

# A corded quilt puzzle

## Carolyn Gibbs unravels the mystery of a recent purchase

AS AN AVID scouter of the antique quilt listings on a certain well-known website, I snapped up this small corded quilt/table cover within five minutes of seeing it offered as a 'Buy it Now'. Examples of this technique rarely appear for sale at prices accessible to the hobby collector, and I could see from the photos that the stitching was exquisite.

Corded quilting was at one time a very popular technique, but is rarely done these days, due to its time-consuming demands. In the 17th century, southern France (particularly Marseille) and Italy became notable centres for professional needleworkers who produced many items in *piqué de Marseille*. From the early 18th century, these ateliers produced 40,000–50,000 corded quilts and items of clothing annually for export throughout Europe; British examples of corded quilting

from this period are known too. This quilt was being sold by a dealer in Midi-Pyrénées (not far from Marseille), who could tell me nothing more about its history, apart from commenting that the 5 inch deep fringe was undoubtedly of a later date than the centre.

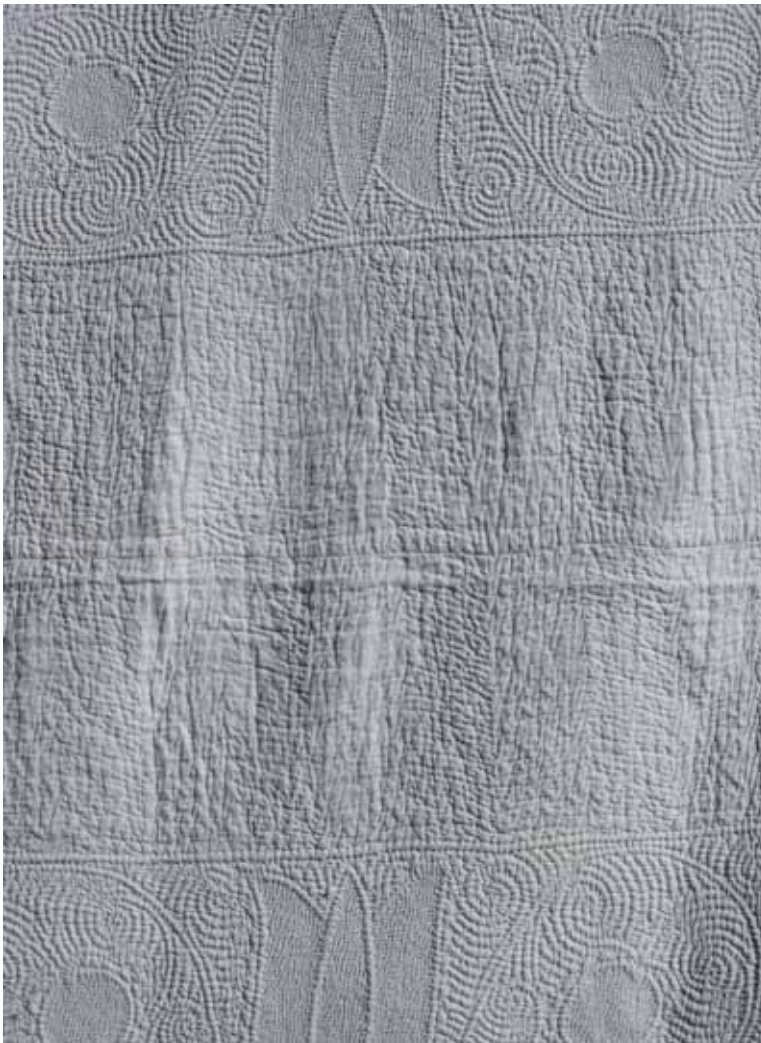
Corded quilting starts with two layers of linen or cotton fabric, the backing fabric being of a slightly looser weave than the front. The desired motif is outlined with a double row of fine running stitches, and a soft cotton cord is inserted through this channel from the back. The motifs are filled with rows of similar cording if a raised area is desired, or simply with parallel rows of running stitches through the two fabrics to form a more flattened region, giving a contrasting texture. Although not present on this quilt, the cording could be combined with



Above:  
Detail showing a large  
pineapple motif.

