SIDE CURTAIN AND VALANCE (*detail*) FROM A SET OF EMBROIDERED BED HANGINGS, INITIALED A P AND DATED 1674

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Embroidery in the Society's Collection

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FEMINISTS may not readily accept the idea but it certainly can be argued that it is chiefly with the use of the needle that women have created the majority of their achievements in the field of art. There are of course exceptions, but very few considering how many women there have been. Bulfinch has no female counterpart and certainly America can boast no feminine Benjamin West or Paul Revere. The houses they kept, the meals they cooked are now simply a matter of record or a memory fond or otherwise. It is fortunate, therefore, that the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has such an excellent collection of needlework representing the period from the middle of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century.

The representative embroideries chosen for discussion have been placed in six arbitrary classifications, crewel, flame stitch, memorial pictures, samplers, embroidery on canvas and art squares. For the most part they represent the norm rather than the exceptional and as such better illustrate the development of embroidery in this country. Many are neither dated nor signed, which is regrettable for here diaries, account books and inventories can be of little help. Though many came to the Society with a family history, only their style and workmanship can properly place them. There are mavericks, of course, as mercifully no law compels an embroideress to do any special type of work at a given time, nor will she necessarily want to. But it is interesting and very helpful that so many needlewomen did, and still do, choose the form of needlework in vogue at the moment.

The earliest dated piece of embroidery owned by this Society is of crewel, or embroidery in wool. It consists of a set of bed hangings comprising four curtains and a single length of valance, found by a dealer in the vicinity of Cape Cod (Frontispiece). In the corner of one curtain is the date 1674 and the initials "A P." Though the authorities agree that this set of hangings, with its sophistication and elegance, is probably of English work-

manship,[1] the scale and over-all simplicity of the design would not rule out an American origin, and in any event, it can be considered a good example of the type of crewel that must have been brought to this country in the seventeenth century and one which must have greatly influenced work done here. Embroidered on linen and cotton twill in blue and two shades of green, this set uses few stitches, chain, link and Roumanian, all of which illustrate the economy of wool practiced by necessity in this country. Despite its probable European origin and with so few examples for comparison this set could nevertheless be a clue to the sort of work done here before the development of what we consider our native style.

By the mid-eighteenth century this style had fully developed. In comparison to the English, the over-all design appears lighter and sketchier, the forms cruder and the colors brighter and clearer. Though the result is noticeably less impressive, there is a gaiety, a spontaneity and charm to replace it. Neither of the two valances chosen as examples are precisely dated and we have only the information that one came down in the Clapp family of Dorchester, Massachusetts (Fig. 1), and the other in the family of Joanna Rust who married in Boston in 1799. But they are easily comparable to other dated pieces of this period. Both designs are composed of a continuous flowing pattern of imaginary and exotic leaves and flowers which meander the length of the material. The colors, more numerous than in the seventeenth-century piece, are clear bright blues, reds, yellows and greens. Three or at the most four shades of each color are used and there is none of the emphasis on violent contrast of tone that there would have been in England and would be in this country in the next century. The stitches, for the most part Roumanian, outline and satin (in very small areas), are also limited and seem to have been chosen for the maximum effect achievable with a minimum use of wool.

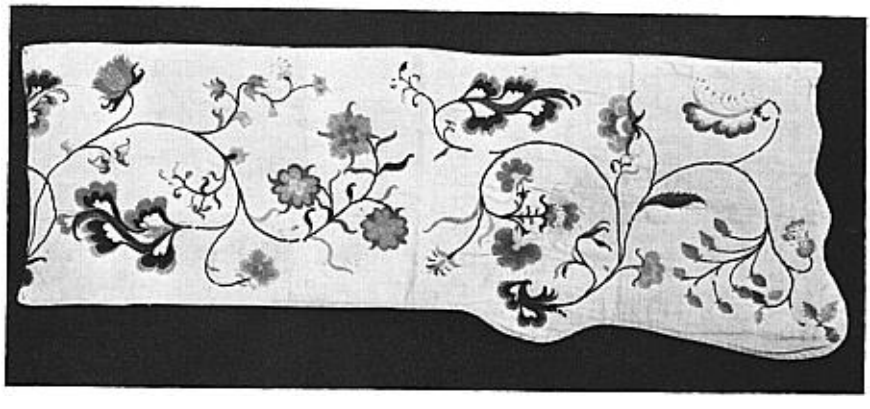

FIG. 1. EMBROIDERED BED VALANCE (*detail*), CLAPP FAMILY, DORCHESTER, MASSACHUSETTS, LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

[1] See, for example, John L. Nevinson, *Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue of English Embroidery*, Plate XLVII.

