The Embroidered Word:
A Stitchery Overview for Visual Arts Education

June Julian, Ed.D.

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Abstract

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This historical research provides an examination of the embroidered word as a visual art piece, from early traditional examples to contemporary forms. It is intended to encourage appreciation of embroidery as an art form and to stimulate discussion about the role of historical contexts in the studio education of artists at the university level.

Commonly characterized as obsessive stitchers of hankies and tea towels, hand embroiderers have recently evolved from homespun to hot. The *Home Sweet Home* stitched samplers of days gone by have been reinvented into challenging needle works by both contemporary fine artists and home practitioners. When art students view embroidery work through time and culture, they better understand that every stitch is the heart beat of a unique individual responding to the world.

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Many artists like Tracey Emin and Louis Bourgeois, for example, share intimate messages and deeply personal musings by stitching words on fabric. Inspired by examples in the *Subversive Cross Stitch* book, indie hobbyists join forces in *Stitch n' Bitch* groups to reinvent the traditional gold framed sampler by painstakingly rendering irreverent words and phrases with needle and thread.

This historical research provides an examination of the embroidered word as visual art piece, from early traditional examples to contemporary forms. It is intended to encourage appreciation of the art form and discussion about the role of historical contexts in the education of studio artists at the university level.

Early Samplers Background

The term, **sampler,** comes from the Latin *exemplum*, meaning an example to be followed, a pattern or model. It is believed that although the earliest dated samplers and references to the come from the 16th century, they were stitched long before this time – simple embroideries on linen have been found in the tombs of the Pharaohs.

Some of the earliest samplers from the 16th century, typically **band samplers**, included a huge variety of stitches. They were made from long, thin strips of linen and were not intended to be decorative but to act as a reference to stitchers, and were kept rolled up in a drawer to be referred to as necessary. These now very valuable treasures demonstrate the skill, diligence and patience of the embroiderers and leave us in awe of their talent.

Perhaps the most famous **band embroidery** is the Bayeux Tapestry,
Which consists of some fifty scenes with Latin captions. It is likely that it was made in England—not Bayeux—in the **1070s**. In 1729, scholars rediscovered the hanging at a time when it was being displayed annually in Bayeux Cathedral.

Fig. 1 Bayeux Tapestry, c.1070

The first known dated English sampler was made by Jane Bostocke in 1598 to celebrate the birth of her daughter Alice Lee, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This work, although 16th century is not a band sampler but more a **spot motif sampler,** covered with random motifs in a variety of stitches and shades, including metal threads, pearls and beads.

Fig. 2 Jane Bostocke, 1598

Later in the 17th and 18th centuries, **spot samplers**, which included random motifs worked in colored threads, were common. These could be used on costumes, bed

hangings or other furnishings. During this period **printed pattern books** became available, so samplers lost some of their use as reference works.

Fig. 3 Christina Wood of Nottingham, 1816, Spot Sampler

It became more common for young girls to **work samplers as part of their education**. Alphabet samplers, pictorial designs including houses and animals, decorative borders, poems and prayers became common and represent the popular image of the sampler. **Marking samplers** included various alphabets in reversible stitches, crowns and coronets, which could be used to mark the household linens of the aristocracy. Some samplers contained religious symbols or verses, and others taught geography in the form of embroidered maps or mathematics as almanacs or multiplication tables. During Victorian times samplers became more pictorial and metamorphosed into decorative articles to be hung on the parlor walls.

Loara Standish, daughter of Captain Myles Standish, is thought to have made this sampler in her teens. Made in **1653, it is the earliest known American-made sampler and the earliest known sampler with a verse,** now in the Pilgrim Hall Museum**.** American samplers followed the British form, as instruction in needlework passed from mother to daughter.

Fig. 4 Loara Standish, 1653

Classic **Home Sweet Home** and **God Bless This Home** samplers became popular from the colonial times and can still be found in many homes today.

Fig. 5 Home Sweet Home

It is possible now for the home hobbyist to **obtain stitchery kits** on the web to reproduce these historical and classic embroideries. For example, amazingly, one can purchase the Loara Standish Sampler kit at the *Traditional Stitches* website.

Reverence

Throughout time, reverence and extreme care have been intrinsic characteristics of traditional embroideries. Once can find exquisite stitchery in a multitude of religions and cultures worldwide to document the pantheon of religious figures and narratives, and to function as mnemonic devices for the teaching the liturgy.

In Himalayan culture, for example, embroidered tangkas depicting sacred teachings are common. At the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City, the author initiated the **Auspicious Stitches Program,** when she was the Manager of School and Community Programs there a few years ago. The Eight Auspicious symbols were used as the basis for a huge collaborative tangka Sampler where each stitcher participant created a panel that was included in the whole. She chose to ground this work within the Relational Aesthetics Theory of Borriaud. Bourriaud (1998) explains that Relational Aesthetics involves social opportunities and conviviality, rather than an insular private perspective for artists. “Their works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 43).

Fig. 6 June Julian, Auspicious Stitches Collaborative Tangka, Rubin Museum of Art, NY

Contemporary Artists

In Contemporary Art, many artists have critiqued traditional needlework with their embroidered pieces. Tracey Emin, Gada Amer, and Louis Bourgeois, for example, share intimate messages and deeply personal musings by stitching words on fabric.

Fig. 7 Tracey Emin

Popular Culture

Nowadays, an interesting perversion of traditional embroidered samplers and needle works can be observed in the work of trendy home hobbyists. Most likely the initial impetus for the cultural deconstruction of classic stitchery came from the *Subversive Cross Stitch* movement led by Julie Jackson. (Jackson, J., 2006)

> *Subversive Cross Stitch began in the spring of 2003 as a form of anger management therapy when I was dealing with a cruel bully of a boss. At my wit's end and in dire need of some art therapy, I stopped by a craft store on the way home from work one day and picked up an ornate sampler—I hadn't done any cross stitch since I was a kid. Once I finished the intricate border of pink flowers, I decided to stitch the word "F--k" right in the center. It felt so great, and the idea was born! Since I got such a kick out of it, I stitched a few more pieces this way and started sharing the idea with friends through a simple website. Then, suddenly, my site was discovered and started getting a lot of press. So I quickly decided to offer this crafty form of therapy to others through kits.*

Fig. 8 #@%&!!, Subversive Cross Stitch

Conclusion

Providing an historical context for hand embroidery provides art students with a wide perspective from which to embed their own contemporary practice. From that informed position, they may be better able to reflect their own time and their individual responses to it. When art students view embroidery work through time and culture, they better understand that every stitch is the heart beat of a unique individual responding to the world.

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