

samplers – and the art of obedience

By Patricia R McDonald

During the 1970s, the National Trust of Australia (NSW) acquired a small, disparate group of samplers ranging from the late eighteenth century to 1861. Such is the nature of the medium (works are almost always signed off and dated as an addendum to the design) that it is possible to attribute and date all these works.

Less is known, however, about the owners of the small hands which crafted them – and they were all children who executed these extraordinarily detailed works – and their place of origin. Were the samplers they laboured over produced in the early colony, encapsulating traditions and memories of England, or were they produced in England, perhaps under the watchful eye of a governess or maiden aunt?

There are a few exceptions where clues can be found. Emma Bryen, who signs herself as 'aged 7 years' in c1840, incorporates highly coloured Australian native birds and sailing ships, as well as domestic animals, other motifs, numerals and the alphabet into her design. Jane Harris, 'aged 9 years', has a border featuring tulip designs and surrounds her colonial-style cottage with trees and flowers.

Judging from the date, Tempe Stimson's Map of England and part of Scotland (1791), with a floral border is almost certainly English, while the sheep outside the village of Great Broadham, Surrey in the sampler by ten year old Letticia Mecran (? her name has faded over the years) implies local knowledge.

An ancient craft

The age-old art or craft, however you see it, of embroidery – including tapestry and cross stitch – dates back to the Tang dynasty in China. The Romans described embroidery as 'painting with the needle'. Over the centuries, almost every culture has employed cross stitch of one kind or another – in its basic form one of the simplest embroidery stitches to execute – to decorate and embellish clothing and household items. Moreover, each country or area developed its own distinctive style.

Cross stitch evolved from the double lacing of skins with thongs or gut and developed over the years into a colourful and highly decorative craft. Much early embroidery was done by guilds of craftworkers or in convents and monasteries, but it was not until the beginning of the sixteenth century that counted thread embroidery, where the size of the stitch is determined by the warp and weft of the fabric, became popular.

Over the years the variety of stitches used gradually dwindled until, by the end of the eighteenth century, cross stitch was the predominant stitch. Birds, trees, butterflies and animals became more popular subjects and alphabets and numbers began to appear. Flowers have always been a favourite design source for embroidery but never more so than in the mid and late nineteenth century.

With rising prosperity, there was a great demand for embellished clothes and furnishings as outward symbols of newly acquired wealth. Chair seats, bed quilts, curtains, wall-hangings and even carpets were worked in designs which imitated traditional tapestries. These were stitched on canvas or linen in half cross stitch. Needlework pictures also became popular and working them became an acceptable way for ladies to pass their time.

Samplers – more than decoration

Early samplers were essentially a portable record of patterns and stitches, worked on long strips of linen by amateur and professional stitchers. They were kept rolled up in a sewing box and contained the types of stitches and patterns characteristic of the current costume and textiles. Later band samplers began to include alphabets and numbers and may have been used as a teaching aid for young children. The shape of the sampler gradually became more square and the inclusion of a border pattern suggests that they were intended for display.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century,



A colonial cottage is a clue to the provenance of Jane Harris's design, worked in 1837 at the age of ten years



Bethany's letters and numerals



Letticia's English village

samplers worked in charity schools and orphanages became a means of demonstrating to future employers that their charges could sew and mend; necessary prerequisites for becoming a lady's maid. Those produced from the orphanages of Bristol developed a particularly distinctive style. Worked in monochrome red, their sole purpose seems to have been to teach and demonstrate aptitude with the needle and an obedience to duty.

Samplers from this period generally contained text and pictures which were of a religious or moral nature. Biblical passages and psalms or hymns were popular, as were representations of Adam and Eve or the Tree of Life.

The 1841 sampler by Eleanor Esling from the Trust collection contains the following inscription:

*Remember now thy Creator in the
Days of thy youth while the evil days come
not, nor the years draw nigh
When they shall say I have no pleasure*

Elizabeth Morris's earlier sampler of 1812 (executed when she was 9 years old) features flowers and classical urns together with the following homily:

*Industry taught in early days
Not only gives the teacher praise
But gives us pleasure when we view
The work that we are taught to do.
Our parents with exulting joy
Survey it as no childish toy
But as a prelude that each day
A greater genius shall display.*

Another sampler in the Trust collection was executed by Susannah Lampe in 1861. It incorporates letters from the alphabet, numerals, Roman numerals and the following biblical reference:

*Children obey your parents
In the Lord: for this is right. (Ephesians VI, 1)*

A cross stitch revival

During the nineteenth century, a craze for the much simpler Berlin work took hold and interest in cross stitch and tapestry waned. The invention of the first embroidery machine in 1828, and the mass production of Singer sewing machines from 1851, reduced the need for women to master the skills needed for hand sewing and embroidery, and those skills went into decline.

By the 1920s and 1930s, the popularity of the needle arts had waned in Australia, replaced by sporting activities like tennis. This is borne out by women's journals of the period.



The months of painstaking work which must have lain behind Tempe Stimson's map of England and Wales dated 1791, would have ensured that the counties and waterways she stitched so carefully were indelibly marked in her memory



Susannah Lampe combined English and German in her sampler dated 1861



A homily worked in 1812 by the nine year old Elizabeth Morris

Craft underwent a revival during the 1970s and new, more contemporary designs and formats were developed for cross stitch. At the same time, an increasing number of specialist journals have appeared on the market while the Internet offers further possibilities for the dissemination of designs worldwide. Many companies, moreover, can now convert photographs to cross stitch patterns.

Other examples of cross stitch can be inspected in other National Trust collections, especially in Victoria, and in state, regional and local history museums throughout Australia.

Further reading:

Therese de Dillmont, *Encyclopedia of Needlework*, Mulhouse, France.

Marion Fletcher, *Needlework in Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1989.