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An Early-Eighteenth-Century Pieced Quilt in Montreal

JACQUELINE BEAUDOIN-ROSS

McCord Museum, Montreal

In America, we know of no published example of a pieced quilt with an early-eighteenth-century date.¹ Neither do written references of the period exist for this type of bedcover. In Europe, however, we do have early mention of patchwork bedcovers, with the first dating back to a twelfth- or thirteenth-century French poem, *Les Lais del Desiré*. Then there are no references for several hundred years, although allusions to this type of work become common by the eighteenth century. Of these, a well-known early English mention is found in Jonathan Swift's *Guilliver's Travels* of 1726:

When my Clothes were finished, which was done in my House, (for the largest of theirs would not be able to hold them) they looked like the Patch-Work made by the Ladies in *England*, only that mine were all of a Colour.²

¹ See Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York, 1974). An American quilt, the Saltonstall Quilt, has been dated 1704 through circumstantial evidence and family history (Orlofsky, 18-19). However, Ann Farnam, Curator of the Essex Institute at Salem, Massachusetts, where the quilt is now located, believes the date to be erroneous. Along with other textile curators in the area, she believes that the fabrics employed date from the mid- to the late nineteenth century (letter to the author, 21 August 1979).

² Averil Colby, *Patchwork* (London, 1964), 22, 96. The words 'patchwork' and 'pieced' are used interchangeably by the author. The passage from Swift is from *A Voyage to Lilliput*, ch. vi.

³ I am grateful to S.M. Levey, Assistant Keeper, and to Wendy Hefford, Senior Research Assistant, Department of Textiles and Dress, Victoria and Albert Museum, for this information.

⁴ The quilt was made of ivory silk with a patchwork border of green and ivory in a 'windmill' design (cf. Colby, 101).

⁵ See Mary Conway, *300 Years of Canada's Quilts* (Toronto, 1976), 11-26, for early Canadian quilts. The McCord Museum likewise possesses an unpieced greenish-brown wool quilt which is dated 1725-35 through historical documentation and on the advice of the late Mr. and Mrs. Harold Burnham. The bedcover is earlier than any discussed in Conway's book. We shall however see that the silk patchwork example under discussion is more precisely dated.

The earliest English pieced bedcover discovered until now has been dated ca. 1708 on circumstantial evidence and is in the Levens Hall Collection near Kendal in Cumbria (Fig. 2). The quilt is constructed of seventeenth-century chintz fragments in the form of patchwork and appliqué. Its provenance is English and its work is characterized by extremely fine stitching, probably reflecting a development from an earlier tradition.

An interesting silk patchwork quilt of later date is found in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Fig. 3). It is fashioned of silk squares, both plain and patterned, some possibly from the late seventeenth century, but most from the mid- and late eighteenth century. Its squares are constructed over paper templates in five different manners, including ones which are diagonally quartered, and some which are not at all divided. The embroidery motifs include flowers and animals, with some of the latter from Aesop's *Fables*. The bedcover has no history, despite the tantalizing initials N.S.C. embroidered in the centre.³ Yet another silk patchwork quilt, reliably dated 1750, is known to have existed in 1934 in southwest England, but it has dropped from sight.⁴ These are the only two eighteenth-century *silk* patchwork quilts of English origin known to me. English pieced bedcovers were generally made from calico, linen, or cotton.

The McCord Museum in Montreal possesses a predominantly silk patchwork quilt (Fig. 1) which, interestingly enough, is dated 1726, the same year as the oft-cited reference in *Gulliver's Travels*. As previously mentioned, no example of a pieced quilt of such an early date seems to exist in North America.⁵ As the appliqué year could be commemorative, or simply added by a later



FIGURE 1. *The McCord Quilt, 1726*. Pieced silk (including brocaded silk and damask), velvet, linen (printed and plain), and cotton: the border of brocaded silk. McCord Museum, McGill University, Montreal (Photo: McCord Museum).

