

Carolyn Gibbs – winner of the Amy Emms Bursary 2016

Studying the art of traditional wholecloth quilt design

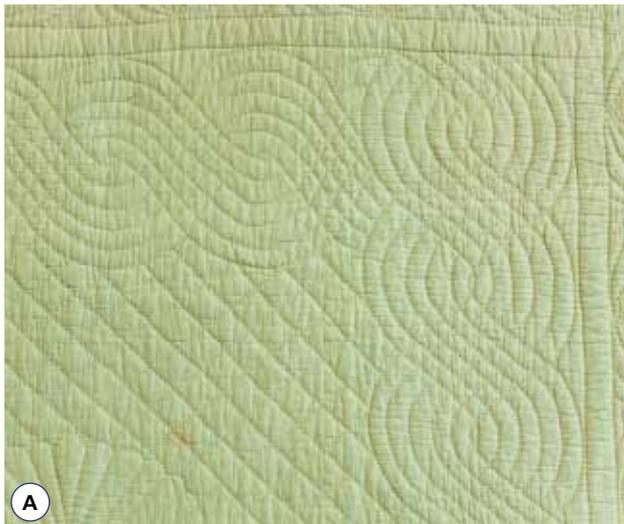


IMAGE COURTESY HELENA DOLBY



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GIVEN EVERY OTHER year, the Amy Emms Bursary is awarded to enable a Quilters' Guild member to further their knowledge of, or skills in, the traditional art of quilting. My application focused not on developing my practical skills of hand quilting, but on deepening my understanding of traditional quilting design. As well as studying the quilts of others, I chose to spend my bursary on some professional photography, which would not only aid my own study, but allow the results to be more easily shared with others.

Features of the Bursary application

Designing quilting patterns is something many of us shy away from. Little emphasis is placed on this in workshops and courses, or in books and magazine articles, compared to patchwork design. So, other than quilt-in-the-ditch, most people opt to copy the designs provided by the pattern creator, or employ the services of a professional longarm quilter

now that this has become so easily available. In contrast, apart from the professional 'quilt stamper' in the North East who would draw out a quilting design for others to stitch during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the majority of antique wholecloth quilts were marked by the maker.

As I became more interested in antique quilts, I started looking at the quilting designs on the wholecloth quilts in my own collection more closely. It was the design of the border corners that particularly caught my interest. As I had discovered in my own quilting, making a border turn a corner perfectly was not a simple matter. I noticed several variations in the ways that quilters had tackled the corners, and classified four possible types of corner in my Amy Emms Bursary application:

- **Ignore:** The border design on two sides runs to the edge of the quilt, and the design on alternate sides simply butts onto these.
- **Avoid:** The quilter uses a separate motif as a cornerstone, which makes no contact with

"... making a border turn a corner perfectly was not a simple matter"

the border design.

- **Fudge:** The quilter attempts to make the design flow around the corner, but the treatment is not completely successful – 'fudging' is needed to squash or stretch the motif near the corner so that it fits.
- **Master:** The width and length of the design repeat are carefully selected to fit the size of the



IMAGE COURTESY HELENA DOLBY

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quilt and integrated with a harmonious corner treatment so that the design can flow smoothly around the entire border in a controlled and pleasing manner.

Study and development

Closer study of a larger number of quilts has identified examples of these corner design features.

Ignore

The broad cable on this late 19th- to early 20th-century simple quilt (A), from a farmhouse in mid-Wales, makes no attempt to turn the corner, simply running to the edge.

Avoid

The use of a different motif within a lined square at the corner, such as a rose, four-leaf or simple diagonal grid, is a very common feature, particularly on Welsh quilts (B). Their use can be a good way for less experienced quilters to avoid complicated planning.

Welsh quilts often include repeated motifs within repeated frames set next to each other, which makes planning corner motifs simple.

Fudge

Some quilters are able to plan the repeating motifs in borders better than others. Although the quilter managed to stretch the last leaf to make it fill the remaining space on another corner of this Welsh quilt, on the corner shown here (C), the bent leaves are visibly cropped, and the maker also had to use part-paisleys at the ends of the inner border to fill the gap. This quilt would have been marked in the frame. A standard-sized template would have been laid down at one end of the border and marked around before being moved along; this would be repeated along the border until the other corner was reached. It is thus possible to work out which way round the quilt was stitched. The first side is usually more evenly spaced, but up the side borders, the motifs were

marked in stages as the quilt was re-rolled on the frame, so they often got out of step. So, by the time the quilter reached the top border, they were unable to fit in whole motifs – even by stretching or squashing – and had to use just the part of the template that would fit the gap.

Now take a look at a different Welsh quilt (D), which has four interesting quilted borders – as well as an unusual printed design running down the middle of each of the three fabric strips which make up the quilt top. At first glance it looks perfect, but a closer look reveals some minor fudges, particularly at one corner. Can you work out which way the quilter stitched this?

North Country quilts also use corner motifs to avoid the need for the borders to flow around them, although they lost the framing lines towards the end of the 20th century. As they developed a more flowing style, the corner designs became a major feature in themselves, with separate motifs extending out into the central area, often embellished with sworls and curlicues (E).

The borders, whether continuous running feathers, cables and plaits, or large repeated units such as swags, fans or hammocks, have no need to turn the corner, although care in placing them enhances the corner treatment. For example (F), the running feathers are placed perfectly to form bellows which frame the corner shell and flowers on this quilt made by Isabella Tucker, a Durham miner's wife who made and sold quilts to add to the family income in the 1930s. This style of design needed to be marked on the whole quilt before putting it into the frame – it is well known that professional 'quilt stampers' designed and marked quilt tops for others to stitch, but the generally improved planning of the borders and corners indicates that this must have been common practice.



