Quiltmaking in Connecticut 1750-1850
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The history of quiltmaking can be traced back thousands of years. The art of quilting originated in several parts of Asia and has been practised in Europe since at least the fourteenth century. Of course, the practices of quilting and patching are as old as the use of cloth. By the first half of the seventeenth century, bed quilts and quilted clothing were common in many parts of western Europe. When the first English and Dutch settlers arrived in America, they brought with them knowledge of quilting, and, most likely, quite a few quilted blankets. Even if they had brought no quilted or pieced articles, they would have remembered many things which they had seen or heard of in Europe, and when the necessity arose, they could use that knowledge to suit their needs. Though the colonists relied heavily on imported European manufactured items, articles such as imported fabric and thread were too expensive to be bought continually. Local flax and sheep raising took some time to develop to an adequate level, so when bedclothes wore out, it was not easy to replace them. Though no American quilt survives from before 1700, it is likely that seventeenth century quilts were made from the scraps of the original English bedclothes, plus the scraps from clothes making, or articles totally worn out since.

It is possible to guess at the design of these quilts by examining eighteenth century designs and the earlier British styles. British quilts tended to be one patch designs, which means that the quilts were composed of any number of, for instance,
squares or rectangles of the same size, all sewn together and attached to the filling and backing, and quilted. The Puritan housewife was faced with the problem of attempting to do this with several good, large pieces of perhaps wool or linsey-woolsey, and many smaller pieces which she wanted to make use of. What many women apparently did was to use the pieces as they were, rather than waste thread seaming pieces that had been whole. The first concession to design, however, was to trim all the pieces into squares and rectangles and thus impose some kind of order on the 'crazy quilt.' The next important design concept was to build the quilt around its center. The quilt would have some special design for its center, with the rest of the pieces being sewn in rows around it, perhaps in rows of darks and lights. The largest pieces formed a characteristic wide border. Though these 'center medallion' quilts were formed from necessity, later the women who made them took advantage of the increasing prosperity of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to create new and beautiful forms of quiltmaking.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the work of most women in Connecticut centered on a rural sort of lifestyle. From the time they were small children, most girls (and boys too) learned to sew, knit and spin, and many gradually learned the arts of weaving, dyeing, quilting, and other skills needed to make the household self-sufficient. Particularly around the time of the Revolution, it became very patriotic, and often
very necessary, for household industries to supply the goods formerly purchased from the more industrial England. Though the products were produced on a small scale, and the nation lacked capital and banks, this necessity paved the way for the expanding industries of the early nineteenth century. Women themselves had been producing imitations of costly European goods all along, and it is their efforts at this which make the history of quiltmaking so unique. This idea of invention by necessity was repeated again and again as the frontier gradually moved west.

Aside from what they carried over from England, perhaps the first influence on New England habits was the skills to be learned from the Indies. Some influence from an art such as weaving is to be seen in the designs which survive in quilts and other domestically manufactured items. The close proximity of the seventeenth century New Englander to the Indians, whether welcomed or not, could not have failed to influence colonial women, particularly if goods were exchanged, or women were themselves daughters or descendants of Indians.²

As prosperity increased in the eighteenth century, Connecti cut men and women, particularly those with easy access to a trading center such as Middletown, became increasingly aware of the current European fashions. Though of course not everyone desired to live like the English or French, they were affected by the design trends of the imported goods all around them,
and when they went to make their own textiles, and other decorative household items, they adopted elements of the designs around them.

The East India trade, which had a huge impact on European textile manufacture, was by 1700 booming. The first Indian palampores and other prints were well received in London in the early seventeenth century, but the prints which were actually put on the market were tailored to London merchants' specifications. The India prints were valued for their fast dye and colorful splendor, but they were more saleable when the Indian artists copied British and Italian embroiderers' and lacemakers' designs. These commissioned fabrics flooded the European market, and they were so popular that French and British linen and wool producers were eventually protected by a ban on further imports. Even the European entrepreneurs who imitated the India prints were banned in 1700, though shortly after they were working again. The French and English ventures to create India-like prints led to important discoveries about weaving, dying, and printing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The prints were generally of two kinds: large pictures which were like India palampores, and smaller repeated prints which were called callicoes or chintzes. The American market was also busy with these India prints, both from India and from European factories.

