

The Designs on a Group of Reversible Silk Quilts

© LINDA BAUMGARTEN 2021

Introduction

This article discusses the motifs found on a group of early silk quilts with complex raised designs that feature dense foliage and tracery, often combined with human and animal figures and ships sailing on undulating seas. My purpose is to reveal the quilting patterns by means of line drawings created with a computer-assisted design program. The CAD program allows us to select details for close analysis or to drop out the foliage to better showcase the complicated pictorial motifs.¹

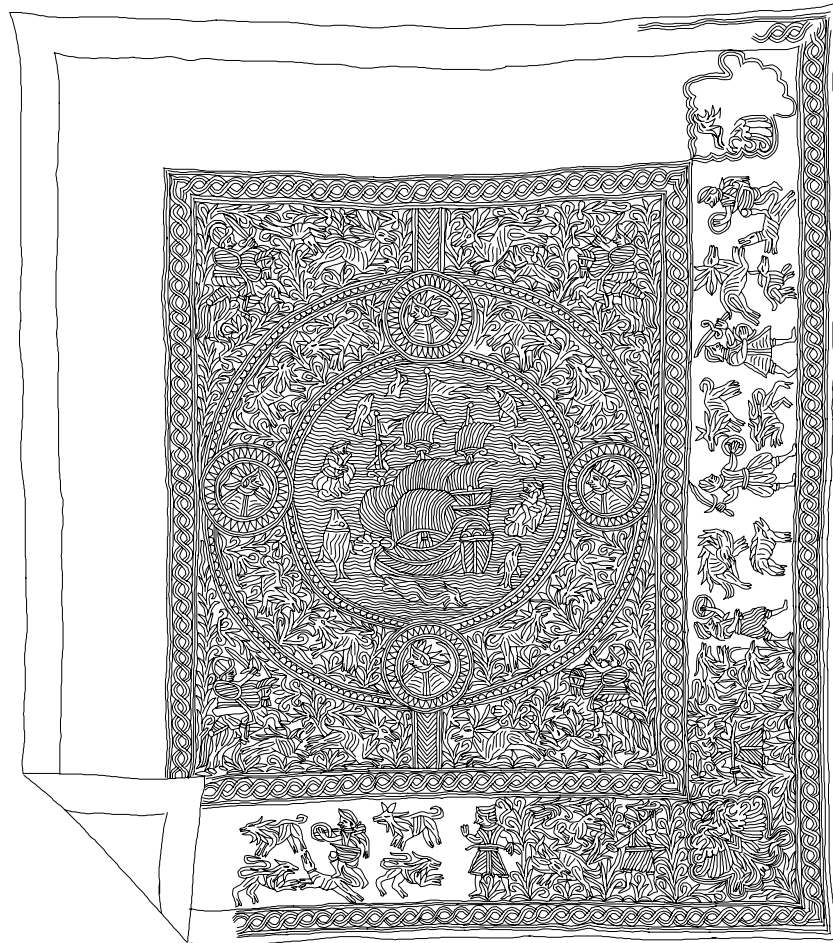


Figure 1

The image of a partially drawn quilt from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collections (2005-94, figure 1) includes the dense background foliage and wavy water in the center medallion. The pictorial motifs are almost hidden by the background.

Contrast the previous view with the image below, in which the background foliage has been dropped out, bringing the main motifs into focus.

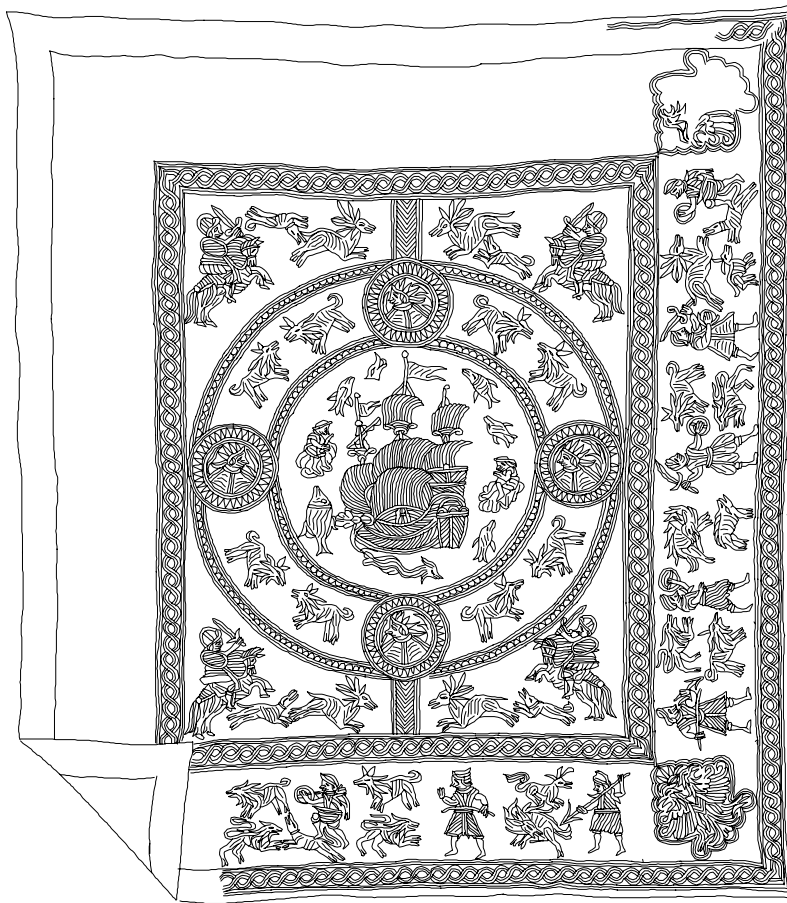


Figure 2

Materials and Construction

All the quilts in the group are fashioned with silk on both sides, making them essentially reversible. Most of the quilts I have examined in person and documented by other scholars are made of thin, plain-woven textiles measuring 30 to 32 inches (76–81 cm) wide as taken up by the quilting. The total selvage width prior to quilting is estimated to be several inches wider, perhaps 32 to 34 inches (84–86 cm) wide. One example at the Art Institute of Chicago (1960.889) is made of satin-weave silk measuring 20 inches (51 cm) wide.

The quilts are constructed in a variation of cord quilting. There is no all-over batting; instead, channels and shapes are stitched through front and back textiles with silk running stitches. The channels are filled with fat rolls of cotton, often as much as 1/4 -inch in diameter, to create a bold, raised surface. These quilts differ from traditional cord quilting in that the fillings are not true cords, but consist of rolls of slightly spun, un-plyed cotton.²

Layout and Designs

The quilts' overall layouts fall into four design types that I will call Center Medallion, Horizontal Arches, Bordered Floral Tracery, and All-over Pictorial. The Center Medallion type, (figures 1, 2, 3, and 10 to 13), has a circular medallion in the middle filled with a pictorial design. Four quilts out of this group of five feature a ship sailing on water in the center medallion. The medallion is surrounded by a quilted field and a wide outer border on all four sides. As noted above, the quilting is typically worked with dense background foliage and wavy water that nearly obscures the figures. The narrow borders in this group show classical guilloche bands, chevrons, or foliage. Double-headed eagles appear in the corners or upper quadrants. The wide borders and/or quadrants on four quilts feature hunting scenes in which men on foot and horseback fight wild animals. Only one example (Royal Ontario Museum 971.143, figure 12) has no hunting scenes. Instead, floral and vine tracery fills the quadrants and wide borders. One quilt, the silk satin example at the Art Institute of Chicago (1960-889) has a musician in the center medallion, surrounded by animals and foliage (figure 3 below and figure 13). This is clearly a reference to Orpheus serenading and taming the wild animals.



