

Unique Feather Quilting Designs

by Gwen Marston

Feathers can be considered the classics of quilting design families. Distinguished by their elegance and vast number of feather variations, these designs have enjoyed a long run of popularity with quilters. Their flexibility enables them to fit into almost any space. First popular in England and Wales, these graceful designs seem to have arrived on American shores almost as soon as permanent settlements became a reality.

I've enjoyed using feather quilting designs on my quilts for years. As a quilt teacher, I've also enjoyed showing others how easy it is to draw quilting designs. Ironically, the best place to look for new feather designs is antique quilts. Here are five of the most unique feather designs I know. All five were "discovered" in my continuing study of 18th and 19th century quilts.

Feathers on an Appliqué Vine

Familiar to most quilters is the continuous feather used to advantage on the borders of many quilts (Fig. 1). Most often continuous feathers move around the border in one direction. But on several antique quilts I've seen an interesting variation on this classical design and I've used it on a number of my own quilts. Look at the feathers on the borders of my quilts, FLOWER POT and GOD'S DOGS (page 49). Instead of coming off a central spine, the feathers come off the appliqué vine itself. When it comes to appliqué shapes on the vine, the feathers can run right over the top of them, or appear to slip behind the appliqué motifs.



FLOWER POT, 40" X 40", by Gwen Marston. Feather quilting designs originate on the spine of an appliquéd vine.

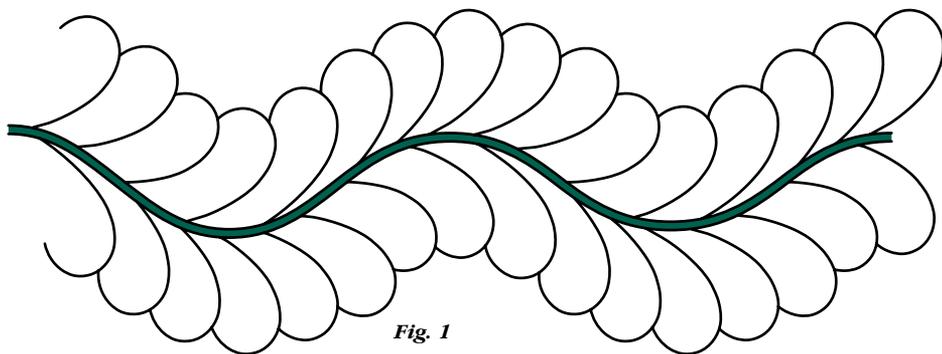
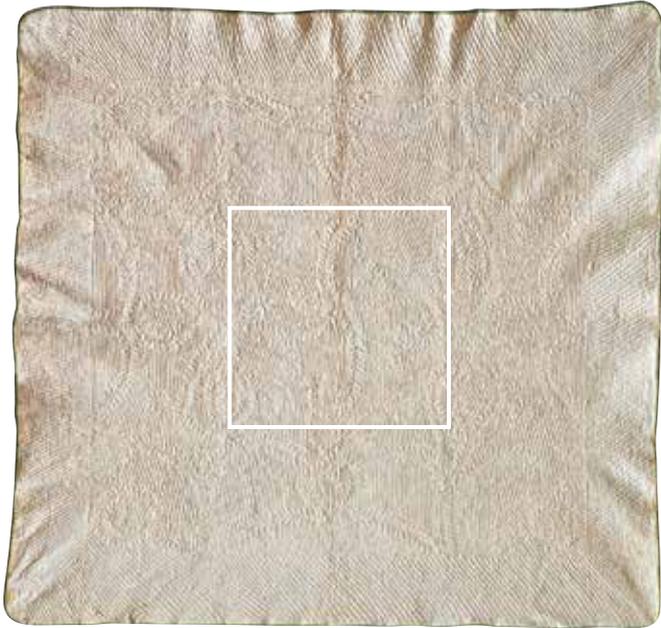


Fig. 1



The reverse side of ROSE QUILT, 76" x 80", ca. 1875, "Signed E.L." Note that because it is quilted from the front side, quilting stitches are reversed from the pattern below. COLLECTION OF GWEN MARSTON

Feathered Plume

An antique rose appliqué quilt is one of the favorite quilts in my collection and includes innovative feather quilting designs (you can see them clearly on the back of the quilt shown at left). While it isn't unusual to find all-over quilting designs on 19th century quilts, the designs on this appliqué quilt are particularly outstanding. Various feather designs cover the surface of the quilt, running right over the appliqué motifs as though they weren't even there. A large feathered plume (Fig. 2) covers a central appliqué floral spray, ignoring the appliqué design completely.

