

# The Copp Family Textiles

By

Grace Rogers Cooper

CURATOR, DIVISION OF TEXTILES • NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY

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*The Copp Family Textiles*



FRONTISPIECE. View of Salem, Massachusetts, in the mid-eighteenth century. Salem, like the other New England and Atlantic seaports, received goods from many parts of the civilized world. Textile materials, shown in the foreground of this engraving by Leizelt, are being unloaded onto the wharf for checking and distribution. In spite of our image of Colonial life as being ruggedly independent and self-sufficient, the colonists were not only ready but eager to buy cheaper goods imported from abroad. (Smithsonian photo 70489.)

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S. DILLON RIPLEY  
*Secretary*  
Smithsonian Institution

COVER ILLUSTRATION: A professional weaver at his loom. From *The Panorama of Professions and Trades or Every Man's Book* by Edward Hazen. Philadelphia, 1836. (Smithsonian Photo 57898-A.)

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# *Preface*

AN EXTENSIVE COLLECTION of household textiles, costume items, furniture and related family pieces used by the Copp family of Stonington, Connecticut, from 1750 to 1850, were presented to the United States National Museum in the 1890s by John Brenton Copp. The group of household fabrics is a rare cross-section of the types of textile materials found and used in a prosperous, but not wealthy, New England home of the period. All of the textile items described in this catalog were made in or bought for the Copp home at the time of their original manufacture. Although it is not uncommon for families to save some treasured items from their beloved ancestors, it is far less common to save so much of the more utilitarian types of fabrics—ticking by the bolt, handwoven sheets by the dozens, yards and yards of fringes—items that many other, more frugal, New Englanders might have continued to use throughout the nineteenth century. The Copp descendants, primarily John Brenton Copp, appreciated the value and future interest of these “everyday,” seemingly homely textiles. They were exhibited in the late nineteenth century at centennial celebrations, giving rise to the family dating of so many pieces as “1775” or pre-American Revolution. Although many of the textiles are not that early, they do represent a most important period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But as significant as the early dating, is the fact that such seemingly ordinary items were offered to, and accepted by the Museum over seventy-five years ago, thus preserving for the future a realistic picture of family possessions of the past.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the general background information, this catalog includes considerable technical information about each textile. The decision to make a complete technical study of each fabric was made by this division at the time it became custodian of the first group of Copp textiles in 1961. These included thirty sheets, twenty-four of which were marked with embroidered initials. Since linen sheets have a tendency to vary only slightly in appearance, it was theorized that a study of the yarns and a yarn count of each sheet might reveal a clue to their dating. The embroidered initials did not help much, however. Unfortunately for our purposes, the Copps liked certain given names and used them repeatedly in successive generations. It was hoped that some conclusions might be drawn as to which generation a given sheet might belong by an analysis of the construction. Although we were unable to arrive at any conclusion in dating these sheets, the information that was gathered from this initial technical study helped us to understand better the problems of dating home-woven textiles. To increase the value of these textiles to subsequent curators and historians, technical analyses were also made for the remaining Copp household textiles as they came into the custody of this division. It is hoped that this information will be of continuing use

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<sup>1</sup> A history of the Copp Family and a study of the entire collection of Copp material is in preparation by Mrs. Anne W. Murray, Curator Emeritus, Department of Cultural History, the National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution.

in comparative studies of other Connecticut or New England textiles of the period and also with examples from other geographical regions of the United States.

The condition of most of the Copp textiles was basically good; they had had little or careful use and had been stored with reasonable precautions. However, fabrics stored over a long period of time acquire some soiling or discoloration due to an acid condition of many storage containers and to the many types of fumes to which they are exposed.

Some of the white textiles were badly discolored. It was decided that for continued preservation the cellulose fibers should be put into as near neutral condition as could be done safely. The dust-removal and wet-cleaning methods used were solely for the purpose of preservation; the resulting improvement in appearance was a bonus, but not the primary concern. An italic notation next to the catalog number in the entry of each textile indicates whether the item was cleaned by our Textile Laboratory. Notes on the cleaning methods used for each class of items are summarized in the Appendix.

For further study a bibliography on pertinent related subjects is included at the close of this catalog.

Portions of the Copp collection have been exhibited in the Museum since the 1890s. Most recently the entire collection of household textiles were shown for the first time in a special exhibit from March 1968 to March 1970 in the National Museum of History and Technology. Many of these items will also be shown in the future Hall of Textiles. A number of pieces of furniture and related family items are now on exhibition in the Hall of Everyday Life in America and some costume items may be seen in the American Costume Gallery on the second floor of the National Museum of History and Technology.

I am greatly indebted to the work of my staff in the preparation of this catalog: Miss Rita J. Adrosko, Associate Curator; Miss Doris Bowman, Lace and Needlework Specialist; Mrs. Maureen McHugh, Textile Conservation Specialist; and Mrs. Lois Vann, Textile Technician; for their cooperative work in recording the technical information. And to Miss Adrosko for the preparation of the brief history of the Copp Family and preparation of the excellent special exhibition of "The Copp Family Textiles."

