
CROSS STITCH SAMPLERS

Historical Notes

General History

Cross stitch samplers are single pieces of cloth on which various stitching techniques, borders, patterns, and motifs are practiced. Once done, they serve as a reference piece for the stitcher to look back on and recreate later in other projects.

Samplers have been used since at least the 16th century. The oldest extant sampler, currently at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, was created by Jane Bostocke in 1598.¹ The typical format of the sampler that you may be most familiar with evolved in the early 18th century. This format is square or rectangular in shape and was designed to be something that could be framed and displayed on the wall like a piece of art, rather than kept rolled up.

Samplers as Education Tools

Girls, some as young as 6 or 7, created samplers as they were learning to sew and embroider. A girl would be taught the basic needlework skills needed to operate the family household and her sampler would be used to demonstrate her proficiency. Beyond being a necessary skill within the 19th century household, embroidery served as a key component in young girls' education. Most samplers created by girls at this time included the alphabet and numbers. For many, creating their first sampler would also be their first introduction to formal education. While working on their sewing skills, they would also be practicing their numbers and letters, and learning how to spell.

Another common learning outcome for young girls making cross stitch samplers was religious ideology. It is incredibly common for samplers to include religious or moral passages, motifs, and figures. On top of practicing basic sewing skills and the alphabet, young girls creating samplers would also be expanding their religious education. Religious elements were especially prevalent within the embroidery traditions of European settlers in early America and Canada. Their strong sense of religious purpose

¹ Museum, V. and A. (n.d.). *Sampler: Jane Bostocke: V&A explore the collections*. Victoria and Albert Museum: Explore the Collections. Retrieved March 9, 2022, from <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O46183/sampler-jane-bostocke/>

and belief played an important role in sustaining them in an unfamiliar and often harsh landscape.² In addition to religious verses, 19th century feminine morality ideals are regularly featured through the text included on cross stitch samplers. Virtues such as humility, contentment, and selflessness are common traits represented on samplers.³

Cross stitch samplers did not only play a role in girls' education at home, they were also used in formal school settings. Being such an integral part of European settler tradition, needlework was commonly used as a means of assimilation. Cross stitch was taught to young Indigenous girls as part of the effort to assimilate Indigenous culture into European settler culture in Canada. In Eastern Canada, it is said that a style of Mi'kmaq beadwork was influenced by the education of Indigenous girls by the Ursuline nuns.⁴ From the establishment of an Ursuline school in New France in 1639, needlework was part of the curriculum taught to young Indigenous girls.⁵

Cross stitch was not only used to assimilate Indigenous girls into settler culture, but also black girls into white culture, as seen in this sampler from Nova Scotia Museum:

² V&A · *embroidery – A history of needlework samplers*. Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.). Retrieved March 9, 2022, from

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/embroidery-a-history-of-needlework-samplers>

³ Chafe, Anne. "Newfoundland Samplers." The Rooms. The Rooms. Accessed February 15, 2022. <https://www.therooms.ca/newfoundland-samplers>.

⁴ Vastokas, Joan M.. "History of Indigenous Art in Canada." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Historica Canada. Article published August 27, 2013; Last Edited October 03, 2019.

⁵ Vastokas, Joan M.. "History of Indigenous Art in Canada." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Historica Canada. Article published August 27, 2013; Last Edited October 03, 2019.



Rachel Barrett Sampler, 1845. Nova Scotia Museum. 2018.14.1

This sampler, created by Rachel Barrett in 1845, demonstrates the significance of moral and religious instruction for African Nova Scotians in the 19th century. The African School in Nova Scotia was built for children of African descent and their parents. In Victorian-era Nova Scotia, education was segregated so only black students were allowed to attend the school. The verses from “God Save The Queen” are significant because the school was likely funded by the province and London-based Anglican organizations. It is also likely that the girls were taught needlework as a means of self-support.⁶

⁶ Bower, Lisa. 2019. The African School Sampler. February 21. Accessed March 4, 2022. <https://museum.novascotia.ca/blog/african-school-sampler>.

Women's Work

As a traditionally feminine craft, stitching, especially stitching done for decorative purposes, has often been dismissed as a frivolous domestic art. This devaluation of the skill and creativity needed to produce embroidered works has meant that the women and girls who made samplers have often gotten lost in history. Taking a closer look at these works reveals far more than just the hand skills of their creators. Samplers can tell stories that might otherwise have never been recorded or preserved.

While similar motifs and designs can be found between samplers created in different parts of the world, each sampler is unique and can offer a glimpse into the individual history and personality of its creator. Needlework may have been an essential skill for women and girls to learn, but cross stitch samplers allowed for a reasonable amount of creative freedom. Each choice of colour, motif, and design reflects the creativity of the young woman who stitched the sampler. Embroidery connects women's work across time and place.

Not only are samplers vital to museum collections because they often include dates and the names of the maker, they are also some of the only documents produced by young women from the 19th century. In some cases, a piece of needlework is the only record of a life lived. Studying these unique records can reveal a lot about the social status, politics, community, and personal experiences of the women and girls who created them.⁷

For much of history, the importance of needlework in women's lives was shared across social classes, but for different reasons. For middle and upper class women, fine needlework skills were an emblem of femininity and leisure. Their samplers would be used to display their status and demonstrate their suitability for marriage. For working class women in domestic service, samplers were used to demonstrate their employability skills.

In addition to being a record of a woman's daily life and status, embroidery has also been used by many women as a subversive medium. For many young women, a sampler may have been one of the only places they could safely and freely express subversive statements and resistance.

⁷ McCracken, Krista. "Embroidery as Record and Resistance." *CONTINGENT*. Contingent Magazine, November 19, 2019. <https://contingentmagazine.org/2019/11/19/embroidery/>.

A sampler created by Elizabeth Parker in 1830 expresses a deeply personal reflection on the abuse she suffered at the hand of her employers.⁸ Held in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Parker's sampler is an excellent example of resistance and personality embedded within a textile. Openly discussing her experiences would not have been an option for Elizabeth Parker, but embroidery was an accessible medium that she could use to privately express her feelings. Like many young girls at the time, she may not have been able to speak her mind, but she could use her needlework skills to express her innermost thoughts.

⁸ McCracken, Krista. "Embroidery as Record and Resistance." CONTINGENT. Contingent Magazine, November 19, 2019. <https://contingentmagazine.org/2019/11/19/embroidery/>.

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Related Readings

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[Embroidery: A History of Needlework Samplers](#)

[Dating Ontario Samplers](#)

[Embroidery as Record and Resistance](#)