

Early America's Medallion Quilts With Multiple Borders

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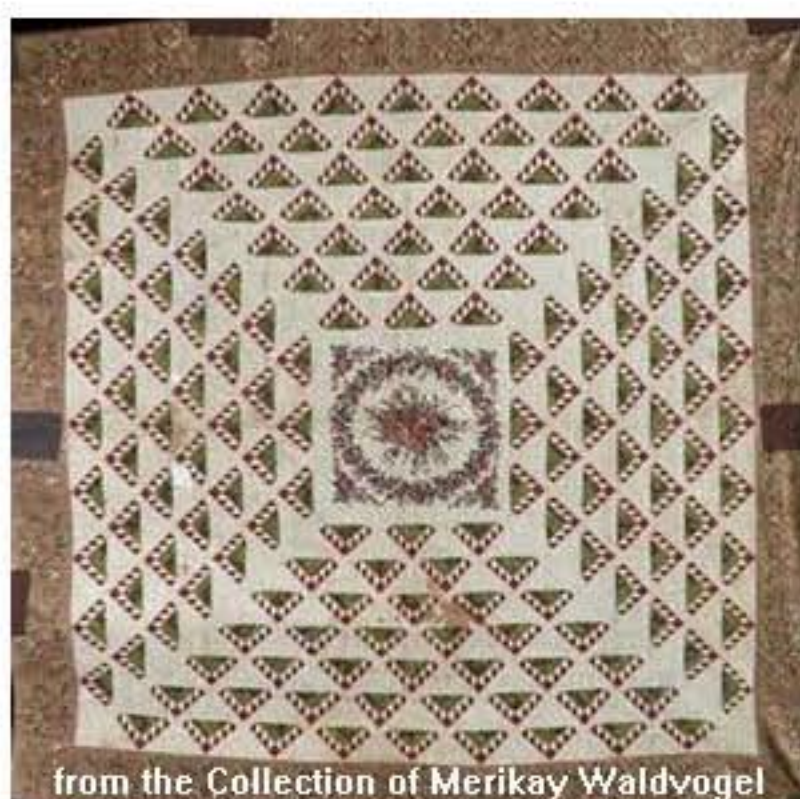
The typical pieced quilt of America's early years was far different than we may imagine. These quilts were made up of several borders built around a central theme. Antique medallion quilts are among the most valued today.

History and Descriptions of Medallion

Immigrants to America brought framed medallion style quiltmaking techniques across the Atlantic with them. These quilts were a favored style from the 1780s through the early 1800s. Then during the middle decades of the 19th century most Americans turned to making quilts with rows of blocks much like the ones we usually make today. Quilt makers in Europe and Britain continued to prefer making medallion style quilts well beyond that time.

Some borders were made of a chintz print or even a special border fabric. Ruth Marler points out that fabric manufacturers noted that quiltmakers wanted fabric for these multiple borders and, "Around 1790, prints on a dark background became fashionable and were often printed in strips ready for quilt maker to cut out for borders." ¹

Antique examples of Medallion quilts range from the perfectly symmetrical with intricate piecing or applique to the informal and sometimes asymmetrical. We assume the finer ones were made for formal bedrooms while the more casually made medallion quilts were for more humble beds.



from the Collection of Merikay Waldvogel



Rare medallion style baby quilts and even doll sized can be seen in collections. The doll sized quilts were made by children as they learned to sew or were given to them as gifts for their dolls.

Quilts on Four Poster Beds

Not all medallion quilts were square, some were made with cut out corners to fit on a four poster bed. Imagine one of these quilts on a grand four poster bed. During the 1700s the most formal room in a well to do household often included the finest bed usually used by the husband and wife. "Displaying their 'best bed' in the 'best room' couples could put a premiere

household possession in public view."² A feather filled four poster bed with a beautiful medallion quilt on it might well have been the centerpiece of the home. Consider how the center would be featured when bed curtains were pulled back.

Early Appliqued Examples

Often a motif was appliqued in the center. The early appliqued centers and borders were usually done in the broderie perse style that involved cutting out images from printed fabric then sewing them onto the quilt's center and borders. Appliqué was dominant on medallion quilts until the latter 1700s.

Printed Fabric Centers

The center was sometimes an interesting piece of printed fabric like a tree of life, a basket or a toile. Some early fabric manufacturers specifically designed panels to be used in the center of medallion quilts. The photo to the right shows the central section of one.

In some cases these medallion panels were cut apart with sections of the original panel put in various parts of the medallion quilt. For example the curved corner pieces could be cut out and appliqued to the 4 corners of the medallion quilt. Also smaller panels were printed often in rectangular or oval shapes. These smaller panels could be cut apart and appliqued one after another to create one of the many borders of the quilt. Most of the surviving examples of this method are from North Carolina and other southern seaboard states.