Figure 3

The second design type that I refer to as Horizontal Arches is organized around bands and architectural openings, surrounded by wide and narrow borders on all four sides (figures 4, 7, 9, and 14 to 18). In figure 4, below, a quilt in the collections of the International Quilt Museum (2009.014.0003) includes the figure of Orpheus charming the animals, along with additional musicians, profile heads, energetic wild animals, and men on horseback. (The foliage is not shown in the drawing.)³ Six of the eight quilts or fragments in the Horizontal Arch design group include a depiction of Orpheus, while four include ships or boats.

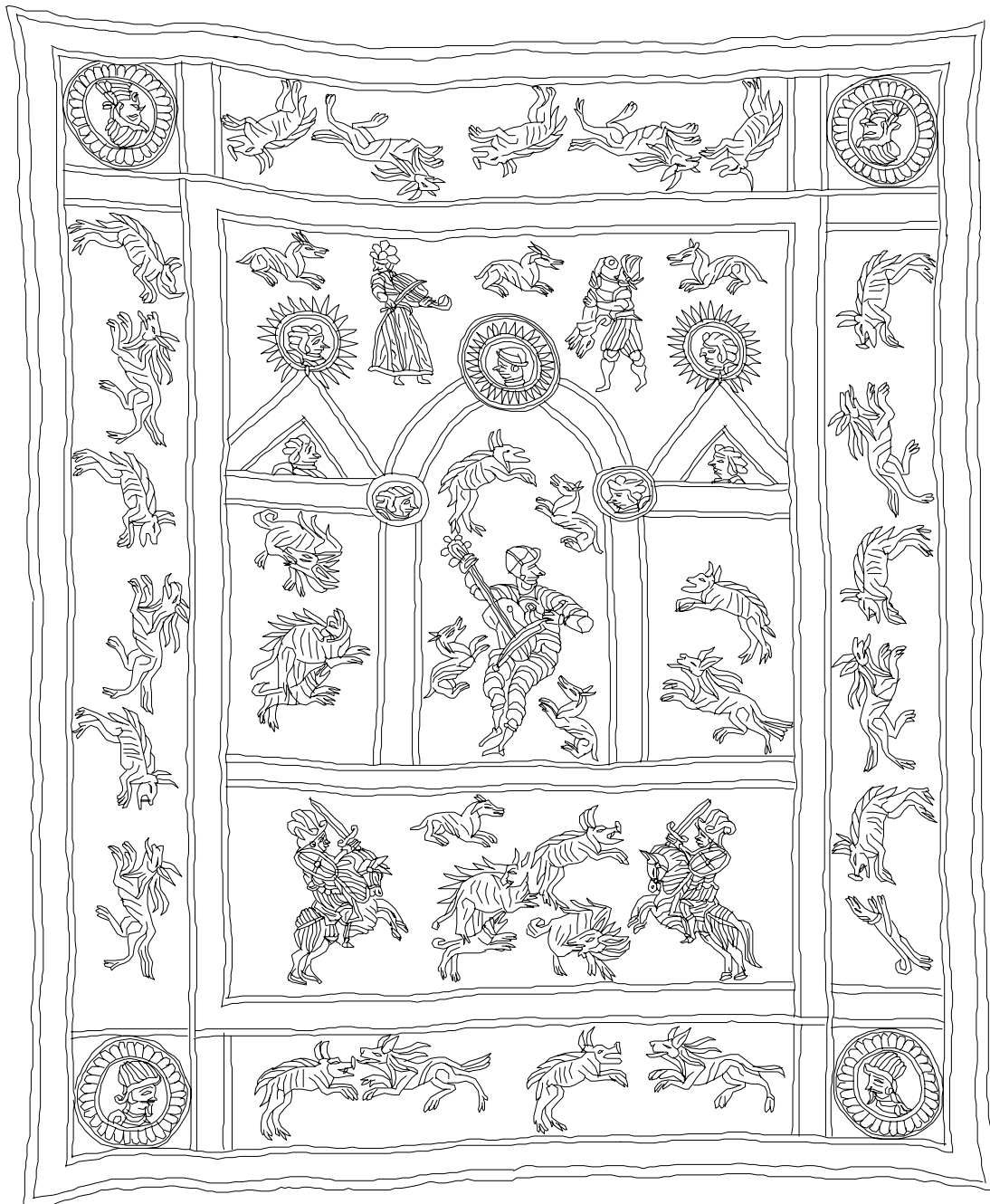


Figure 4

A few quilts are not pictorial; they have central fields filled with overall repeating interlacing bands, which I refer to as Bordered Floral Tracery. In these quilts, the center field features an overall repeat of interlacing lines and abstract foliage, bordered on all four sides by wide bands of scrolling foliage and narrow inner borders of guilloche, foliage, or cables. In figure 5 below, from the International Quilt Museum (2009.014.0002), the overall quilt design is shown in schematic (on top), with a detail of the center field and the center portion of the lower border.

