

A 15th Century Italian Quilted Blanket



by Senhora Rafaella d'Allemtejo, GdS
An Tir Kingdom Arts & Sciences Championship
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Introduction

There are many names for the bed coverings which keep us warm at night. Bedspread, coverlet, counterpane, quilt, and blanket, are just a few of the terms that have been used to describe a large fabric or fur bedcovering. There is no standardized technical definition for these items, even within a single culture. Artisans within the craft often disagree on terminology.

Quilting is the technique of holding two or more layers of fabric together with stitched thread. The quilting threads are often done in a pattern, examples are simple rows, squares, or diamonds (lozenges). There are three styles of the quilting technique:

Wadded quilting – two layers of material are quilted with a layer of batting between them.

Corded or stuffed quilting – two layers of material are quilted in designs, then the designs are stuffed with cord or batting to give the designs dimension. Also known by the Italian name for this technique, "trapunto".

Flat quilting – two layers of material are quilted together with no batting between them.

For the purposes of this documentation, when I say "quilted" or "quilting" I am referring to wadded quilting. When discussing the other two styles, I will explicitly label them.

Of Beds and Bedding

As I looked through books on period illumination and textiles in the course of my research, I found myself drawn to the beds like those in Continental and English illuminated manuscripts of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. These domestic interiors display a bed frame/support structure, multiple mattresses, sheets, blankets, flat bolster pillows, fluffier pillows, and hangings. There are hangings behind the head of the bed, around the bed, and hangings that create a canopy. Bed hangings were supported by four poster bedpoles or suspended from a frame or chain system.

In late period Western Europe there was no bedding or furniture industry like we have today with the modern standard sizing of frames, mattresses, and bedclothes (blankets, sheets, pillowcases, etc.). According to De Bonneville, "A bed would have been between five-and-a-half and eleven feet wide" (74), but she is generalizing for Western Europe. I found no discussion of the length of a bed my reading, though a look at the sizes of the few extant quilts might give a clue. It's hard to determine from art pictures, even the truly wonderful photo-realistic paintings of the Italian Renaissance, what the sizes of items might be. Textile items do not age well and when old were recycled into secondary and tertiary products, especially large flat pieces like sheets or blankets which could make many new smaller items. The few domestic textile items that have survived to our time are either ecclesiastical or royal.

Recreating from Small Fragments

My goal in beginning this project was to try and recreate a medieval quilt. I realized that I had no idea what a real medieval blanket would look like and if they even had quilted blankets. Although finding documentation for my persona (13th c. Portugal) would have been ideal, but all I found for medieval Portugal was a small discussion of wool blankets and nothing on Portuguese quilting. The Portuguese imported quilts from India during their expansion and colonization period (late 15th c. on), but there is no indication that these quilts were made in Portugal in the SCA timeperiod.

I set out to make a whole-cloth wadded quilt that would work for both home and event use. I wanted the blanket to be reasonably authentic in its materials and embellishment. I wanted the blanket to be warm,

but not heavy, and large enough to drape over the edges of my modern full-sized mattress. Support for quilting in any one timeperiod or culture was hard to determine, but I was drawn to the opulence of the Italian Renaissance.

I will present evidence for quilted blankets where it is found in a few cultures of our timeperiod, but this blanket emulates the style found in paintings of 15th century Italy.

Questing for Quilts

Surviving examples of quilting are seen in tomb statues and manuscript illuminations of quilted armor (gambesons and other arming equipment). (Staniland: 38) Evidence of quilts is also found in inventories and other household accounts (especially in England and Wales). Colby states, "The almost casual inclusion of them among other items, infers that they were not of unusual value, and so possibly they were made [...], by the women of the household and used until they were worn out." (Colby, 1971: 88) Colby has found examples in English inventories dating back to the 13th century:

