

# Uncoverings

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## **White Work Classification System\***

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White work bedcoverings date from the neoclassical period (1790-1830) of American decorative arts. The beauty of all white work resulted from an infinite number of intricate stitches which produced dramatic three dimensional qualities. Most of these bedcoverings feature a large central motif; the designs were suited to the revival and reinterpretation of Greco-Roman motifs inspired by the finds at Herculaneum and Pompeii. The white surface area of bedcoverings during this period is yet another interpretation of "classical purity." The same florals, cornucopias, wreaths, urns, medallions, and tassels will be found on textiles as well as furniture, glass and ceramics of the period.

There are three major types of white work bedcovering: embroidery, candlewicking, and Marseilles quilting or stuffed work. The latter two classifications are further divided depending upon whether the example is hand or machine worked. Often two or more of these techniques could be combined. It is especially common to find candlewicking combined with embroidery. One often finds examples of stuffed work (or Marseilles quilting) combined with either applique or piece work in the early 19th century.

White embroidery on a white linen or cotton ground provided an effective decorative technique for bedcoverings. These embroidered bedspreads should not be confused with candlewick spreads because they employ flat embroidery techniques which do not rely on the French knot to achieve a nubby effect. Often these spreads feature the names, birth or wedding dates, and residences of their makers or recipients. The

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embroidery yarn is cotton, sometimes two ply cotton, and the flowers and vines have become more open and more swirled. An embroidered bedspread of about 1815 shows a variety of stitches, but they all produce a flat outline and texture. This particular bedspread was made in Laurens County, South Carolina.

Of the dozen embroidered bedspreads which have family histories in the DAR collection, they are predominately from Virginia, South Carolina and Kentucky. None of them is from the North, nor is any of metropolitan origin. Exclusively they seem to be southern and rural. As such they show less of the neoclassical inspiration in their decoration, tending to be more naturalistic. Very often these flower-vine decorations have been called The Tree of Life motif. It would probably be more appropriate to assume that the decorations were more closely associated with crewelwork or with the popular designs of printed chintz from the end of the 18th century. Also, since these bedcoverings tend to be southern and rural, it is quite possible that some of these wool yarns were not available or alternatively that the desire for certain kinds of patterns existed longer in a more rural area.

Candlewick refers to the soft bulky yarn used as an embroidery material. Candlewick spreads could be made by machine or by hand. Usually handmade candlewick spreads are limited to the use of French knots. Sometimes the knots are not the classic French knot done in silk embroidery, but because the yarn is particularly nubby, a knot-like effect is achieved. Actually these stitches are much more like the basic outline stitch in embroidery. Many women, however, achieved different effects with other stitches, and by clipping the exposed wick or threads. This is often called tufting, and when the candlewicks were close together, it produced a sculpturally interesting effect. Machine-made candlewick bedspreads continue to be popular today and are usually referred to by their manufacturer as "heirloom" or erroneously as "colonial style."

An exceptionally fine machine-made candlewick was made in Philadelphia in 1834 and carries the name "William H. and Mary Fowler." A large star forms the center with small stars and flowers along the border. The designs, when executed by machine, appear geometric in form. A flower border shows the linear quality which is characteristic of the machine-made spreads. These machine-made examples are woven in one panel and are not seamed.

In contrast, the handmade candlewick bedspread of Alida Holmes of Montgomery Co., N.Y. 1812 is executed in French knots. It features a central panel with the federal eagle and "E Pluribus Unum." The two

borders surrounding the central panel show neoclassical tassels and swags. Another handmade candlewick bedspread made by Lydia Barker in 1827 is executed on a huckaback weave cotton. The central panel contrasts again with the distinctive linear or geometric quality of the Fowler machine-made example. In addition, the reverse side of the handmade candlewicked spread shows a plethora of knots and yarn. The machine-made examples are completely plain. The handmade Barker bedspread is constructed of 3 panels, each approximately 29" in width. Ribbed cotton is another commonly seen type of weave on candlewick bedspreads. There are also combinations of embroidery and candlewicking.

A great deal has been written about the very popular stuffed work of this period, usually employing the name "trapunto", which is in fact a 20th century term for an 18th century style of needlework. Advertisements appeared throughout the 18th century in America for two types of Marseilles quilting: the entirely handmade work which resembles these stuffed or corded bed-coverings or the "loom quilting or Mock quilting" which was machine-made and imported to America (Susan Swan *PLAIN AND FANCY*, New York 1977: pg. 229). The 19th century examples of this work were often referred to as Marseilles quilting. One of the machine-made examples in our collection, which was received in 1943 with a reliable family history of use in the mid-19th century, was called a "Marseilles spread." Unfortunately 'trapunto' has been used so frequently to describe these bedcoverings that we have tended to forget the proper 18th and 19th century terms.

Women had often employed the technique of Marseilles quilting during the 18th century — but for their petticoats. Until the end of the 18th century the construction of dresses left a front panel exposed from the waist to the hem. Many of the petticoats were quilted (not just for warmth), but because the technique was particularly attractive, especially on the solid color garments which were often coordinated with the color of the dress. The 19th century use of Marseilles quilting is an outgrowth of this 18th century popular form which was not only useful, but highly decorative.

Marseilles quilting was not really quilting, which implies the use of a batting or third layer of fabric between the two outer layers. Instead, there are only two layers of fabric and cord or cotton on the inside. A loosely woven fabric was selected for the backing, so that the yarn, cord or cotton could be stuffed or drawn through from the back. The top layer was more finely woven fabric. The maker outlined her design with very fine stitches, stitching the two layers together at the same time.

Then she used a bodkin, a blunt-eyed needle shaped instrument or a large-eyed needle to force the yarn, thread or cotton between the stitched-down area.

Despite the number of intricate stitches required to do Marseilles quilting, women continued making these attractive bedcoverings until the 1830's. However, machines soon replaced the hands and Marseilles spreads became popular. The fabric used in the machine-made examples is completely different in texture and appearance from the handmade Marseilles quilting examples. Both sides are relatively loosely woven with horizontal rows of thick cording between. By comparison, the stuffed areas are nearly flat. What had been the running stitch or rows of diagonal stitches on the handmade variety, now appears to look like rows of small pin holes. The pattern is formed from the lack of this machine stitch in certain planned areas which are deliberately left blank. Thus, there is really no stuffing at all. These spreads are usually not seamed, and one example is approximately 105" square.

This classification system should be useful and effective for early 19th century white work. The use of consistent, proper terminology for these examples will aid in classifying these works. It is especially important that we attempt to drop from our vocabularies the term 'trapunto' which was never used in the early 19th century. While Marseilles quilts appear often on early 19th century inventories, I have never seen the term 'trapunto'. Stuffed work executed today should be called just that, "stuffed work."