GRACE ROGERS COOPER  
*Curator*  
*Division of Textiles*



# *The Copp Family*

ABSTRACT: At the time this exhibit was proposed, the Copp collection of textiles and other family memorabilia, although unique in its scope of everyday household textiles, had received little exposure since its receipt in the late nineteenth century. The nature of household linens, however, made it imperative to take a considerably more-than-superficial look in order to distinguish one white piece from the next. Consequently, studies were made on each textile item in the collection which are now being published for the first time in this catalog.

In preparing textile items for exhibition, the historical information as to how, why, and where each textile was made is not the only element involved in considering them for exhibition. The physical handling of textiles must also receive serious study. Although, unlike ceramics, textiles do not break, their preservation is a complex problem. Old textiles that are in seemingly good condition can deteriorate from strain in handling, or too much light, or dust. Acid transferred from the hands of people touching the fabrics (as in hanging or mounting them), improper finishing of exhibition cases, overexposure, and heat are additional hazards. Unfortunately, many rare and irreplaceable museum textiles have been "lost" in the museum due to any one of these factors. Therefore, the methods used to meet the problems of cleaning, mounting, and exhibiting the Copp Family Textiles have been described in an appendix.

THE AUTHOR: Grace R. Cooper is Curator in Charge of the Division of Textiles, National Museum of History and Technology. She also serves as the Department Editor and Advisor for Textile for the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Her textile specialization, although limited to those of American interest, is not confined to domestic fabrics but ranges from primitive spinning wheels to sewing machines and from printed cottons to thirteen-star flags.

THE COPPS WERE CHARACTERIZED by an early twentieth-century historian as a family whose "social family life was fully enjoyed, for . . . wit, beauty and culture united [among them] to form nature's noble men and women."<sup>2</sup> They were probably fairly typical of the hardy God-fearing English-

men who survived the ordeals of settling in a new land, and lived on to enjoy its rewards.

The first Copp to reach America was William, a 26-year-old London shoemaker who in 1635 set out for the Massachusetts Colony on the good ship *Blessing*. He landed east of Boston and became the first owner of Copp's Hill in north Boston where his first wife Judith was later buried. William's son Jonathan established the Connecticut branch of the

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<sup>2</sup> Grace Wheeler, *The Homes of Our Ancestors*, p. 43.

family around Stonington later in the seventeenth century. Many of his male descendents gained comfortable prosperity as merchants and businessmen, while their wives and daughters led full lives as mothers of large families in which education and refinement were encouraged.

Storekeeper Daniel Copp's advertisement in a 1798 newspaper reveals that his stock, covering a great variety of goods, was comparable to that of many stores of the period. His textiles from Europe and India included such basic items as "elegant light and dark Chintzes and Calicoes, corded Dimities handkerchiefs," as well as "a pleasing assortment of Ribbons . . . of all figures" and "a variety of fashionable stockings." Besides imported cloths he "also had on hand, groceries of all kinds; snuff . . . flour . . . excellent dried codfish and crockery which could be sold at a very small advance for Cash, or most kinds of Country Produce."<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly many of these goods found their way into Copp wardrobes and larders.

The long succession of Jonathans, Samuels, Catherines, Esters, Marys, and Sarahs makes it rather difficult to set in order the generations and their contributions to the collection. Although many items are marked with finely cross-stitched initials, the recurrence of the same given names makes it almost impossible to attribute them to specific individuals. Thus, for example, the sheets initialed **MC** could have belonged to Margaret, born in 1727, Mary, born in 1745, or Molly (also called Mary), born in 1777.

Among the more colorful Copps was thrice-married Samuel—known as Uncle Sam—who stated after taking his third wife, "I married first for love and second for her purse, the third for a warming pan, doctor and nurse."<sup>4</sup> A bolster cover (not illustrated) is identified by the hand-inked name of his second wife, **B. Chapman**, (Betsey), a Norwich, Connecticut, woman whom he married in 1844.

A daughter, Phebe Esther, born to his first wife, made one of the two samplers (Figure 10). The design of this embroidery, made in 1822 when Phebe Esther was eight years old, is obviously based on a similar sampler made fifty-seven years earlier by a relative—possibly a second cousin—whose name **Esther** is embroidered on her sampler (Figure 9).

Samuel's brother, John Brown Copp, who was born in 1779, may also have made a contribution to the family's textiles. According to a family story this deaf and dumb fellow, a stonemason by trade, was gifted with an "artist's mind and eye." It is said that he "drew patterns for white bed spreads or counterpanes . . . for the young ladies of the neighborhood, who [felt they had to] own one of these among their marriage portion. They were made of cotton or linen homespun cloth, and embroidered in design with white cotton. . . . One or more of these can now [1903] usually be found among the treasured possessions of almost every old family in town. . . ."<sup>5</sup> The patterns for the embroidered counterpanes (Figures 11, 13, and 16) could have been drawn by John Brown Copp, for the above description fits them very well and their dating coincides with the period in which he would have been active.

