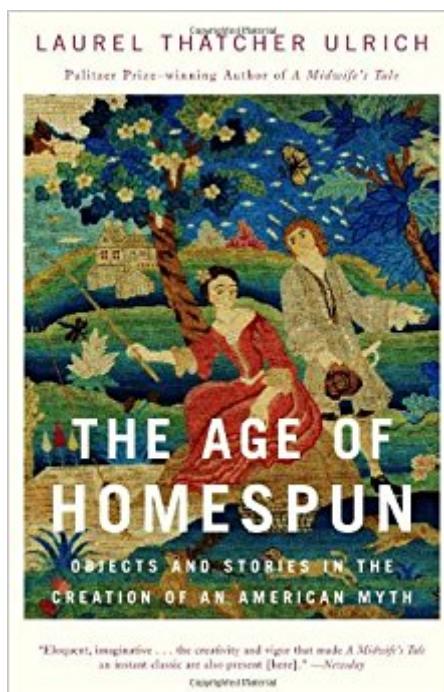


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# The Age Of Homespun: Objects And Stories In The Creation Of An American Myth



## Synopsis

They began their existence as everyday objects, but in the hands of award-winning historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, fourteen domestic items from preindustrial America—ranging from a linen tablecloth to an unfinished sock—relinquish their stories and offer profound insights into our history. In an age when even meals are rarely made from scratch, homespun easily acquires the glow of nostalgia. The objects Ulrich investigates unravel those simplified illusions, revealing important clues to the culture and people who made them. Ulrich uses an Indian basket to explore the uneasy coexistence of native and colonial Americans. A piece of silk embroidery reveals racial and class distinctions, and two old spinning wheels illuminate the connections between colonial cloth-making and war. Pulling these divergent threads together, Ulrich demonstrates how early Americans made, used, sold, and saved textiles in order to assert their identities, shape relationships, and create history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1851, when theologian Horace Bushnell stood on the village green in Litchfield, Conn., and looked back lovingly on the "Age of Homespun," he was expressing a perennial American nostalgia for the "good old days," when clothing and other necessities were mostly made at home by family labor. Historian Ulrich (author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Midwife's Tale*) has not set out to deflate the sentimentality that accompanies Bushnell's vision, but rather to trace its genesis and understand how it has weathered the test of time. In her previous works, Ulrich studied the lives of

ordinary people, examining their diaries and what they left for probate when they died in order to understand their place in history. Here, under the tutelage of various museum curators, Ulrich shifts toward a material culture study studying objects to understand the people who used them. From 14 artifacts of early American life (baskets, spinning wheels, needlework, etc.), Ulrich uncovers details about their makers and users and the communities they built. Eighteenth-century New England was a battleground of Indian, colonist, slave and European cultures, and each left its mark on the design of these "surviving objects." A quote from Bushnell and an illustration of an object open each chapter. What follows is anything from a rambling digression on a particular cabinet's provenance to a detailed discussion of how dyes were made or flax prepared. As fascinating as the book can be, though, general readers may give up halfway through, finding it frustratingly diffuse and too much of a patchwork. But early Americanists, historical sleuths and "textilians" will delight. 165 illus.

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Items produced in the home to be used by their owners and treasured by later generations are worthy of study in their own right, but they also tell us much about those who made and kept them. Ulrich, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, again offers brilliant insights into the lives of early Americans, as she examines their material culture as well as their lives. This engaging combination of women's studies, history, and the study of museum artifacts will delight a wide variety of readers. Chapter by chapter, Ulrich presents interesting early American objects and follows their description with the even more fascinating stories of the people who owned them and the world in which they lived. This work, approachable for the casual reader but based upon firm scholarship, would be a welcome addition to most larger academic and public libraries. Theresa McDevitt, Indiana Univ. of Pennsylvania Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

One stitch at a time, one woven inch a day. It's hard for us nowadays when every piece of clothing from our skin to winter hats & gloves come from every country in the world, made on machines. My kind of history book: it takes a handstitched/woven relic & expands on its past & future, reminding us that after the War for Independence, America headed straight into the Industrial Revolution which had historic & life-changing influences on the family unit. Imagine how treadle sewing machines changed women's clothes. Have given a copy to all the women in my life whether they sew or not, &

we talk/email about it. Amazing the attitudes: One of the first reactions was from a friend 16 years older: "Women were such slaves then!" I reminded her that her husband still labors for hours every single day in the fields of their farm. 30 years ago this would have fed the Feminist Fire, today, Feminist though I be, I'm old enough to read it for the information, vision & wisdom it transfers.

In the Age of Homespun, Ulrich examines "homespun" artifacts or artifacts relating to the creation and storage of homespun goods in early colonial America. Each chapter of her text is devoted to a particular artifact, such as an Indian basket, spinning wheels, a Niddy-Noddy, a chimneypiece, a pocketbook, linens, and a cupboard. However, the chapters are not merely about these artifacts. Instead, Ulrich uses the artifacts as a lens or a vehicle through which she examines the complex social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics of the time period the artifact stems from. Further, Ulrich uses these articles to "write" history--women's history--that has largely been unwritten in history texts. Each chapter of her text really undermines the myth of an idyllic and pastoral society and provides a fascinating look at the complexity of the times.

These books for charming!

Read this book to find out how the impulse to fill our closets with old textiles and oddments fulfills a cultural tradition so deeply imbedded that it may as well be a genetic imperative. Ulrich's sensitive descriptions of the nuances of colonial society explain how bits of fabric evoke class distinctions, wealth, and a sense of self worth. Perhaps even more interestingly, the interpretations that the descendants give to these items tell us more about their contemporary society than genuine colonial history -- something to muse over as we wish for the "good old days" (My goodness, who would EVER have thought the 1970's would be something to remember fondly?!?) This is a scholarly book, and the earlier review that suggests readers may be tempted to give up halfway through is correct. Stick with it though -- there are rewarding insights in the final chapters. Throughout, the early colonial history is fascinating and the personal details are tantalizing.

Ulrich is always an interesting read.

This came in perfect condition! It is not a cosy analys such as A Midwife's Tale but rather an indepth history of certain objects, how they came about, their purpose and the stories surrounding them. A bit technical but extremely interesting for a history buff.

yes very intense and interesting if one is interested in the New England history of the world of fibers of all kinds from linen to basket reeds.

I love history and combining it with fiber makes this book a great read for me. I would recommend it to any fiber artist.

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