For most Americans who could not afford this type of import, there were still many choices. Most households spun their own thread or yarn, with the aid of a large spinning wheel (for wool)
and a small wheel (for flax), and various carding and cleaning tools. Weaving, however, required a larger set-up for which few households had room or capital. Therefore, weaving was often done only in a limited number of households in a community. One weaver could keep up with nine or ten spinners. Women took this 'homespun' and dyed it with mineral and vegetable dyes. The dye pot, located over a low fire near the house, was used either before or after weaving. In Middletown, at the close of the eighteenth century, 'dying drugs' could be bought at the William B. Hall Co., but apparently each spring some indigo dying stands would be set up somewhere in Middlesex County where people could bring their yarn or cloth. Linen, tow, and other kinds of material could be woven in checks or stripes, and wool could be hooked into ordinary or decorative patterned rugs for beds. For those who wanted further ornamentation in their textiles, the most common form of printing was relief printing with wooden blocks (which would be locally carved.) With a good knowledge of dying processes, women could tackle printing efforts with some success, either by stamping the dye onto the cloth, or by stamping a mordant solution on, which would hold the dye in the desired spots. Sometimes cloth was simply painted with dye in the desired pattern, or a chemical agent which would discharge the dye was stamped or painted on. These home processes were no different from the processes employed by professional dyers in the early eighteenth century. Two- or three-tone blue resist printing, which employed a waxy
substance to prevent dying in some areas, was practiced extensively in New York in the eighteenth century, and no doubt this was sold in Connecticut as well. 5

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, however, advances in the textile field lessened the need for so much home production. Though cotton was not grown extensively in the South until the cotton gin solved the problem of cleaning it in 1792, it was grown elsewhere and spun and woven in Great Britain. So the spinning and weaving advances of the eighteenth century occurred in England, and were with difficulty brought to the United States. From 1790 to 1810, the American textile industry was aided by the slowing down of British-American trade, and the subsequent increase in American capital. By 1815 many textile products had become much cheaper in Connecticut, and ideas about design with regard to printing and quilting making began to change rapidly.

Eighteenth century textile design came to be dominated by 'toiles de Jouy'; one- and multi-colored prints from France, which were done on Indian cotton and linen. Originally concerned with imitating India style designs using copperplate and, after 1785, copper roller presses, this factory produced large and small prints of nature, neo-classic, and historic scenes. These carefully printed fabrics found their way into only the wealthiest American homes, but other companies, such as the Peels factory of Lancashire, England, specialized in a less expensive product for American export, and produced large American- oriented prints from 1770-1850.
Many inventions from these kinds of factories led to better multi-colored and small printing, new dye colors (particularly green which had always been a blue-yellow combination) and better bleaching and finishing processes.

Still, much of this was too expensive for the Middletown woman of the late eighteenth century. Wallpaper, which developed alongside fabric printing, and floor carpets were also much admired, and these things might have been known to exist in merchants' homes. The designs for these items, and the designs for what replaced them in the United States are closely connected. The high style at the time for bedroom furnishings was to buy a huge quantity of toiles in one pattern for coverlet, hangings and curtains. The average woman, who was lucky to have a bedroom in her home, could hardly aspire to this. However, she could take scraps of new material and good pieces from old dresses and shirts, and with the help of dying, skillful piecing and perhaps some embroidery, make attractive quilts or coverlets for the beds. This was at a middle stage in quiltmaking when women had a little extra time and material to devote to decorating, yet not enough to make quilting so much more time consuming than the other forms of domestic manufacture.

