"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 revisite 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 Mennonite “grecian” vase; 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.¹

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 old ringer 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 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.³

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,
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.¹

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.

References


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).