HISTORIC SAMPLERS

By Donna Knowles Born
Presented to St. Johns Chapter, 23 February 2004

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.”¹

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

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.”2 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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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.”

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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3 “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.”

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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4 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

“Early American Life.” February 1984, pp. 7 – 44.


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.


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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.


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.
Victoria and Albert Museum, byname V&A, British museum that houses what is generally regarded as the world’s greatest collection of the decorative arts. It is located in South Kensington, London, near the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. The foundation of the museum dates from 1852, when the British government established the Museum of Manufacturers in Marlborough House, St. James. The items were transferred to the South Kensington Museum and redisplayed in 1857 as part of a government effort to improve taste and knowledge among those concerned with British manufactures. The collection soon outgrew its premises, and plans for a new museum were developed. The Paintings collection was an original part of the Museum of Ornamental Art, later renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum, which opened at South Kensington in June 1857. In that year John Sheepshanks offered the Museum his collection of around 500 modern British oil paintings, watercolours and drawings to found a ‘National Gallery of British Art’. He preferred the ‘open and airy situation’ of South Kensington to the polluted atmosphere of central London, and believed in the importance of making art accessible to the public. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Portrait miniature of A Young Man Leaning Against a Tree Amongst Roses, possibly Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex (1566 â€“ 1601), Nicholas Hilliard, 1585-95. Museum no. P.163-1910. The Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London’s decorative arts and design museum. The museum’s collection is so diverse it is difficult to pinpoint the highlights. One of the visitor’s favorites are the cast courts, a collection of casts of famous European monuments and sculptures. At the end of the nineteenth century, when most people weren’t fortunate enough to travel around the continent, casts were a popular way of showing famous foreign monuments to the people.