Yet gradually, styles changed from homespun, home-dyed pieced quilts to the other form of quilting; applique work. Calico baskets, flowers, fruit, and trees, which were sewn onto whole cloth, came closer to the toile ideal, and the exis-
tance today of many appliqued quilts from the late eighteenth century shows not only that some women had time enough to make these skillfully cut, sewn, and quilted articles, but that they were considered very special and elegant and hence have survived all these years. Doubtless more ordinary pieced quilts were being produced, from necessity, but the constant need for old rags for papermaking, and the habit of using and reusing cloth until it was rags, has wiped out any quilt that did not have some special value.

Bed quilts seem to have been needed, and owned, extensively in Middlesex County at this time. Beds in Middlesex before 1810 were of the bedstead and cord type, furnished with either a feather bed (for wealthier people), a straw bed, or of a type unspecified in the county Probate records. Beds were also made of leaves, moss, or horsehair. The straw used may have been barley, which was recommended in Mrs. E's 1804 Domestic Encyclopaedia. Most bedsteads had underbeds, which themselves can have bedsteads and cords. A boulster and two pillows are usually included with each bed. Probate inventories also indicate the presence of quilts and woolen blankets in about equal proportions. Inventories from around 1820 show a few 'high bedstids' as opposed to 'coCommon', and a few field beds, also with curtains. One very wealthy household with seemingly common bedsteads and cords has '3 suits bed curtains', so apparently some normal bedsteads could accommodate curtains. Curtains are significant because they indicate increasing availability of cheap fabrics, and because
they provided extra warmth in unheated upstairs bedrooms, and perhaps some privacy.

Quilts, when described in these inventories, are often 'callicoe' or 'blue', there is also a 'blue and brown', 'red and black', 'green edged', 'brown edged', and 'flannel'. Around 1820 the descriptions are more apt to be 'pieced', 'patched', 'woollen', 'pieced callico' or 'piece work', along with some 'blue' and 'calico'. This change in notation, if not in the styles of the quilts themselves, indicates that there was a difference between a 'pieced quilt' and a 'quilt', perhaps indicating the emergence of applique, or perhaps distinguishing older, random scrap quilts from a more elaborately designed quilt.6

By 1820, quilts were losing their 'center medallion' style, and many after 1800 were being made in small, identical squares which were then sewn together, with a border added. Applique quilts were also likely to be made from small squares, and as the nineteenth century progressed, quilts became less centered, and more uniformly integrated. Wool and other materials which had been used for batting were succeeded in the nineteenth century by ginned cotton from the South, which was relatively inexpensive. Many quilts were made more carefully and leisurely than in the eighteenth century. Color, design and quilting worked together over the whole quilt and quilters were more apt to consider their work very carefully. Women may have been able to become aware of the artistic possibilities
of their own homes, and have time, if not money, to make up for the lack of carpets, wallpaper, and imported coverlets.

Stencilling, on walls, floors, furniture and fabric is very typical of these efforts. Stencils or 'splattering' could be used on floors already painted to prevent splintering, but they were more likely to be used on 'floor cloths'—painted canvas which saw a lot of wear and therefore seldom survives today. Illustrations E and F seem to show examples of this. Though this work could be done at home, the cloths could also be bought. 'False carpets' were advertised in 1762 in the Boston Evening Post, and painted canvas floor cloths were advertised in 1773 in the same paper. In Middleton, women who may not have been able to buy the finished product may have done their own, or itinerant artists may have provided that kind of service. Stenciled walls were also popular, done either by itinerant artists or the occupants themselves. Stencils themselves could be made or copied at home on heavy paper and cut with a knife and scissors. In addition to painted stencilling, effective things could be done with dyed stencils on fabrics. This method was often used with thin cambric to make decorated window shades, which were replaced in Victorian times with more opaque painted shades.

Design possibilities could abound even (or especially) for a woman who had never seen European painting and sculpture. Stove panels, hooked rugs, quilts, stenciled furniture and tinware, furniture and woodwork carving, lace, embroidery,
and crewel work, and woven items all shared similar ideas about beauty, and designs were borrowed heavily among these arts. More obviously European items such as pressed glass, carpets, wallpaper, decorated china and slipware were also influential, and often served as the standard of elegance.