In 1290, 'Maketh a bed ... of quoytene [quilting] and of materasz' infers that the quilting was a covering and not an underlay or mattress; a little later, in about 1300, 'cowltes and couvertures' (quilts and bed clothes) are mentioned in a poem, and another reference in 1320 to "Foure hondred beddes of selk echon, Quiltes of gold there upon' is on the scale of furnishing necessary for a palace. (1971: 13)

There are no surviving wadded quilts from period. There are four surviving corded quilts from period, the most famous being the Tristan Quilts made c.1395 in Sicily (also known as the Guicciardini Quilts) which are three quilts in the same style, one in a private collection in Florence (Laning: 1) one housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, [see figure 1 & 2] and the last one in the Museo Nazionale, Florence. (Staniland: 38) The other surviving corded quilt is from 16th century Germany. [see figure 2A & 3] (Colby: 89)

These are whole-cloth quilts, where one fabric is used to make a quilt top or quilt bottom layer. I found no evidence to support that pieced or patchwork quilting was done in period. According to Averil Colby, who has written many books on quilting and its history, the earliest known English patchwork quilt was made in 1708. (Colby, 1965:10) There was no discussion of quilted piecwork in Italy.

Fabric and Color Choices

Quilts have three essential parts: top and bottom fabric, padding (also called batting), and stitching. I chose to make the blanket approximately "queen-sized" (according to modern bedding standards) which will nicely overhang on my full-sized modern mattress. The finished dimensions are 87"wide x 98"long. The top of the blanket is made of two panels of red linen, sewn together near the center with a simple straight stitch and the seams are sewn down. I was following period seam construction as seen in *Crowfoot* (albeit this is an English textile book). [see figure 4] (156) The bottom layer is made with two panels of beige cotton twill and is sewn together using a flat fell seam. I chose to machine stitch the top and bottom panel piecings because of the length and weight of the fabric (I wanted to make sure I had good straight seams and knew that machine stitching would best produce them). The rest of the quilt is hand-sewn.

Linen was woven locally in Italy but the best linen came from France or Flanders. Cotton was used in Italy for summer bed-hangings and coverlets. (Thornton: 73) "From the earliest records, linen seems to have been used more than any other material for the outer covers of bed quilts, clothing and any other purpose for which quilting has been practicable..." (Colby, 1971: 25) The Tristan corded quilts are made of white linen. The Tristan quilt housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is 106" wide x 122" in length. (Colby, 1971: 16) The German corded coverlet is made of heavy white linen.

Thornton says that the linen of Italian quilts was white. "Most coltri [quilts] were apparently of linen and therefore white but some were of thin silk (taffeta and cendal [zendado] are mentioned) which could of course be coloured. Others were of cotton [bambagia]." (165)

In looking at the visual resources available to me (see Appendix A) there are a great many red blankets in the paintings and illuminations. There are references to red bedcovers (usually described as “crimson”) in period inventories.

- "In the fourteenth century Romance of Arthur of Lytle Brytayne, [...] describes a bed cover of crimson silk, either woven or embroidered with gold and quilted with cotton thread." (Colby: 18)
- "In 1526, at the Villa Farnesina (Medici Invt.) in Rome, a coperta [coverlet] of crimson tela (presumably a linen or cotton material) was "imbotita in mando[r]lle [quilted with almond-shaped patterns, i.e. ovals]". (Thornton: 162)
- In the 1584 inventory of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, there is listed a quilt of crimson satin, quilted in a diamond pattern with "silver twist" and other design motifs. (Colby, 1971: 87)

I knew I wanted a red blanket, so while linen is a period fabric the Italians didn't seem to color linen for blankets in period Italy. The red blankets seen in illuminations are probably of silk. I have combined the two in the choice of my top fabric.

The bottom layer is made from cotton twill and as seen above cotton was a period Italian fabric. Most illuminations/paintings show the blanket with the top turned down and the white sheet showing over the turned down area making it hard to determine what colors were chosen for the backside of blankets. I chose a tan/beige color so it would hide dirt better and the brushed twill is very soft and comfortable to the touch.

