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## Some Published Sources of Design Inspiration for the Quilt Pattern Mariner's Compass – 17th to 20th Century

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Many quilt patterns are literal interpretations of designs and shapes familiar to the people using them. Patterns named after stars, trees and baskets are examples of familiar shapes used in quilts. The design called Mariner's Compass probably was suggested to early quilt-makers living on the east coast of America by sea charts that were available in the 17th and 18th centuries. An examination of compass designs on sea charts and maps from this period provides interesting background to the use of compass designs in quiltmaking from a later period.

Early sea charts showed the coastlines of the area involved and a grid of intersecting lines. Each line represented a line of constant bearing known as a rhumb line. Sailors wanting to sail from one place to another located a line on the sea chart between the two places and could then calculate what wind to sail. At the intersection of these radiating rhumb lines was often a device based on a compass card and known as a wind rose. This design is attributed to a Greek known as Timotheus.<sup>1</sup> The rhumb lines were drawn with a tapered form and resembled a star, perhaps the North Star to which the needle on a magnetic compass points.<sup>2</sup>

A compass card is a circle that is marked with degrees and points indicating direction. North, South, East and West are generally prominently marked and the other 28 named points are indicated. Wind roses, or compass roses as they are called on the European continent, are commonly divided into as few as four or as many as thirty-two points.<sup>3</sup> The main point was generally directed to the north and frequently indicated by a fleur-de-lys. Very early maps were frequently oriented with the east at the top for religious reasons and this custom survived on later maps as a small cross at the eastern point of the compass.<sup>4</sup>

By the 16th century Mercator, a famous cartographer, had devised a method of constructing charts more accurately with meridians and parallels marked and had eliminated the need for radiating rhumb lines.<sup>5</sup> It was becoming a convention in cartography to orient maps with north at the top. The need for rhumb lines as well as direction indicating compasses had disappeared, but they survived as decoration in the empty ocean areas of maps and charts.<sup>6</sup> Drawings of ships and dragons also appeared in the ocean areas of charts but only the geometric designs of the compass appear to have appealed to quiltmakers.

Assigning a name to a quilt pattern is often pure speculation. Quiltmakers did not usually record the title for future generations, and the older a quilt pattern the more names it might have picked up. We can only use a name that has come down to us through convention or use a name that is common to the area where the quilt was produced. We can look at sea charts from the 17th century and clearly identify the design as a mariner's compass because of its purpose. We can look at quilts that came from the New England and coastal areas that have similar designs and say they were probably inspired by a mariner's compass from a map or sea chart. These quilt designs usually have sixteen to thirty-two points arranged in a circle with four of them more prominent than the others. They are also usually oriented in a square block with the prominent points in North, South, East and West locations. Bonnie Leman defined the quilt pattern Mariner's Compass as one in which the points appear to be layered.<sup>7</sup>

An examination of published literature on quilting reveals that Mariner's Compass designs are marked more by omission than inclusion. Quilt patterns that have names referring to the sun or stars are similar or often identical to the Mariner's Compass pattern.

Marie Webster makes no reference to Mariner's Compass but does include a photograph of a quilt titled Sunburst.<sup>8</sup> The design appears layered, but the points seem randomly oriented in direction. The maker did not appear to have a directional compass in mind.

Ruth Finley includes two photographs of designs similar to Mariner's Compass. The quilt titled Sunflower, from New England, has thirty-two points. Rising Sun, from Long Island, New York, has sixty-four points and has a definitely layered effect.<sup>9</sup> It is very similar to one that Florence Peto calls Mariner's Compass.<sup>10</sup>

Many authors mention how difficult this design is to accomplish. Both Peto and Finley refer to it as "post-graduate work." The quilt illustrated in AMERICAN QUILTS AND COVERLETS is also shown in QUILTS OF THE SHELburne MUSEUM. It is described as having

*Two compass roses from early Portuguese maps. From: Portugaliae  
Monventa Cartographia, Armondo Coresao, Lisbon 1960.*



been pieced using the paper template method.<sup>11</sup> This method involves basting the fabric over paper patterns and then whipping them together with small stitches. It is tedious but extremely accurate.