Master

My search for ‘Master’ corners was not entirely as I expected. To my surprise, within the heritage British quilts that I have studied, I have found very few where a continuous border design, such as a cable or running feather, continues around the corner in a smooth and unbroken fashion. This 1930s Durham quilt (G), owned by Guild member Jenny Jarvis, is an uncommon example of how a broad cable can be made to flow into related designs in the corner.

It seems fitting to finish by showing the work of one of the few quilters to master the perfect turn of a corner with a feathered cable – Amy Emms herself (H).

However, it is now clear to me that making a border flow around the corner is by no means compulsory, or indeed common. Many other effective options can be chosen – and are usually much simpler!

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www.carolyngibbsquilts.co.uk (you can see more images of these quilts on Carolyn’s website)

www.facebook.com/CarolynGibbsQuilts
You can also find CarolynGibbsQuilts on YouTube

Amy Emms Bursary 2018

Amy Emms was a North Country quilter and eminent teacher who was influential in passing on design and hand-quilting skills. She was awarded the MBE for her work and died in 1998, aged 94. The Amy Emms Bursary, of up to £300, is given every other year and will next be awarded at the 2018 Conference & AGM.

The only criterion for eligibility for this award is that the applicant must be a current member of The Quilters’ Guild of the British Isles. The award, which is to further the winner’s knowledge of, or skills in, the traditional art of quilting, must be spent as stated on the application form.

*The closing date for entries is **28 February 2018**. Full guidelines and an application form are on the Guild’s website (or contact the Guild office): www.quiltersguild.org.uk/membership/amy-emms-bursary*



IMAGE COURTESY CAROLYN GIBBS

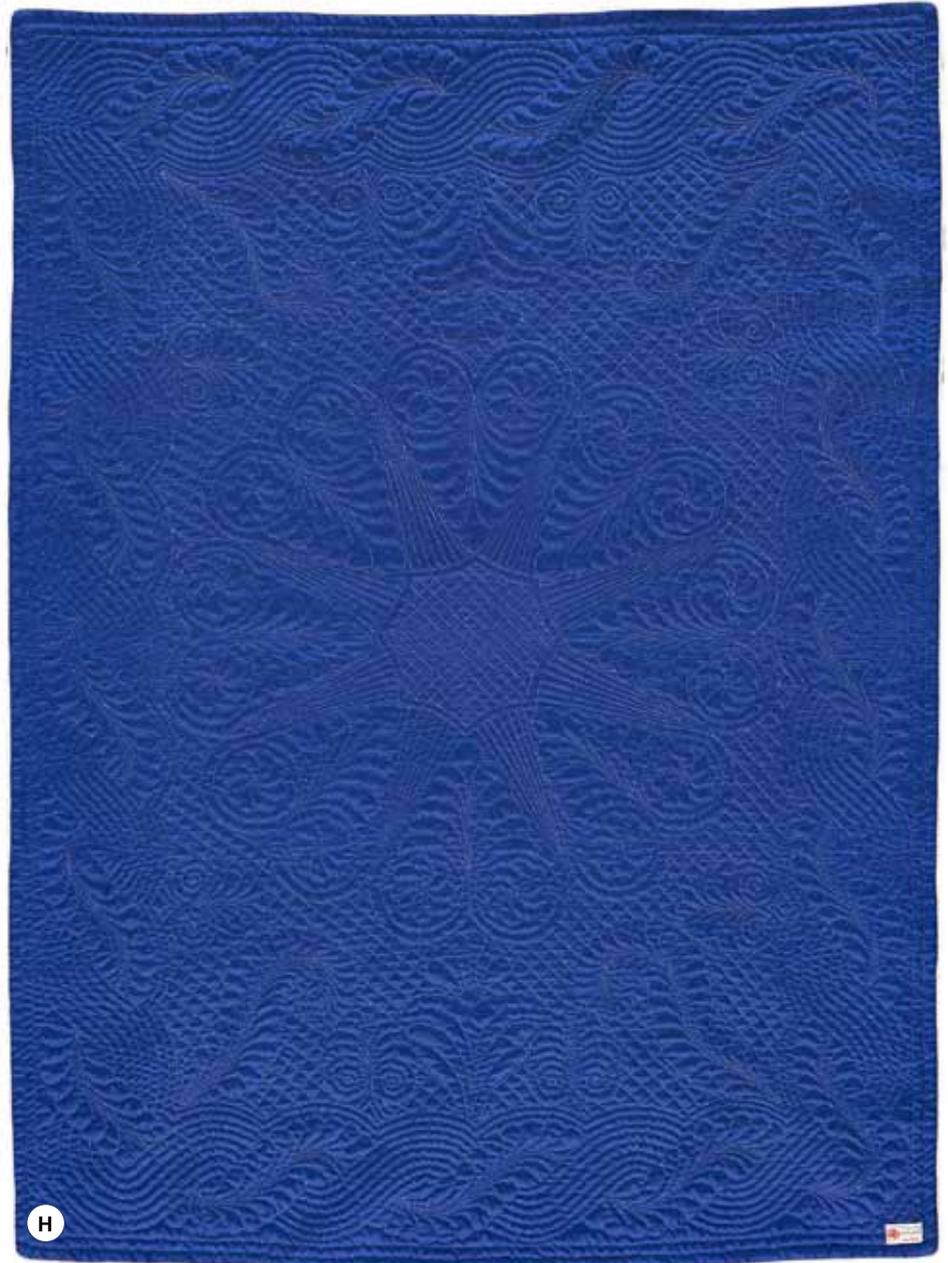


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