

Feature



Quilted Clothing in America

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Quilted clothing existed well before the founding of the United States, but the unique styles and techniques over the past 300 years have produced a uniquely American art form.

Mention the word "quilting" and you summon up a plethora of images: thrifty pioneer housewives piecing patchwork coverlets for their families; album quilts signed by bridesmaids, or perhaps even a sprightly petticoat worn by a dainty colonial lady as she danced with George Washington. The popular image of the quilt is often pieced, calico, and American. This stereotype is not correct, though there is evidence that by 1733 there was at least one bed quilt in the colonies.

Quilting is commonly believed to have originated in Asia and migrated to Europe during the time of the Crusades, when soldiers needed padding for protection under their heavy armor. Since there are a few ancient Egyptian sculptures showing figures that seem to be wearing quilted clothing, the origin of the technique may be even earlier, but no extant textiles exist to prove this. But there is evidence, even in early times, for recycling of quilted items of one sort into

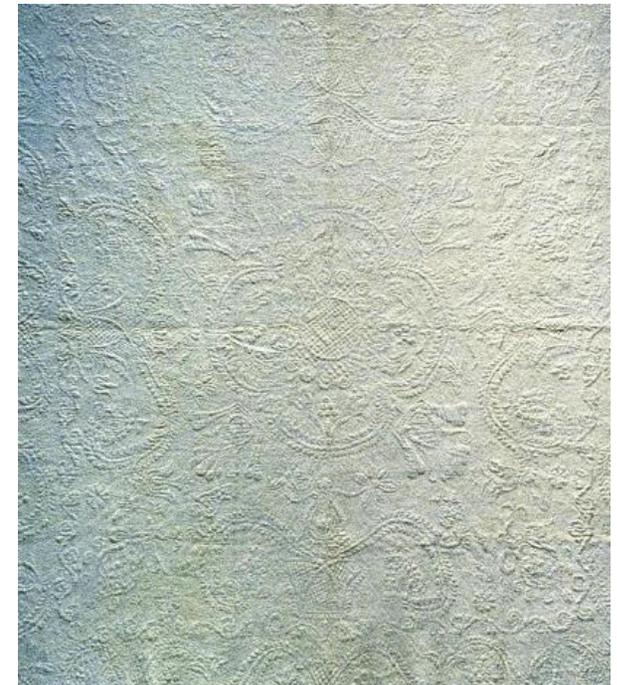


Quilted doublet of the late 1630s has clearly been fashioned from another textile, probably a bed cover. Photo: [Victoria and Albert Museum](#).

another. The silk suit (above) from the early 1600's was probably made from a bedcover.

North America, particularly the United States, is often recognized for a long tradition of quilt making in both bed coverings and garments. Counterpanes and garments of the Colonial era were generally whole cloth quilts with fine needlework, like Eve Van Courtland's counterpane (right). Piecework styles soon followed.

A piecework bed quilt in Canada's McCord Museum is dated 1726, and pieced from small pieces of silk, velvet, and brocade, but it may have been imported. The next oldest is Anna Tuels' medallion style patchwork quilt, known to have been made in America in 1785. Although piecework existed prior to its use in America, it was here that it achieved its highest expression, growing from the simple need to use even the smallest fabric remnants due to of the



Eve Van Cortlandt's fine linen quilted counterpane is one of the earliest dated American quilts in existence. The date, "1760" and her initials, "E V C," are embroidered in blue silk cross-stitch on the quilt lining. Photo: [Smithsonian Collection](#).

scarcity of fabric in the colonies, to a globally recognized art form with hundreds of different patterns that developed over time.

By the mid-1800's the Industrial Revolution had reduced the cost of textiles, and increased the color options. Quilt making in the United States became even more widespread. With this trend came the rise of artistic patchwork patterns: first simple geometric shapes, followed by more creative and complicated designs. The use of quilting continued to expand whenever warmth without bulk or strength without stiffness was needed.



Quilted Stays - Williamsburg. Photo by [Kate Newton](#).

The final innovation to impact quilting was the sewing machine. By the 1870s a good many households owned one and women could now sew their family's clothing much more quickly. This left more time to devote to quilt making. They could also use their sewing machines to make all or part of their quilts. Thus a hobby was born which still attracts men and women today.

Quilting is the ultimate delight for recyclers. Old bed coverings become clothing, from hats on heads to quilted slippers. Old clothing becomes new pieces for quilted tops used for pillows, upholstery and new counterpanes. Once Americans had taken the technique to their hearts, it has never gone completely out of fashion; it merely cycles around and re-appears in another form or style.

So how did quilting become such an "All American" favorite?

European Quilting in the American Colonies

During the early years of European colonization padded or quilted garments (example at left) were being imported and might have been being made locally. Designed for warmth, the geometric stitching patterns they used at the time might be interpreted as decorative, but most of these garments were either worn as underwear, were covered with an outer layer of fashionable un-quilted fabric, or were worn in the home and not in public.



Woman's waistcoat; silk and linen, hand-sewn with silk thread, c. 1745. Bright yellow was a popular color for women's dress from the 1740s to the 1770s. Photo: [Victoria and Albert Museum](#).

The idea of a difference between underwear and outerwear as it is understood today had no real meaning in the 18th century. At the lowest levels of society, a working woman might shed her "outer layer" while doing heavy work, and work in her shift, stays and petticoat, permitting her stays, which we would consider "underwear", to be seen as the outermost layer. But what was permissible clothing depended much more on the activity being done, who was likely to see you, and whether you were in a "public" or "private" space.



Full Dress Outfit with Pink Petticoat – Williamsburg.
Photo by [Kate Newton](#).