Ideally I would have liked to make both top and bottom panels out of linen but that proved to be cost prohibitive (actually I wanted to make a silk blanket, as that seems to be the noble fabric of choice in period, but I couldn't find red silk in my price range). There are approximately six yards of fabric in each of the top and bottom layers. I got a good deal on the linen via an online vendor but linen fabric for both the top and bottom layer was starting to get a bit steep. I had a self-imposed budget of \$100 (see Appendix B) and still needed to buy batting and thread. I chose cotton for the bottom layer and the total cost of fabric became reasonable.

Thread Options

The threads used to do the quilting in period were less varied, the two most common being silk and linen. Colby states that "the quilting itself commonly has been carried out in silk thread, but some examples of cotton or linen thread being used are known." (1971: 74) The Tristan quilts (Italian 14th century) are made with brown and white linen thread. Sometimes the quilting was executed with a coloured silk as the 16th century quilt from Palermo which was made of white linen fabric and quilted with yellow silk. (Thornton: 165) There seems to be no preference for pairing any given thread with any given fabric.

In England, the two reference to famous quilts are both stitched with metallic threads. One is stitched in gold, "a rich quilte wrought with coten, with crimson sendal stitched with thredes of gold" (Colby, 1971: 18) and the other in "silver twist". (Colby, 1971: 87)

I went shopping at my local specialty threads store and picked up samples of linen and cotton thread. I wanted a red linen thread for the outside finishing stitches and originally wanted either white or yellow silk for the majority of the quilting. It did not occur to me until discussing it with the proprietress that cotton floss was originally designed to be a silk thread copy. Given the large quilt and the large amount of thread involved I decided to use cotton floss for the majority of my project. I decided to use a commercial poly/cotton hand-quilting thread to do the finished edging of two rows of running stitch as it was reasonably priced and sturdy.

In the meantime, however, my Laurel (Dame Zenobia Naphtali) went to Robin & Russ Handweavers in McMinnville, OR and called from the store offering to pick me up the spooled linen thread they sell. For over 3000 yards of thread, \$24 was a good deal for the genuine article from Ireland (that's \$.008/yard for undyed white wet-spun linen thread). The dyed linen thread from Needlepoint Plus was \$2.55 for 20 yards (that's \$.128/yard). I'd also been wanting linen thread for other projects so it was a good deal all-around. Countess Elisabeth de Rossignol recommended that I wax the thread. I did a little research online and

saw that waxing linen thread was recommended for ease of pulling through the fabric and to preventing knotting and fraying. I saw no mention of waxed linen thread with regards to quilting in my research books. Crowfoot, et al. mention that linen thread in England came in different thickness and colors and was used in domestic items and for quilting bed covers. (151)

In the finished blanket I have used the red poly/cotton for the edging which emulates linen, the black cotton floss which emulates silk floss, and the white linen thread which is the real thing.

Stuffed, Padded, and all Wadded Up

The padding for quilting isn't often mentioned. Thornton says of Italian quilts, "By definition quilting involves two layers of material but these usually form a sandwich with an inner layer of stuffing, albeit often a very thin one especially if a summer quilt was being made. This inner layer could be of cottonwool -- or perhaps of wool, if a winter quilt was involved." (165) Colby talks about "flokys" being used for stuffing in England and that "at this time 'flokys' probably would have been all wool, but of inferior quality from that used for spinning. [...] for domestic quilting it is likely that the rough wool left over from shearing, as well as pieces left on the briars in the fields, were washed and used for padding, much as it has been in rural areas up to the present century." (1971: 21-22) Staniland also says that unspun wool or cotton was used in quilting for gambesons. (38)

Since my goal was to be reasonably authentic, I tried to find commercial all-cotton batting. My local fabric store was having a sale but by the time I got to the store they only had all-cotton in baby blanket size and I didn't want to piece together batting or have weird floating bits in the interior of the blanket so I purchased commercial polyester batting which was on sale.

