



A Brief History of Needlepoint in Two Essays

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The term *embroidery* generally refers to any textile foundation that is decorated with needle and thread, although embroidery can be worked on other foundations such as leather. Embroiderers have almost complete freedom to create either linear patterns or flowing pictorial compositions; the needle and thread are not bound by a geometric foundation, as on a loom.

Embroidery has a long tradition of both professional and amateur production in Europe and was practiced universally. Professional embroiderers' organizations or guilds existed in Europe at least as early as the Middle Ages, and work of a professional quality was also done in convents, particularly in Italy and France. The church was one of the most important customers for high-quality embroidery. All of the textiles involved in the liturgy—priests' vestments, hangings, even Bibles—were commonly embellished with some form of embroidery. Religious vestments, in particular, typically had elements of embroidery in their design; the tradition of ornamental bands, called orphreys, appears at least as early as the thirteenth century. Contemporary fashion, as well as religious tradition, played a role in vestment design, and sumptuous textile designs with no apparent religious connotations were also used in the church.

The nobility were also major customers of top-quality embroidery. Individual designers and embroiderers were often retained by a monarch or employed by a noble household to embellish garments, furnishings, and decorations, both for everyday use and special occasions. One such craftsman, Charles Germain de Saint-Aubin (1721–1786), who was employed as a designer to the French king Louis XV, published a treatise on embroidery in 1770 which has become one of the most important sources of technical information on eighteenth-century needlework. His book included a brief history of the art, definitions and uses for specialized tools, and specific instructions on a great variety of stitches in materials such as silk, metal threads, and glass beads. While Saint-Aubin's work was aimed at the professional embroiderer, pattern books for talented amateurs were produced as well. One such author was Johann Friedrich Netto, who published several embroidery pattern books in Germany during the late eighteenth century.

Needlework on canvas was a very popular type of embroidery for furnishings and hangings during this period and was produced by both professionals and amateurs.

Many fine examples from England and France survive. The canvas grid provided a foundation for creating pictures with a very simple stitch (tent stitch), often worked in two sizes that could either cover areas quickly or provide more detail.

On the domestic front, skill with a needle was considered an essential part of a well-bred young woman's education. Samplers were produced as teaching tools to acquire the needlework skills necessary for decorating clothing and household furnishings as well as household maintenance tasks such as marking and mending linens. A typical sampler consisted of rows of practice stitches and repeating designs; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the alphabet and numbers were also common motifs. These were made throughout Europe, with variations in style appearing from country to country. As a needleworker's skills developed, she might attempt more ambitious and purely decorative projects such as a picture on which to display her talent. Some of the most extraordinary examples of the facility of English needleworkers appear in the category of raised work seen on caskets or boxes. These boxes were decorated on all sides with scenes from the Bible or allegorical subjects. Sources for these designs were usually contemporary prints, illustrated Bibles, or books of embroidery patterns. It appears that some of these more advanced projects were designed by professionals and sold in kits for the amateur needleworker to complete.

Pattern books specifically intended to provide models for embroidery and lace appeared as early as the sixteenth century. While most books were simply collections of black-and-white printed designs, a more ambitious publication might include hand-colored plates, or even embroidery samples.

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http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/txt_e/hd_txt_e.htm (October 2003)

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In eighteenth-century America, a girl was expected to grow up, get married, have children, and take care of a home. Because of the limits of her sphere, a girl received a very different education from that available to a boy. Indeed, before the advent of public education in the mid-nineteenth century, in order to receive any education at all a boy or a girl had to be born into the middle or upper classes and have parents who valued education enough to pay for it. Usually, a boy would be taught traditional academic subjects, while a girl might be tutored in the barest rudiments of reading and arithmetic. Instead of academic studies, girls were usually sent to schools that taught an assortment of skills considered “female accomplishments”—music, watercolor painting, comportment, manners, and sewing.

As part of her preparation for the responsibility of sewing clothes and linens for her future family, most girls completed at least two samplers. The first, which might be undertaken when a girl was as young as five or six, was called a marking sampler. Marking samplers served a dual purpose: they taught a child basic embroidery techniques and the alphabet and numbers. The letters and numbers learned while embroidering a marking sampler were especially useful, since it was important that any homemaker keep track of her linens, some of her most valuable household goods. This was accomplished by marking them, usually in a cross stitch, with her initials and a number.

Young girls made marking samplers either at home under the tutelage of their mother or grandmother, or at small community schools, called “dame schools” for the women—usually widows or spinsters—who ran them. The equivalent of today’s early years of elementary school, they were attended by both boys and girls. The children were taught reading and arithmetic, and in some cases both sexes participated in knitting, sewing, and sampler-making instruction. Although boys usually went on for further academic training, in many cases this was the only formal schooling a girl received.

A girl who was lucky enough to continue her education usually made a second embroidery at a ladies boarding school while she was in her adolescent years. This was usually a more decorative pictorial sampler or needlework picture. While less straightforwardly useful than marking samplers, decorative samplers and needlework pictures also served an important function: they revealed the values of the girl and her family to potential suitors. The completed work was usually framed and hung in the parlor, proclaiming the maker’s obedience, patience, and skill. It also communicated that a girl’s parents were wealthy enough to send their daughter to school and that the family valued the arts of refinement. The verses found on many samplers reinforced these messages, emphasizing the importance of female virtue, the value of education,

and obedience to one's parents and to God. The acceptance of death and the remembrance of the dead, including the sampler maker herself, is another frequent theme. Girls usually signed their samplers, stitching their name, age, and the date the sampler was completed. These small bits of embroidered cloth are often all that remains to testify to the otherwise unrecorded lives of their makers.

Although most women did not make decorative embroideries after they married and became responsible for all the day-to-day sewing that was needed to keep their families clothed and provided with basic linens, some continued to make imaginatively patterned and colored embroidered textiles for their homes. The most common projects, especially in New England, were bedcoverings and bed hangings. These were usually sewn of a linen or linen/cotton blend fabric that was decoratively stitched with patterns of plants, flowers, and birds in brightly colored worsted wool. These designs imitated similar bedcoverings and hangings popular in England; the English embroideries looked to elaborately printed textiles from India for inspiration.

Another, much more rarely surviving example of household embroidery was upholstery covers for seating furniture; the Museum owns one completely embroidery-covered easy chair and an embroidered chair back. Projects like bedcovers or furniture upholstery could have been made by teenage girls who were preparing to be married, or by married women who were wealthy enough to have servants to complete household chores, thereby allowing them the leisure time in which to embroider. But in some cases, embroidered household textiles were actually "professionally made": during the eighteenth century, talented embroiderers are known to have sewn for their neighbors in exchange for money or goods.

Peck, Amelia. "American Needlework in the Eighteenth Century." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-.
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