

Stitch-by-stitch: Embroidery, Girlhood and Embodied Practice

We'd like to acknowledge that this research project was written on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. Sovereignty was never ceded.

Introduction

Within the Russell and Mab Grimwade Collection sits three embroidery pieces made by two young girls. To us, they appeared somewhat out of place. An odd addition within this collection. We were immediately drawn to examining these examples of eighteenth and nineteenth century girlish material culture. Who were these girls and what did embroidery mean to them and to society during this period? Throughout the early days of researching, we quickly realised that we didn't just want to be research the ideas of embroidery but wanted to experience it as well. We decided to give it a go and connect practically with our subjects. Our research project, therefore, is split into two parts. The first part is a historical and cultural exploration of embroidery in Britain during the eighteenth century. Using the examples in the Grimwade Collection as our foundation, we explored the uses and connotations attached to embroidery, in particular, exploring themes of nation-building and girlhood. The second part of our research is a practical component where we employed an embodied practice-led framework to make our embroidery. In doing so, we were able to experientially connect with the girls in the Grimwade Collection.

Part 1: Embroidery: An Exploration



Figure 1: Beatrice Acton, *Embroidery Map of England and Wales*, 1794.



Figure 2: Beatrice Acton, *Untitled [Castle Embroidery]*, Undated.

In the Grimwade collection are three pieces of embroidery. Each a different style but they encapsulate a youthful quality of the young women who made them. These pieces include an *Embroidery map of England and Wales* (1794) (fig. 1) and *Untitled [Castle Embroidery]* (undated) (fig. 2) both by Beatrice Acton, and *Untitled [Decorated Alphabet Sampler]* (1871) (fig. 3) by Mary A. Wilson. The story behind each piece is unclear but what we do know is that the pieces made by Beatrice Acton, niece of Sir Richard Acton, were brought to Australia by her sons who emigrated from England in 1846.¹ When it comes to Mary Wilson the details are less clear, there are theories that Mary was Mab Grimwade's aunt, however this has yet to be proven.² These pieces exhibit the colonial and literary aspirations of the British Empire. Map sampler embroideries transformed the empire and the British colonial project into something that can be made and displayed within British homes and becomes a tangible aspect of connection to the rest of the globe for young women.³ Mary's sampler, made in 1871, was made during the decline of the golden age of embroidery in England and is an example of a more traditional sampler.⁴



Figure 3. Mary A. Wilson, *Untitled [Decorated Alphabet Sampler]*, 1871.

¹ Matthew Martin, "The Art of Needlework: An Important Social Narrative" (Virtual, Potter Museum of Art, June 17, 2020).

² Ibid.

³ Clare Hunter, "Global Domestic Objects, Embroidered Maps, Lydia, and The Female American," in *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle* (London: SceptreBooks, 2019).

⁴ Margaret Eleanor Fraser, "'With My Needle': Embroidery Samplers in Colonial Australia" (University of Melbourne, 2008).

Embroidery and needlework cross the line between function and decoration and have traditionally been viewed as craftwork.⁵ While needlework has been practiced all over the world by many craftsmen and women of all ages and backgrounds, nowadays, embroidery is considered a specifically gendered activity in the West.⁶ The association of embroidery and femininity was primarily formed in eighteenth-century Europe as girls became an increasingly visible category and embroidery was prescribed as an activity of girlhood.⁷ Indeed, as historian Deborah Gorham states, “a girl who could not sew was considered not only to lack a useful skill, but to lack one that was essential to her as a female”.⁸ Embroidery, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, was a specifically feminine activity which girls learnt in preparation for their looming womanhood.⁹

While embroidery was specifically gendered, it held different connotations for different types of women during this period. Sewing for daily use was seen as necessary for working class women.¹⁰ For women of the upper classes, by contrast, sewing and embroidery had more luxurious connotations using richer materials such as silk thread.¹¹ Upper-class women, for example, often embroidered items which indicated their status, such as embroidered gloves to separate them from those whose hands would be sullied by manual labour.¹² In Britain, women used familial material objects such as embroidery to convey various meanings, for elite women, they could use objects could to convey various ideas from “fashion, taste, and style to wealth and status, history and lineage, and from science, education, political allegiance, and religious conviction to personality, relationships, memory and mortality”.¹³ For most colonial women in Australia these were used to sustain “matrilineal family history”.¹⁴

Samplers were the first step for young children on their sewing journey. Embroidery was taught to girls as young as six and formed part of the domestic sphere as an activity, skill and pedagogical tool.¹⁵ Sampler patterns combined simple stitchwork to teach children, particularly young girls, how to sew and embroider. Mary Wilson’s sampler is a great example of this style of sampler as both practical and decorative, a tool which enabled girls to practice different stitches and patterns.

⁵ Jennifer Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women’s Domestic and Decorative Arts* (Sydney: Lansdown, 1987).; Martin, “The Art of Needlework”.

⁶ Martin, “The Art of Needlework.”; Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (The Women’s Press, 1984).

⁷ Helen Hughes, “‘Happier in My Lonely Cell’: Convict Women’s Textiles,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 22, no. 2 (January 2022): 203. doi:10.1080/14434318.2022.2147546.

⁸ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 11.

⁹ Hughes, “Convict Women’s Textiles,” 203.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 70.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tanya Evans, “The Use of Memory and Material Culture in the History of the Family in Colonial Australia,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 36, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 207–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2012.678584>.

¹⁵ Fraser, “Embroidery Samplers in Colonial Australia.”

