

**"Making Something for Myself": Women,
Quilts, Culture and Feminism**

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Certificate

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Production Note:

Signature removed prior to publication.

Emma Grahame

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Abstract

This thesis juxtaposes a historical and ethnographic account of a highly organised women's activity -- quiltmaking -- with an examination of feminist discussions on art, craft, leisure, culture and folklore. In describing and analysing the quiltmaking revival in Australia, I attempt to show how quiltmakers have collectively constructed a space in which they avoid, and indeed, deconstruct, some of the ideas and practices which constrain women. As a case study, quiltmaking reveals the practical 'workarounds' that these women have found, which enable them to take time and space for themselves in the face of family responsibilities, to be creative and proud of their artistic efforts in the face of conventions of womanly modesty, and to arrange their own public events in the face of training in silence and backroom support. In so doing, they break down the divisions between professional and amateur, commercial and voluntary, and even public and private.

For the most part, feminist analysis has ignored or misunderstood such women. Although feminist philosophers, academics and artists have often used the products of traditionally feminine crafts as metaphors, examples and parables, they have not always done so with knowledge or familiarity. My study of feminist art and craft writing suggests that this is because of a complex interaction between the political and strategic needs of academic feminists at different times and a lack of detailed attention to the actual creative choices of such women, who often refuse the label 'artist', though they are indubitably cultural producers. Similarly, feminist theorists and researchers of leisure have been concerned with why women do not choose the same leisure activities as men, but have discounted the specific pleasures of traditional women's skills, and the homosocial organisations they inspire, as positive reasons for the choice of such activities. Cultural studies analysis, with its emphasis on the products of the commercial media has underestimated the popularity and importance of voluntarily organised cultural production, such as quiltmaking, especially when such production has not been seen as politically interesting. Feminist folklore studies provides the only model for research which takes such activities seriously, and pays attention to the complex ways in which they both subvert and support women's traditional roles.