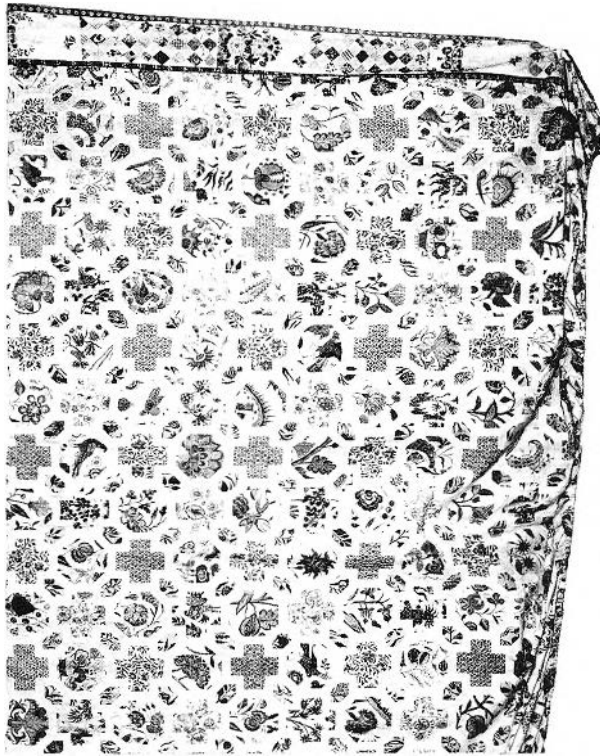


FIGURE 2. *The Levens Hall Quilt*, ca. 1708 (detail). Appliquéd and pieced 17th-century Indian chintzes. Levens Hall Collection, near Kendal, Cumbria, England (Photo: Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

but poorly informed owner, we must attempt to verify the date by internal evidence in order to evaluate the quilt's significance.

Unfortunately, the bedcover's provenance does not really contribute to any authentication of its dating. The textile was owned by Mrs. John Cridiford (née Purnell, 1811-68) of Montreal, but we cannot establish its history prior to this. However, one might note that John Cridiford's parents, John and Elizabeth Pridham Cridiford, immigrated into Canada from England in 1832. Although we know nothing of the Purnell family history, the Cridiford immigration suggests a likely English origin for the quilt. It is nevertheless difficult to ascertain a more precise source without further documentary evidence, for no other 'best' patchwork bedcovers have been published from this early period. It does seem at least probable that 'best' patchwork coverlets, even if made in North America, would be influenced by those in England in much the same way that we know American fashionable costume was affected by European styles.

6 Orlofsky, 299-300.

The 'McCord Quilt' measures 207 by 197 cm and is constructed predominantly of rows of multicoloured and diagonally-quartered squares over paper templates in silks of many types. These include embroidered fragments, brocaded silks, damasks, and velvets, as well as both printed and plain linens and cotton. These patches surround a large central square having a medallion which, in turn, contains an eight-pointed star. (Pieced fabrics are also used in this central area.) A wide border of multicoloured brocaded green silk completes the quilt. The centralized design is often referred to as the central or 'framed' medallion style, and it was this pattern which was popular in the United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶ Thus the design of the quilt is itself supporting of an early date.

A fine American example of this central scheme is the later (1785) Anna Tuels pieced and appliquéd marriage quilt (Fig. 4). It is once again fashioned mainly of diagonally-quartered squares over paper templates. In this case, the

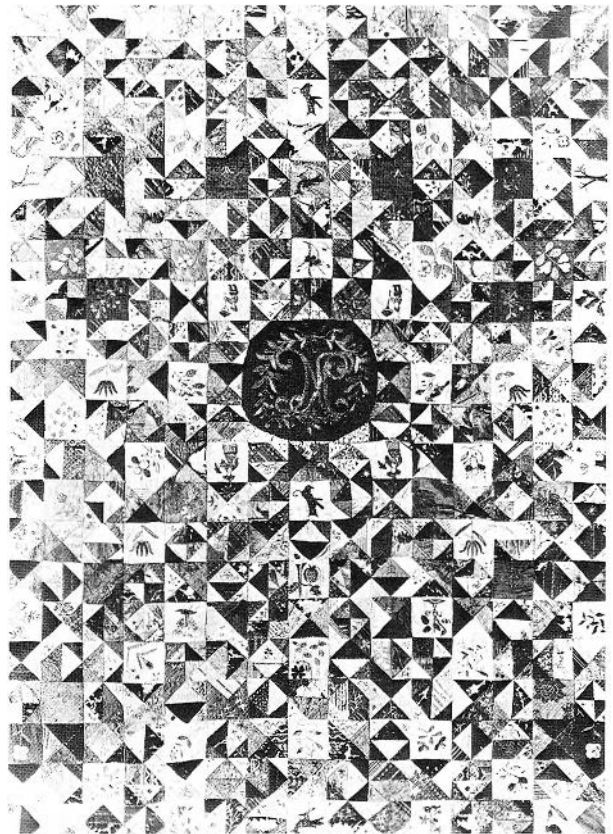


FIGURE 3. *The Victoria and Albert Quilt*, late 18th century. Pieced plain and patterned silks, with embroidery motifs of mainly flowers and animals and the monogram N.S.C. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Photo: Victoria and Albert Museum).

multicoloured fabrics are linen, corduroy, and cotton with a few silks, while the patchwork is framed with a pink glazed wool border. Now the pattern formed by piecing the squares with four triangular sections of fabric has become known as the 'Yankee Puzzle' pattern.⁷ As mentioned before, the squares in the McCord Quilt are essentially pieced in this manner, although some are pieced with only two triangles, and yet others in diverse manners. The so-called 'Yankee Puzzle' pattern exists in the Anna Tuels and Victoria and Albert quilts, and in a late-eighteenth-century quilt in the Henry Francis du Pont Museum at Winterthur, Delaware.⁸ These comparisons again point to at least an eighteenth-century dating for the Montreal quilt.

