

## HISTORIC SAMPLERS

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The craft of sampler-making is no doubt much older, but the first written record of it is this: Five hundred and two years ago, Elizabeth of York, who was the daughter, sister, wife and mother of four English kings (Edward IV, Edward V, Henry VII and Henry VIII, respectively), ordered an ell of linen to make a sampler. The account book still exists. Alas, her handiwork does not. It was more than a century later, in 1615, that a young German girl stitched a sampler that would survive into modern times and become part of the collection of London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

Early samplers were *essamplaires*, from the French "something to be copied." They were essentially a stitchery "notebook;" a reference for creating embroidery and a practice sheet. Although pattern books were in print early on (Johann Sibmacher's 1523 book, *The Needle's Excellency*, printed in Augsburg, Germany, was one of the first), they were rare and expensive. "In an age when paper was scarce and books were scarcer, the logical way for a woman to remember an interesting pattern or stitch was to copy it on her own sampler. Even a cursory examination of household inventories and account books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries will show that while cloth was bought and owned in relatively large amounts, paper was a very rare item indeed."<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the decorative pieces that the term calls to mind, very early samplers were long (sometimes up to three feet in length, with additional pieces of fabric sewn on as the first one was filled up) and quite narrow, rarely exceeding nine inches in width. This was probably because of the size of the looms of the time. However, because some English examples were hemmed on all four sides, indicating the possibility that the cloth had been cut from a larger piece, another theory is that the narrow width made the samplers

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<sup>1</sup>Grow, Judith K. and Elizabeth C. McGrail. *Creating Historic Samplers*. (Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1974), 7.

easier to roll up and carry around. They were working documents, not meant to be framed. This size would still allow for one or two repeats of each pattern, which was all that was needed. They were not planned out ahead of time, but stitched either randomly or row after row as the woman ran across new patterns to add to her collection. Many were border patterns, but cutwork practice for the elaborate lace that was popular at the time was also common. Colored silk thread was used on bleached or unbleached linen. It appears that more than one person worked on some of these early samplers. Perhaps a mother began one and handed it on to her daughter, much in the same way we might pass along recipe files today.

With this art well established on the Continent and in England, it is not surprising that women carried their samplers with them when they emigrated to the New World. Anne Gower stitched her sampler, now in the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, in England in 1616 and brought it to the colonies when she emigrated shortly before her 1628 marriage to Governor Endicott of Massachusetts. Loara Standish (daughter of Miles) stitched the earliest known American example, which is in the Pilgrim Museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in about 1640. However, American samplers of the seventeenth century were so influenced by English embroidery that they cannot really be classified as "American."

By 1706, Boston newspapers were carrying advertisements for designers, embroiderers and teacher of needlework, which was, along with cooking and household management, an essential skill for young girls to master. "Even female apprentice children were taught to sew and knit."<sup>2</sup> Girls would first learn plain sewing, then darning and finally embroidery. Still, the Colonial Dames' pioneer survey, *American Samplers*, published in 1921, lists only 53 that were worked before 1740. Clearly, early colonial life was too hard to leave much time to spare for the decorative arts.

Both the shape and the purpose of samplers changed as the eighteenth century progressed. By 1720, looms were producing wider pieces of cloth and samplers became square or nearly square. As printed books became more readily available, the need for a stitch catalogue decreased. Therefore the sampler began to be thought of as a record of

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<sup>2</sup> Fennelly, Catherine, ed. *New England Samplers to 1840*. (Sturbridge, Massachusetts: Old Sturbridge Village, 1978), 1.

achievement rather than a pattern book; an artistic endeavor to be framed. Having a sampler to ornament one's sitting room became something of a "status symbol" in the pre-Revolutionary period, as it proclaimed a certain level of affluence and artistic refinement. "A prominently displayed sampler also alerted potential suitors to how proficient the daughter [of the family] had become in one of the major skills of housewifery."<sup>3</sup>