I used this idea on one of my appliqué quilts and was delighted with the results. The stems on the flowers in the middle of all four sides are quilted with feather sprays. The corners of the quilt are quilted in double feather wreaths placed right over the inner corner design.

Feathered Hourglass

Welsh quilters have been absolutely ingenious in the use of classical feather designs. Welsh quilts are extraordinarily rich in varied and artful quilting designs. Several antique Welsh quilts used an all-over hourglass feather design. I used this idea in my quilt RED SQUARE. The border designs on RED SQUARE are also inspired by Welsh designs. If you are looking for quilting designs that will make your quilt stand out, take a careful look at antique Welsh quilts.

Feathers with Coil

Effective partly because of its sparse use, is the elegant Welsh feather with a coil (Fig. 3), an idea that definitely works. Used infrequently, only a few feathers on a continuous feather design curve gently to form a coil. It's amazing how much elegance a few coiled feathers can add.

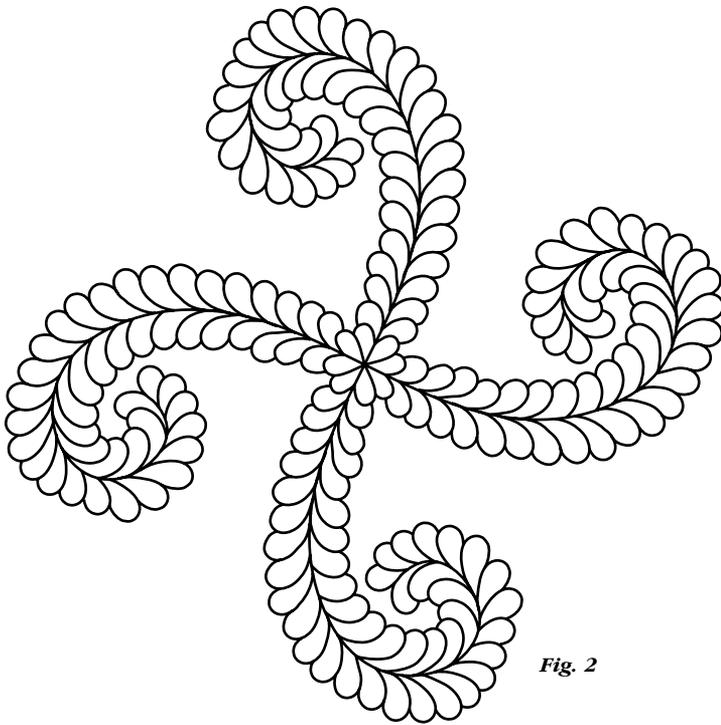


Fig. 2

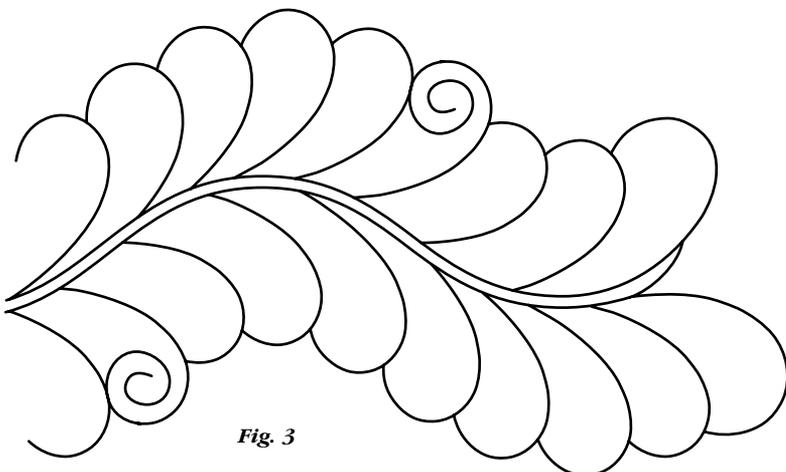
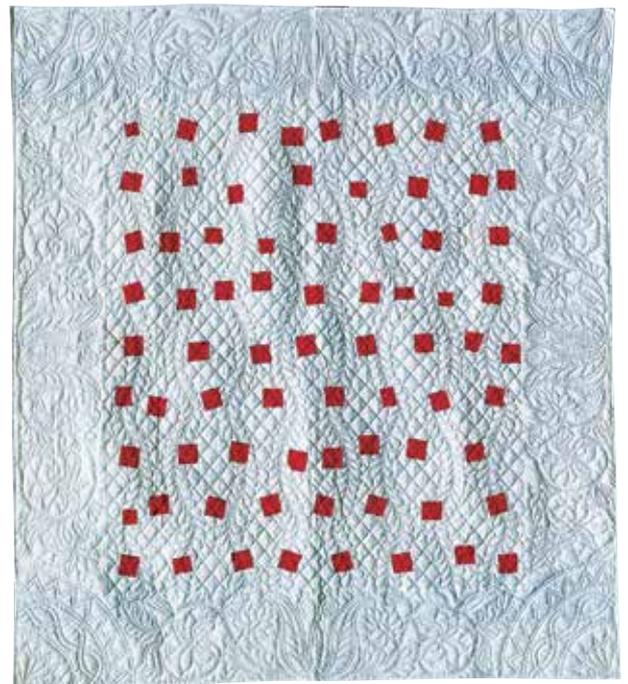


