

The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. 501pp., 165 illus., 3 maps. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN 0 619 44594 3.

Perhaps one of the few things we can say with some certainty about the collective project of design history is that it intends to elucidate the past through analysis of its objects. This, too, is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's aim in *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. The author communicates her knowledge of using and making the objects she has studied just as she reflects on the act of using and making history. Each of the chapters is a self-sufficient object study—perhaps a product of the book's ten-year gestation through a series of papers and awards—but it is when collected here that they, and the numerous links between them, resonate most powerfully. Following an introduction, the chapters discuss, in sequence, 'An Indian Basket: Providence, Rhode Island, 1676', 'Two Spinning Wheels in an Old Log House: Dover, New Hampshire, date unknown', 'Hannah Barnard's Cupboard: Hadley, Massachusetts, 1715', 'A Chimneypiece: Boston, Massachusetts, 1753', 'Willie-Nillie, Niddy-Noddy: Newburyport, Massachusetts and New England, 1769', [1] 'A Bed Rug and a Silk Embroidery, Colchester and Preston, Connecticut, 1775', 'Molly Ocket's Pocketbook: Bethel, Maine, 1785', 'A Linen Tablecloth: New England in the Early Republic', 'A Counterpane and a Rose Blanket: Kennebunkport, Maine, and New England, 1810', 'A Woodsplint Basket: Rutland, Vermont, After 1821', and 'An Unfinished Stocking: New England, 1837'. A photograph of the eponymous object accompanies each chapter along with others of its type, and a range of maps, diagrams, portraits, paintings and broadsides. The illustrations are not extensive being, instead, acutely pertinent and illuminating. In fact, the book's entire appearance gives form to an assurance of quality within.

There is much here with which historians of many creeds may engage, just as the quality of the writing means that each chapter has narrative tension enough to hold a non-specialist audience. *The Age of Homespun* may, therefore, be widely and highly recommended. Thatcher Ulrich's writing is direct, open, friendly and intimate, so it is not a surprise that when discussing spinning she asks us to take the cotton from the top of a medicine bottle and 'Flatten it out, then tear a strip about an eighth of an inch wide. Gently pull on one end so that it grows longer and thinner. This step is called "drawing". As you draw, twist the tip of the extended fiber until it forms the beginning of a tiny thread' (p. 87). This interactive exercise is accompanied in a lengthy exposition on spinning with annotated diagrams so that the reader is fully in agreement when Thatcher Ulrich offers the pithy challenge, 'Some writers refer to spinning as unskilled work. They have obviously never tried it.' The author has learned to spin and she wants us to do the same in order that she, and we, better understand her material.

In her candid text, Thatcher Ulrich regularly reflects on the act of writing history and the significance to it of the study of cloth, spinning and women's work. The most obvious and powerful justification for the study of textiles is found in the Introduction, voiced by Horace Bushnell in his surprising speech at the County Centennial of Litchfield, Connecticut in 1851:

What we call History, as a record of notable events, or transactions, under names and dates, and so a really just and true exhibition of the causes that construct a social state, I conceive to be commonly very much of a fiction . . . It is not the starred epitaphs of the Doctors of Divinity, the Generals, the Judges, the Honourables, the Governors, or even of the village notables called Esquires, that mark the springs of our successes and the sources of our distinctions. These are rather effects than causes; the spinning wheels have done a great deal more than these. (p. 15)

The Introduction goes on to show how 'In the half century since Bushnell gave his speech on Litchfield Hill, the age of homespun had passed from an alternative vision of history to a new kind of orthodoxy' (p. 36). The trope of homespun succeeded in securing the collective imagination as well as providing Thatcher Ulrich with her clarion call for this book: 'To study the flow of common life is to study the electricity of history' (p. 40).