Below:  
The corded quilt (left) with a computer-  
generated overlay highlighting the corded  
quilting patterns (right).





embroidery stitches such as French knots or pulled work, or with stuffed work (trapunto), and the technique eventually evolved into the 'boutis' style still known in France today.

On the photographs on the website, there were areas of the design across the centre of the quilt which puzzled me, as the texture seemed different to the detailed patterns on the outer sections. When the quilt arrived a few days later, I discovered that the structure was indeed quite odd, and led me to wonder why it had been made that way.

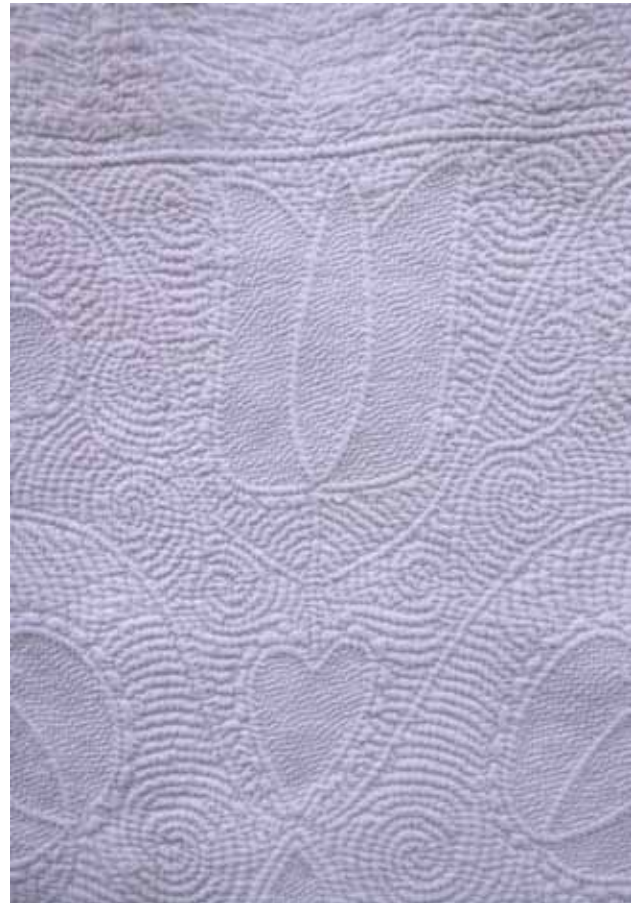
While there are 20 inch (51cm) wide strips of beautiful corded quilting along both top and bottom edges, the design changes (without any seams) into a 9½ inch (24cm) wide central area which has no cording, and consists of only two layers, stitched together with a simple repeated zigzag pattern. The two halves are joined with a seam across the centre.

Also, a careful study of the motifs in the outer areas reveals an unusual layout. It's difficult to see fine details on photographs

of white-on-white quilting, but this can be seen more clearly on the image with the computer-generated overlay shown on page 22.

One side of the quilt is a mirror-image of the other, with each side having two complete motifs, and a half-motif at either end. There are two large 'double-decker' complete designs: one has a large pineapple motif topped with a tulip, and the other a tulip topped by an oak leaf. Each of these is flanked with large scrolls with a variety of smaller motifs at their centres – apples, hearts, acorns and paisley pears. At one end of the quilt, the tulip and oak leaf motif can be found again – sliced vertically in half, with the mirror-image matching half being found opposite, across the flatter simple zigzag section. At the other end, a new elaborate motif can be found – again sliced in half and mirrored across the centre.