Fabric was an integral part of these trends, particularly as it was increasingly made in America. The years 1785-1820 saw an increasing supply in Middletown of printed fabric, and toward the end of that period, no doubt the prices were becoming increasingly reasonable due to the British-American struggle for control of the American marketplace. In 1806, Daniel Mitchell's Middletown dry goods store was inventoried following his death. The prices per yard of the materials point out some interesting comparisons. Among the very cheapest are camlet (wool and silk; imported), calimanco (wool and silk, made in Flanders), India cloth, and striped Nankeen (buff colored Chinese cotton). These were very popular in the eighteenth century, and must be remnants of what had gone out of style. In the same price range are tow, brown linen, durant (glazed wool), calico, and homemade and imported striped linen. So the fact that a material is imported does not seem to price it automatically above locally produced goods. Slightly steeper are birdseye (patterned cloth), plaid Nankeen, flannel, serge, dimity, and apron check. The muslin, jean, cambric (fine linen), crape, marseills, and velvet are in the next range, and cassimere and broadcloth (both for men's cloths), velvet and printed marseills are the most expensive. In general the cloths are priced (except
for the first few) by the cost of producing them — whether in America or Europe. We can also note a low proportion of prints. Only a few years later, in 1810, Henry Lyman offers gingham, a variety of calicos, figured satin, and plaids for sale in the Middlesex Gazzette. He also offers 'chintz borderings' which were very popular for applique quilts and coverlets.

In the nineteenth century, quiltmaking had become such an American institution, and had reached such a high level of elaboration and artistic sensibility, that quilts were replacing to an extent what they had originally set out to imitate. Quilts themselves were becoming more and more dependant on purchased goods. Some quilt materials were still being produced at home, but home industries were changing drastically in the early nineteenth century. The desire for mass produced goods was being fulfilled, but at the price of the eighteenth century lifestyle. Quilting probably survived the industrial revolution because it was more than a frugal means of keeping warm; it was a fascinating means of artistic expression for women who thought they knew nothing about Art.

The Connecticut woman's lifestyle changed drastically in the early nineteenth century. Whereas in the eighteenth century a married woman was responsible for the maintenance of numerous household tasks which, with the help of single female family members, kept the home somewhat self sufficient; in the
nineteenth century, those single women and husbands were likely to be working in factories or shops. The homemade articles and services which had been so important could now be purchased with the husband's wages. This left the housewife with a different kind of work, and she alone was to perform it. It was not her privilege to enjoy the earned leisure of the working people -- she was still governed by the eighteenth century notion of constant chores, and hence the ideal of the nineteenth century housewife was to fill every 'spare' moment with still more household duties. An occupation like quilting was ideal for this time because it used up spare time and materials, and produced useful items. Most importantly, it was an outlet for the creative energies of a woman whose work (cooking, washing, cleaning) had turned her from a producer to a consumer.

Many women were caught between the older occupations and the industrial lifestyle. 'Putting out' systems caused many women to spend their time at only one type of household manufacture, such as weaving or sewing, and use the meagre wages to supply the other household necessities. Some women in Middletown kept up such pre-industrial occupations as straw hat weaving to earn money. There were, of course, women who could quickly abandon eighteenth century habits and adjust to a life of leisure. Mary Russell, a wealthy British girl who lived in Middletown from 1796 to 1801, was an early example of this. Compared to equally affluent Anna Green Winslow, a 1770's Boston girl, who spent all her time at spinning, sewing
and school, Mary Russell did no household work, but was rather only expected to enjoy herself. Mary's 'literary pursuits and elegant accomplishments' set her high above (in her opinion) the Americans who were so busy with the care and provision of their families. In a few years, Mary Russell would have found many peers among the wealthier people in Connecticut. 9