As the colonies became more diversified and farther from their European roots, truly original American design began to emerge. Biblical scenes, farms, school houses, animals and trees were frequent motifs on increasingly pictorial samplers. Adam and Eve were often depicted – sometimes wearing colonial dress! "Floating" baskets or vases of flowers began to appear. Narrow borders, which had been nonexistent on early pieces, were added and grew wider as the decades passed until they occasionally threatened to overwhelm the composition. Many American samplers featured a "landscape," often a series of hills, across the bottom. Verses or religious mottos, which eventually came to be regarded as an essential part of the sampler, appeared at this time. Their sources were, among others, *The New England Primer*, hymns, psalms and the Gospels; the author most often quoted was Alexander Pope. Among the mottos are such pious but depressing sentiments as:

"IN PROSPERITY FRIENDS WILL BE PLENTY  
BUT IN ADVERSITY NOT ONE IN TWENTY"

"WHILE GOD DOTH SPARE  
FOR DEATH PREPARE"

"HAVE NOT EVE AND ADAM TAUGHT US  
THEIR SAD PROFIT TO COMPUTE  
TO WHAT DISMAL STATE THEY BROUGHT US  
WHEN THEY STOLE FORBIDDEN FRUIT"

Also, beginning around 1720, alphabets (frequently lacking the letter "J" and occasionally also "U") began to appear on samplers. Numerals followed, but not before

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<sup>3</sup> "Early American Life." February 1984, 44.

the middle of the century. It is a misconception that the purpose of stitching alphabets and numbers on samplers was to help girls learn to read. Samplers were worked by girls who were as young as five and as old as 15 (It is hard to tell exact ages, since sometimes the name and date were the first part stitched and the sampler could actually be finished years later.), but generally not younger than eight, at which age they "already knew quite well how to read. Similarly older girls in their teens did not work alphabets on elaborate pictorial samplers to learn the alphabet, since a girl of 12 or 13 who did not already know how to read was unlikely to be making a sampler at all."<sup>4</sup>

All those alphabets did serve a purpose, however. Linens were hand spun and hand woven and very precious. At the time of the American Revolution, textiles could account for 20% of a family's net worth. Therefore, each item, including sheets, towels, pillowcases, quilts, blankets, coverlets, crewel-embroidered bed furnishings, petticoats, nightgowns and even corsets, was carefully marked and sometimes numbered, so it could be accounted for and wear could be equalized by alternating use. Thus the various alphabets were not to practice reading the letters, but the stitching of them.

Female seminaries or dame schools came to prominence in the years after the Revolution. Their curriculums included cooking, reading, music appreciation and embroidery, of which the sampler was an essential part. The samplers from each school have certain identifiable characteristics, including similar layout, borders and motifs. Originality was neither encouraged nor applauded. One of the best known of these seminaries was the Balch School in Providence, Rhode Island, which existed from 1785 to 1831. Balch samplers feature a floral border, with a vine growing from double-handled urns worked in Florentine stitch, a pair of facing trumpeting angels, two facing birds between the angels with a heart between them, identifiable buildings and oversized flowers. Two Balch samplers are now in the Winterthur Museum collection.

A house first appeared on a sampler in America in 1742. Within 20 years, houses were a common motif. Early samplers show rustic houses in elaborate landscapes. Later, the landscape becomes more simplified and the buildings more prominent. In New England and New York later samplers featured large public buildings, including Princeton's Nassau Hall, William and Mary's Wren Building, Old Brick Row at Yale and

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<sup>4</sup> Grow and McGrail, *op. cit.*

Philadelphia's Liberty Hall. Samplers made in Quaker schools in the middle states tended to show private homes and smaller buildings.

Human figures were rarely depicted on American samplers after about 1810. Later samplers sometimes take the form of a family record, showing births, marriages and deaths. As time went on, vines on borders went from rigid and stylized to more natural. Flowers, which had also been stylized motifs, were allowed to bloom and droop and generally appear more lifelike. By the early nineteenth century, more relaxed artistic expression rather than strict adherence to patterns from books became the rule.

The South, for a number of reasons, probably produced fewer samplers than did New England and the mid-Atlantic region. Certainly many fewer southern samplers have survived. However, an 1806 South Carolina sampler by Sarah S. Caldwell is the first to show the emblematic American eagle. Emilie Wiltz stitched a verse in French on her sampler worked in 1830 in New Orleans.

The vast majority of samplers were worked on linen, which in America was mostly of home manufacture. A few from the 1790-1820 period from New Hampshire, Connecticut and Maine are stitched on an olive green cloth called "linsey-woolsey," which had a green linen warp and a brown woolen weft. Silk thread was by far the most popular to use for the embroidery, although some linen and wool threads were used, as well. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, threads were dyed with plant leaves and roots, which produced a limited range of soft colors.