Carrie Hall also mentions how much work these designs are. While there are four different patterns in her book that are similar to Mariner's Compass, none is given that name. There are two sun patterns and two sunflowers. The Sunflower designs are also listed as having other sun names. Setting Sun is a twelve pointed design with a hexagon in the center and Sunburst has thirty-two points.<sup>12</sup>

Ruby McKim and Marguerite Ickis both give patterns for a Sunburst design.<sup>13,14</sup> Both authors indicate the method of construction is applique, although an examination of the photograph of the quilt in the Ickis book seems to indicate it was pieced into a circle. The same quilt appears in a photograph in AMERICAN QUILTS by Elizabeth Wells Robertson.<sup>15</sup> It is owned by the Brooklyn Museum. MUSEUM QUILTS, a publication by Graphic Enterprises, Inc., also gives the pattern for this quilt and for one in the Smithsonian Institution of the same design as McKim's, and directs construction by the applique method.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between a Mariner's Compass quilt pattern and a sun or star pattern is probably only in the mind of the quiltmaker or the viewer of the quilt. Carter Houck mentions that some people call the design Mariner's Compass if it is pieced, but by another name if it is appliqued.<sup>17</sup> It seems likely that the name of the quilt would be more apt to be sun or star in the midwestern United States or any other place that is distant from a large body of water. However, a quilt called Princess Feather and Sunburst in Peto's book clearly fits the pattern of a Mariner's Compass and it comes from New Jersey, a state that is near the ocean. The same quilt is pictured in Rose Wilder Lane's book where it is called Princess Feather and Rising Star.<sup>18</sup> The Newark Museum, present owner of the quilt, calls it Princess Feather and Rising Sun.

All of the designs and patterns discussed so far have had some kind of design in the center; circle, hexagon, etc. There is another design that is nearly always referred to as Mariner's Compass where the intersecting lines meet in the center. Usually this design has only sixteen points and the rays are split in half lengthwise with one side dark and the other side light. This design is illustrated and the pattern given in Rose Wilder Lane's book.<sup>19</sup> It is also shown in the Shelburne Museum book.<sup>20</sup> It was made in Vermont and is now owned by the Shelburne Museum. A quilt pattern sold by the Sterns and Foster Company has a large Mariner's Compass surrounded by four smaller compasses.<sup>21</sup>

*Author's drawings of two Mariner's Compass quilt pattern variations*

The large one also has split rays but it has a circle in the center. Sterns and Foster also sells a pattern for Sunburst but they make reference to the star points and different methods of putting them together.<sup>22</sup>

Two excellent reference books on the history of quilts that were published in the 70s are Orlofsky's QUILTS IN AMERICA and Holstein's PIECED QUILTS AN AMERICAN DESIGN TRADITION. Both make only fleeting mention of Mariner's Compass. Orlofsky includes a photograph of Mary Strickler's quilt owned by Mary Strickler's Quilt Gallery, San Rafael, California and made in Pennsylvania in 1834.<sup>23</sup> Holstein includes a photograph of a Mariner's Compass from New Hampshire dated 1820. He mentions that it is a popular Eastern coastal pattern.<sup>24</sup>

In Leman's article<sup>25</sup> excellent instructions and patterns are given for six different variations of Mariner's Compass. Instructions for a Mariner's Compass made about 1860<sup>26</sup> are given in a book by Rosemary McMurty. It differs from others in that the points are not made with straight lines but with slight curves, making a design many people consider difficult even harder.

Contemporary quiltmaker and author Jinny Beyer made a quilt called Ray of Light in 1977. It features a large forty-eight pointed design in the center with twenty smaller sixteen point designs surrounding it. In her first book she gives instructions on how to draft Mariner's Compass and sun and star designs and variations.<sup>27</sup> In her second book Beyer illustrates a number of compass, sun and star designs for blocks as well as for borders.<sup>28</sup>

The current revival of interest in quilting has led contemporary quiltmakers to seek out challenging designs. There are of course patterns and inspirations available in publications about quilts discussed in this paper. However one contemporary quiltmaker, Esther Barnwell, recently was inspired to design Rose Compass Quilt by an article in a South African magazine on compasses from old sea charts.<sup>29</sup> The quilt features five appliqued compass designs with radiating quilted rhumb lines.

Perhaps we have come full circle by again being inspired by the sea charts that brought about the creation of the original Mariner's Compass quilts.



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