A pair of seat covers, also undated, show a further development typical of crewel work at the end of the eighteenth century. Embroidered on a dark brown woolen ground which throws the design into greater relief, the colors themselves are far more varied, including even a dark purple and a black and white not seen in the earlier pieces (Fig. 2). Several strongly contrasting colors are used in simple motifs and there is much more modulation. The types of stitches, too, have grown in number with the addition of the blanket, herringbone and seed stitch. Despite the fact that the "Tree of Life" design which is used here, consisting of flowers and leaves sprouting from a central branch, is an early one, these later examples lack the proper balance and organization of color and form found in earlier work. For an example, one piece has its central branch sprouting out

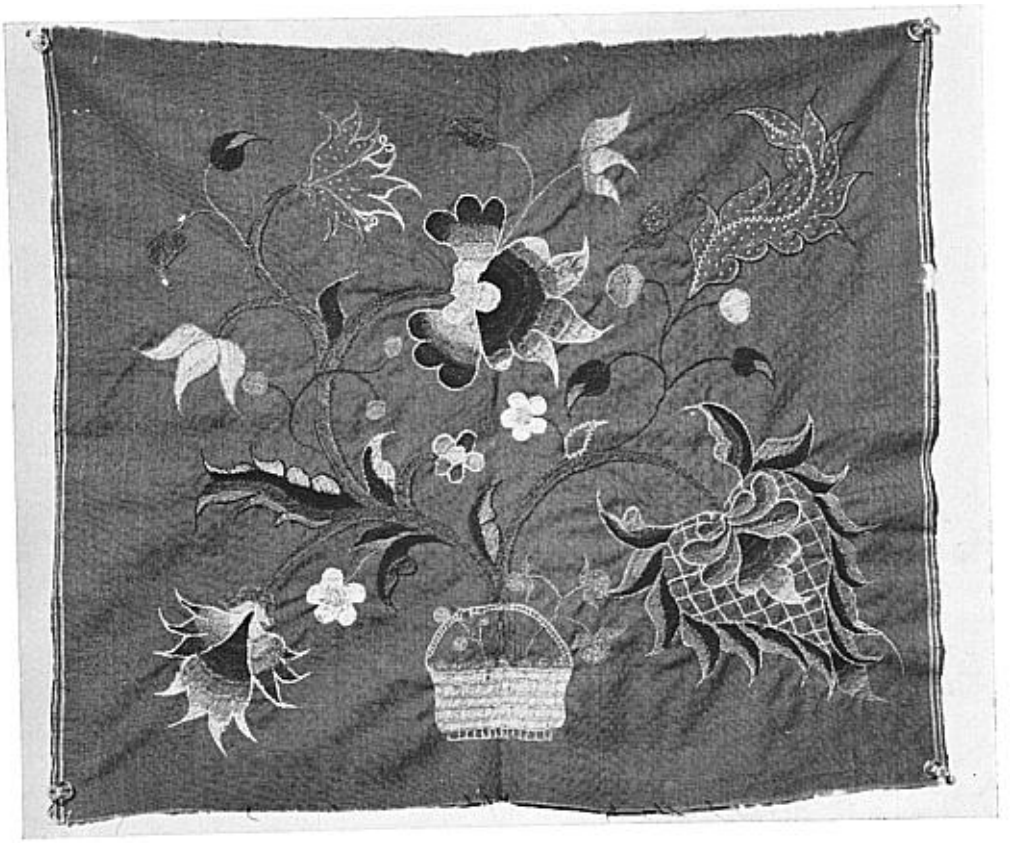

FIG. 2. SEAT COVER, WORKED PROBABLY BY MISS JOANNA RUST OF IPSWICH, MASSACHUSETTS, WHO MARRIED JONATHAN HOWARD OF BOSTON, LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

of a charming but inadequately small basket of berries.