By 1840-50, the art saw a decline in inventiveness. Berlin patterns from Germany, which were exact stitch graphs, were widely available in shops and ladies' magazines. Although school samplers were still worked until about 1920, the Industrial Revolution effectively ended the era of the sampler. More than another century was to pass before the sampler began to be regarded as less of a nostalgic curio and more of an example of folk art, with its characteristic disregard for both scale and perspective.

Samplers are at once easier and harder to study than most antiques. They tended to be preserved because they were small in size and easy to store and transport; they had sentimental ties to the family in that they were stitched by an identifiable ancestress, and they had relatively little monetary value, thus reducing the temptation to sell them along

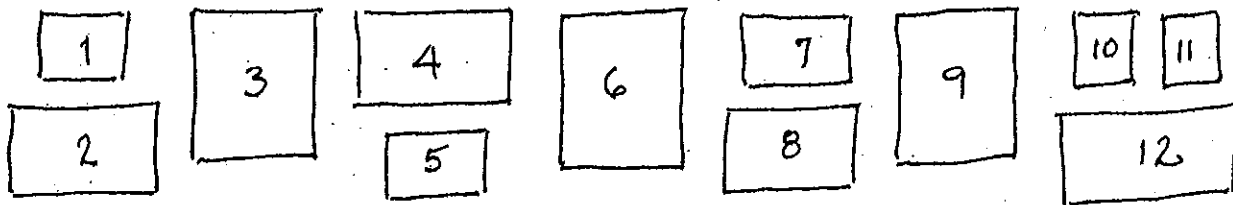
with the family silver. Many are still kept in the family, or have been given to local museums.

On the other hand, each sampler is the work of a single individual and most girls produced only one. Therefore there is no way to study the progress of the artist as with, say a cabinetmaker from apprentice to master. There are no catalogues or sales receipts to research. The patterns and motifs originated in one place were carried elsewhere, from one school to another, thus making precise identification of the origin difficult or impossible. Also, samplers tend to be inaccessible. Many are privately owned; those in museum collections may not be on display because of their age and fragility. Lastly, they are framed, which makes it impossible to study the underside, which may be more informative than the face, revealing the original colors and method of stitching.

Samplers were not taken seriously for a long time. They were, after all, the work of children, and girl children at that. Among other things, they now can be seen to reveal details of period dress and a history of development of American architecture from about 1745-1850. They provide crude but revealing pictures of buildings, many of which no longer exist. Above all, they are an intrinsic part of America's folk art tradition.

#### Bibliography

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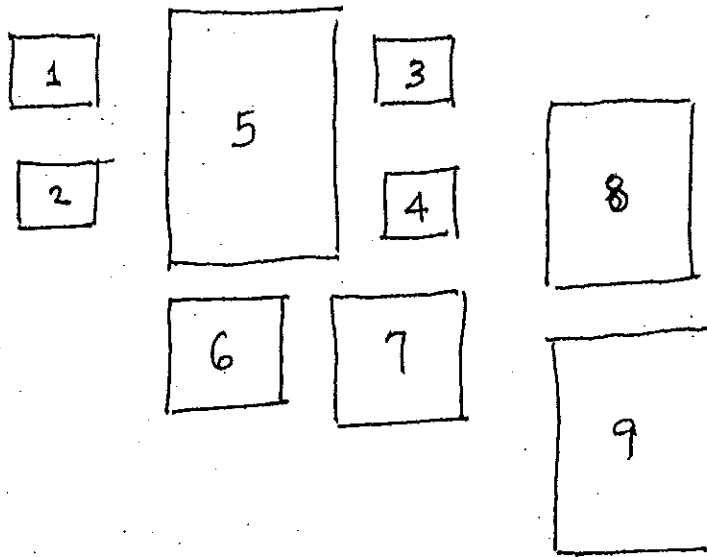
### BREAKFAST ROOM