In spite of the fact that at least two Copps—Oliver and Daniel—were storekeepers who could have supplied most of the family's textile needs, it is quite possible that some of the simple cloths, such as sheeting and table linens, were handwoven at home with yarn spun by women. *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine* in November 1791 stated, "There is scarcely a family in the State of Connecticut so rich or so poor as not assiduously to attend to domestic manufactures . . ." Such comments added to the family's sense of thrift (seen in their quilt shown in Figure 4) and the presence of many willing hands made it quite unlikely that the great quantity of yardage used—nearly fifty yards in the set of checked bed furniture alone—would have been purchased.

RITA J. ADROSKO

<sup>3</sup> *The Connecticut Gazette and the Universal Intelligencer*. New London, Connecticut: 6 June 1798.

<sup>4</sup> Grace Wheeler, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Grace Wheeler, op. cit.

# Catalog of the Copp Household Textiles

## NEEDLEWORK

### *Quilt Making*

IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND quilt making was a matter of extreme necessity and practicality. Fabrics were precious. The tiniest scraps of fabrics, including those that had been used and reused, were saved to be pieced together in a hit-or-miss fashion and quilted into warm bed covers.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the heavy exertions required to clear the land and sustain life in the early days of the colony had been gradually replaced by less strenuous domestic routines. The resulting increase in their free time meant that housewives could give more consideration to the decorative aspect of such utilitarian concerns as quilting. A more plentiful supply of both domestic and imported fabrics was available as well. Although fabrics were used more extravagantly, to the extent of piecing quilts in a definite pattern or making a quilt with the entire top of one fabric decorated with a quilted design, the old habit of thrift was not forsaken. The smallest scraps continued to be saved and used. Worn sheets and blankets often served as linings. The nineteenth century, however, brought a progressive disregard for the saving ways associated with quilting in the previous century.

The three quilts in this collection represent three distinct types, all typical of eighteenth-century America—the quilted counterpane, made of a single fabric; the pieced quilt in an overall repeated pattern, made up of different fabrics; the pieced quilt in a single motif design, using different fabrics.

Quilted counterpane (Figure 1), 100 by 89 inches,

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<sup>6</sup> “Water camblet (also chamblet and camlet), those which after weaving receive a certain preparation with water and are then passed under a hot press, which gives them smoothness and lustre.” Quoted from *Chambers' Cyclopaedia*, 1731 edition, in James, *History of Worsted Manufacture*. The sharp creases visible in Figure 1 indicate where the folds of the fabric were subjected to the hot press. The piece is probably an English fabric.

top fabric of water camblet,<sup>6</sup> indigo, warp and weft two-ply Z-twist wool,<sup>7</sup> thread count 40 by 39; quilted and seamed with two-ply, indigo wool thread, S-twist; it is lined with two different natural wool fabrics, probably portions of old blankets, one with a thread count 41 by 35 of smooth, tight single-ply Z-twist yarns. The second blanket, with a thread count of 43 by 30 and with the initial C cross-stitched to it in dark blue, two-ply S-twist wool thread, is of softer single-ply Z-twist yarns and stitched with two-ply linen thread, S-twist. The counterpane is interlined with carded wool fibers and bound at the edges with the indigo wool fabric stitched to the right side, then turned back to the lining and stitched with a running stitch. It is quilted in a combination of two popular Colonial American patterns, the pineapple and tree of life—which in this quilt trails off to a flowering vine border—with diagonal ground quilting. It was probably made in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. H.6643

Pieced quilt (Figure 3) 101 by 101 inches, “Nine-Patch” design. The alternating major pattern squares are made up of nine pieces stitched together, set with alternating major squares of the same size in white to make an overall pattern of intersecting

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<sup>7</sup> The identification of the yarn fiber as wool is based on microscopic examination, as are all other fiber identifications. Two-ply indicates that two single yarns have been twisted together. Z-twist indicates the direction of the twist to be /, or from right to left; S-twist means the direction of the twist is \, or from left to right. The direction of the twist is, therefore, one more characteristic in the identification of a textile. If the term 2/2-ply is used, it means that two two-ply yarns have been twisted together.

In the thread count, the first number refers to the warp yarns and the second the weft yarns in one square inch of the textile in question. The thread counts are made by averaging a minimum of three places, if the textile is of sufficient size to permit this. A slight variance of one or two yarns would not necessarily mean that two pieces of like fabric did not come from the same loom run. Washing, bleaching, dyeing, and daily use could change the thread count to a limited degree if both pieces had not been treated in exactly the same manner. There is also more variation in the weft count of handwoven fabrics.



FIGURE 1.—Quilted counterpane. (Smithsonian photo 32795-A.)

diagonal lines. The top is cotton, the printed fabrics are in browns. It is pieced with two-ply linen thread and quilted with both two-ply linen and two-ply cotton thread, with diagonal quilting in the pieced squares, and shell quilting in the all-white squares.

