

2015

Review of *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon*—Janneken Smucker

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groups” (21), then these connections to the larger Anabaptist world—both temporally and ideologically—should be carefully mapped out.

Nevertheless, Yoder's work is and will be an essential part of the understanding the Conservative Mennonite Conference's history and their present world. His access to the sources, his interpretation of those sources, and his narrativ form of presenting the sources make this a book of importance to anyone who wants to understand the origins, development, and present life of the Conservative Mennonite Conference.

Review of **Smucker, Janneken. *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

By Jana Hawley,¹ *John and Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Arizona*

In this ambitious work, author Janneken Smucker provides a fascinating account of Amish quilts by placing the quilts into the context of history, culture, art, economy, and community. The in-depth book presents more than 100 spectacular color photographs that provide visual context for the well-researched and written text. Smucker is a fifth generation quilter. As a quilter, she understands the meticulous skill and aesthetic nuances needed to produce a magnificent quilt. Her enthusiasm of quilts led her to an assistant curator position at the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a woman of Mennonite heritage, she inherently better understands the Amish culture than many others who have written about Amish quilts.

Smucker couches the entire work in the context of Amish history and culture. As she points out in the introduction, the purpose of the book is not to discuss what Amish quilts look like or how they are made. Indeed many other authors have already done this (Koolish 1994; Pellman 2002). Instead, Smucker helps the reader understand the generalizations and stereotypes of Amish quilts so that an even deeper understanding of the quilts can unfold. She then accurately describes the transitional phenomenon of when outsiders began to collect Amish quilts as pieces of art, an investment, or a souvenir from a trip through Amish country. When collectors became enamored with Amish quilts, the quilts moved from a cultural tradition to an economically driven artifact that will forever change the purpose and production of Amish quilts.

Throughout the book, Smucker has visually made her point with remarkable photos of Amish quilts. The photos range from vibrant examples of quilts as art to close-up images that point to the detail of Amish quilts. Each photograph draws the reader into the book searching for the narrative that supports the photos.

Smucker reminds the reader throughout the book of the historic and cultural tenets of the

Amish. She often provides narratives that further couch the work into cultural context. For example, in the introduction, Smucker explains the *Ordnung*, the rules that define Amish life and explains why one Amish community varies from another. She also embeds many historically accurate accounts that illustrate Amish life and the actions they take. A case in point is her description of the thirty-seven tornadoes that devastated the Midwest on Palm Sunday of 1965. Amish came from all over the United States to help rebuild the wreckage, particularly in northern Indiana. In her account, quilts became part of the relief effort. Thus, quilts serve as a symbol that binds communities together. This and many other stories throughout the book illustrate how the quilt remains a touch-point of Amish culture.

Outsiders are often curious about the Amish, and thus the Amish have become the objects of cultural tourism and idealized perceptions. Many view the Amish as backward and representative of early American life. Much of this has been depicted in movies, documentaries, and even reality shows. As a result, symbolic icons that represent the Amish have developed, including the horse and buggy, one-room schools, barn raisings, lack of technology, kerosene lanterns, and the Amish quilt.

Amish quilts vary widely not only from region to region, but from quilt maker-to-quilt maker. Often Amish quilters are creating quilts that align more with modern quilting trends than with what outsiders view as distinctive “classic Amish quilts.” Quilt designs are also determined by local preferences or availability of materials. Sometimes the quilters would experiment with new designs, color combinations, or techniques, but often they would revert to their favorites. Even though there is variability, Amish quilts still often are bound by certain local church or community rules that determine how to construct a quilt, what pattern and colors are chosen, what tools are used to produce, and what modes of work are used. For the Amish, the quilt continues to serve as a reminder of community, family, virtue, hard work, and thrift.

Often passed from generation to generation, or made as a treasured gift for a milestone family event, the Amish quilt was not intended as a piece of art but instead as either a functional warm bed cover or as a symbolic gesture that binds the generations and the community. Friendship quilts were a popular way for Amish quilt makers to work together toward a final product that would be gifted to a teacher, a minister, or someone that was leaving the community to live in another settlement. Smucker creates a dialog that sends your imagination to where the reader can imagine the quilt being imparted with family stories, personal significances, and cultural values. For example, on page 57, she describes Maude Miller’s story of the maroon nine-patch quilt and how the story remained with the quilt even in subsequent generations.

To the outsider, the Amish quilt has been seen as a representation of modernist American art. Smucker writes a detailed account of how collectors, curators, and critics have represented the Amish quilt as art. Her account tells of collectors such as Doug Thompkins, Jonathan Holstein, and Gail van der Hoof who built collections of Amish quilts by paying pennies on the dollar for quilts that turned out to be worth thousands. The transition of Amish quilts from the

Amish home to the museum wall also changed the ways in which the Amish viewed their quilts. No longer were they only an artifact that bound their families and communities, but now they were seen as marketable items that could supplement family farming income.

Smucker describes the phenomenon of when outsiders began to collect Amish quilts as pieces of art, an investment, or as a souvenir from a trip through Amish country. When collectors became enamored with Amish quilts, the quilts evolved from a cultural tradition to a value-driven artifact that impacted the ways in which Amish quilts were made and distributed. As the quilts became more valued by outsiders, some Amish families became active participants in the marketing of quilts. Amish owned quilt shops and fabric stores became part of the business-mix found in most Amish settlements. Smucker illustrates this through the narrative told about David Riehl's quilt business. Not only was Riehl selling quilts, but he was also brokering Amish culture.

Like any object, the Amish quilt is imbued with dynamic meaning. As the quilts moved from the hands of the Amish to the collectors, tourists, and museums, the meaning of the quilt has changed. Smucker depicts this transition in a complete story that is rich in narrative, history, and cultural explanations. Even though much of the book focuses on this transition, it is an important piece to add to the understanding of the purpose and place of the Amish quilt in modern society.

Endnote

¹Jana M. Hawley did her dissertation on the business practices of the Old Order Amish of Missouri. The study focused on the cooperation among Amish business owners as well as the competition between Amish and non-Amish business owners. She and her two sons lived among the Old Order Amish of Jamesport, Missouri for eleven months while she collected data working daily alongside the Amish. She is the author of "The Commoditization of Old Order Amish Quilts: Enduring and Changing Cultural Meanings" *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 23(2):102-14 (2005).

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