The fabric segments in the McCord Quilt are folded over paper templates, some of which are without writing, while others feature handwriting or even printing. The sections with handwriting reflect an upper-class provenance and are further substantiated by the fine variety of fabrics in the quilt top. The template construction is shared by all three above-mentioned quilts.

Textiles employed in quilt-making usually include those collected over a period of time. The McCord bedcover is no exception to this rule. In the upper row of patches are found block prints of small-scale stylized florals in tones of rose, rust, and brown combined with neutral. These prints are securely dated in the early eighteenth century.⁹ Also in this row (the right triangle of the fifth square from the left) is an example of an eighteenth-century blue linen resist print with *picotage* (pricked work) on a white ground. Although many other examples of this latter textile are found in American museums, it is yet to be determined if they were indeed *made* in America.¹⁰ Again strongly in favour of our appliquéd date is the presence of multicoloured fragments of silks dating, rather surprisingly, from the early seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries. Further support to an early date is given by the early-eighteenth-century striped silk which backs the quilt; indeed, there is an absence of textiles later than this date. Even the date of the English or Dutch brocaded silk border – the last part of a quilt with which one works – is ca. 1725, a date consonant with the year '1726' which is found on the quilt.¹¹ Thus it seems that 1726 was indeed the year in which the bedcover was completed.

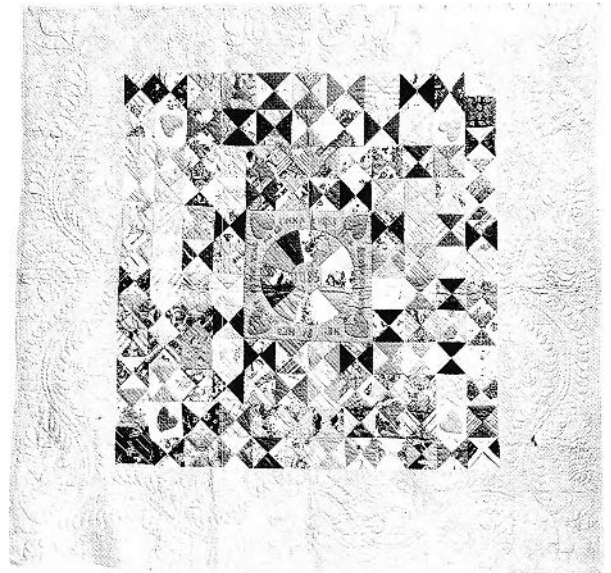


FIGURE 4. *The Anna Tuels Marriage Quilt*, 1785. Appliquéd and pieced with plain, striped, printed and damask patterned linens, patterned corduroy, printed cottons and a few silks, the border of quilted pink glazed wool. The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut (Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford).

In conclusion, the McCord Quilt's construction, design, and fabrics all clearly indicate that its appliquéd date relates directly to the period of its execution. It would then be the earliest known example of a pieced bedcover in North America. It is then all the more regrettable that its origin cannot be securely traced.

While the McCord Quilt is constructed of a few fabrics other than silk, the great predominance of this textile strongly connects it with the silk patchwork tradition. No earlier bedcover in this tradition seems to exist. As a result, the McCord example becomes, in effect, the earliest known extant silk patchwork quilt, its colourful and unfaded silk remnants echoing an all but lost tradition.

7 Jonathan Hollstein, *The Pieced Quilt* (Greenwich, Conn., 1973), 26.

8 Orlofsky, pl. 53.

9 Florence Montgomery, *Printed Textiles, English and American Cottons and Linens, 1700-1850* (New York, 1970), 16-22.

10 See Florence Petit, *America's Indigo Blues, Resist-printed and Dyed Textiles of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1974).

11 Nathalie Rothstein, Deputy Keeper, Department of Textiles and Dress, Victoria and Albert Museum, kindly conveyed this latter dating information from photographs. Dorothy (Mrs. Harold) Burnham was able to study the quilt itself and agreed with Rothstein's overall dates.