It is lined with linen, probably an old sheet, marked in cross stitch **D C**, perhaps standing for Dolle Copp, who was born 1772. The interlining is of carded wool; edges are bound with linen stitched with two-ply linen thread. Although the wool interlining is

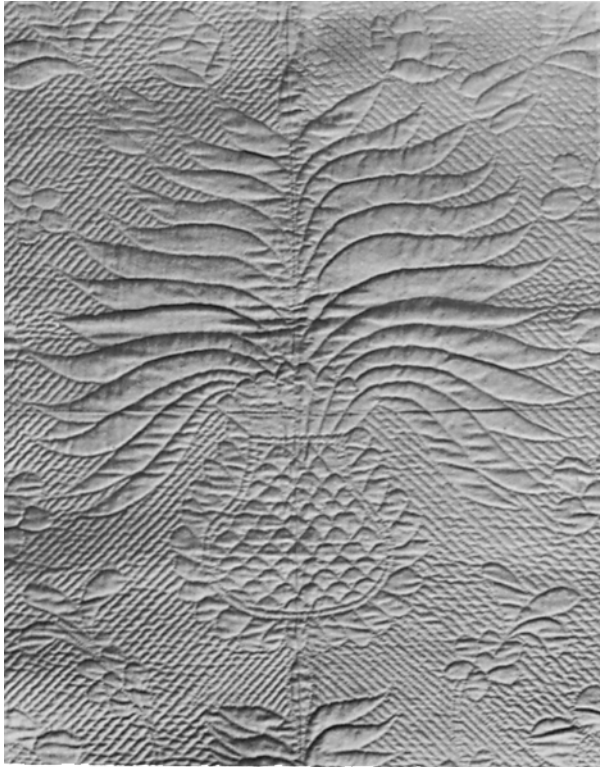


FIGURE 2.—Detail of Figure 2, showing center pineapple design. (Smithsonian photo 61288-B.)

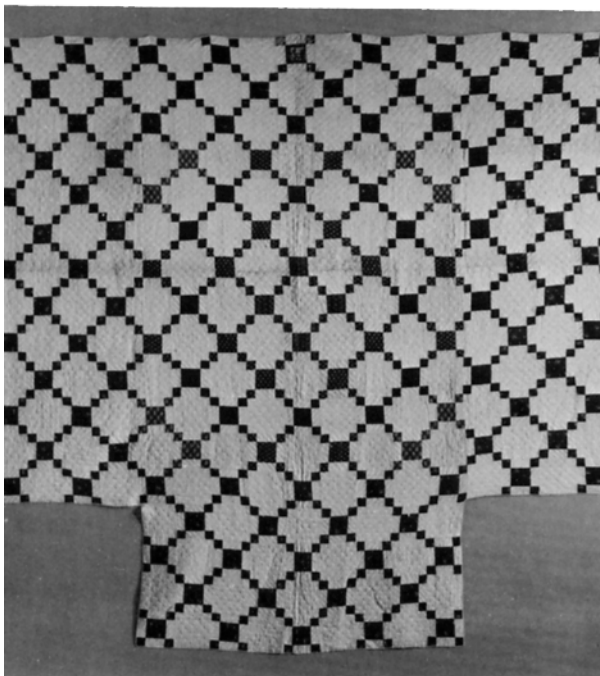


FIGURE 3.—Pieced quilt, "Nine-Patch" design. (Smithsonian photo 61291-I.)

more typical of an earlier period, the dark ground prints used would indicate that this quilt was made in the late eighteenth century. *H.6679*

Pieced quilt (Figure 4), 83 by 85 inches, variation of the "Framed Medallion" design. The medallion is made up of a group of five  $2\frac{3}{4}$ -inch patches pieced in the "Variable Star" pattern, surrounded by five rows of patches of the same size, with the initial frame in a two-inch "Chained Square" pattern. (The variety of dress fabrics used in this quilt are worthy of note and will be described separately.) The major part of the top is stitched with two-ply linen thread, the blue border is pieced with two-ply blue cotton thread; part of the linen lining is an old sheet marked **H V**; the lining is seamed with both two-ply linen and two-ply cotton thread. The quilt was probably made about 1795 or a little later. *H.6680*

The fabrics in the quilt shown in Figure 4 are quite unusual because of both their condition and pattern variety. Although they play an inconspicuous part in the overall effect, at least nine different white fabrics appear in the top—five dimities and two each of plain cotton and plain linen. There are three different woven silk and linen stripe patterns, in blue and white, red and white, and yellow and white. The greatest treasure trove, however, is the variety of printed dress fabrics—at a conservative count over 150—dating from the 1770s–1790s. It is hard to believe that such a variety could represent the fabrics of a single household, even with many friends and access to a dry goods store, over a span of two generations. This goodly selection gives some idea of the great number of printed dress goods that were in use in a single community in eighteenth century America.<sup>8</sup>

There are three major groupings of printed fabrics in this quilt: all linen; cotton and linen; and all cotton. Only a half dozen or more are in the first two categories; the remaining ones are all cotton. A sampling of each is illustrated. The photographs illustrate the frugality of the times, when even very small pieces of fabric were stitched together to make a unit. The smallest piece in the quilt is  $\frac{1}{2}$  by  $\frac{1}{4}$  by  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch. The photographs reproduce the fabric pattern at about three quarters actual size.