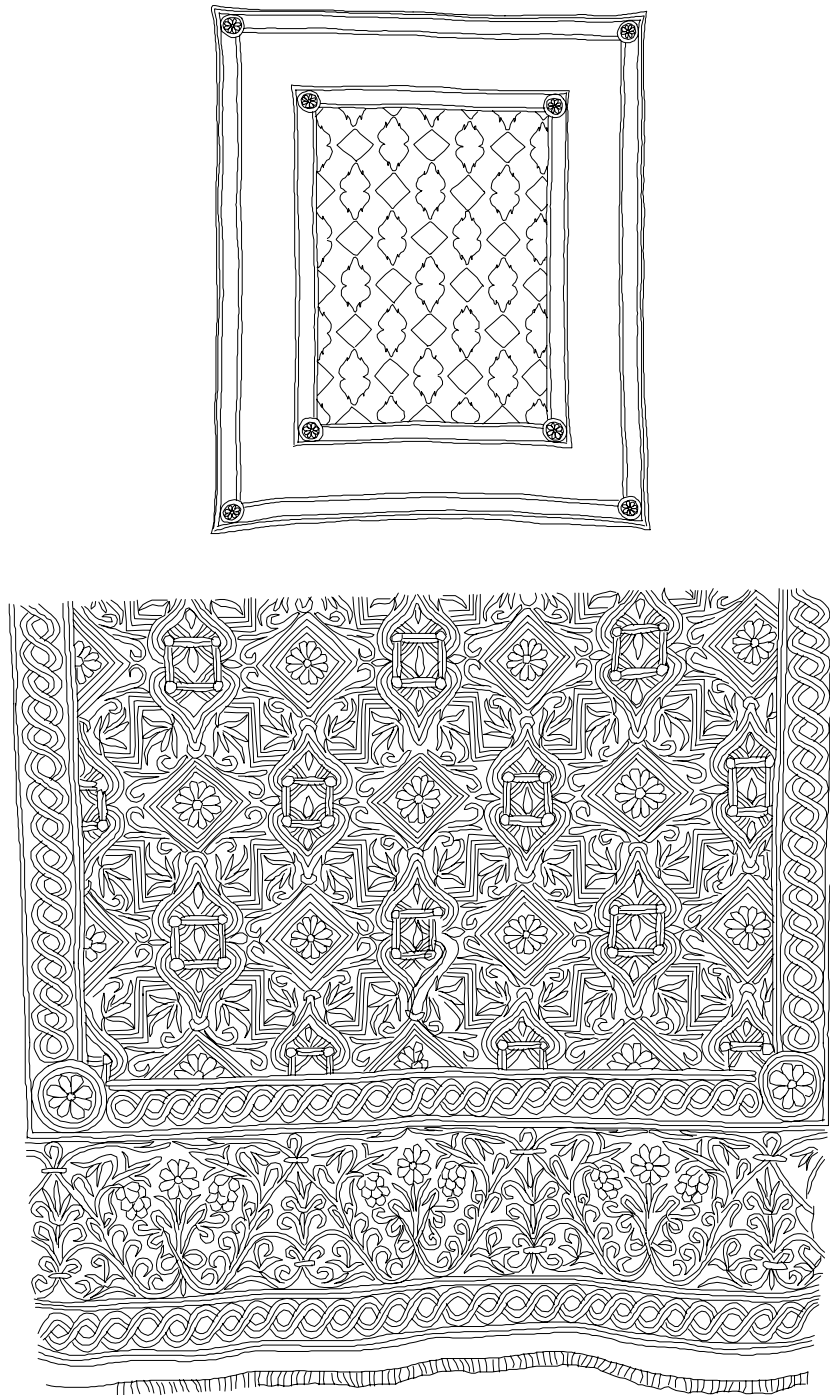


Figure 5 overall and detail

A final overall design type, here referred to as All-over Pictorial, is represented thus far by a single surviving fragment from the collections of Colonial Williamsburg (1974-650), seen in figure 6 below. Consisting of less than half a quilt, this example appears to be a mélange of figures and scenes without an apparent central focus. Unlike quilts of the Center Medallion or Horizontal Arches formats, these scenes occur entirely on water, without any of the land animals, musicians, or fighting men seen in other quilts. (Not shown in figure 6 are the parallel horizontal wavy lines representing water throughout the textile.) A variety of sailing vessels share space with fish and other water creatures, a personification of the wind blowing across the waters, and mythological figures. The guilloche border can be compared to the narrow guilloche borders on several quilts from the previous three design groups.⁵

Individual Motifs

Analysis of this and other quilts reveal significant influence from Greco-Roman design and beliefs. In the lower third of figure 6, for example, the god Triton blows his horn, and immediately below that, Neptune or Poseidon, the god of the sea, is shown riding a dolphin. The naked swimmer in figure 6 can be compared to motifs in early Roman mosaics, including the 1st-century Baths of Neptune at Ostia, near Rome.⁶ Even the narrow guilloche or cable borders on numerous quilts can be found in Greco-Roman mosaics and other art forms. (That is not to say that the quiltmakers necessarily copied mosaics: a naked swimming figure can also be found on a European print from 1550, embellished with sea motifs intended for mapmaking, and the guilloche rope or cable was popular for centuries.)⁷



Figure 6

The Greco-Roman figure of Orpheus is depicted on at least seven quilts. The musician serenading a group of wild animals was a Greek character whose musical abilities were said to charm wild animals and coax rocks and trees to dance. The

Orpheus story that began in the Greek era around the 500s BCE appeared periodically in art thousands of years thereafter.

Borders and inner fields of the quilts often feature hunters surrounded by wild boar and other animals. Although boars were hunted in many cultures for centuries, the boars on the quilts may reference one of the Labors of Hercules, or Heracles, originating about 600–700 BCE in Greece. In this labor, Hercules was sent out to hunt and capture the Erymanthian Boar. A quilt at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs de l'Océan Indien, Réunion Island (996-1022) has scenes in the upper field that also suggest the 12 labors of Hercules. In figure 7 below, motifs appear to depict the labors of stealing golden apples guarded by a dragon, capturing a golden stag, and hunting Symphalian birds, in addition to hunting boar.

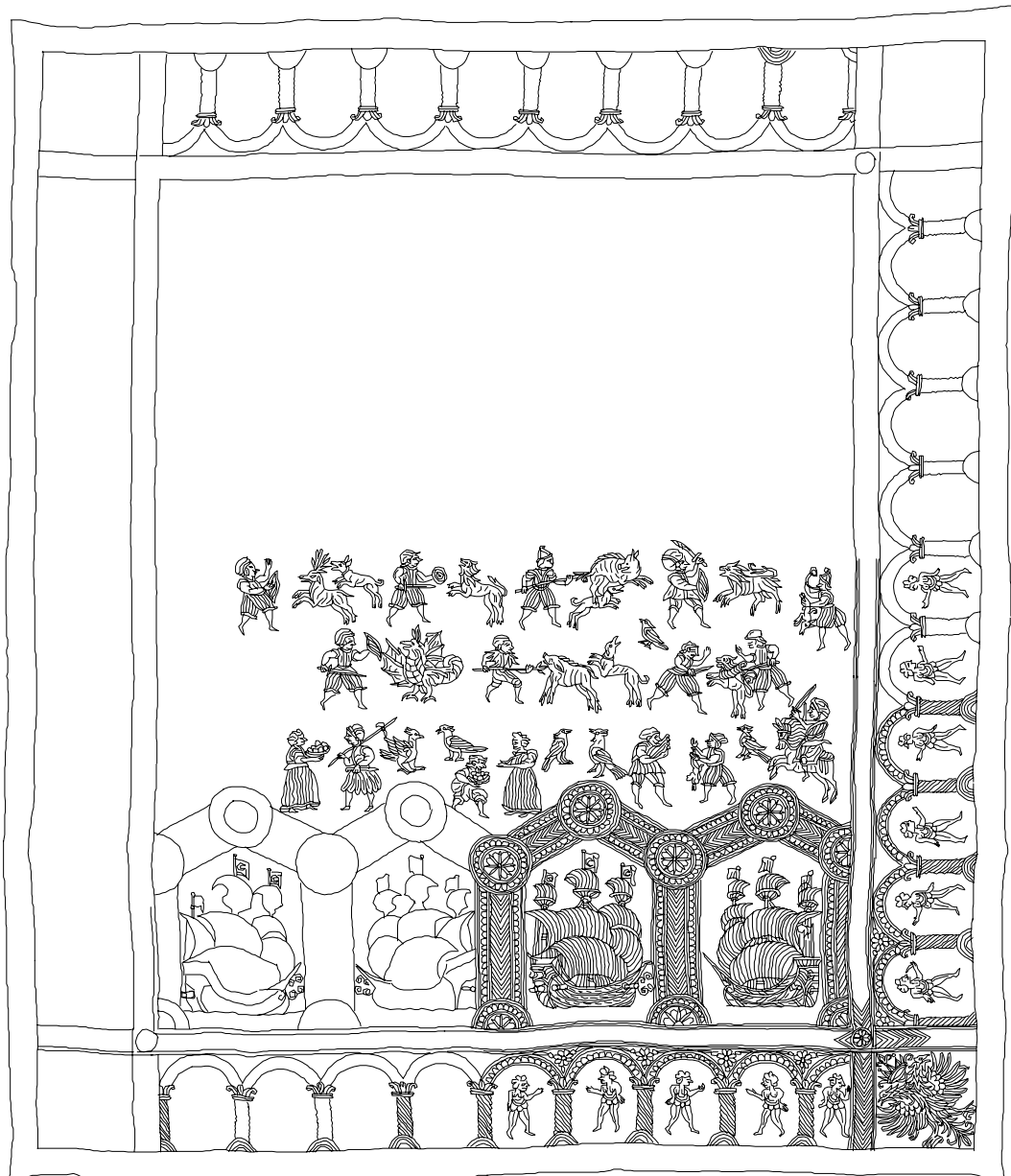


Figure 7

Date Evidence and Iconography

Most of the fighting men in the quilts wear European clothing styles from the late 1500s: their clothing includes fitted and padded doublets on their torsos, combined with full, knee-length hose, or breeches. Upper sleeves are sometimes embellished with shoulder rolls, fashionable in the 1500s. Various styles of helmets, high-crowned caps, and hats worn by men in the quilts also correspond to European prints and paintings from the late 16th century.⁸