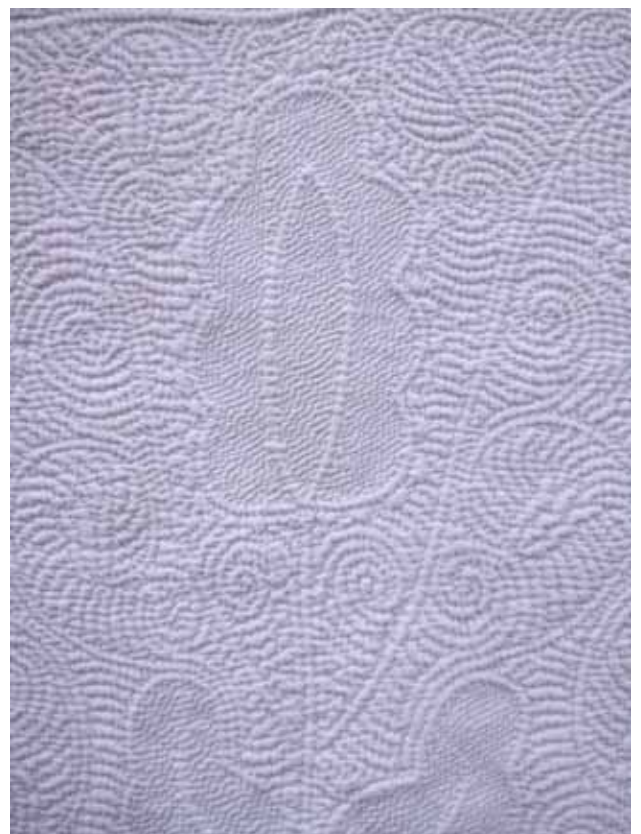
Why would someone make a quilt with this design? Although I'm not an expert in this field, after a lot of thinking and reading, I think I've worked it out – that in fact this is an example of recycling of an earlier garment – a



Above left:  
Detail showing the seam running across the centre of the quilt.

Above:  
Detail showing a tulip and heart motif.

Below:  
Detail showing an oak leaf motif.



petticoat made originally in the mid-18th century. In Chapter 8 ('The eighteenth century') of her seminal book *Quilting\**, written in 1972, Averil Colby discusses the popularity of corded quilting in this period, and comments on the number of cord-quilted items such as small quilts and clothing which have clearly been made from larger items. Elaborately stitched petticoats were worn underneath outer skirts. From the middle of the 18th century, these were often exposed at the front where the overskirt was looped back or cut away. Colby records that 'the fashion for quilted petticoats had died out after about 1770', as more elaborate clothing changed towards the simple muslin dresses we recognise from the Regency era. As they would have been luxury purchases, recycling into household items where their decorative qualities could still be appreciated must have been common practice. The International Quilt Study Center & Museum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has also identified a petticoat restyled into a bedcover – one of the items displayed at an exhibition in 2010/11 curated by Kathryn Berenson entitled 'Marseille: White Corded Quilting' (see [www.quiltstudy.org/exhibitions/online\\_exhibitions/marseille/](http://www.quiltstudy.org/exhibitions/online_exhibitions/marseille/)).

The petticoat would have had a deep band of decoration around the bottom, with a simpler area towards the top, which would generally remain unseen, with this less bulky area being pleated onto a tape and tied around the waist. The largest, most elaborate motif would be placed at the centre front, with a symmetrical distribution of other motifs to either side and round to the back. To be remodelled into a flat quilt, imagine the petticoat being slit down the centre front and centre back. Once the pleated top was unpicked from the waist tape, the two sections could be spread out and stitched together along what was originally the top of the petticoat (see right).

So recycling is not new – and although patchwork is often associated with the reuse of worn-



Above and below, top to bottom: Diagrams showing how the petticoat could have been remodelled into a flat quilt.

out garments by the poorer classes of society, this beautiful example shows that there were other ways of ensuring that a treasured piece of needlework could prolong its life and continue to be appreciated over 200 years later.

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\* *Quilting* by Averil Colby, Batsford, first published 1972.

**Can you help?**  
 If anyone can contribute any further guidance on my corded quilt's date or origins, then do please contact me, as I would love to learn more:  
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