Flame-stitch embroidery (Florentine work, "pointe d'Hongrie"), done on canvas in wool or silk thread and using a horizontal stitch (up four and under six —or a combination thereof), achieves the effect of diamonds or pinnacles of flame by augmenting or diminishing the number of threads of the canvas over which a stitch is worked. Though used in all types of upholstery, in fire screens, pillow covers and even pot holders, this type of embroidery is best represented in the Society's collection by a large number of wallets. Dating generally from around the middle of the eighteenth century, they do not vary greatly in form, consisting of either one divided pocket closed by a plain or scalloped flap, or of two divided pockets which close by folding toward each other. They are worked in bright colors, for the most part reds, yellows and greens, using several colors of the same intensity for each flame. These flames in turn are divided one from the other by a narrow line of some neutral color. The wallets are usually lined with a glazed fabric of a dull green or red and are bound and tied with matching cotton tapes. They depend for effect on a wonderful sense of color and a skill in shading rather than on stitch or design.

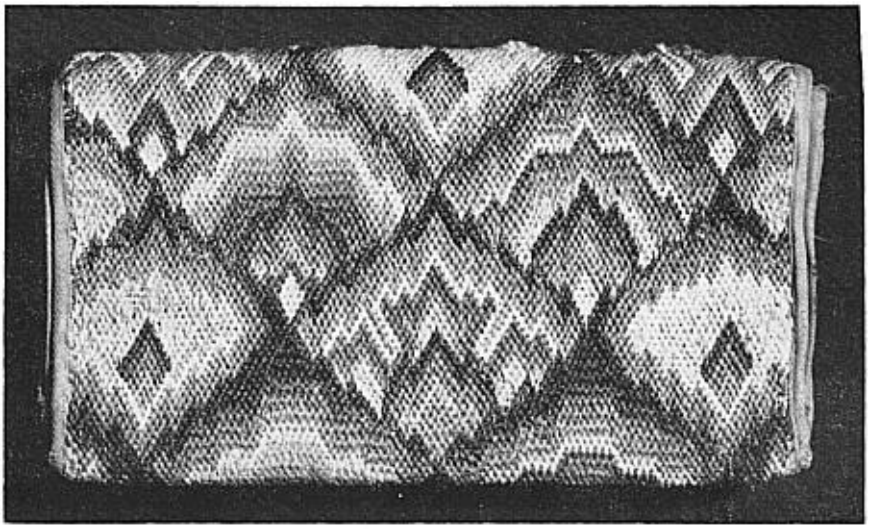

FIG. 3. FLAME-STITCH PURSE, SIGNED "JOSHUA DAVIS, BOSTON," AND DATED 1772

One example has worked into a corner: "Joshua Davis | Boston | Dec. 29 (?) | 1772," giving both the owner and the year in which the wallet was worked (Fig. 3). This is the only early example in our collection bearing both name and date. Of the two-pocket type, its diamonds are in reds and yellows and the lining and tape are red.

A second is recorded as the sermon case of the Reverend Sylvanious Ames, chaplain in the American Revolution, who died at Valley Forge during the win-

ter of 1777-1778. This one, of the single-pocket type, is lined with a light green silk and bound and tied with a dark green tape. The diamonds alternate between red and olive green in one line and yellow and mauve in the next.

A third belonged to Jonathan Bailey of Massachusetts who lived in the late eighteenth century. Lined and bound with a red cotton and trimmed with a

FIG. 4. FLAME-STITCH PURSE, DATED 1845

matching tape its diamonds are in shades of red, purple and yellow.

A final example, dated 1845 (in steel beads) shows to what extent this formerly charming type of work had evolved by the middle of the nineteenth century. By now the flames are rigidly symmetrical and stitched not in the glorious colors of the earlier examples but in limited shades of a dull brown, showing an equally limited imagination and skill. Typical of the growing sentimentality of the period is the word "Souvenir" picked out in steel beads along with the date (Fig. 4).

By 1800 a new vogue in embroidery had swept the country: embroidery on silk inspired by that first taught by the Moravians at their school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. This type of work, which also includes flower and ship pictures as well as bucolic and Biblical scenes, is best represented in this collection by still another classification, that of the "memorial picture." These are particularly interesting because by their very nature they are in one way or another both dated and identified. A glance at a few of these pictures will show to what extent they conform in subject matter and technique.