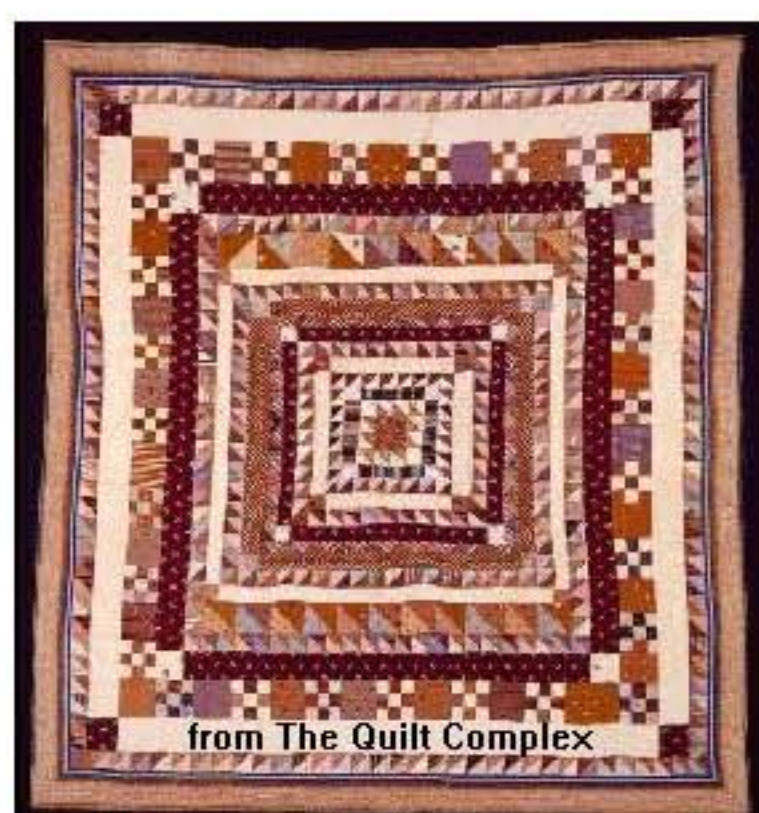


Collection of Merikay Waldvogel

Pieced Medallion Centers

As piecing became more common even the medallion centers were sometimes pieced, often with one of the various star block patterns. Star patterns were some of the earliest used for pieced blocks. Hexagon mosaic patterns were also used for the centers of some medallion quilts. Barbara Brackman places the earliest documented star patterns in the 1830s and dates the earliest known hexagon patterns at 1817. ³

Multiple Quilt Border Patterns



from The Quilt Complex

Although the centers of many medallion quilts were exquisite, just as fascinating are the numerous styles seen in the multiple borders on these quilts. As mentioned above the earlier quilts were appliqued in the center and these quilts usually had applique in the borders as well. In time piecing was also used in the borders in fact some quilts in this style included both applique and piecing.

Borders could be pieced of triangles in border patterns such as the saw tooth or pyramid style. Squares could be turned on point along a border strip or simply sewn together to make the border. Others borders were made of rows of small pieced blocks. The hourglass and modified nine patch patterns were some

of the simpler blocks used in borders while various intricate star block patterns were created for more elaborate borders. These borders were often made of varied fabrics giving scrappy look. Often the pieced borders were alternated with strips of fabric in prints or solids.

While some medallion quilts had just a few borders leaving the central area as dominant others involved a great many borders dwarfing the center. These can be the most intriguing as you examine the borders and enjoy their variation.

Medallion Quilts During the Colonial Revival

Some medallion style quilts continued to be made throughout the 19th century then they enjoyed another burst of popularity during the Colonial Revival in the first decades of the 20th century. The medallion quilts made during this period often had appliqued centers and borders usually in solid fabrics. Others made during this time were embroidered.

Make Your Own Medallion Quilt

One of the most delightful things about the earlier medallion quilts is that each one is unique. The same panel or block may have been used in several quilts but the borders were left to the quilt maker's imagination and skills. For the same reason making a medallion quilt today can be a truly creative experience. Whether you stay traditional and use reproduction fabrics or decided to go wild with modern fabrics and techniques you will enjoy making a medallion style quilt.



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Thank you to [The Quilt Complex](#) for giving permission to display the pieced medallion quilt shown above. Visit their site for more antique quilts.

Thank you to Merikay Waldvogel for permission to use pictures of the quilt with the central panel from her collection.

References:

¹ p36 "[The Art of The Quilt](#)", by Ruth Marler

² p123 "[The Reshaping of everyday Life: 1780-1840](#)", by Jack Larkin

³ p169, "[Clues in the Calico](#)", by Barbara Brackman

Webpages:

[Colonial Revival Medallion Quilt Pattern](#)

[Patterns From History for Doll & Baby Medallion Quilts](#)

[Colonial Women: Their Quilts and Quilting](#)