Fig. 3



RED SQUARE, 62" X 70", by the author, quilted by Carol Morris. An hourglass feather configuration is inspired by an antique quilt.



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Heart Feathers

While attending the Vermont Quilt Festival several years ago, I viewed an exhibit of 46 quilts from the Shelburne Museum in Vermont. The experience of seeing so many spectacular quilts and being able to study them at my leisure was thrilling.

Sometime between 1840 and 1860 Elizabeth Kinzer made CAESAR'S CROWN. Measuring 113" x 114" and pieced from chintz fabrics in browns, blues, and reds, this quilt is breathtaking. Elizabeth stitched in a little surprise I discovered 150 years later. At first I thought she had used a standard continuous feather design on the outer border, but on closer look, I realized she had artfully turned each feather into a heart (Fig. 4).

I couldn't get home fast enough to use a similar design

**CAESAR'S CROWN, 113" X 114",
ca. 1840-1860, by Elizabeth
Kinzer. Outer border feather
designs have heart-shaped
plumes.**

FROM THE SHELBURNE MUSEUM
COLLECTION

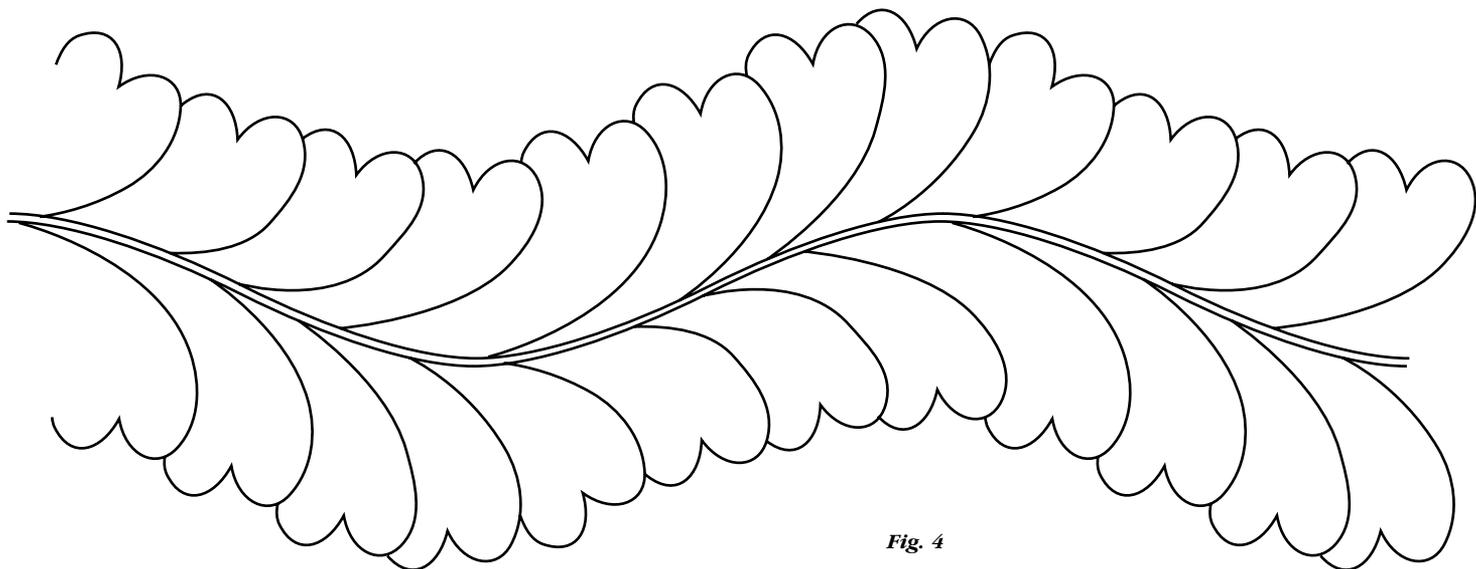


Fig. 4

on one of my quilts. The result is **FOUR PATCH VARIATION**, a simple design quilted with heart feathers and heart feather wreaths (Fig. 5).