A typical example is that worked in memory of Ebenezer Tufts who died in 1829. At the very center is a tomb topped by an urn, both embroidered in silk in the "Kensington stitch," a carefully laid stitch that goes over and over without overlapping itself. Inscribed on the tomb in ink, directly on the silk, is the following inscription: "IN MEMORY | of | EBEN^{R}. TUFTS, . . . | WHO DIED | Nov.^{r} 7th 1829 | AET 20 years." Behind and cascading over the scene is a willow tree, the leaves and trunk embroidered in the Kensington stitch. To the right stands a woman whose pale robes are similarly embroidered but whose flesh and hair are painted, as are the foreground of the picture and the background with its landscape and buildings. A tree to the right, however, has its leaves embroidered in French knots.

A memorial worked in 1806 by Mary Clark, at the request of her mother, in memory of her brother Strabo who died in 1799, follows much this same general scheme. In this case, however, the inscription is embroidered rather than inked and the urn painted rather than embroidered. Otherwise, the customary details

FIG. 5. EMBROIDERED MEMORIAL PICTURE, ABBE FAMILY OF WINDHAM, CONNECTICUT, EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

are handled as usual with the exception of the leaves which are all worked in French knots.

A large round picture of 1804 in memory of Shubael Abbe (Fig. 5) does break with many of the customary conventions. Though the usual monument, urn and willow tree are all worked in the expected stitches, even to a tree at the right with leaves of French knots, and though the background and sky is as usual painted, the foreground, instead of being stitched is composed of appliquéd velvet embroidered with clumps of flowers, and strips of chenille. But the greatest difference lies in the large number of mourners gathered around the tomb. Instead of the usual two or three there are nine, eight women and one man, all, including the kneeling figure of the embroideress, identified as members of the Abbe family of Windham, Connecticut. Their hair and features as well as their large white handkerchiefs for weeping are painted, but their clothes of unrelieved black are of an appliquéd material, found also in the figures of the Clark picture.

A final example, even more unusually individual, is a picture worked in 1805 by Hannah Pickard in memory of the Reverend Ezekial Rogers. Originally buried in 1660, Rogers' corpse was disinterred for relocation in 1805, at which time this memorial piece was worked, incorporating strands of his hair with the embroidery silk. While the willow tree, the inscription and the mourning figure are typical, a large coffin executed in the Kensington stitch replaces the slab and urn at the center. Equally individualistic is the swan floating on the painted water of the foreground.

From these examples it is clear that the embroidered memorial picture follows a fairly rigid form both in style and execution. The colors are almost uniformly soft and muted, befitting the somber subject. The embroidery, though it shows little more imagination than does the choice of subject, is delicate and certainly highly proficient. The effect is really of a picture painted with the help of a needle, and indeed, painted memorial pictures were as popular in this period as the embroidered.

Another form of embroidery is the sampler. Examples chosen here are from among the most proficient and up-to-date of their period. It is not difficult to tell, whatever the period, whether a sampler was worked for pleasure by a skillful embroideress or as a painful task by a novice. In an early form, at the turn of the eighteenth century, are those worked in narrow strips of linen or canvas. The colors are few and soft. There tends to be a wide choice of stitches, and the whole is organized into a series of horizontal lines. The best samplers show a desire on the embroideresses' part to record not only as many stitches as possible but also interesting motifs and color combinations which might later be referred to. This type of true "sampler" was to become rarer in later years.

One example was worked in 1733 by Sarah Sevey using cross-stitch, drawn work and herringbone stitch. First there are rows of the alphabet in capital letters, large and then small. These are followed by "SARAH SEVEY IS | MY NAME ENGLA | ND IS MY NATION I | S PORTSMOUT | H IS MY DWELLING | PLACE AND CHRI | ST IS MY SALVATI | ON ON THE YEAR 1733." The colors, blue, rusts, yellows, brown and greens, alternate with no regard to the division of word as do the lines. In other examples of the same period, flowers, animals and birds are combined with the alphabet and organized into the same horizontal lines.

A particularly beautiful piece of work is a sampler done in 1717 by Sarah Hill. On a narrow band of canvas divided into a series of horizontal lines it combines the alphabet and a series of highly imaginative designs all worked in lovely gay colors with the most delicate and beautifully executed stitches, combining a large variety of canvas stitches with satin, long and short, outline and boullion. At the very bottom is a fruit tree surrounded by white birds and on either side pots of flowers.

