EARLY AMERICAN EMBROIDERY

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That a woman’s place is in the home was less often and less easily disputed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than it is today. The woman who was supposed to have lost her reason by “giving herself wholly to reading and writing” evoked the stern rebuke of John Winthrop of Massachusetts in 1643. She might have kept her wits and God’s grace, he claimed, “if she had attended her household affairs and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men whose minds are stronger.”

Traditionally considered among the principal “things as belong to women” is the art of needlework. In the earliest days of America, however, household affairs included many more arduous duties. A woman’s mind may have been considered weaker than a man’s but her body was not, and she worked and toiled beside her husband to such effect that twice as much land was offered to married men as single. These pioneering women could hardly have spared the time for decorative needlework, and when they employed the needle it must have been only for the most necessary sewing.

As the colonies grew and prospered, comfort rather than mere survival became the goal. The inventories of the colonists’ possessions ran to new lengths in the second half of the seventeenth century. A large proportion of the aggregate wealth of an estate was formed by textiles, and the records abound with references to “wrought,” “needleworked,” or “Turkey” chairs, cushions, “carpets,” cupboard cloths, and hangings. As in the case of other household goods of this early period, some of the embroidered pieces had been brought over from the homeland and those that were made in this country probably followed closely the current English styles and were often made from English materials.

Very little of this early work survives, but the Museum acquired a few years ago a set of bed hangings (see opp. page) which are probably characteristic of many that adorned American houses of the late seventeenth century. According to the tradition accompanying them, they are the work of the three successive wives of Dr. George Gilson Clapp, an English physician who, after finishing his medical studies in London, traveled for twenty years in Europe and the Near East, resumed his practice in England, and finally, about 1666, came to this country and settled in Westchester, New York, where the curtains are said to have been completed. Romantic stories of this kind are too often attached to examples of pretentious needlework to be entirely credible, but the pattern of this embroidery is of the type that came into fashion in England late in the sixteenth century and remained popular for almost a hundred years with ladies of the middle class and provincial groups from which the greatest number of American colonists came.

The hangings are of white twilled cotton embroidered with red wool in outline, blanket, and seed stitches. Dogs, squirrels, stags pierced with arrows, and birds alternate with sprigs
of flowers in a close repeat of four. The motifs for embroidery of this kind were adapted originally from natural history and botany books, mediaeval manuscripts, and very often, as in the case of the stag pierced with an arrow, from the emblem books so characteristic of the period. Devices from these various sources as well as original ones were later adapted for special use by the embroideress in such books as Shorleyker's *Schole House for the Needle*, published in 1624, and in engravings such as those of Stent and Overton about 1660.

The Turkeywork chairs, cushions, and "carpets," as table covers were then called, represent another style of embroidery that came into favor in England in the sixteenth century and, judging from the frequency with which it is mentioned in the inventories and wills, was used extensively in this country. In imitation of the durable and handsome rugs imported from the Near East and available only to the most well-to-do, heavy, rich-colored wools were pulled through canvas or coarse linen, knotted, and cut to form a pile. The Museum is fortunate in being able to exhibit, as a loan from Mrs. J. Insley Blair, two of the very few American pieces upholstered with the original Turkeywork that are known to survive. They are oak and maple chairs of the Cromwellian type popular in New England in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. Their seats and backs are worked with large stylized flowers in green, blue, rose, black, and white wool in the current English fashion. Such possessions were evidently highly regarded. For example, in the inventory of Captain Edward Roe in 1676 twelve Turkeywork chairs were valued at 960 pounds of tobacco, twice the amount noted for an equal number.
of leather chairs in the same listing.

By the turn of the century the colonies were well established, commerce thrived, and fortunes were beginning to be amassed. With the increased wealth came greater leisure for the women. As early as 1686 John Dunton, in noting the habits of the “old (or superannuated) Maid in Boston,” remarked that much of her time “was taken up in needlework and learning French, etc.” At the same time the universal trend toward more comfort in the home was becoming stronger. New forms such as easy chairs, sofas, and fire screens, provided fresh fields for adornment with the needle, and embroidery became a necessary accomplishment of the housewife. Although she might avail herself of the services of a professional “mantua-maker,” or dressmaker, and even send out her husband’s socks to be “new grafted and run at the heel,” it was nevertheless considered “as scandalous for a woman not to know how to use a needle as for a man not to know how to use a sword.” In the advertisements of the fashionable schools, embroidery rivaled the three R’s in importance, and one man complained in a letter to the New York Mercury in 1758 that his home had “twice as many fire-skreens as chimneys, and three flourished quilts for every bed.” His overzealous wife, he claimed, awoke his daughters at an early hour to appoint to each a “task of needlework to be performed before breakfast.”

Turkeywork had enhanced the handsome, sturdily built furniture of the previous century, but the lighter forms of the Queen Anne style called for less ponderous decoration, and shopkeepers advertised “all sorts of beautiful figures on canvas for Tent stick.” Tent stitch, or petit point as it is popularly called today, is worked in even rows with short slanting stitches each covering an intersection of the threads of the basic fabric. This diminutive stitchery inspired by tapestry lent itself well to the patterns of small but naturalistic blossoms and foliage that succeeded the earlier formalized designs. An exceptionally fine petit-point chair seat decorated with roses, carnations, tulips, oak leaves, and other flora (see ill.) has been presented to the Museum by R. Thornton Wilson in memory of Florence Ellsworth Wilson. It was worked about 1740 by Sarah Tyler of Boston and is related in its competent execution and sophisticated character to a large group of needlework pieces made in the vicinity of the Massachusetts capital during the first half of the eighteenth century. The young embroideress may well have attended one of the schools advertising that their pupils might “be supplied with patterns and all sorts of drawing and materials for their work,” or she might have purchased from Mrs. Condy near the Old North Meeting House one of the “patterns from London but drawn by her much cheaper than English drawing.”