Design, Patterns, and Execution of the Quilting

In all the visual resources I looked at no bed coverings showed signs of dimensional quilting. Only one manuscript from the Netherlands [see figure 5] shows line markings in squares that might be quilting. (Backhouse: 144)

Thornton says that in the Italian inventories "Quite often the designs formed by the quilting are mentioned -- with squares, waves, herringbones, birds and flowers, circles and lilies, ovals, and no doubt many other patterns." (Thornton: 165) "In 1526, at the Villa Farnesina (Medici Invt.) in Rome, a coperta [coverlet] of crimson tela (presumably a linen or cotton material) was "imbotita in mando[r]lle [quilted with almond-shaped patterns, i.e. ovals]". (Thornton: 162)

Both Staniland and Colby discuss English quilting patterns in the context of protective armor padding. Colby talks about the professional pattern makers for quilted items whose existence is documented from the 16th century. (40-41) Staniland goes on to say: "Surviving examples of medieval quilting are exceptionally rare. Unspun wool or cotton sandwiched between two pieces of linen had long been used in the creation of protective doublets for wear under chain mail or plate armour. Some stitching was used to keep all layers in place, either vertical or diagonal cross-hatching, and this is frequently indicated in tomb effigies and manuscript illuminations." (38)

An inventory entry from France in 1525 shows that the owner, Pierre le Gendre, owned at least four piqué (or quilted) blankets, "one quilted in diamonds surrounded in bough, another in chevrons and diamonds, [another] in hemp with fleur-de-lys in the corners and a rose in the middle, [and] the most precious, in diamond-quilted linen, of three breadths and two-and-a-half ells wide." (de Bonneville: 81)

I decided to emulate the blankets in Thornton found on pages 54 and 151 [see figures 6 & 7]. Both blankets are red and have border edges with 2 rows of black straight stitching. The blanket on p. 151 has thick lines, possibly appliquéd trim (like a thick bias tape). The blanket on p. 54 has an edge pattern with parallel rows of thin black lines and inside the lines are alternating eyes and connected triangles. It is important to note that in most of the Italian paintings it appears that border patterns are on the sides of the blanket, not the head or the foot of the blanket.

I wanted a fairly simple design so I set apart the borders from the quilt body with a row of red running stitches. I then applied two lines of black parallel lines using backstitching. Taking a cue from the Italian quilt which was quilted with almond-shaped patterns (quoted above), I quilted a row of connected almond shapes end-to-end in white linen using a running stitch between the black lines.

For the body of the quilt I wanted to use a diamond pattern. Although not mentioned in the inventory of Italian quilts, it is a standard quilting pattern and is mentioned in both English and French contexts (quoted above). As Colby says, "little experience in sewing is needed to discover that diagonal lines of stitching through layers of woven material hold them more firmly together than those which follow the straight woven thread." (1971: 40) The lozenges are large and quilted using a running stitch.

I had some trouble with the design of the body as I did not have space in my apartment to fully lay out a piece this big. I ended up folding the blanket in quarters and marking the pattern in each quarter. There are slight variations in the pattern due to this difficulty. I used a fine mechanical pencil to layout the design lines on the quilt. Thornton shows a 1527 Venetian woodcut of embroideresses using both prick & pounce and pens to layout designs on their embroideries. **[see figure 8]** This same woodcut shows standing embroidery frames in use. (Thornton: 81) I originally tried to do the quilting without a frame but the bulk of the blanket became too heavy. Signora Francesca Testarosa de'Martini loaned me her standing oval quilting frame which held the blanket at a steady height and tension.

I used two rows of running stitch to edge the quilt. **[see figure 9]** (Colby, 1971: 179) I had originally thought to finish the quilt edges with fringe or tassels (as seen in many of the Italian paintings, especially **figure 6** which was my primary blanket inspiration.) After turning in both top and bottom materials and doing the two rows of running stitches, I placed the blanket on my bed and it drapes far enough over the edges of the bed that it the bottom of the box spring. As I currently do not have a frame on my bed, this also constitutes hitting the floor. I decided against adding fringe to the blanket so it won't drag on my bedroom floor and also because it would drag home straw and other debris from events.