<sup>8</sup> In 1784, John Lord Sheffield in his *Observations on the Commerce of the American States* (p. 40), stated that after woolens, linens, and cutlery, "Printed Callicoes and other printed goods" accounted for the largest volume of articles imported into the American states.

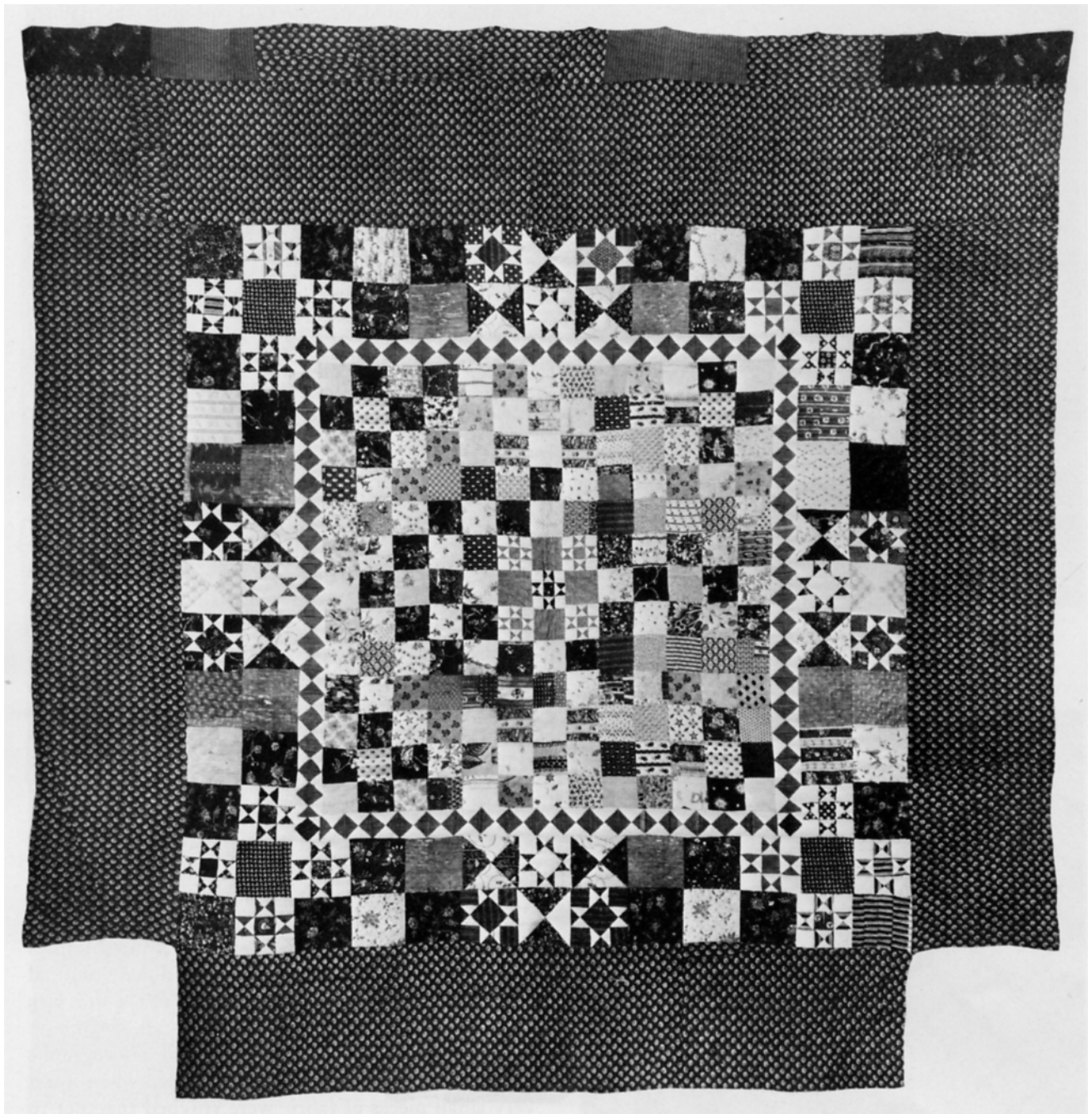


FIGURE 4.—Pieced quilt, variation of the "Framed Medallion" design. (Smithsonian photo 6535.)



FIGURE 5.—Block printed fabrics used in quilt shown in Figure 4. *a*, Linen. *b*, *c*, *d*, Linen and cotton. *e*, *f*, *h*, Cotton. *g*, Resist cotton.