The first actual evidence of quilted items in New England is given in household inventories from 1633 and 1685. In the 1700's "bed quilts" began to be differentiated from "quilts" (quilted petticoats), but these were not the only uses for quilting. Many types of garments are made of wool, linen, cotton and silk. Not only petticoats, but waistcoats, stomachers, jackets, pockets, bonnets and cloaks are being quilted. Men also wear quilting in the form of nightcaps, dressing gowns and coat linings. Quilting coat linings and petticoats not only provided warmth, but also helped to shape and support a lady's skirts or gentleman's coat tails. Trapunto style corded quilting was also a popular method of quilting in America for stiffening petticoats.

As skirts began to open in the front during the early 18th century, women chose more decorative quilted petticoats to add another layer of detail to their ensemble (photo at left). A fine petticoat indicated the status of the owner. An extremely refined design would have been extremely labor intensive and thus costly to purchase. Making one's own design showcased the maker's taste and sewing skills. In addition, "quilting parties" of three or more friends provided a social outing. Unmarried girls might attend one of these events as often as every six to eight weeks.

Many women purchased quilted goods for their households. London was an important center of production. Pattern designers would draw the patterns and

Sewcabulary

Quilting – a sewing technique involving two or more layers of fabric, usually sandwiched with padding of some sort, stitched together in a decorative pattern.

Trapunto – as the quilt top and backing are sewn together certain areas are stuffed with batting or cording to make them stand out. Alternately the areas may be stuffed from the back of the quilt after all the sewing is completed.

Piecework or *Pieced work* - Also known as patchwork, pieced tops are made with fabric pieces sewn edge to edge, as in a mosaic to make a design, or freely wandering (crazy quilt).

Appliqué - Decoration is "applied" by stitching different fabrics to the surface of a plain background fabric.

Whole Cloth - The whole item is one piece (or type) of fabric, with no piecing or appliqué work to add other types or colors of fabric.

Cheater Cloth – A printed fabric that mimics a piece work quilt top.

Tied Quilt – The quilt is tied together at intervals with yarn or string instead of quilting stitchwork.

professionals of both genders would do the quilting. Quilted goods in silks and wool were shipped to the colonies flat and put together after their arrival, by local tailors and householders.

Although skillful quilting of fine fabric was a sign of wealth, sewing together layers of fabric for warmth was done by the poor as well. If someone couldn't afford wool or cotton to sew between the two layers, they could use old blankets, used clothing or even feathers, straw or leaves. Quilted garments were worn on all social levels from rich to poor. It is even documented that indentured servants and slaves sometimes wore them as well as the highest-ranking persons of society.



Mid 19th century silk quilted petticoat. Photo: [Antiques Associates](#).

Throughout the 18th century, a brisk trade with England provided colonists along the Eastern seaboard with ready-made articles of fashion. Quilted items from professionals could be purchased, but many women enjoyed making their own petticoats. The fad for quilted petticoats for women and coattail linings for men was at its height from 1688 to 1714, but poorer people wore them for much longer.

During this time, as in the past, bed quilts continued to be made into clothing and on occasion museums (Old Sturbridge Village is one) have found extant bed quilts that were just as obviously made from quilted petticoats after they had gone out of fashion.

Quilting in Post Civil War America

Some one hundred years later, quilted petticoats re-emerged from fashion purgatory to become part of women's everyday cold weather wear. Some extant older petticoats were actually re-gathered on new waistbands to be used again. Whether



Vintage slave quilt. Photo: [Les Stockton](#).

worn as a matching petticoat, or one of contrasting fabric and color, petticoats were worn two to three at a time. After all, it was the only garment women had to keep the lower half of the body warm aside from a pair of stockings or split drawers. Outerwear, such as bonnets, was quilted as well.

Men found the lining of the shoulders and upper chest of their new coats was once again being quilted to improve the fit, but the great innovation of the age was the pieced bed quilt. The 19th century was perhaps the heyday of this American institution.

Old clothing and scraps from family sewing found their way into quilts. Wealthier women produced quilts as a

leisure project. Quilts also still provided warmth for families with few resources. Some of the most famous quilt patterns of this period grew out of slavery, as former slaves dyed their own rough cloth and produced beautiful quilts reminiscent of their heritage and culture (previous page).

Quilting and the Modern American Myth

All the American myths about quilting came together in 1954 when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer decided to adapt a short story by Stephen Vincent Benét into the film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. MGM considered this a B movie at the time, but it has become a classic of Americana.

Costume designer Walter Plunkett had arrived at MGM in 1945. He specialized in



Heavy patch-quilt skirt with red lining and coordinating petticoat. Worn by Jane Powell in the movie *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Handwritten label "1643-3523 JANE POWELL." Sold at Debbie Reynolds auction, Dec. 2011. Photo: [collector auctions](#).

insets, you will see that the petite lead Milly, played by Jane Powell, does wear some costumes obviously made from real quilts (photos at left and below).

Plunkett was extremely fortunate. At that time, there were old quilts available as cheaply as \$5.00 each or less in thrift stores. In the 1950s, quilts were out of style and available to be re-born again as clothing.

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Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her [web site](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.



Jane Powell, Virginia Gibson, Norma Doggett, Ruta Kilmonis, Betty Carr, Nancy Kigas, and Julie Newmeyer. Publicity still from the movie *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, 1954. Photo: [Jane Powell Scrapbook](#).

period and ethnic costumes. Once he was assigned to the film, he spent months rummaging through Salvation Army stores to try and find old quilts suitable to turn into "authentic" dresses for the girls, rather than using cheaper cloth that simply looked like the patchwork that was called for in the script.

While many of the brides' gowns are plain fabric with gingham