



Janet Reuter

September 2020

Quilting and patchwork as a beautiful visual and historic reflection of the past.

This month I would like to continue exploring things that are rare and beautiful. Objects that have their roots in the past when people spent their time designing and making things with great craftsmanship, patience, and artistry which grew out of the needs of their times. Textiles have always been a major part of my life and the art of patch working was for me a wonderful form of meditation and a chance to preserve “snip-its” of many decades of fabric design. Basically thought of as a hand craft, patch working is also an important art form which gives us a vast amount of important historical knowledge.

Recently, as a result of the corona crisis and the long periods of lockdown these older traditions have been rediscovered by young people to help them spend their time creatively. The Guardian newspaper has reported on many individual projects where the **Brits** have turned their idle hands to stitching, knitting and crochet and produced some wild and beautiful results. So let us start by looking at the history of quilting and patchwork in Britain.



The history of quilting can be traced back at least to medieval times. The word '**quilt**', linked to the Latin word '**culcita**', meaning a bolster or cushion seems to have first been used in England in the 13th century. The earliest quilting was used to make bed covers, very fine quilts are often mentioned in medieval inventories and frequently became family heirlooms. Throughout their history, many superior examples of the technique have survived by being passed down through generations. However, during the medieval period, quilting was also used to produce clothing that was light as well as warm. Padded wear could be put on under armour to make it more comfortable, or even as a top layer for those who could not afford metal armour. For the aristocracy and rich people this technique was used to construct the most elaborate and highly decorative garments both for men as well as women adding physically to their size and status. The pictures above show **Henry VIII** and **Elizabeth I** who were painted in their finest garments which were designed to give them a larger than life image and reinforce their status as head of the monarchy. The technique of padding and quilting was used to enlarge the garments therefore giving the body more prominence. Henry VIII was once described as the '**Best Dressed Sovereign in the World**'. In Tudor times, there were laws which governed who could wear what colours, fabrics and furs. Only the King could wear purple, sable fur or cloth of gold. Henry VIII adorned himself with lots of jewels. His clothes were inlaid with jewels, including a diamond that was described as '**the largest walnut you ever saw.**' Rubies and pearls were extremely popular and used on most garments for that extra rich effect. Henry VIII was the only man allowed to wear a hat in his company but women always had to cover their heads

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Quilting and patchwork (continued)



Queen Elizabeth I, followed very much in her father's footsteps when it came to fashion. As a rather small woman, approximately 160 centimeters, in a very big man's world, she used the same methods of garment making to increase her physical image. Lots of padding and quilting. Enormous wealth of precious stones were used to adorn her garments.



Elizabeth's influence on fashion extended beyond women's clothing. In the early years of her reign, men's fashion was much the same as it had been under her father and brother, favouring a broad, square silhouette with layers of garments made of rich fabrics. As her wardrobe became more opulent and elaborate, with a more exaggerated silhouette, so did that of her courtiers. Men wore corsets to give them a cinched waistline and stuffed **'peascod'** doublets, which gave them a pointed pot-belly, like a pea in a pod. This richly quilted garment was made to give her the appearance of an arc angel, especially made in white.

Her influence on the female face was also drastic. The Renaissance ideal of beauty was fair hair, a pallid complexion, bright eyes and red lips. Elizabeth was striking in appearance, with pale skin and light red-gold hair. She exaggerated these features, particularly as she aged, and other women sought to emulate them.

An alabaster complexion symbolised wealth and nobility, signalling that one did not have to labour in the sun, and women went to great lengths to achieve this look.

The most popular white foundation, called ceruse, was made out of white lead and vinegar. Concoctions used to bleach freckles and treat blemishes often included ingredients such as sulphur, turpentine and mercury. These toxic ingredients took their toll, leaving the skin 'grey and shrivelled'. To combat this, the skin was glazed with raw egg white to produce a smooth, marble-like surface.

