

As the Victorian craze for making a crazy quilt waned a new sewing fad took its place. Women turned to the craft of redwork embroidery using a wonderful deep red thread called Turkey Red.

Although the popularity of redwork embroidery peaked around the turn of the century it wasn't new. Beginning in the 1880s women had been willing to pay extra for Turkey Red thread because unlike most colors it was colorfast. A colorfast blue thread was popular from about 1910 to 1930. Outlined pictures were stitched with a simple stem stitch; a linear stitch that children can easily learn.

Redwork Throughout the House



Initially redwork was not done on quilts but on a variety of useful household items. Embroidered tidies were used to protect chair backs while embroidered splashers were hung behind the sink. Napkins, tea towels, dresser scarves, chair cushions, sofa pillows were all opportunities for stitching with red floss.

In her book, "Red and White: American Redwork Quilts" redwork enthusiast Deborah Harding writes, "Given this mandate to decorate everything in sight with embroidery, women took to their task seriously."

Redwork Themes, Designs & Patterns

Some patterns were quite simple, others intricate. The array of designs was endless and varied fabric was used. Animals, flowers, toys and children were all popular themes. Pictures of famous buildings and people were stitched as well as playful storybook and nursery rhyme characters.

Magazine publishers gave away patterns to promote new subscriptions. Women were encouraged to get new subscribers in order to earn stamping outfits that included perforated patterns, a pouch of marking powder, and instructions. Some publishers included pull out patterns in their magazines. Companies got into the act with extensive catalogues including, patterns, thread and other needed items. A sawtooth edged wheel was sold to women who wanted to mark their own designs on the stiff parchment used for perforated patterns.¹



Women also used carbon paper to mark designs. Pictures in children's books, magazines and even advertisements were pattern sources. Some fabric was thin enough to simply place over the desired picture and trace.

Redwork: A Home Business for Women



Manufacturers encouraged women to start a home business of stamping fabrics for friends and neighbors. Kits including all the necessary materials including a large variety of designs were sold for this purpose.

In the 1870s iron on transfers were developed. This was a welcome new product compared to the old stamping methods. How much easier it was to apply the design to the fabric with a warm iron.

Only Later Was Redwork Used for Quilts

It wasn't until the turn of the century that women began to use redwork embroidery for bedcoverings. Preprinted squares ready to embroider were sold. Because they originally cost only about a penny apiece they were commonly called penny squares.

The quilt blocks used for redwork quilts ranged from six to ten inches across. They were usually embroidered then sewn together without any sashing between the blocks. Often a feather or cross-stitch was used to cover the seam line. Later a red or red print sashing was sometimes used. Some of these bedcoverings were quilted while others were simply lined without batting and then tied at the corners of each block.



Blossoming Out in a Rainbow of Colors

In the 1920's more and more embroidered pieces were done with a delightful variety of colors as methods were found to make all colors colorfast. Barbara Brackman wrote, "Floral baskets and bouquets, nursery rhymes and new themes of state birds and state flowers are typical subject matter for these quilts." Today DMC and other companies offer several types of thread in a multitude of colors including new variegated threads.

(Thank you to Sue Franklin for the delightful redwork quilt photos.)

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Reference:

"Red & White: American Redwork Quilts & Patterns" by Deborah Harding

"Barbara Brackman, The Quilt Detective: Clues in the Needlework, 2005, digital newsletter."