a Puddle" resembles a small frog sitting in the middle of the square when the triangles on the sides are made from dark fabric and the rest are made from a single light one.
	Tennessee Waltz	1900s	Originally published in 1906 as "Grandma's Star" in <i>Practical Needlework</i> , this design creates an optical illusion of connected stars when pieced together in a full quilt.

	16 Patch	1900s	This pattern looks like four miniature “Simple 4-Patch” blocks combined and was another basic block women could use to get rid of scrap fabric.
	Double X	1900s	“Double X” is a nine-patch block comprised of 6 half-square triangles and 3 solid patches, with the “X” design made from contrasting fabric.
	Oregon State Block	1910s	<i>Hearth and Home</i> magazine asked readers to submit state patterns from 1907 – 1912, and this design was ultimately selected as the official State of Oregon Quilt Block.
	Jacob’s Ladder	1910s	Reading the Bible was a daily staple in the lives of many American women, and this pattern is inspired by the story of Jacob’s Ladder.
	Snowball	1920s	“Snowball” is one of the most recognizable 20 th -century quilt block patterns, and the rounded effect is created by sewing smaller square patches on a diagonal seam to each corner of a larger square.
	Hit and Miss	1920s	This pattern utilizes many small scraps of multi-colored fabric to create a maximalist block, alternating dark and light rectangles of fabric.
	Squares Within Squares	1930s	This block is comprised of 16 solid square patches arranged in a 4 by 4 grid to create the optical illusion that three larger squares are stacked on top of each other.
	Broken Window	1930s	“Broken Window” is made from 32 small half-square triangles and 4 center square patches to look like a window shattering outwards.
	Fox and Geese	1930s	This pattern is arranged with 4 sets of flying geese pointing towards corner half-square triangles, creating the appearance of fox and geese chasing each other.
	Spring Beauty	1930s	This design is a modernized rendition of “Toad in a Puddle,” with an additional set of flying geese on each diagonal.
	Forward and Back	1930s	“Forward and Back” is a four-patch design comprised of four sets of flying geese arranged in opposite vertical directions.
	Old Maid’s Puzzle	1930s	This design is intended to be used as another way to use up scrap fabric, especially when materials were difficult to find, like during the Great Depression when this pattern was created.
	Little Cedar Tree	1940s	“Little Cedar Tree” is an extremely popular “1 patch” quilt pattern, meaning every patch in the finished quilt is the same size and design.

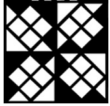
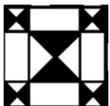
	Arrowhead Puzzle	1950s	This pattern is a more advanced version of “Crossroads,” comprised of many small triangles and squares pieced to create an appealing look.
	Bleeding Heart	1950s	“Bleeding Heart” showcases the use of appliqué, a top-stitching technique commonly used in decorative patchwork and quilting.
	Odd Fellow's Cross	1950s	Odd Fellow's Clubs were a kind of old English trade guild, often comprised of local craftsmen in rural areas, and this block is inspired by their symbol.
	A Design in Geometrics	1960s	Initially published in the <i>Kansas City Star</i> in 1956, this pattern was popularized in the 1960s. This square is meant to be created with patterned fabric, such as plaids and florals.
	Judy in Arabia	1970s	Published in <i>The Perfect Patchwork Primer</i> in 1973, this pattern creates a mesmerizing design when pieced into a full quilt.

Table 1: Annotated Index of Quilt Patterns

This table serves as a compilation of the various quilt squares I found while researching popular historical quilts and is sorted chronologically by the first known instances of each pattern I could find. I included a simple sketch and a few notes about the symbolism or importance of each design to add context to every square I created for my final quilt.