Elizabeth's curly red hair presented another challenge for the fashion-conscious, and many recipes for dyeing and bleaching emerged as women tried to achieve the same look. Red wigs became a popular alternative, which Elizabeth also took to wearing. As Elizabeth aged, her legendary sweet tooth caught up with her, causing her teeth to decay. Her influence by this time was so pervasive that some women went so far as to blacken their own teeth to mimic her appearance! Quite incredible!



There was great competition amongst her courtiers to receive one of her cast off dresses which was worth an absolute fortune. Hand made, hand quilted, hand jeweled!

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Quilting and patchwork (continued)

During the **Tudor** times fabrics for the rich were extremely valuable, cloth of gold was imported from China and only worn by the monarch. The most expensive and decorative fabrics were also imported from Italy or France where the technology to produce them was much more developed than in Britain. The making of them was slow and relied on tedious hand skilled workmanship. So you can imagine that all the „**snip-its**“ or left overs were carefully saved and used for other products such as hand crafted bed covers and cushions. The **Elizabethan** period saw the start of the **Commonwealth** and gradually the wider use of cotton. Cotton was difficult to grow in colder northern countries but could be grown in warmer climates and so it could replace other fibres such as linen for clothing and interior fabrics. Later the developments in printing fabrics led to very wide variations of fabric design and to much larger social groups who could afford these fabrics. However, nothing was just thrown away but left overs were kept to be put to use .



From the **17th century** until the **20th century** the craft of patchworking by hand sewing was very popular. The remnants of clothing and interior fabrics were sewn into beautiful bed covers, wall coverings and cushions. Quilts were made from the finest velvets and silks to basic cottons which were not so expensive. A quilt told the story of a whole family and what they had worn over many generations. Even the men in the family were represented, as quilts in mens outer wear fabrics were turned into very warm bed covers for the cold Winters without any central heating!

The women in the family would get together to sew a marriage quilt for a young girl to receive as a gift on her wedding day. The birth of a baby or a wedding anniversary were also events which needed a quilt. These quilts were then passed down from one generation to another as family heirlooms. This tradition was called a **quilting bee** and was an important part of the social life of women especially in the 19th century. Prisoners including men were encouraged to make quilts as therapy in the prisons at this time!

As a result of this interest and love of patchworking we have centuries of examples of fabric and the social history of the people who made them. The **Victoria and Albert Museum** in London has a wonderful collection which includes not only British quilts but examples from all over the world.



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Quilting and patchwork (continued)

People lost interest in quilting and patch working in the **20th century** but this interest was shortly revived in the **hippie era** of the late **1960's**. The use of an electric sewing machine meant all sorts of items could be made very quickly. Clothing, accessories and household items were more colourful, unusual and individual than the standard shop bought items. The wonderful London markets like **Portobello Road** were full of stands selling flowing hippie patchwork clothes and bags in the 1960's.



Here are some examples of quilts made in the 20th century and sewn by machine not by hand. The fabrics from these examples could be bought from shops which specialize in selling everything you need to make your own individual quilt. There are also many books to explain how to do it. I personally prefer to hand sew my quilts which are a special history of my family and life and working by hand is an important form of meditation for me personally.

I was inspired to write about the theme of patchwork this month because I received a beautiful example of this as a modern cushion design by one of my lovely ladies, **Petra Kohlen**. Petra has been working in this technique of fabric design for many years now and has a large collection of very original quilts which are hung as wall hangings or cushions. Thank you so much Petra, I feel very honoured to get such a present!



News for and about the English ladies.



Knives Out: a new film which you can download. Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer), a wealthy writer, is turning 85. His eclectic and eccentric family has become fragmented, but Harlan believes he can reunite them at his birthday. After the entire family gathers at his mansion to celebrate him, he is found dead the very next morning. When the police begin to

investigate his death along with private investigator Benoit Blanc, (Daniel Craig), many family secrets come to light. There are now multiple murder suspects, and they must figure who is responsible for Harlan's death. Inspired by novels of Agatha Christie novels, with a great cast!

Birthdays in September:

Juliane Ott

Happy Birthday, Juliane.