In the following period there is a marked break with earlier practice, more specifically in less rigidity of form which had caused the division of design, alphabets, numbers and poems into a series of parallel horizontal areas each divided from the next with a line of geometric design. One worked by Hannah Pickard in 1801, though still on a dark linen is square in shape. The colors, still soft, are blues and black skillfully blended, the stitches are cross combined with outline and satin. An embroidered archway now frames the alphabet and this in turn is encircled by a scattered freehand floral design reminiscent of crewel embroidery. The gloomy verse is typical of the period: "While these delightful arts my tender mind employ | May I prepared My maker to enjoy."

Another sampler worked around 1800, by Atta Downing, is again a square piece but the colors are much brighter. The stitches are cross and satin. The now typical border surrounds an alphabet and numbers interspersed with a representation of a house, two dogs and two trees, motifs which were very popular and often repeated. At the bottom is "Atta Downing her work | Born january 25, 1789. When the grass is green and rose is red hear is my name [and added outside of the framework] when i am dead." The general impression of these examples is that of an attractive, decorative picture, an expression of a personal mood, rather than a pattern book to be used for marking linens, as had formerly been the case. There is less meticulous care, less of an attempt to create a portable guidebook but more ingenuity and thought in creating individual and imaginative designs.

In a later group is a sampler worked in 1839 by Ellen Bowyer on a fine white canvas, using mainly two colors, dark green and tones of yellow. The verse is entitled *Sunday Morning*. "Sunday morning bells are knolling slow | The Summer morn how fair | While father - mother - children go | and seek the house of Prayer." The motifs have become far more stylized with little or no innovation, and cross is the only stitch used.

A piece worked by Mary E. Shorey and dated 1837 has the same stylized motifs of birds and a tree combined with the customary alphabets and numbers. There is no shading and again cross-stitch is the only one employed. Imagination has gone, taking with it any individuality and unexpectedness. The attractive and varying border is also gone along with a freedom in the use of stitches and color combinations.

To end on a much more hopeful note and to prove that a clever workman can always rise above the typical limits of the day is an exceptional sampler by Fanny Haigh dated 1838 when she was twelve years old (Fig. 6). Though embroidered on the customary square coarse white canvas of the period, the colors are exciting, mostly tones of red, green and blue. The shading and choice of combinations is excellent. While only cross-stitch is used the work is filled with a scattering of imaginative and diverting mo-

tifs of birds, flowers and animals. The poem sets a metaphorical mood: "May I a branch of Jesus be | And Grow into a fruitful Tree; On some good ground oh let me stand | and often feel the pruning hand."

ditional shape already discussed in connection with the flame-stitch wallets, even to its red lining and matching tape, it depicts a parrot surrounded by flowers in shades of pink and green against a darker green background. This example shows

FIG. 6. SAMPLER WORKED BY FANNY HAIGH, AGED 12, IN 1838

Needle point, or tent stitch, had been worked in this country since the beginning, as it was a form of embroidery brought here from Europe by the first settlers. One early example is a wallet which comes from the Chace family of Providence, Rhode Island (Fig. 7). Of a tra-

the amount of stylization and rigidity of form necessarily imposed by this type of embroidery. It also shows how effective such a piece can be when, as shown here, color and design are used to their full advantage.

Though the earlier variety of embroi-

dery is certainly more appealing to the majority of tastes, the Society's collection has many more examples of work done after the middle of the nineteenth century. As it was a very popular and productive movement in American embroidery it is worth examination at some length.

FIG. 7. EMBROIDERED WALLET, CHACE FAMILY, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Its most popular expression is what is known as "Berlin work," so named because it originated in Berlin around 1810, though by 1831 it had been taken over by a Mr. Wilkes of Regent Street, London. Briefly, the pieces were worked in cross-stitch on a fairly coarse canvas by following a design drawn on a squared paper which had then been colored to match the wools. These wools came from the fleece of Merino sheep, and were soft, thick and felt-like with an adhesive quality and brilliant color. Though in America the older type of crewels were generally used, the same German and English designs were imported and followed. Its great popularity might be said to rely on the practicality of these designs. Not only were the original examples inexpensive but they could be passed about and used easily by many people. These Berlin patterns were far simpler to execute than the earlier painted designs, for simply by following the chart with care one could be assured of achieving the desired result without depending on any particular skill.