Other motifs on the quilts seemingly relate to sources from the second half of the 1500s. Ships in the style of 16th and early 17th century galleons sail on evenly undulating water, which resembles that in early print sources such as Theodor de Bry's map of *Floridae Americae Provinciae...*, published in Frankfurt in 1591 (Colonial Williamsburg 1984-58, detail figure 8).⁹

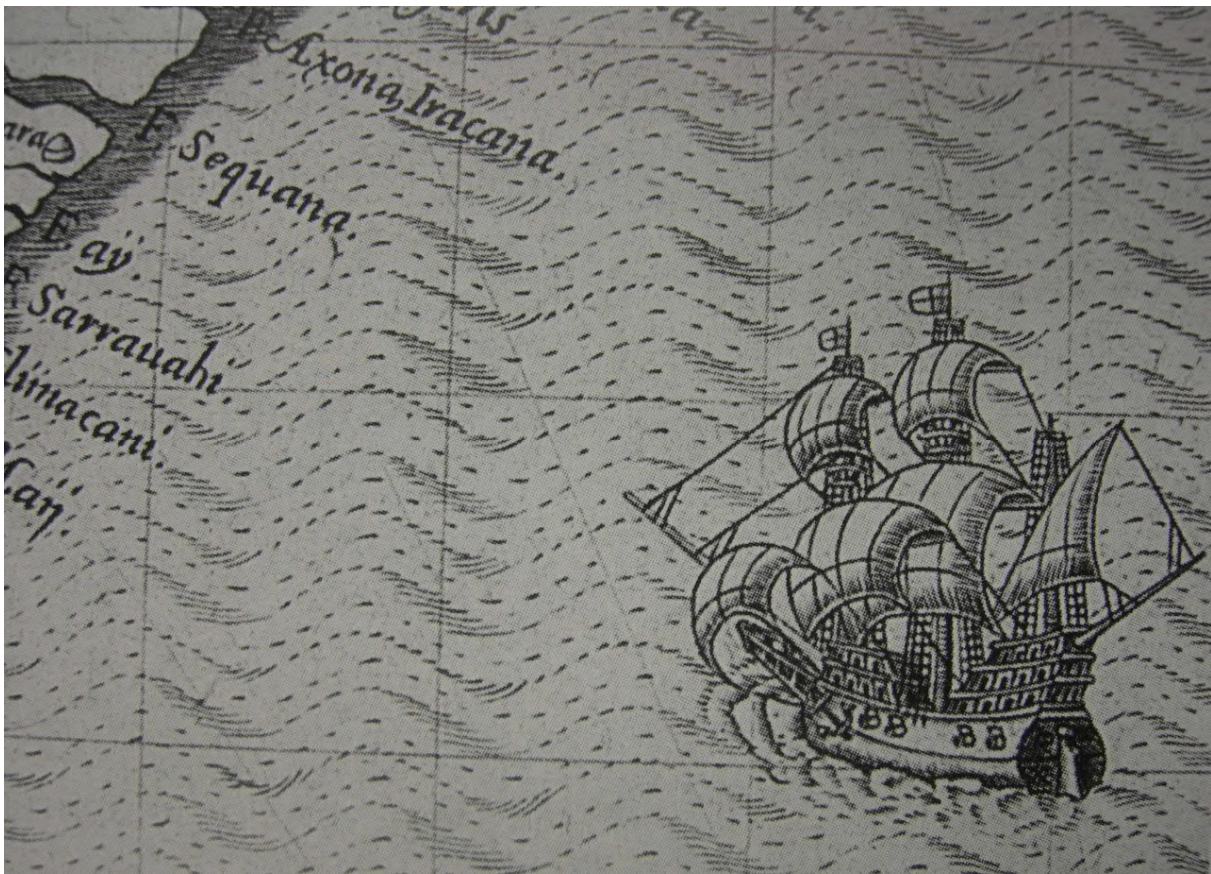


Figure 8

Nine of the quilts have ships with puffs of smoke emanating from onboard cannons. Of these, four fly flags and pennants with crescent shapes (figures 6, 7, 9 and 14). The crescent was part of various Ottoman pennants and flags from 1453 into the nineteenth century, suggesting that Ottoman history influenced the design of the quilts.¹⁰

The quilt in the Wadsworth Athenaeum (1977.71, figure 9 below) combines the familiar Orpheus musician in an arch with a battle scene in the lower panel, probably referring to one of the many battles between Ottoman forces and various European states beginning in the thirteenth century.¹¹

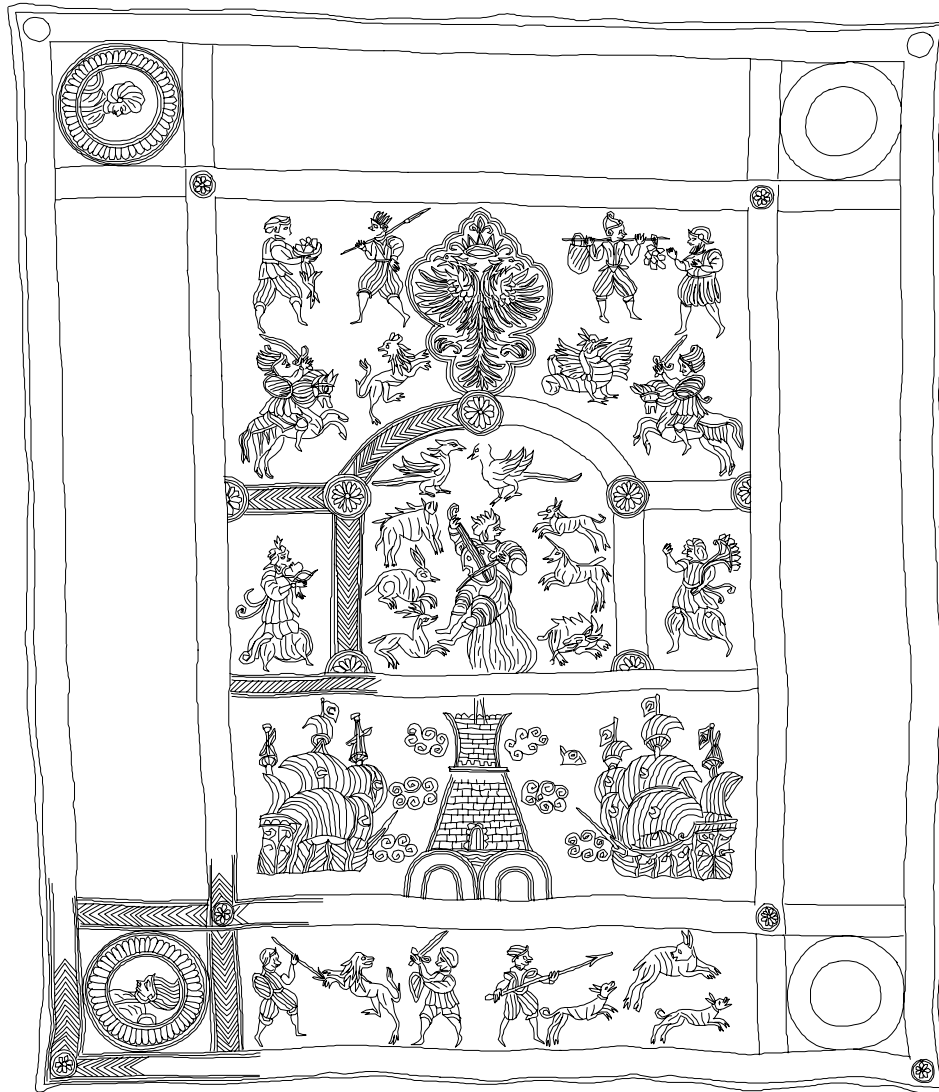


Figure 9

In summary, the clothing and iconography on the quilts suggest a date in the late 1500s or early 1600s. If the quilts were made later, as some scholars suggest, it seems clear that the designers consulted earlier print sources.¹²

Gallery of Quilts

The following figures 10 through 18 present drawings of related quilts, in addition to those in figures 1 through 9 above.