Of all the feather quilting variations I've collected over many years of searching, these are among the most unique. Through my continuing study of antique quilts, I've found the most innovative artistic ideas. Stay on the lookout – there are treasures to be discovered. ■

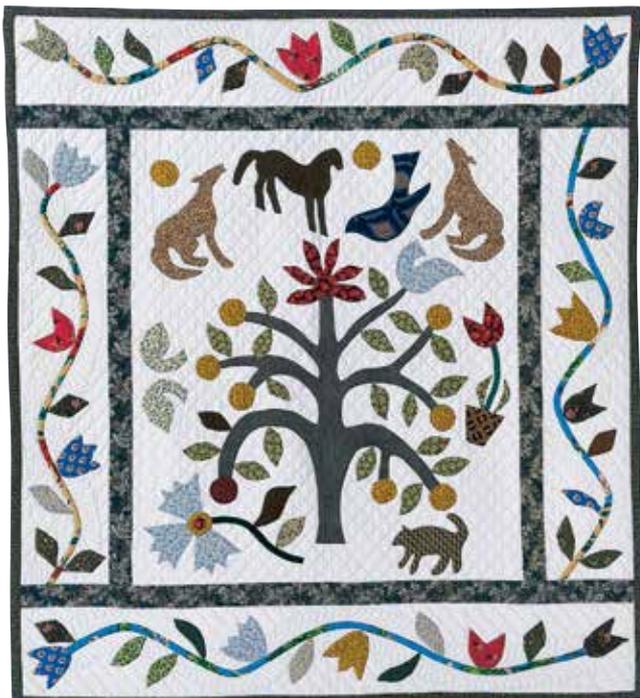


Gwen Marston of Beaver Island, MI, is the author of 17 books on a variety of quilting topics, the most recent being Mary Schaffer: American Quiltmaker (The University of Michigan Press, 2004).

Gwen has always maintained a consuming interest in hand quilting patterns from historical quilts.



RIGHT: *FOUR PATCH VARIATION*, 48" x 54", by the author. Contains heart feather wreath and heart feather border designs by the author, inspired by the quilting patterns in *CAESAR'S CROWN*.



***GOD'S DOGS*, 52" x 58", by the author. Another example of feathers on an appliqué vine, this quilt was made to honor the clever coyote that Native Americans called God's Dogs.**

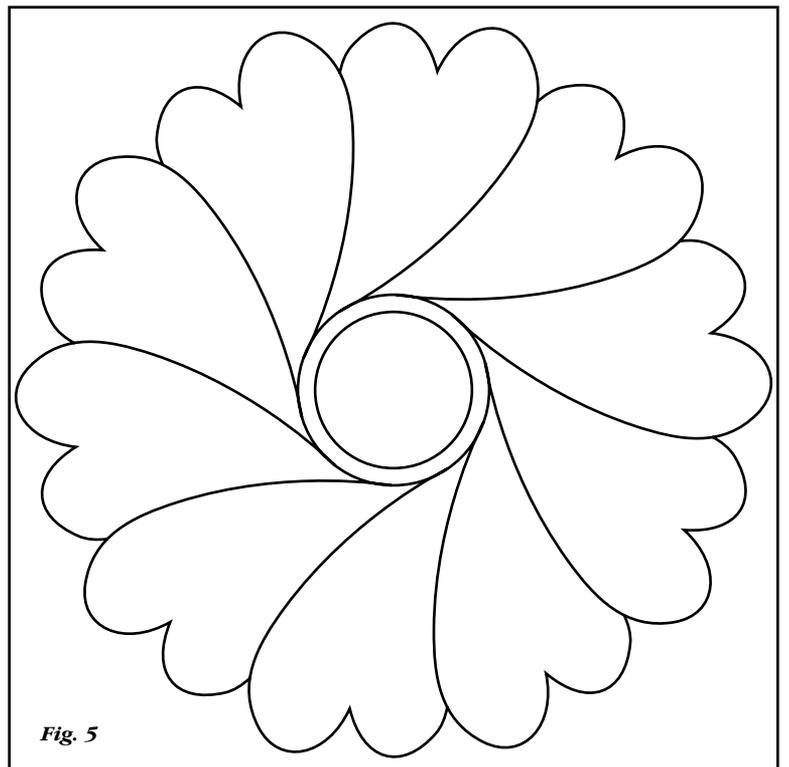


Fig. 5