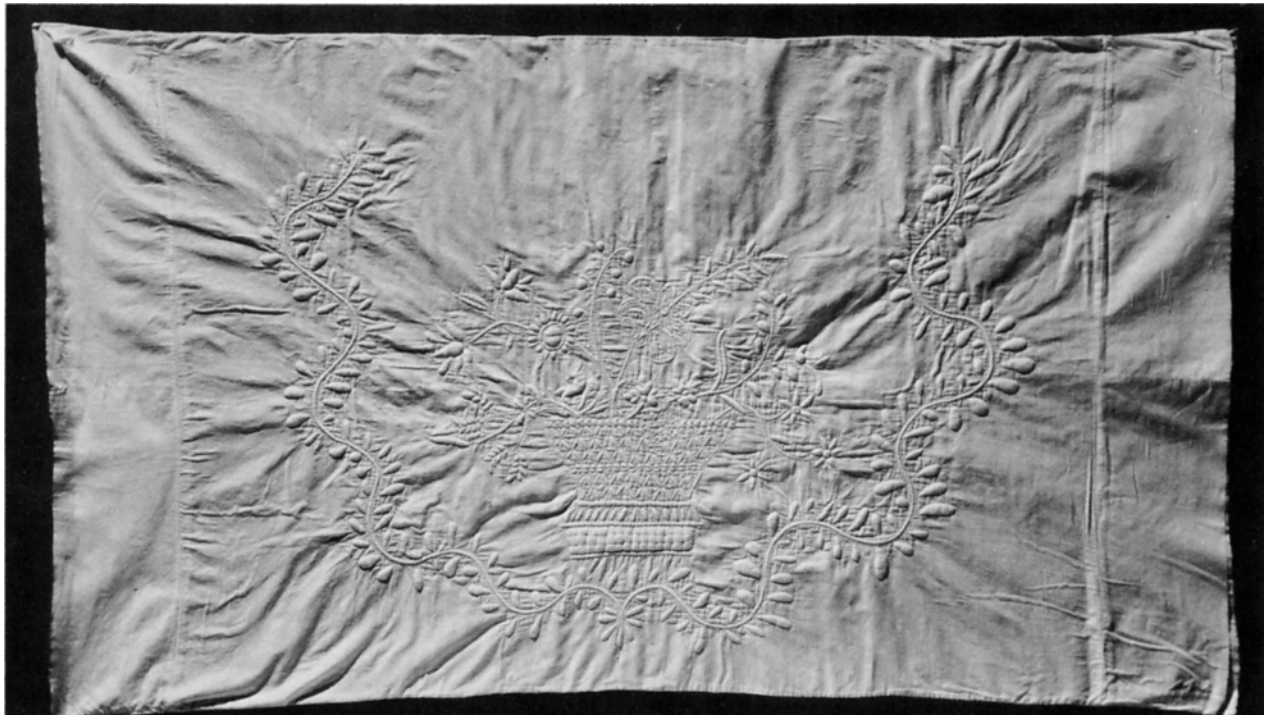


FIGURE 6.—Quilted dressing table cover. (Smithsonian photo 61668-A.)

Linen (Figure 5), block-printed in two shades of brown on natural color linen, stippled ground; thread count warp 40 (Z-twist) and weft 32 (Z-twist); probably English, 1780s. The other printed linens are of the same general style, printed primarily in browns with small amount of red, with stippled grounds. Their thread counts vary from 40 to 48 in the warp and from 28 to 40 in the weft; one is a balanced fabric.

Linen and cotton (Figure 5), block-printed in brown and gold on a natural color ground with an overall stipple pattern similar to above; thread count linen warp 52 (Z-twist) and cotton weft 54 (S-twist); probably English of the 1780s.

Linen and cotton (Figure 5), block-printed in browns on white; thread count linen warp 40 (Z-twist) and cotton weft 24 (S-twist); possibly American of the 1770s.

Linen and cotton (Figure 5), block-printed in red, brown, yellow, and tan on white. Stippling on the white stripe is in red; thread count linen warp 40 (Z-twist) and cotton weft 28 (S-twist); possibly American of the 1780s.

Cotton (Figure 5), block-printed in a red stripe with an overprint of dark brown serpentine pattern

on a white ground; thread count 44 (Z-twist) and 28 (S-twist); three blue threads in the selvedge indicate an English cotton of post-1774; the weft has only a very slight twist and was probably spun on a jenny rather than on an Arkwright spinning frame as was the warp. This is one of several prints in the quilt having remaining selvedges with the blue-thread clue.

Cotton, (Figure 5) block-printed in an Indian mound-of-earth design in yellow, red, and green on a white ground; thread count 54 (Z-twist) and 52 (S-twist); probably French of the 1780s.

Cotton (Figure 5), block-printed in a resist snail shell design, indigo dyed; thread count 68 (Z-twist) by 53 (S-twist); probably an Indian cotton, possibly printed in America in the 1780s; the fabric was used for the wide outside border of the quilt; it shows signs of earlier usage and was probably a dress originally.

Cotton (Figure 5), block-printed in a small flower and rosebud sprigged design in brown outline with red flowers and yellow leaves; thread count 60 (Z-twist) by 55 (S-twist); probably French, 1780s; fabric used in one of the dresses in the Costume collection.