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is Phillips Professor of Early American History at Harvard University. Her previous publications include the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (also televised as a PBS documentary) of 1990, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (1982), and with Emma Lou Thayne, *All Gods Critters Got A Place in the Choir. A Midwife's Tale* (1995) and *The Age of Homespun* share an emphasis on the use contemporary texts as evidence, with the former being based on Martha Ballard's diary and the latter using a range of letters and diaries as well as published sources in conjunction with the objects that form the focus of the book. Thatcher Ulrich's success as a historian has been demonstrated in forums of history both mainstream and elite. At no point, however, is the championing of textile history, the quotidian, and its relevance to understanding wider historical currents related directly to the author's own career at various successive host institutions. In citing a speech from 1851, championing the production of textiles as central to 'History', does Thatcher Ulrich mean to place the argument firmly in the past as one that need no longer be made? Or does she mean to point out that the

argument is not only long running but also ongoing? The structure and content of the book as a whole suggest the latter.

The Prologue begins optimistically with an extremely vivid picture of an exhibit based on the book in the form of a room filled with the objects she studies herein. It closes, however, with a qualification:

A Book is not an exhibit. Words cannot display the texture of a bed rug, the sheen of old linen, or the curious geometry of a niddy-noddy. Nor can words replace the subtle measurements our bodies make as we look up at or down upon things. But with good fortune and sympathetic readers, a book about objects might move through the cluttered rooms of nineteenth century memory and the ordered galleries of twentieth-century scholarship into that dimly seen and never fully realized space we call history (p. 8).

This aim has been well received by Thatcher Ulrich's peers, as the reviews testify. Yale historian John Demos describes her achievement:

Venturing off in a new and highly original direction, she has put physical objects—mainly but not entirely textiles— at the center of her inquiry. The result is, among other things, an exemplary response to a longstanding historian's challenge—to treat objects, no less than writings, as documents that speak to us from and about the past.[2]

Readers of the *Journal of Design History* may wonder whether this approach to the central importance of objects may still be regarded as new and highly original. Such an assertion leads to questioning of whether the use of objects as a way of understanding history differs from the project(s) of design history. Are we concerned more with objects than with wider histories, or are we in fact doing exactly what Demos praises Thatcher Ulrich for her originality in doing here in understanding history through objects?

Thatcher Ulrich is acknowledged to be a 'supremely gifted scholar and writer' by Demos in his review and her work is referred to as 'singular and brilliant' on the flyleaf of the book. I have no quarrel with this assessment. Thatcher Ulrich makes her work look easy through numerous interconnections of people, places and things and through the uncanny demolition of any idea of the past as distant, with the accompaniment of many vivid and pertinent images. In other studies, we are asked to accept one piece of evidence as representative of another, sadly lacking, example. Here, that is rarely the case, and it is clear that the extent and proficiency of Thatcher Ulrich's research is the reason. Her precision and detail are as minute as the basket weaver's. The notes and index adequately meet the needs of the reader in lieu of a bibliography or bibliographical essay. They amply demonstrate that Thatcher Ulrich's commentary is rooted in primary research and archival materials, but equally to be valued is the way in which such sources are put to work to offer an alternative account of the period from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries.

For example, the Native American Molly Ocket made a pocketbook that is used as evidence of the 'contradictory impulses that characterized economic life in the mountain valleys of northern New England.' Those impulses subsumed mere market values beneath the maintenance of interlocking social connections. (p. 267) The pocketbook is compared with items of moose-hair embroidery on birch-bark, initially made in response to a lack of imported embroidery thread. The painstaking technique of using short moose-hair instead of longer threads continued when conventional materials became available, again indicating the continuation of a European tradition modified by the American landscape. Molly's twined moose-hair pocketbook is similarly hybrid—pocketbooks being an imported type-form and the technique being wholly bound up with the New World and its own traditions. In *The Age of Homespun* Molly Ocket's pocketbook sits with other objects that are similarly eloquent products of political and social change.

The Age of Homespun is undoubtedly an excellent text and it appears, in addition, to have made a clear contribution to the way in which history is practised and written in North America. And therein lies the rub, if any may be seen to exist in relation to this splendid text. While Thatcher Ulrich's text has much to offer the design historian in general, and is essential reading for the textile historian and those concerned with early American history, I can't help reflecting upon how much design history has to offer in return. In some ways, at least, Thatcher Ulrich's 'new venture' is a path well trodden in the literature of design history.

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Notes

1 A ruddy-noddy was a wooden 'device to wind and measure yarn' (p. 175).

2 John Demos, ' "The Age of Homespun": Learning About the Past From Objects', *The New York Times*, 11 November 2001.