Figure 10. Winterthur Museum and Gardens (1954.0049). Two details and overall schematic of quilt (small drawing at upper right.) In the middle of this Center Medallion quilt, a sailing ship engages its canon from both front and rear. Profile portraits of men in turbans fill small and larger medallions. The quadrants enclose double-headed eagles above and mounted fighters below, while borders feature guilloche bands and undulating vine tracery.¹³ Background foliage and wavy water are not shown on the drawings.

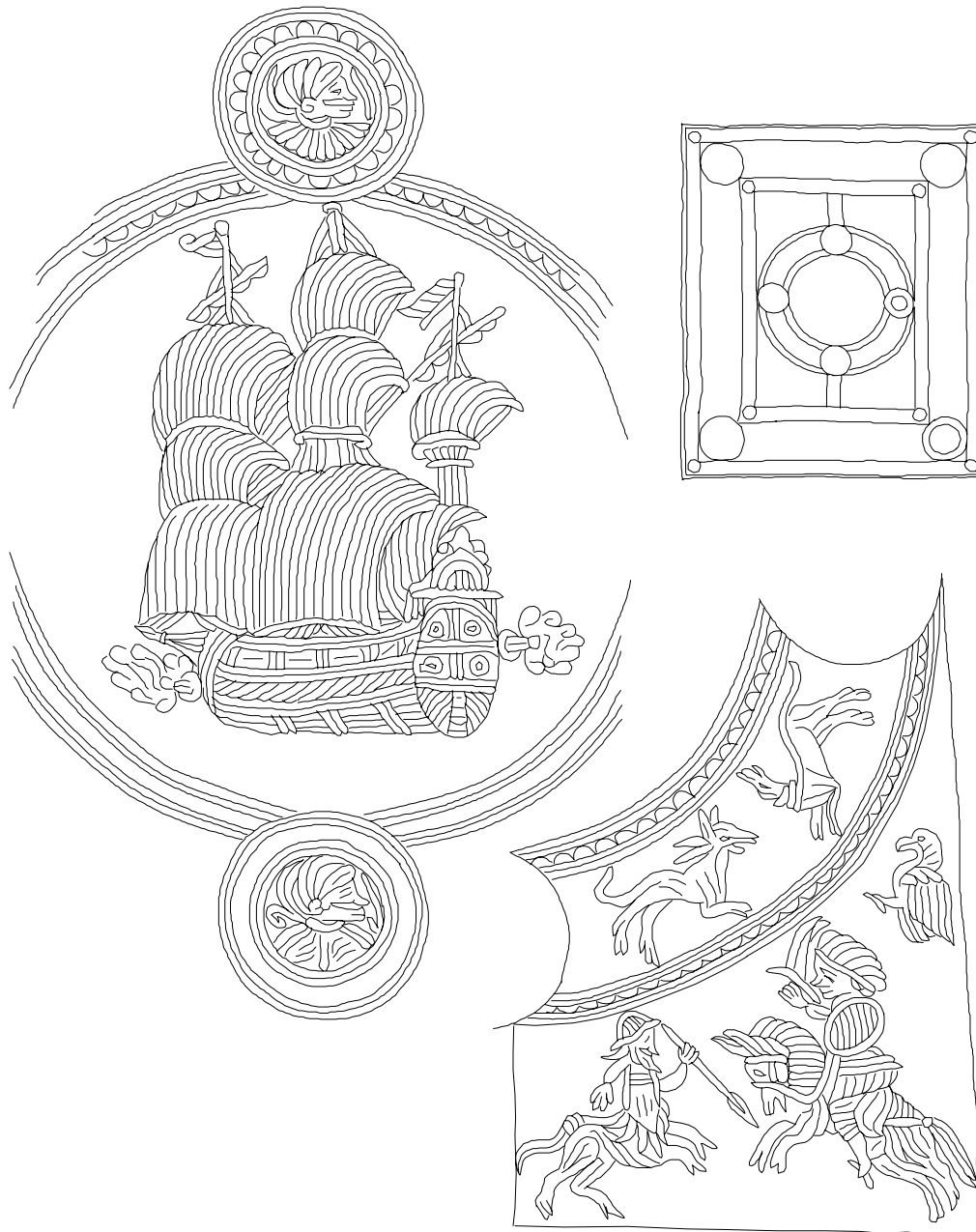


Figure 11. Private Collection, Cornwall. Details and overall schematic (at center). This Center Medallion quilt features a ship at sea firing cannon. Double-headed eagles dominate the four corners and upper quadrants, with hunting scenes in the lower quadrants and borders.¹⁴ The dense foliage is included in several of the details.



Figure 12. Royal Ontario Museum (971-143). This Center Medallion quilt includes the familiar ship sailing on undulating waves, surrounded by dense floral tracery. Double-headed eagles fill the four outer corners.¹⁵