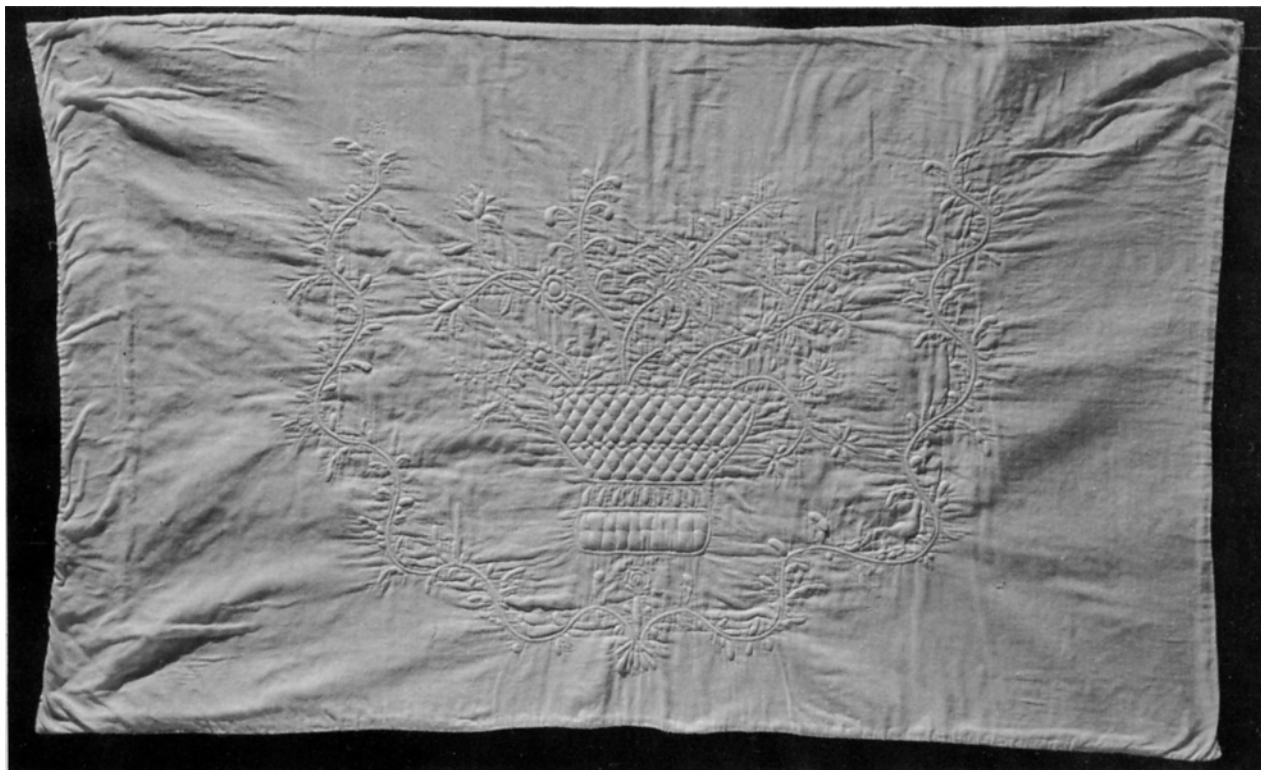


FIGURE 7.—Quilted dressing table cover. (Smithsonian photo 61668.)

Quilted dressing table or toilette cover (Figure 6)<sup>9</sup>, 44 by 24½ inches; cotton top, thread count 128 by 104 both single-ply Z-twist yarns; cotton lining, thread count 48 by 41 single Z-twist yarns; quilted with three-ply S-twist cotton thread; the quilting pattern in a flower basket with a semicircular wreath in back stitch and “stuffed work,” a padding accomplished by forcing a thick soft cotton yarn or fibers, as appropriate, through the lining fabric in the areas of the design. Fabric was added to both ends after the original was in use. It was probably made about 1825. *Cleaned T. 67-162. H.6549.*

Quilted dressing table cover (Figure 7), 33⅞ by 20½ inches; cotton top, thread count 92 by 74, both single-ply Z-twist yarns; cotton lining, thread count 42 by 37 single-ply Z-twist yarns; quilted with two-ply S-twist cotton thread. The quilting pattern is a flower basket with a semicircular wreath in back stitch and “stuffed work.” Probably made about 1825. *Cleaned T-67-161. H.6589*

<sup>9</sup> Although items such as this are sometimes catalogued in museums as bureau covers, contemporary references list similar objects as dressing table or toilette covers.

Dressing table cover (Figure 8), 35 inches by 20½ inches; made from an earlier piece of embroidered muslin, thread count 52 by 48, single-ply cotton, embroidered in pulled work, chain stitch, running stitch, satin stitch in three-ply S-twist cotton and two-ply S-twist linen. Cotton fabric, 148 by 112, with portions cut away to show the main part of the pot-of-flowers design of the early piece superimposed about 1820; additional embroidery in three-ply S-twist cotton through both fabrics. The early embroidery was probably made during fourth quarter of eighteenth century, the dressing table cover was made about 1820. *Cleaned T-67-32. H.6593*

### *Embroidery*

As soon as time permitted, the need for beauty and self-expression led the Colonial housewife to decorate her household fabrics. The implement that she used was the needle. Girls were taught to embroider quite early and each dutifully worked her sampler. As a housewife, long hours of sewing and

