

Brief History of Samplers

The earliest samplers, which date back to the sixteenth century, were both a record of stitches and motifs and a practice piece, at a time when needlework was an important domestic activity for upper-class women and girls.

But by the seventeenth century the nature of the sampler was changing and it increasingly became an educational and moral exercise for young girls. Neat rows of alphabets and numbers began to appear, along with signatures, dates and ages, proof of the child's developing skill at needlework. This coincided with varying quantities of household linen owned by more prosperous families and an accompanying zeal to mark the linen with their initials. Pious and moral texts stitched on the sampler exhorted patience, duty and obedience to one's parents. The sampler had become an important part of a girl's training for womanhood.

In the eighteenth century the changeover was complete : almost all samplers were made by children. Sampler-making was a part of the school curriculum and the wide repertoire of stitches formerly used in samplers declined dramatically, until by the 1980s, the ubiquitous cross-stitch was the predominant stitch used.

During the nineteenth century sampler-making continued as primarily a way of teaching a child her alphabet and as part of her instruction in needlework. The new charity schools for working-class girls taught sampler-making, the marking of letters, as an important element in their training in a range of needlework and sewing skills, skills which their pupils would find necessary in future employment, usually as domestic servants. Late in the century, samplers of middle-class girls often reflected the influence of the fashion for Berlin wool work.

Although conventional samplers of the most elementary kind continued to be produced in schools into the twentieth century, the circle was beginning to turn. Art schools and needlework guides developed and encouraged a revival of adult interest in embroidery and sampler-making. Today, pre-printed patterns and kits, usually in cross-stitch, are popular, but many samplers are now created in their original form - as a record of stitches and motifs stitched by a proficient needleworker.