Reflection

Through the process of creating this quilt, I have gained a deep respect and appreciation for all quilters, both past and present. I spent many, many hours seated at my sewing table working to bring each square of my quilt to life, and during that time I reflected on the many differences between my experience of creating a quilt in 2025 and the experiences of women who created their quilts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most significant difference I noticed was how much more work this quilt would have required if I did not have access to electricity, a sewing machine, and the infinite knowledge of the internet. A part of me feels incredibly overwhelmed by the idea of creating my entire quilt by hand, thoughtfully stitched together piece by piece without the aid of a sewing machine or helpful YouTube tutorial when I inevitably get stuck. Simultaneously, I can also understand how hand quilting could be very meditative, expressive, or a way to escape the daily struggles of life, especially for women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century who did not have many spaces where they held authority, freedom of expression, or autonomy. I now deeply admire how quilters of all generations have consistently demonstrated their resourcefulness, creativity, and ability to convey powerful messages through their work

This was the longest I have ever spent on a single creative project, and even though this was my first quilt, I am very proud of the finished product and the story it tells of quilting history in the United States of America. The colorful and whimsical look of the final quilt, the blending of my own fabrics with those of my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, and the visible improvement of my own quilting skills over the course of this project make the hours of difficult work extremely worthwhile. Creating this quilt was truly an experience I will never forget.

Conclusion

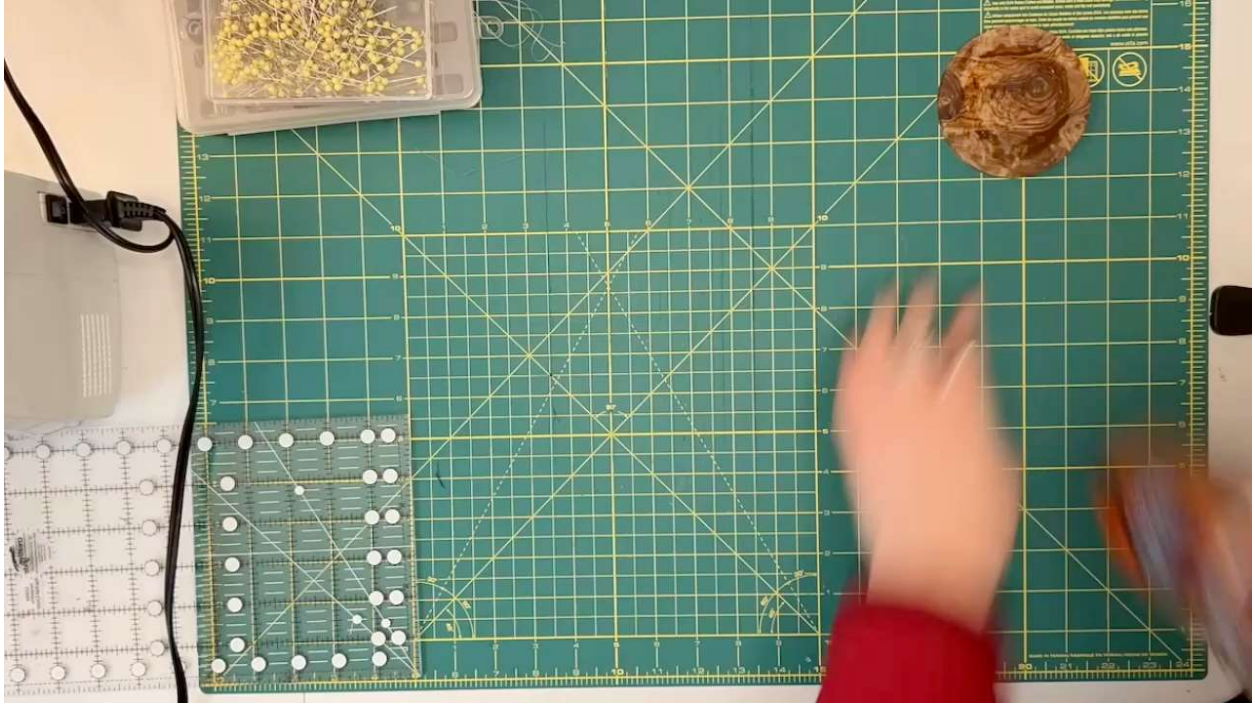
Reflecting upon my research and quilt making process, I now truly believe that there is no meaningful difference between what is considered “art” and what is considered “craft.” Creating a quilt, even if for a purely utilitarian purpose, is still an incredibly intentional and laborious process, as every part of the quilt is a conscious decision that requires time and effort to bring to life. Every choice I made about the quilt’s fabric, pattern, layout, stitching, and arrangement was guided by my artistic eye for color, shape, and balance. This project was far more than simply following instructions to make a useful item-- it was a form of deep personal expression and a highly involved artistic process. I will forever cherish the time and energy that goes into every single quilt, and value the ways women before me expressed themselves through the creative decisions they made with their quilts.