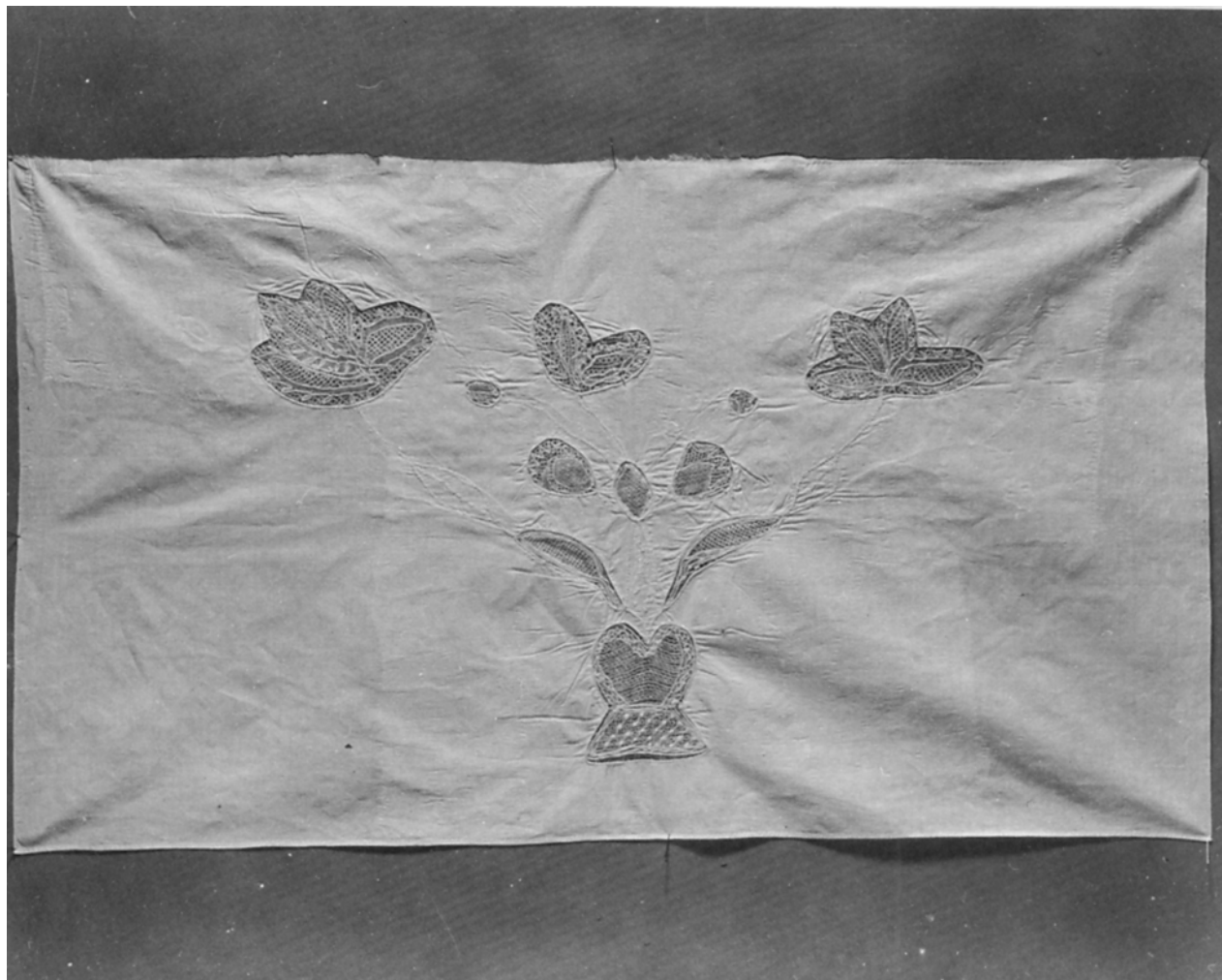


FIGURE 8.—Dressing table cover of embroidered muslin. (Smithsonian photo 61291-G.)

mending gave her the proficiency that helped her to be artistic. Patterns were few and were frequently copied from earlier works. By the eighteenth century there emerged a fresh and charming quality to the embroideries produced in this country that could be identified as "American."

Sampler (Figure 9), 11 by 13½ inches. Multicolor silk embroidery in tent stitch, eye stitch, and crossed-corners cross stitch on a linen ground, thread count 36 by 39 Z-twist. It shows alphabets, numerals, flowers, tree and verse, "Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud." Marked "Esther Copp her sampler made in the eleventh year of her age August AD 1765." *H.6590*

Sampler (Figure 10), 21½ by 16½ inches; multi-color silk embroidery in the same stitches as the eighteenth-century one in Figure 16, on a linen ground, thread count 29 by 31 Z-twist. The width of the sampler is a full fabric width, selvedge to selvedge; the design was obviously inspired by the earlier sampler, with the addition of a typical nineteenth century multiple border. In addition to the earlier verse the following were added, "Let the sweet work of prayer and praise employ my youngest breath, Thus I'm prepared for longer days or fit for earlier death" and "This work I did to let you see, What care my parents took of me." Marked "Phebe Esther Copp aged 8 1822." *H.6591*

Embroidered counterpane (Figure 11), 104 inches