

# A Mennonite “Grecian” Vase

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Lynette Sarah Plett, “Memorial to Mennonite Pioneer Women,” digital collage created with images of the bronze panels on a memorial at the Mennonite Heritage Village, Steinbach, Manitoba, 2005

*“A Mennonite ‘Grecian’ Vase” rassemble des vignettes autobiographiques sur l’absence de documents visuels sur le travail des femmes dans une courtepointe murale, où elle tente un geste créateur qui revisera les documents historiques.*

On a huge boulder, taller than I, are six bronze panels etched with depictions of Mennonite pioneer women at work: two women bracing themselves against the wind, hanging clothes to dry; a woman sitting on a stool, leaning into the flank of a cow, milking; a woman standing over

a child in a chair, instructing her to read (the Bible); a woman sitting and rocking a baby; three women hunched over sheaves of grain, harvesting wheat; a woman bent over a hot oven, baking. A seventh panel dedicates the memorial to Mennonite pioneer women with the following inscription: “Her children arise up and call her blessed ... give her of the fruit of her hands and let her own works praise her in the gates. Proverbs 31:28.” The boulder and the bronze panels are bold, strong, and permanent markers of Mennonite women’s work, but the

inscription highlights the difficulty with recovering the details of women's work—it is too dependent upon the short-sighted memory of their children.<sup>1</sup>



I scour the family photo albums for any visual documentation of my mother's farm work. But there are no images that depict her cooking or baking in the kitchen. There are no pictures of her sewing clothes or mending. There are no pictures of her washing clothes in the oldringer washing machine, tying the clothespin apron around her ample waist, and then hanging the clothes out to dry, winter and summer, on clotheslines behind the house. There are no pictures of her sitting at the large dining room table in late winter or early spring ordering seeds from colourful catalogues—carrots, lettuce, peas, and beans (and always flower seeds, too—zinnias and marigolds, for example). There are no pictures showing her working beside her husband, sons, and daughters, cultivating, planting, weeding, and watering the garden throughout the summer, or in fall harvesting the vegetables that would feed her large brood the following winter.



My family's albums, I suggest, are not so different from other historical records. And if they are all so devoid of evidence for women's work, how then do we remember and value our mothers' farm labour? In *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, anthropologist, Elizabeth Barber, concludes, "women's work consisted largely of making perishables—especially food and clothing" (286). And, she argues, if we are to recover such a history of women's work, we need to do more than simply use "that which falls into our laps" (286). Barber advocates using an imaginative approach to "wring out every last drop of information" (286) from surviving evidence: "Draw it, count it, map it, chart it, and if necessary (or possible) recreate it" (295). Barber uses, among other sources, a Grecian vase to help support her argument that patterns on ancient pottery were copied from woven fabrics. She also recreates patterns from ancient woven fabrics on her own loom.

What visual evidence there is for my mother's farm work has to be gleaned with Barber's kind of imagination. All photographs of my sister and me, for example, show how carefully Mom combed and braided our hair each morning. Pictures taken at weddings and baptisms show us wearing dresses sewn by our mother. Photographs of my brothers hold evidence of the hearty meals she cooked and the breads she baked—for they are all strong, healthy men. But I wonder how different my perspective of their work would be if I'd had access to a rich pictorial and textual history of my mother's and grandmothers' farm work—their contributions to their family's economic, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

And so, in addition to viewing photos in the family album differently, I find another way to depict and thereby



Lynette Sarah Plett, "A Mennonite 'Grecian' Vase,"<sup>2</sup> quilted wall hanging, 51 x 97 cm, © 2007. Materials: cotton fabrics, cording, cotton embroidery floss. Machine embroidered, hand appliquéd, machine quilted.

value Mennonite women's farm work. I recreate it visually using an art form that I have inherited from my mother and grandmothers—quilting.



"A Mennonite 'Grecian' Vase" is based on the same Grecian flask (550 – 530 B.C.) that was one of Elizabeth Barber's sources for her research. It depicts Grecian women's wool work. Working in groups of two and three, the women weigh, spin, and weave wool. Two women fold the finished cloth.<sup>3</sup>

These images move me deeply for they remind me of Mennonite girls' and women's farm work—standing side-by-side with my sister washing dishes, my mother and her sister Lena sitting together mending stockings, my grandmothers Sarah and Elizabeth working alongside their daughters—Marie and Lena; Nettie, Lisa, Tina, Esther,



Lynette Sarah Plett, detail, "A Mennonite 'Grecian' Vase," quilted wall hanging, 2007.

Freda, and Mary—in the kitchen and in the garden.

The intricately painted images on the small flask make visible Grecian women's wool work in ways that Mennonite women's farm work has seldom been recorded. The artist who painted these images honoured the importance of women's everyday work by documenting it in such a way that the evidence of it remains thousands of years later.

In a creative and revisionist act, in place of the images depicting Grecian women's wool work, I machine embroidered an image of Mennonite women's farm work—two women bracing themselves against the wind, hanging clothes to dry.<sup>4</sup>

Using an art form I inherited from my Mennonite foremothers—quilting—I create an artifact that supplements the often short-sighted memory of historical records. "A Mennonite 'Grecian' Vase" honours the everyday work of my foremothers. It recovers and recreates visual evidence for Mennonite women's farm labour.

*Lynette Sarah Plett was born and raised in a Mennonite farming community in Manitoba. When she left Manitoba to begin doctoral studies in Toronto, she began using quilting to express and represent her academic ideas and research. Her doctoral thesis, Thinking Back Through Our Mothers: A Sampler Quilt of Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite Women and Country Homemakers (2006), uses quilts and quilting as processes and metaphors to recover, recreate, and represent farm women's everyday lives.*

<sup>1</sup>This paragraph was part of the introduction to one of the blocks of my doctoral thesis quilt, Lynette Sarah Plett, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers: A Sampler Quilt of Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite Women and Country Homemakers" (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Toronto, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>"Mennonite 'Grecian' Vase" was part of the April 2007 Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) Art Exhibit, *Looking Back, Looking Forward*. Images of this exhibit are available on the OISE/UT website: <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/student-services/conferences/artexhibit.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Images and a description of the Grecian urn that inspired this project are available on the Metropolitan Museum of Art website: [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/evdy/ho\\_31.11.10.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/evdy/ho_31.11.10.htm).

<sup>4</sup>The image is based on one of the bronze panels on a memorial to Mennonite pioneer women in Canada. The memorial, sponsored by the Mennonite Heritage Village Ladies Auxiliary, is located at the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach, Manitoba. The memorial was completed in 1985.

## References

Barber, Elizabeth Wayland. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994.

## JOANNA M. WESTON

### On Clover Hill

the child smells purple  
amongst the green

counts leaves  
up to four

lies face down  
in the bee-rich world

takes the hum  
inside herself

as she sings  
soft clover songs

and holds fast  
to the luck in her hand

*Joanna M. Weston has published internationally in journals and anthologies including The Missing Line (Inanna Publications, 2004).*