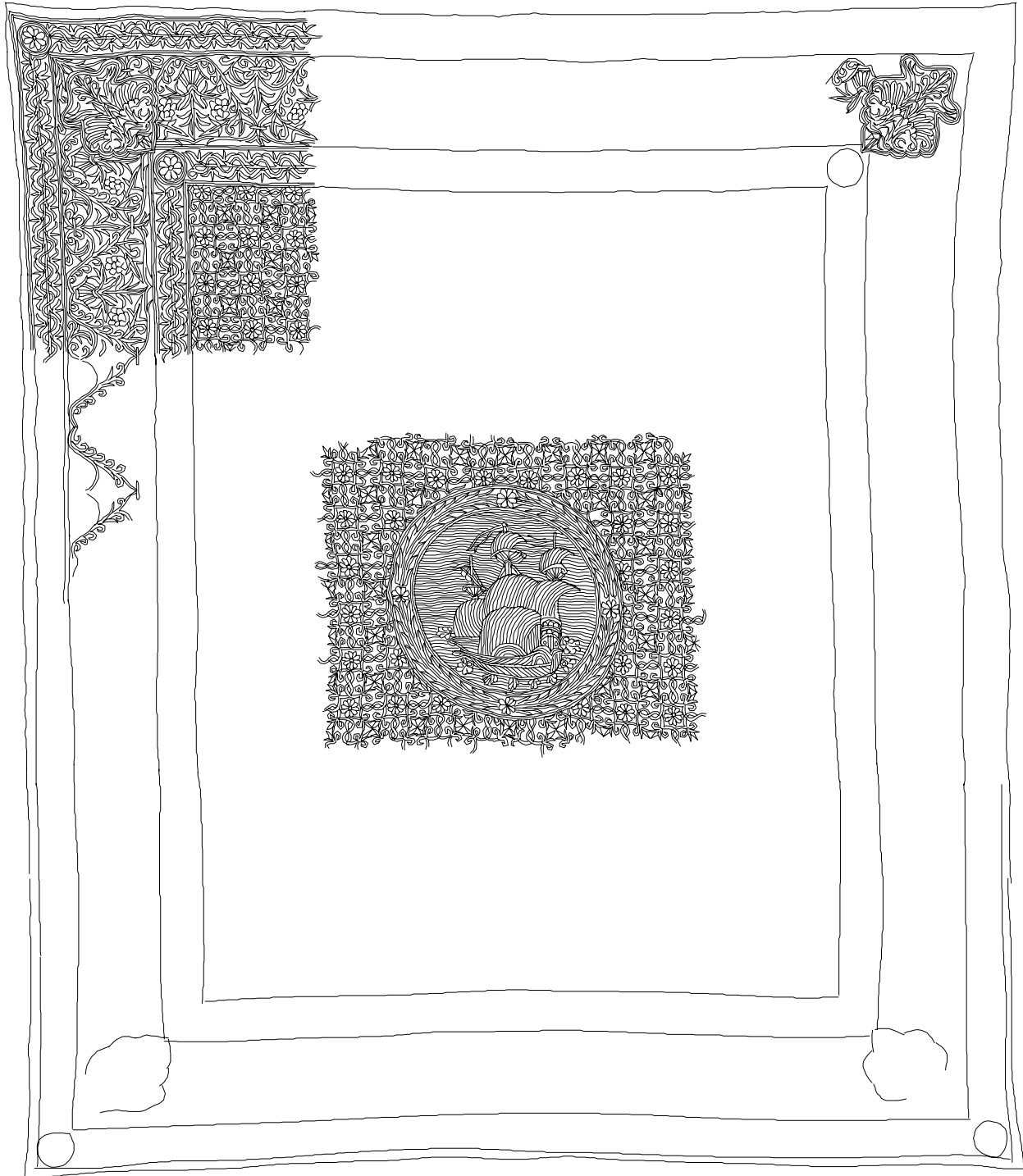


Figure 13. Art Institute of Chicago (1960.889). This Center Medallion style of quilt is the only example I have studied that is constructed of silk satin, not the plain-woven silk of the other examples. The medallion shows Orpheus serenading stags, an elephant, a lion, wild boar, and a bird. Musicians and hunters fill the quadrants and wide borders, while double-headed eagles occupy the four corners.¹⁶ The overall schematic is shown small-scale at center left.

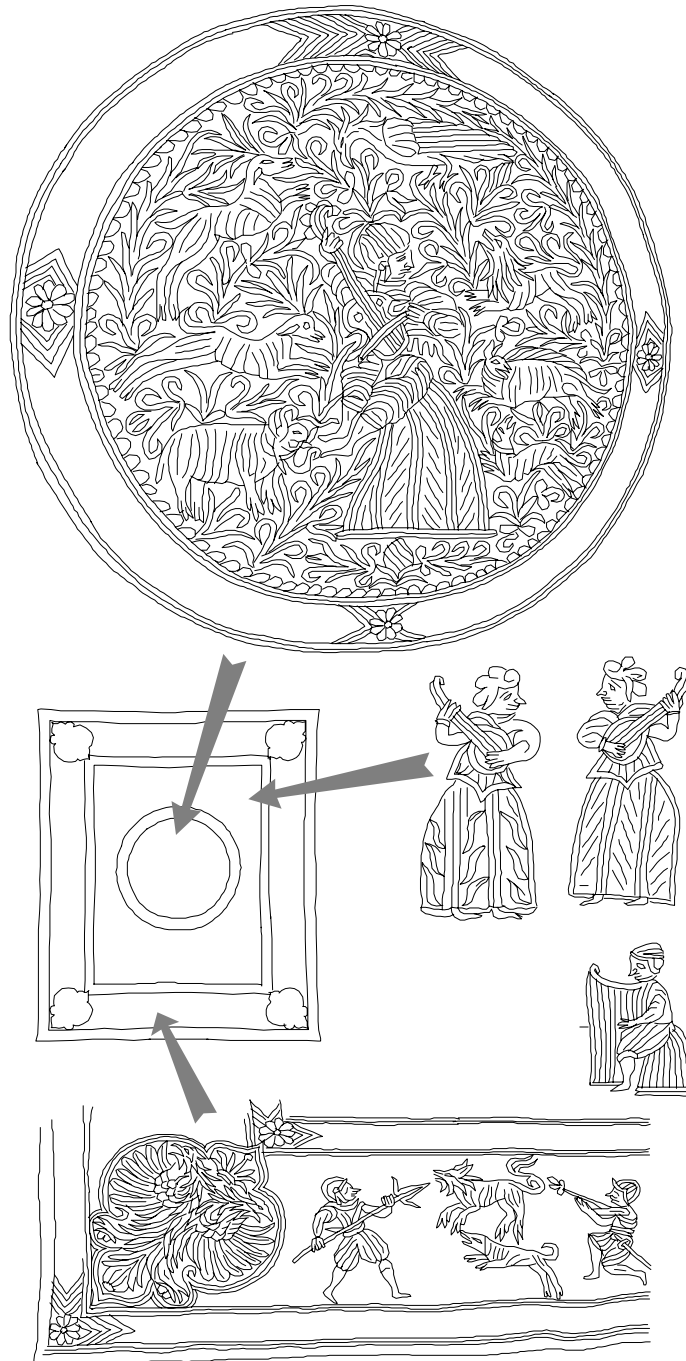


Figure 14. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (ZBA4285). This quilt in the Horizontal Arches format is densely designed with an arcade of partially nude allegorical figures; a maritime scene, including a ship flying a crescent flag; Orpheus under a shallow arch; sword-wielding men on horseback; musicians; portrait heads; birds and vines; and double-headed eagles. The quilt was once in the collection of Cora Ginsburg of Tarrytown, New York.