By the mid-nineteenth century a craze for Berlin work had developed and the Society's collection contains many examples representing the numerous types of its finished products. To mention a few, there is a large bouquet of flowers done in dull reds and pinks and brown-greens against a brown background combining silk with the wool to give highlights. There are several pairs of "carpet slippers," also in muted shades of greens, reds and browns against dark backgrounds. There are wide scalloped bands trimmed with bead or chenille tassels to be used as lambrequins (Fig. 8). There are tea cosies, bellpulls, chair seats, shawl straps and wall pockets all worked in this same manner. The colors are generally dull with an occasional insertion of some vivid color such as purple or bright yellow. The designs are repetitive and unimaginative, mostly floral or geometric. Silk is often used to give an accent with steel or glass beads worked in for a final touch. This use of beads, effective though not true embroidery, reaches its culmination in a pincushion of about 1865 in which the greater part of the surface is composed of crystal beads with beaded tassels dangling from the sides. Only a small bit of Berlin work embroidery, roses in purple and red, appears in each corner and in the very center.

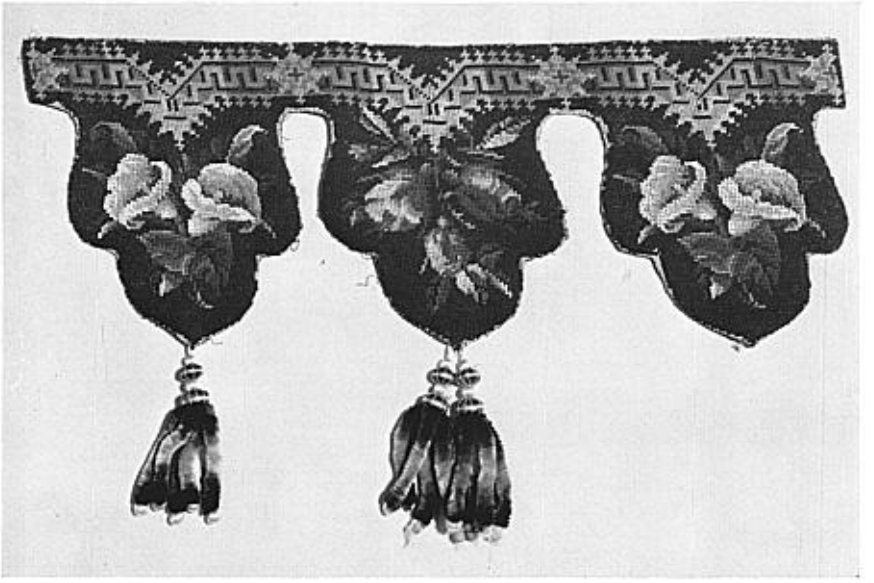

FIG. 8. LAMBREQUIN OF BERLIN WORK, NEW ENGLAND, MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

A further development of this form of needlework was that executed on punched cardboard or "Bristol Board." This has been called the "late and feeble sister of the sampler." The colors for each piece are few. There is little or no shading and the very coarseness of the

ground prevents much detail. On a small scale, one popular for bookmarks and mementos, are a dozen or so oft-repeated patterns: the cross resting on a Bible and placed inside a Gothic arch, an arrow among a bunch of flowers, the word "Love" also surrounded by flowers, a cot-

Bucket" with a house, trees, well bucket and pump in the background in red, greens and browns, of a somewhat brighter shade than usual (Fig. 9). Religion and the love of home are certainly the predominating sentiments.