Domestic science books of the 1840's, however, were still trying to clarify the role of the housewife in the society of the day. Catherine Beecher, a Hartford resident, examined women's place in the changing economy. In the Revolutionary era and afterwards, most luxuries were imported, so the refusal of housewives to buy them could often help the American economy and cash flow. In the 1840's, however, Catherine Beecher points out that if people bought only what was absolutely necessary, about half the community's workers would be jobless. By 1840 Connecticut was a consumer oriented state, and domesticity was vital to the survival of the economic system. Women were torn between the demands on their time from outdated ideas about frugality and home industry and new ideas about their relationship with and responsibility to their husbands and children. 10

By this time quiltmaking had acquired a new meaning. In addition to its link to former ways of housekeeping, it became a kind of symbol, as the nineteenth century progressed, of American history, which women clung to because it was distinctly their own. Quilts began to acquire names with historic, biblical, or personal meaning, and though these names could
change from place to place as the west expanded, they gave the quilts added meaning and tradition. Also from 1800 to 1850, the artistic tradition of quilts and other household items gained new stature as distinctive American paintings were made in Connecticut and elsewhere. These continued to exhibit 'the qualities we have come to recognize as stylistic characteristics of American Folk Art -- clear, simple and bold design, flat, unshaded shapes, strong contours, and an honest, uncluttered and straightforward presentation of subject and surroundings...11 The quilt styles established in the early nineteenth century have been constantly revived to the present day, whether or not they reflected the style of other household furnishings. Simple, geometric quilts had their place even amid Victorian clutter. So the attempts of American men and women in the eighteenth century both to keep up with the styles of their day and to add something of themselves to their many different kinds of handiwork resulted in a distinctly American art form.

The 'discovery' in the 1970's of the unique sense of style inherent in many quilts led to a revival of interest in this art. Ironically, when the established art world recognized quilts as Art, they chose only those quilts, such as Pennsylvania Dutch works, which mixed brilliant color with bold design, in ways characteristic of modern art of the 1970's. These quilts were not even hailed as avant-garde, rather they were still seen as quaint folk art, with a surprising
similarity to real Art. Other quilts with appliqued designs and less dramatic colors are not seen by, for instance, Jonathan Holstein as Art, because they are not similar to currant art trends, or to the European art trends of their day.12

This kind of selective appreciation ignores several important points. First of all, virtually all quilts were made by women, and were influenced by the work of itinerant artists, neighbors and by the interior design trends of the wealthy. Quilters, in turn, influenced itinerant artists, neighbors and interior design trends of the emerging middle class. So attempts to separate bold, masculine designs from decorative, feminine ones ignore the real background of the items. Secondly, within the context of quiltmaking, many women exhibited extraordinary artistic talent, for which they had few other appropriate outlets in nineteenth century America. Quilts are rather unique in that they combine several processes which must be carefully coordinated to be effective. And finally, articles need not be useless to be Art. Such areas as furniture making, architecture, and pewter- and silversmithing (traditionally male occupations) have gained recognition in their own right, while quiltmaking is still spoken of as a handicraft or at best folk art.

Quiltmaking in America has always stood at a distance from the European Art traditions, and this has given quilts their integral place in American art. Quilt designs stem from a time
when both men and women in America had to simplify European styles to fit their needs. The fact that the distinctly feminine art of quiltmaking had such an important place in early American art shows what women were capable of before control of such things as decoration came to be dominated by male industrialists.
Illustrations

A - D: Eighteenth Century Quilts
E, - G: American Paintings
H - I: Applique Quilts
J: Nineteenth Century style Stenciled Quilts
K - M: Design Influences

A. from Quilts in America (orlofsky)
Plate 16. Framed Center Variation Quilt. Pieced. Linsey-woolsey and glazed worsted. Massachusetts. Last quarter 18th century, 93" × 74". Fragments of thirteen different linsey-woolseys as well as sections of glazed worsted materials are found in the pieced center. Heart motifs are quilted throughout. (Collection of Jonathan and Gail Holstein.)
A very old design with the "Windmill" center and "Hit or Miss" in the rest of the quilt. In the "Hit or Miss" quilts we find organization of the size of the pieces of material used, but little in the arrangement of the material itself as every old piece of printed cotton was used.