I look forward to sleeping under my new medieval quilt for many years to come.

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Staniland, Kay. Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

Thornton, Peter. The Italian Renaissance Interior, 1400-1600. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991.

Wieck, Roger S. Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art. New York: George Braziller, Inc. in association with The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997.

Other Reading

International Exhibitions Foundation. Portugal and the East Through Embroidery: 16th to 18th Century Coverlets from the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon. Washington D.C., 1981.

While this book shows one late 16th c. coverlet, the embroidery is tightly packed (horror vacui). This piece falls somewhere between flat quilting and trapunto as the motifs are not stuffed.

Levey, Santana M. Elizabethan Treasures: The Hardwick Hall Textiles. London: The National Trust, 1998. Includes one Bengali cotton coverlet quilted and embroidered in the Indo-Portuguese style. Other discussion of Elizabethan bedclothes important, but nothing specific to quilting.

Marques, A. H. de Oliveira. Daily Life in Portugal in the Late Middle Ages. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971.

Includes discussion of Portuguese styles of blankets (words and definitions) but has no mention of quilted blankets in period.

Appendix A. Deconstructing the visual resources (organized by color)

Source	Main Color	Edge treatment	Culture	Timeperiod
Thornton p.34	Red	Gold trim	Italian	1480s
Thornton p. 55	Red	Black horizontal strips (thick and thin)	Italian	1470
Thornton p. 59	Red with blue/black outline ovals and white dots	None	Italian	1388-95
Thornton p. 123	Red	Gold, 2 horizontal stripes with patterns between them	Italian	undated
Thornton p. 242	Red with gold diapering	Gold on red trim	Italian	late 1380s
Staniland p.6	Red w/gold heraldic motifs (embroidery?)	None	French	15th c.
Gavin MS1	Red	Gold horizontal stripes (2)	French	late 14th c./early 15th c.
Breviary of Martin of Aragon	Red with gold lines in horizontal parallels and chevrons	None	Spain	15th c.
Thornton p. 54 (same as de Bonneville p. 75)	Lt. Red	Black lines, yellow lines, conjoined white triangles and eye motifs, black fringe	Italian	1504
Thornton p. 134	Lt. Red	White, horizontal trim patterns and fringe	Italian	1490s
Thornton p. 151	Lt. Red	2 thick black horizontal bands	Italian	c.1443
Thornton p. 135	Green	Gold horizontal and engrailed lines and fringe	Italian	1455-1461
Thornton p. 279	Green	White parallel lines with patterns between them	Italian	1496
Thornton p. 39	Dark Green	Red with gold	Italian	1486
Thornton p. 118	Dark Green	Gold horizontal stripes (2) and gold fringe	Italian	undated (15th c.?)
Thornton p. 159	Dark Green	White lace edging with gold tassels	Italian	undated
Backhouse, p. 144	Olive green blanket with gold lines in squares.	None	Netherland	early 15th c.
Wieck, p. 120	Royal blue	None	French	1485-90
Thornton p. 119	Brown with black and white stripes	None	Italian	1305-6
Thornton p. 122	Orange and blue plaid	None	Italian	1380s
Thornton p. 163	Orange with teal-blue plaid	None	Italian	late 14th c.

Appendix B. Finances

I was trying to keep under a budget of **\$100**, this influenced my design choices greatly.

Linen fabric (red), 6 yards at \$7/yard =	\$42
Cotton fabric (tan), 6 yards at \$3/yard =	\$18
Linen thread, white (spool) =	\$24
Beeswax in container =	\$2
Red poly/cotton quilting thread, 2 spools at \$1.50/each =	\$3
Black cotton floss = on-hand from previous blackwork projects	\$0
Needles, thimble, scissors = on-hand from previous projects	\$0

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Total: **\$91**