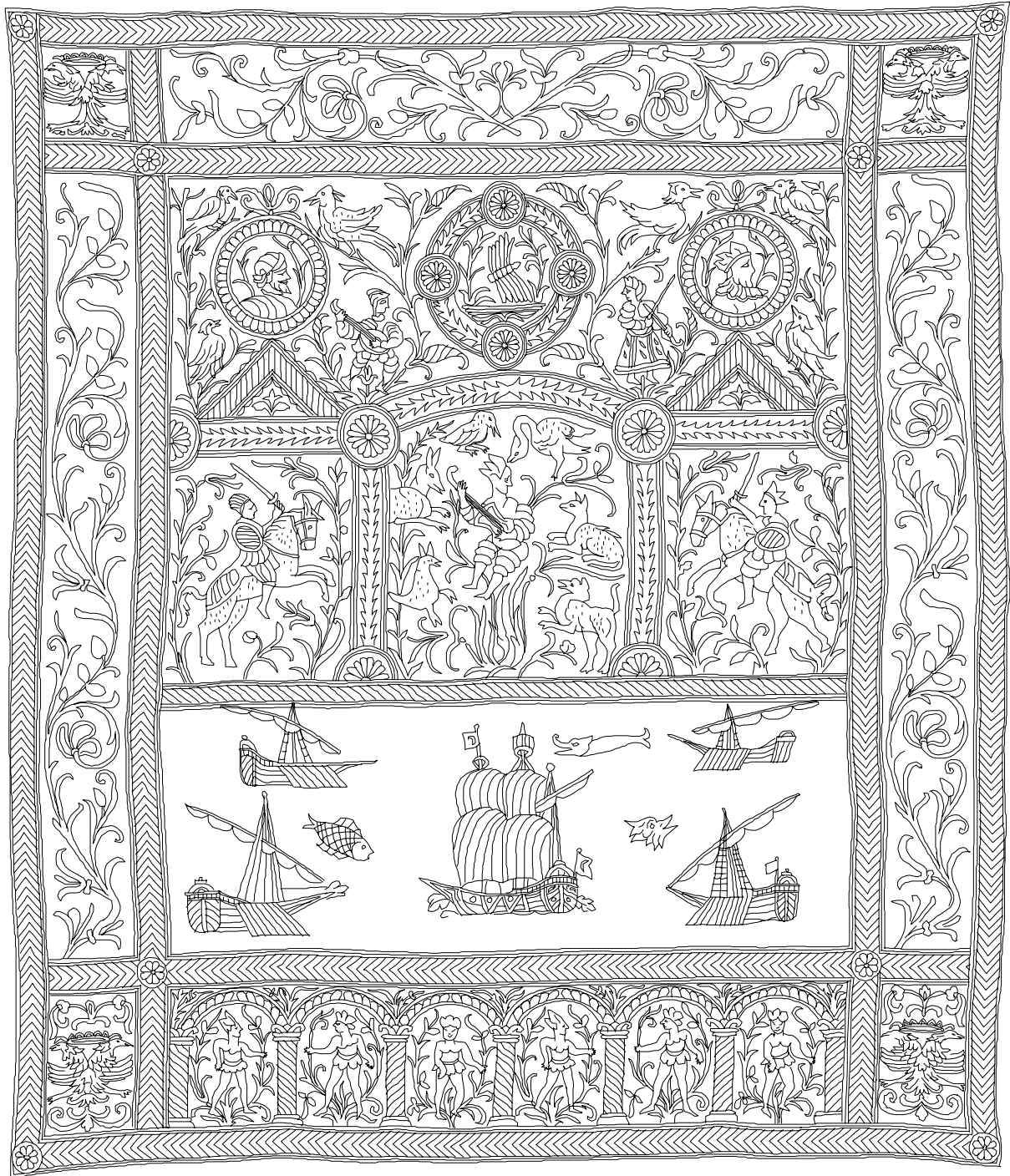


Figure 15. Royal Ontario Museum (975.349). Two shallow arches create the organizational structure for this Horizontal Arch quilt, which combines Orpheus in the upper arch with a pair of ships in the lower arch. Hunting scenes fill the four wide borders, and profile heads wearing turbans form the roundels.¹⁷