1. Bicentennial Sampler (original). Needlepoint, 1976. Double-handled urns in Florentine stitch, "natural looking" vines (Balch School) with state flowers. Recognizable building: our house at the time. Alphabets: in the form of names of states where Mike and I, our parents and our children were born. Family record of sorts: crests representing England and Germany, where our ancestors came from, and US.
2. American Primitive Sampler (adapted from *Needlepoint Celebrations* by Carolyn Ambuter). Petitpoint, 1987. Family record. Stitch sampler.
3. 1990 Sampler (original). Petitpoint. Family record. "Floating" vases of flowers. Highly stylized border.
4. 1983 Sampler (adapted or copied from unknown source). Petitpoint. Number of "floating" vases. Stylized border. Landscape at bottom.
5. 1967 Sampler (from a kit). Crewel: wool thread on linen. Landscape at bottom.
6. Tall Pagoda Sampler (adapted or copied from unknown source). Needlepoint, 1976. Animals, birds and buildings.
7. 1972 Sampler (from a kit). Cross stitch: silk thread on linen. Facing birds.
8. House and Home Sampler (original). Needlepoint, 1986. Alphabets, motto, stylized border, house.
9. Chase Sampler (from a kit). Embroidery and cross stitch: silk on linen, 1976. Animals and birds. Alphabet: missing "I," which was interchangeable with "J," and "U." Landscape at bottom.
10. and 11. Small samplers (from kits). Cross stitch: silk on linen, 1986. Facing birds, animals, floating vases.
11. 1983 Sampler (from a kit.) Cross stitch: cotton thread on linen. Alphabets, buildings, motto.

### OTHER

Newnan Sampler (copy of original silk on linen sampler in a Newnan, Georgia family). Needlepoint. Motto. "Brick" building. Alphabets. Copied exactly as she stitched it, including mistakes.

40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sampler (original). Needlepoint, 1977. Family record. Primitive, Pennsylvania Dutch motifs.



### STAIRWELL

1. Winter Sampler (adapted from *Needlework Antique Flowers* by Elizabeth Bradley). Petit point, 1999-2000. Stylized building, "natural" flower border. Variety of stitches.
2. Spring Sampler: see Winter Sampler.
3. Summer Sampler: see Winter Sampler.
4. Autumn Sampler: see Winter Sampler.
5. "X Marks the Spot" Sampler (original). Needlepoint, 2001. Alphabets and numbers: in the form of addresses of all the places Mike and I have lived. Identifiable building: this house. Motto. Facing trumpeting angels, only one has a harp instead. Facing birds with a heart between them. (Balch School)
6. Childhood Sampler (original). Silk on linen, mid 1950s. Examples of various stitches.
7. Trinity Sampler (original; border adapted from unknown original). Needlepoint, 1999. Large border in contrast to size of center. Building, motto, birds.
8. 1998 Sampler (from a kit). Cross stitch, silk on linen. From Colonial Williamsburg.
9. Schoolhouse Sampler (original). Needlepoint, 1985. Facing birds. Recognizable building. Various stitches. Alphabets. Stylized border.

### FRONT HALL

College Sampler (original). Needlepoint, 1994. Recognizable buildings: the Wren Building at the College of William and Mary (where our daughter went to college), the Rotunda at the University of Virginia (where our son went to college). Alphabets. Motto: quote from Thomas Jefferson, who went to William and Mary and founded UVA. Double-handled urns in Florentine stitch (Balch School). Family record of sorts: birth dates and dates of when W & M, UVA and Phi Beta Kappa were founded. Border copied from *Decorative Victorian Needlework* by Elizabeth Bradley. It is from a Victorian rug and therefore doesn't belong on a sampler, but I liked it.



The Victoria and Albert Museum (often abbreviated as the V&A) in London is the world's largest museum of applied and decorative arts and design, as well as sculpture, housing a permanent collection of over 2.27 million objects. It was founded in 1852 and named after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The V&A is located in the Brompton district of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, in an area that has become known as "Albertopolis" because of its association with Prince Albert, the Albert Part-worked areas and evidence of unpicking in some of these samplers underline their use in trying out new effects, and they frequently display a wide range of stitches, as well as many colours of silk and different metal threads. Some contain initials, but rarely names or dates. The introduction of moral verses into the decoration of samplers is another indication of their role, well established by the middle of the 17th century, as part of a girl's education. The German and Italian samplers in the Museum's collection from the 17th century are worked with repeating patterns and motifs that appear to have more practical application than their English counterparts, although there is less variety in the stitches used.