Store-bought materials and patterns were likewise used for crewelwork, as linen or cotton embroidered with scattered floral motifs in bright-colored wools is popularly called. Of about the same date as the chair seat is a coverlet worked by Sarah Noyes Chester of Wethersfield, Connecticut, and given to the Museum by a descendant, Mr. Frank Coit Johnson, and Mrs. Johnson. Flowers, fruits, and foliage entwine to make a rich border within which separate motifs are embroidered at wide intervals. The small repeating patterns popular
in England early in the previous century had been superseded by large all-over Tree of Life designs inspired by the painted cottons imported into England from the East after 1630. These growing forms called for more naturalistic rendering, and outline stitches were supplemented with long and short filling stitches of various sorts, and wool of several somber shades replaced that of a single color. With the taste for greater lightness that marked the advent of the eighteenth century, colors became brighter and the blossoms and leaves became detached from their branches and used as separate scattered motifs. The Chester coverlet is distinguished for the brightness of the colored wools, the competent drawing, and the skill with which the embroideress has employed her needle to effect subtle shading of colors and delicate detail work. Its sophisticated character suggests that its maker may have followed the latest English patterns and that the materials may have been imported (see p. 120).

Much colonial crewelwork, however, was worked with materials spun, dyed, and woven at home, homespun goods being used extensively in America until the nineteenth century. In the early days of Massachusetts a shortage of material for clothing necessitated the drastic statutes of 1641 and 1656 drafting the labor of women and children for spinning and weaving. Although the situation eased as the colonies prospered, spinning continued to be one of the principal occupations of American women. A favorite social affair of early eighteenth-century Boston was the gathering on the Common of the “spinners” with their wheels, and after the Stamp Act of 1765 spinning became the patriotic duty of Whig ladies, who, in protest against “taxation without representation,” resolved to use only American-made goods.

Characteristic of the manner in which these homespun fabrics were decorated are the coverlet and bed hangings (see p. 125) presented to the Museum by Miss Anna T. Marble. They belonged originally to Alice Wilcox, who married William Arnold of East Greenwich, Rhode Island, in 1765, about which time they were probably worked. For the central motifs of the coverlet and valances, the embroideress worked trees with fanciful birds perched on their branches, charming vestiges of the great Jacobean Tree of Life designs. The scattered triple-stemmed sprays are characteristic of many American pieces, and the curling stems and delicate leaves suggest the painted designs found on Massachusetts and Connecticut chests made in the first half of the eighteenth century. No two of the many floral motifs are identical, and the drawing of the trees, particularly that on the valance, is rather naïve. The embroideress seems to have relied more upon the surrounding countryside for inspiration than the latest patterns available in the city shops.

The less well-to-do women of the cities and those of the outlying districts continued to embellish their furniture coverings and their clothes with wool-embroidered motifs until early in the nineteenth century. With their worldly sisters, however, the popularity of useful embroidery waned much earlier. Pattern-woven fabrics were becoming accessible to a greater number of people through the invention of the fly shuttle and the use of power looms. The slender, attenuated forms of Hep-
The back of an easy chair embroidered about 1740 by Anne Emerson. Lent by Mrs. Henry Van Kleeck Gillmore, 1936. OPPOSITE PAGE: Central motif of a crewelwork coverlet made in New England in the middle of the xvIII century. Gift of Anna T. Marble, 1943
plewhite and Sheraton furniture of the end of the century called for more delicate coverings, and striped and figured silks and satins came to be more generally used. While the leisureed ladies of the first half of the century had employed their idle moments working chair seats and fire screens, their daughters and granddaughters turned for amusement to the creation of needlework pictures which served no more useful purpose than that of decoration.

Pictorial scenes had been a popular subject for the larger pieces of embroidered upholstery. An armchair lent to the Museum by Mrs. Henry Van Kleeck Gillmore was worked about 1740 by Anne Emerson in petit point and cross-stitch with a bucolic scene in a framework of scrolls and flowers (see opp. page). A number of pictures, of which the Museum owns two, were embroidered during the second quarter of the eighteenth century in the vicinity of Boston, but they were the work of women who embroidered a large variety of useful objects as well and, like the furniture coverings and fire screens, they were worked on linen chiefly in cross and tent stitches and predominantly with wool.

Needlewomen of the end of the century occupied themselves more exclusively with fancy-work and, unconcerned with the problems of durability that attended the embroidery of upholstery, employed whatever materials and stitches lent themselves best to a pictorial and decorative effect.

A sampler was a requisite for the successful completion of every young lady's education, and alphabets and pious verses were laboriously embroidered at an early age. Laura Hyde of Connecticut, however, defied convention in the sampler which she designed in her fourteenth year (see p. 123). Her imagination evidently fired by tales brought back by the Eastern traders, she chose, in addition to the American eagle, entertaining scenes of India and worked them with silk on canvas in filling stitches and knots as well as cross and tent stitches. The pastoral scene worked by Evelina Hull at the Charleston Academy about 1812, presented to the Museum by Mrs. Joshua Marsden Van Cott, is worked with pastel silks in satin and split stitches and French knots on a silk ground. To heighten the realistic effect the embroideress used a paintbrush as well as a needle and water-colored the sky, the small dog, and the faces and hands of the shepherd and shepherdess. Needlework, which in the earliest days of the colonies had been a purely utilitarian task and later a popular means for the decoration of useful objects, had become for the fashionable ladies of the Republic little more than a genteel diversion.