C. from Robertson, American Quilts

Edition Museum, Dearborn
Plate 3. Framed Medallion Variation Quilt. Pieced. Cotton and linen. Connecticut, 4th quarter, 18th century. 83" x 85". There are over 150 different printed cotton fabrics used in the quilt. The quilt is one of the Copp Family Household textiles. (The Smithsonian Institution.)

20 Quilts in America

D. From Orlofsky, Quilts in America
35. 'MARTHA BARNES AGED 96'
Lucius Barnes  Watercolor c.1834
Middletown, CT.

Collection of the author

6.
From Lipman, American Primitive Painting.
This laurel border of tulips is repeated in the spread. The hounds in the branches carefully spread.

Ann Robinson of Connecticut started her spread on October 1st of 1813 and finished it exactly three months and twenty-seven days later, for she cross-stitched this information into her counterpane for posterity so that we would have a record of her work. She also appliqued a matching bolster cover measuring 37 x 20" in a similar design of calico patches.
Above: Applique quilt made of cotton prints manufactured by John Hewson, the first printer on cotton in America. The quilt itself was made by Mrs. Hewson, (nee Zibiah Smallwood) in 1830.

Plate 32. One-patch stenciled Quilt. Stenciled and pieced. A pink floral chevron motif printed on muslin alternates with stenciled homespun squares of birds resting on floral branches. Probably Connecticut. 2nd quarter 19th century. (Courtesy of Mrs. Morton C. Katzenberg.)

Plate 33. One-patch stenciled Quilt. Stenciled and pieced. 90" × 88". A blue resist-printed calico alternates with stenciled roses. The backing is of pieced linen. The quilt is bound in 1/8" strips of two figured blue cottons. There are hearts quilted in the corners of the blue squares and shell pattern quilting in the stenciled squares. Connecticut. 2nd quarter 19th century. (Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.)

Plate 34. Stenciled Quilt. Cotton top and homespun linen backing. The top is pieced in 10" squares, the outlines of which are quilted in a trailing leaf design, with a quilted rosette at the joining of each set of 4 blocks. The stenciled meandering vine is placed in long narrow sets that surround each block. 80 3/4" × 81" (without fringe). 2nd quarter 19th century. (Courtesy of Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Massachusetts.)
(Art Institute of Chicago)

(Courtesy Index of American Design)

R. from Robertson, American Quilts
“Les Delires des Quatre Saisons.” A Toile de Jouy copperplate print, designed by J. B. Huet at Jouy, about 1785.

From Robertson, American Quilts.
Elaborate wood carving, such as these two examples, suggested designs for quilts and embroidery. The one at the left is on a mantel in Pingree House, the one on the right is in the Pierce-Nichols House, both in Salem, Massachusetts.

Below: This late eighteenth century American coverlet, probably made by the Pennsylvania Dutch, could also have suggested a motif for many a quilt design.
Footnotes

1. Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States.
2. Mainardi, "Quilts: the Great American Art".
3. Middlesex Gazzette, August 9, 1799.
4. Middlesex Gazzette, March 31, 1795 (Enoch Green)
    March 25, 1795 (Oliver Merrow)
    May 15, 1800 (Cuff Boston)
    August 31, 1820 (Noel Ives)
5. Pettit, America's Printed and Painted Fabrics 1600-1900.
6. Middlesex County Probate Records 1792-1823.
7. Earle, Customs and Fashions of Old New England, p. 120.
10. Sklar, Catherine Beecher.
11. Graves, "Three Centuries of American Folk Art."
William A. Alcott, *The Young Wife* (Boston, George W. Light, 1837)


Lillian Baker Carlisle, *Pieced Work and Applique Quilts at the
Shelburne Museum, Museum Pamphlet Series, no. 2 (Shelburne, Vt.: The Shelburne Museum, 1957)


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Alice Morse Earle, ed., Diary of Anna Green Winslow, A Boston Schoolgirl of 1771 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1894)

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Middlesex County Probate Records, Middletown, Connecticut, 1792-1823.

Middlesex Gazzette, Middletown, Connecticut, 1785-1820.