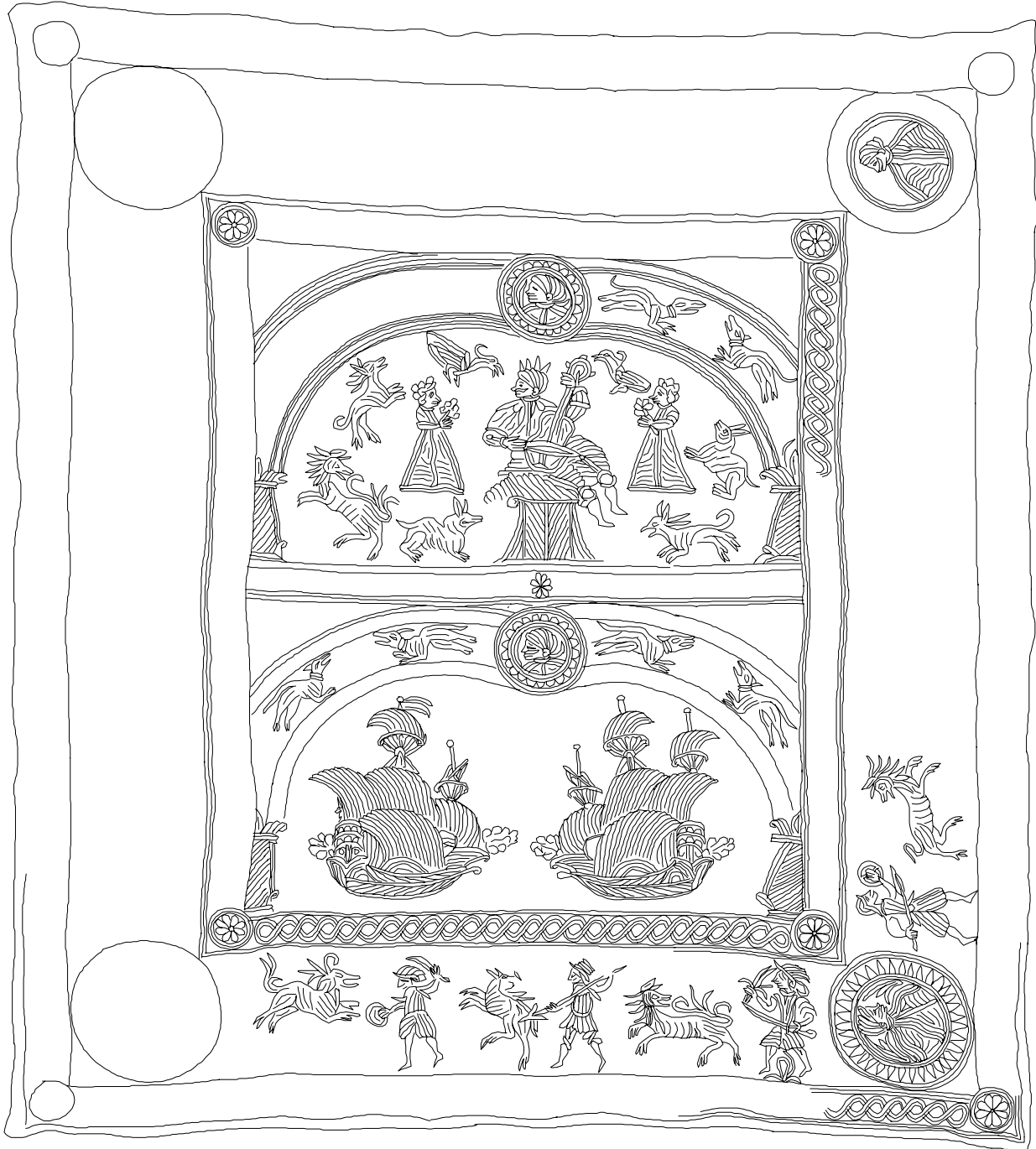


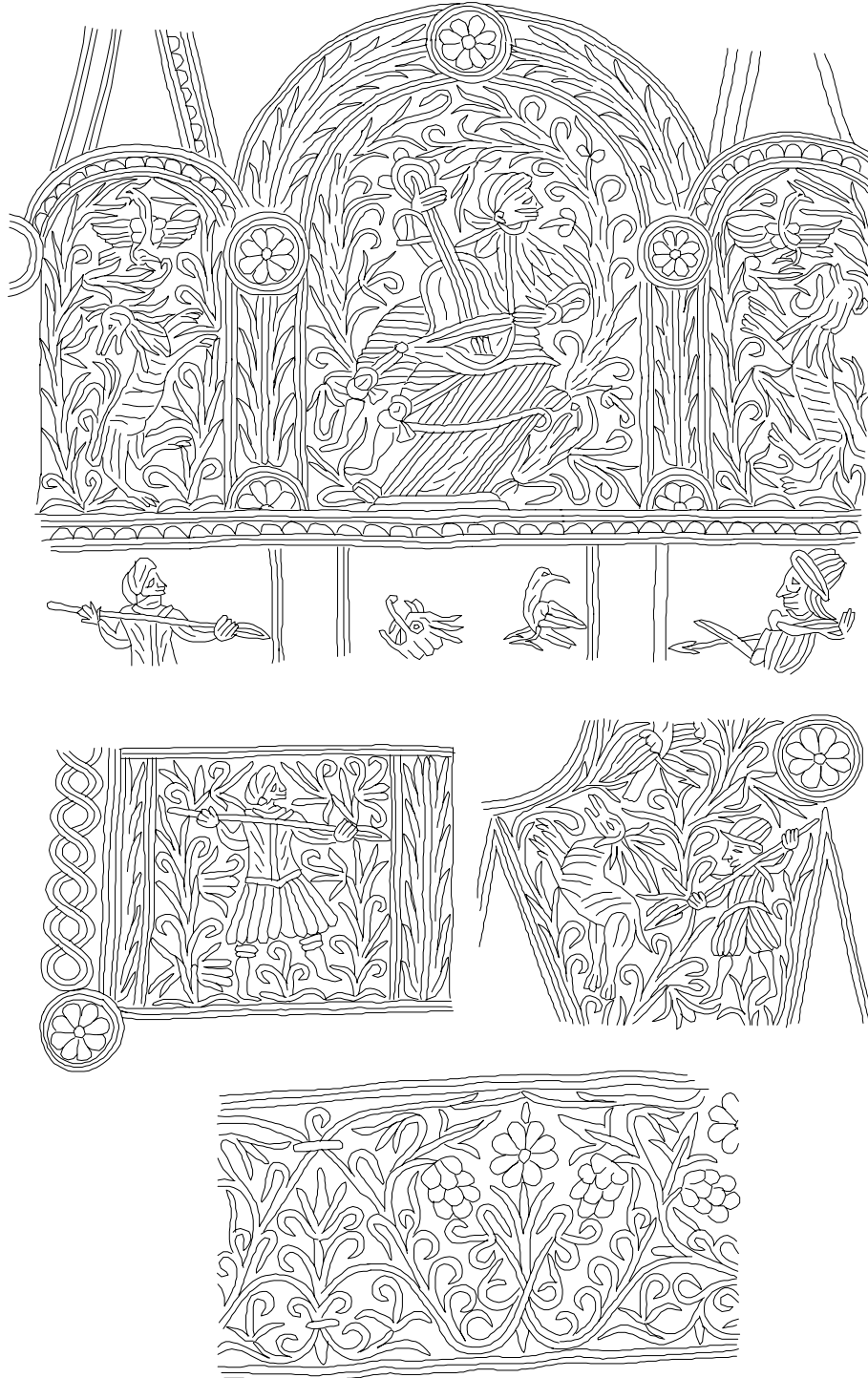
Figure 16. Victoria and Albert Museum (349-1886). The overall schematic of this Horizontal Arches quilt is shown at upper left. Orpheus serenades animals in the center of the quilt below a large double-headed eagle, while female figures fill a lower arcade. Prancing animals, possibly donkeys, fill the borders. The detail of a donkey at lower left includes the background foliage.



Figure 17. Victoria and Albert Museum (CIRC 94-1937 and T62-1937). Two small fragments once formed part of a larger Horizontal Arch quilt with three horizontal panes of designs, including a fantastic dragon-like creature and fighting men. Scrolls and birds fill the wide outer borders.



Figure 18. Victoria and Albert Museum (T296.1967). Details from a quilt (an overall schematic drawing is not available). This Horizontal Arch quilt features Orpheus beneath the central arch, fighting men wearing clothing styles of the late 16th century, and a floral tracery wide border, shown in the drawing at the bottom.



Next Steps

This paper is intended as a visual essay to stimulate discussion about iconography and to encourage others to research the questions of why, where, and exactly when the fascinating quilts may have been produced. By offering these drawings, I hope the research task is made easier for my scholarly colleagues. I welcome your comments to lbaumgarten@cox.net or via my web site <http://www.lindabaumgarten.com/>.

Notes

¹ Portions of this article were presented at the “Global Quilts” symposium, International Quilt Study Center, Lincoln, Nebraska, April, 2009 and at a virtual meeting of the Textile Society of America, co-presented with Kathryn Berenson, October, 2020.

² Of the fillings identified by microscope, all are cotton; others have been identified visually by comparison. See also Linda Baumgarten and Kimberly Smith Ivey, *Four Centuries of Quilts: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection* (Williamsburg, Virginia: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in association with the Yale University Press, 2014), 22–28.

³ For a photograph and catalog information, see <https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/quilt/20090140003>, accessed 1/18/2021.

⁴ For a photograph and catalog information, see <https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/quilt/20090140002>, accessed 1/18/2021. Other related quilts or fragments in this style can be found in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.87.229); Victoria and Albert Museum (T.207.1953); and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (1897 purchase from Emilio Costantini, Florence).

⁵ For photographs and catalog information, see <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/42563/quilt-fragment-silk-cord-work?ctx=1d2cf3e8865759b25a64d7dea7514fa6cc68cbde&idx=3>, accessed 1/18/2021.

⁶ For illustrations, see <https://romesummerclass.georgetown.domains/items/show/422> accessed 1/12/2021.

⁷ The print is in the collections of Colonial Williamsburg, accession number 1986-16, accessible on [emuseum.history.org](https://emuseum.history.org/objects/31146/les-monstres-marins--terrestres-lesquelz-on-trouue-en-beau?ctx=6d711aad188232c01762feec82459831fe0cf078&idx=2): <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/31146/les-monstres-marins--terrestres-lesquelz-on-trouue-en-beau?ctx=6d711aad188232c01762feec82459831fe0cf078&idx=2> accessed 1/18/2021

⁸ For a gallery of styles from 1550 to 1600, see Wikipedia, accessed 1/11/2021: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1550%E2%80%931600_in_Western_European_fashion See also the costumes depicted in Abraham de Bruyn, *Omnium Pene Europae...* 1581; Jane Ashelford, *A Visual History of Costume: The Sixteenth Century* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd. 1983); and Valerie Cumming, *A Visual History of Costume: The Seventeenth Century* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1984).

⁹ See [emuseum.history.org](https://emuseum.history.org/objects/30581/floridae-americae-provinciae-recens-exactissima-descripti?ctx=bd54155d5dda273e150509d11eecb010bbf22f20&idx=0) for an illustration of the map and descriptive information: <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/30581/floridae-americae-provinciae-recens-exactissima-descripti?ctx=bd54155d5dda273e150509d11eecb010bbf22f20&idx=0> accessed 1/18/2021

¹⁰ The presence on the quilts of profile figures of men in turbans also suggest Eastern influence.

¹¹ For example, the 1538 Siege of Diu involved Ottoman forces and the Sultanate of Gujarat who fought for control of the Indian outpost of Diu, then held by the Portuguese. The 1571 Battle of Lepanto between the Holy League and the Ottoman Empire was considered an especially important victory for the West. For more information about the Battle of Lepanto and its possible relationship to the quilts, see Margaret Renner Lidz, “The Mystery of Seventeenth-Century Quilts,” *Antiques* 154, no. 6 (December 1998): 834–843.

¹² See Kathryn Berenson, “Enigmatic Mediterranean Silk Quilts,” forthcoming, University of Nebraska Digital Commons.

¹³ For more, see Winterthur Museum's online collections:

http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/results-text.php?src=searchform&version=100&port=40138&output=HTML&resultsperpage=20&view=catalog&srctype=advanced&srchtxt=1954.0049&commit=Search&ObjObjectName=&CreOrigin=&AccCreditLineLocal=&Earliest=&Latest=&CreMarkSignature=&CreCreatorLocal_tab=&DesMaterial_tab=&ObjCategory=&ObjObjectID=&DesTechnique_tab=#.YAGur-hKjyE accessed 1/15/2021.

¹⁴ The quilt is published in Janet Rae et al, *Quilt Treasures of Great Britain: The Heritage Search of the Quilter's Guild* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1995): 65–67.

¹⁵ For more information, see Royal Ontario Museum's Online collections:

<https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/382372/quilt?ctx=760337df-21cf-4d16-aa70-3ccd7fce73cc&idx=15> accessed 1/15/2021.

¹⁶ For photograph, see Art Institute of Chicago's online collections:

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/12705/bedcover> accessed 1/15/2021.

¹⁷ For more information, see Royal Ontario Museum's Online collections:

<https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/364037/quilt-with-figural-motifs?ctx=21521f05-7773-430d-ab31-ef35985b5eed&idx=25> accessed 1/15/2021.