Quilting is not a skill that is taught in formal art institutions, nor are quilts frequently displayed in museums or fine art galleries, but that does not take away from the fact that quilts are deeply creative and personal endeavors that can convey symbolic messages, emotions, and experiences. If “craft” is limited to a utilitarian need and “art” is confined to subjectivity and expression, the beauty of the quilt proves that there are works that lie outside of these binaries.

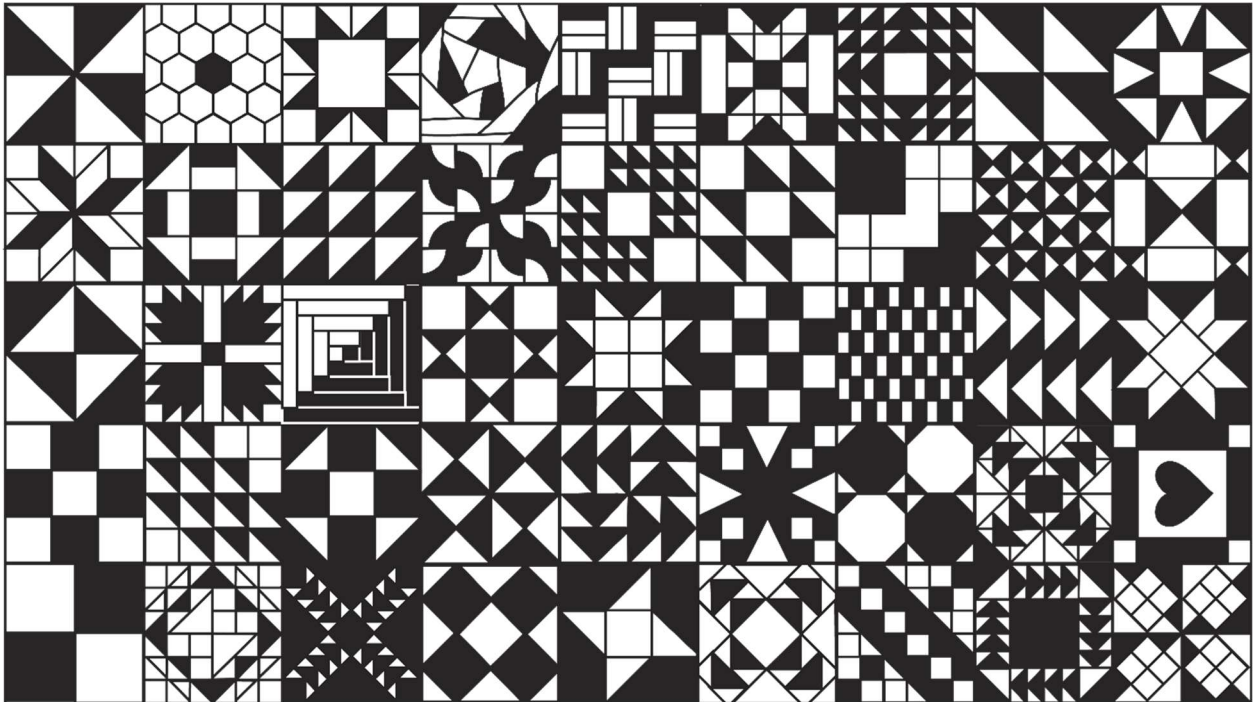
Making this quilt was a laborious, intentional, and deeply creative process, and it has taught me to consider creative works as works in their own right, outside of the categories we tend to put them in. My hope is that this project and my quilt will serve as a reminder that “crafts” are just as valuable and worthwhile as “art,” and to encourage others to become aware of their own subconscious biases towards creative works. I wholeheartedly believe that all creative endeavors are works of art and being willing to understand *why* is the key to preserving these traditions for generations to come.

Supplemental Materials

Video: Time Lapse Process of Creating the Quilt



Photograph: The Quilt Plan (Horizontal)



Photograph: The Finished Quilt on Display



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