One final example of needle point will

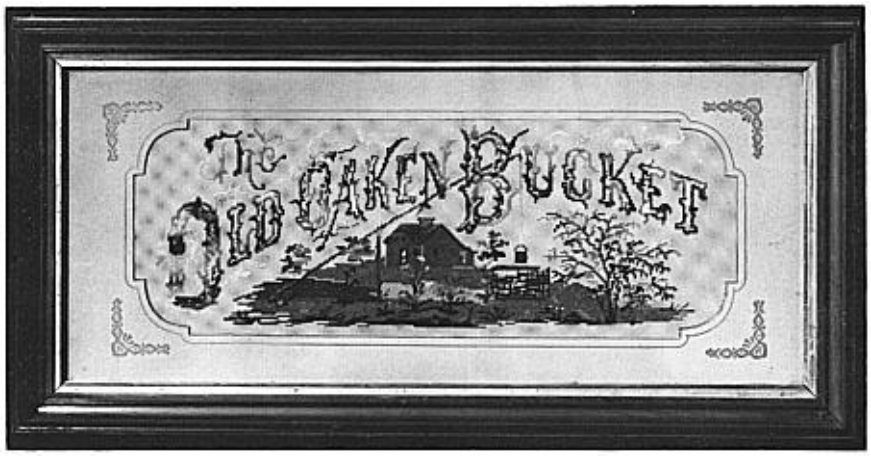

FIG. 9. BRISTOL BOARD EMBROIDERY, MASSACHUSETTS, LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

tage and the word "Home." Sometimes these were done in a larger more ambitious size to be framed. Examples of this type are found usually in dull colors, red, green and brown. One, "He Leadeth Me," has a crook and a lamb in the background; another, "Home Sweet Home," is backed with leaves; while a typical example of "God Bless Our Home" is executed in shades of purple, red and green. The background of lilies and ferns is inked on the cardboard rather than embroidered. One example is inscribed "Rock of Ages" with the words worked in brown wool, the fern behind simply stenciled in ink and the whole backed with silver paper. Finally and possibly the most effective of all is "The Old Oaken

lead us directly into the last category. This is a circular piece depicting a flying angel carying two children. The flesh and features of the three figures are worked in wool in petit point, the robes in beads of white shaded into gray and silver. The colors are soft but clear, the whole piece has a strong two-dimensional quality full of movement and done with a skill in both design and technique.

This form of embroidery much in fashion at the end of the nineteenth century was at first inspired by the writing and art of William Morris and Sir Edward Burne-Jones who sought to bring the art of embroidery back to a high level. One has to agree that there was a need for this. Spurred on by the teaching of

the English School of Needlework at Kensington it spread to this country and was espoused by Louis Tiffany and such embroideresses as Mrs. Candace Wheeler. It sparked the creation of the Society of Decorative Arts in New York and other similar organizations across the country and culminated in the Exhibition of Embroidery at the Centennial in Philadelphia which celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of American independence.

FIG. 10. FLORAL PIECE EMBROIDERED BY MRS. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, ABOUT 1880

A piece worked by Mrs. Oliver Wendell Holmes around 1880 is characteristic, using a background of brown satin it is stitched with a realistic representation of milkweed pods and leaves in satin stitch of reds, yellows and white (Fig. 10). This embroidery, executed at the bottom of a long rectangle gives the design an off-center effect which combines with naturalistic realism and a two-dimensional quality.

Other representations come from a group of so-called "art squares." One is of daisies, its petals composed of applied bright yellow ribbon with centers of brown chenille all stitched to a cream satin; another depicts goldenrod and is worked in yellow chenille with leaves and stems embroidered in green silk on a background of a bright blue. A square of cream satin is embroidered with a band that runs diagonally from one corner to another. The design is of lilies outlined in purple silk with yellow stamens and the whole is bordered on each side with a geometric pattern worked in gold outline stitches. In still another example on maroon velvet there is worked a diagonal band of simple but very bright stitches with pink roses in one corner in high relief created by applying ribbon, the leaves and stems of green velvet chenille. A particularly spectacular design is that of a giant spider worked in gun-metal thread against a dull gold satin. This particular design covers only three-quarters of the square, the rest is devoted to a band down one side of black velvet heavily embroidered in bright silk stitches. A final example is a patchwork combining both silks and velvets, each patch outlined in bright silk outline stitch. Some of the pieces themselves are embroidered or partly covered with an appliqué. The effect is both interesting and startling.

All of these art squares have as a common goal the "artistic," achieved by a contrast of color and texture, and as much realism as can be achieved with silks, velvets and the embroidery needle. The stitches are for the most part simple, relying for effect, more often than not theatrical, on contrast of color and texture. Assymmetry is the general rule and there is a tendency for the design to spring from the background.

Even as sketchy an outline of the embroidery of the American woman as presented here does in a measure reflect her. The eighteenth-century needlewoman whose imagination and inventiveness more than compensated for the limitations imposed by living on this side of the Atlantic, evolved into the embroideress of the early years of the next century, whose work, combining an admiration for classical symmetry of design with an orderliness of execution, is a veritable mirror of her generations' veneration of the past and fascination with death and its trappings. By the late nineteenth century she had become a creature so bound by convention and her artistic sense had become so stultified that she was willing to be subject to such tediums as that of "Berlin Work" in exchange for the certainties of vogue. Lastly, and encouragingly, is the needlewoman of the early twentieth century who was willing to try any possible combination of materials, color or stitchery to realize the highest possible level of art in embroidery. What then, will the embroidery of today tell of us?