Stitched with coloured wool on a coarse canvas, Mary's sampler features the alphabet, a simple floral border and a series of flowers, animals, ships, houses and chapels. The inclusion of the alphabet in Mary's sampler is an example of the late-eighteenth century adaption of the sampler from simply a stitch tool to a key feature of girls' education.¹⁶ Indeed, while the original function as a tool to practice sewing and embroidery, as women's education became more of a societal focus in the eighteenth century, when Beatrice made her embroideries for example, the sampler became a tool to teach young girls' basic numeracy and literacy.¹⁷ Stitching the alphabet became a normative feature of samplers to ensure that girls know the alphabet and how to sew the letters.¹⁸ Stitching biblical verses also became more common to ensure girls learn the bible and could spell accurately.¹⁹

Using embroidery and samplers to educate girls expanded beyond simple literacy and numeracy. As is exhibited in Beatrice Acton's map sampler, samplers were employed to teach girls geography as well. Historian Judith Tyner has suggested that the "rise of the map sampler reflects a transition in women's education away from the lady's accomplishments of the eighteenth century to the geographic education in schools and academies of the nineteenth century".²⁰ Map samplers were extremely popular in the late-eighteenth century and Beatrice's map sampler was likely bough as a kit or pattern as these oval map samplers were very common.²¹ While these samplers are generic, each girl personalised her map sampler by stitching their own floral embellishments and marking their names, as Beatrice has done.²²

Map samplers also reflect the increasingly imperial ambitions of Britain throughout this period. Even though these samplers would have been created within the confines of a domestic space, their borders, compasses and lines of longitude and latitude connected young women and girls to the globe. Historian Carol Humphrey writes that these maps allowed girls to learn "not only about her country, but also her place in it".²³ Indeed, needlework during the eighteenth century was used to "affirm the presence of the empire in the home", the embroidered map created by Beatrice reaffirms this idea and the empire and its reach and the duty of girls to adhere to it.²⁴ As British girls stitched national borders, their understanding of place drastically changed.

¹⁶ Evans, "The Use of Memory," 210.; Susan Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Marion Fletcher, *Needlework in Australia: A History of the Development of Embroidery* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), 52.

¹⁸ Frye, *Pens and Needles*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Judith Tyner, *Stitching the world: Embroidered Maps and Women's Geographical Education* (London: Routledge, 2015), 92.

²¹ Chloe Wigston Smith, *Novels, Needleworks and Empire: Material Entanglements in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ Carol Humphrey, *Quaker School Girl Samplers from Ackworth* (Hascombe: Needleprint, 2008), 176.

²⁴ Wigston- Smith, *Novels, Needleworks and Empire*.

During the nineteenth century in Australia, the function of samplers and embroidery was to add comfort to the home rather than to educate, to create a more homely environment in a new and alien place.²⁵ The harsh environment of the new colonies meant that settlers in Australia depended upon the comfort of material commodities of the home.²⁶ Sewing machines were introduced in the 1860s, however in Australia few would have been able to purchase them, making sewing a necessary skill for young girls to master.²⁷ With limited supplies young embroiderers had to make do with what they could find in the colonies. These embroideries also formed part of the continuing the matrilineal family history.²⁸ Like Beatrice's samplers, embroidery often made its way from mother-country to colony as a memento of both one's mother and one's home.²⁹ Furthermore, gift samplers were often given to people before they embarked on the journey to Australia as "a token of the friend left behind".³⁰ As these samplers made the journey from Britain to Australia, they imposed British domestic norms into the colony. Samplers created during the 1850s and 60s, by young girls in Australia, indicated that samplers became more decorative, although they often included the alphabet, however the influence of the British empire loomed largely on these samplers.³¹ Often embroidery samplers made by young girls were hung up in the house to reward the young girl who made it, and to indicate her future abilities to be a good wife and mother.³² There is the possibility that Mary Wilson's sampler was hung in the Grimwade home as a sentimental and nostalgic reminder of the early settlers and what they brought over from the homeland.

Embroidery has since become a skill that is no longer necessary for girls and women. As sewing machines became more common and subsequently clothes were mass-produced this skill has moved from necessity to a hobby. Something that was passed down from mother to daughter is now taught in books and on the internet. As we learnt about the history of embroidery, it was time for us to pick up the needles ourselves and learn this craft.

²⁵ Fletcher, *Needlework in Australia: A History of the Development of Embroidery* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159.

²⁶ Catherine Gay, "All Life and Usefulness: Girls and Needlework in Nineteenth-Century Victoria," "Miegumyah" Student Project Award, 2018, 6.

²⁷ Andrew Godley, "The Sewing Machine," in *The Routledge History of Fashion and Dress, 1800 to the Present*, ed. Veronique Pouillard and Vincent Dubé- Senécal (Routledge, 2024), 17.

²⁸ Gay, "All Life and Usefulness," 6.

²⁹ Fletcher, *Needlework in Australia*, 159.

³⁰ Fraser, "Embroidery Samplers in Colonial Australia," 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³² Fletcher, *Needlework in Australia*.

Part 2: Picking up the Needle

Embodied Practice-Led Research

Initially, we were drawn to these embroidery pieces in the collection because we thought they were beautiful and somewhat out of place. The Grimwade Collection is full of items relating to Russell Grimwade's interests - Australiana, books, art, carpentry and cabinetmaking, botany and scientific research.³³ For a collection that is relatively preoccupied with themes of discovery, intellect, nature and science, these examples of girlish, decorative art stood out. This piqued our interest. The samplers combined our research interests of girlhood studies, textile history and broader feminist history. Furthermore, they were intriguing outliers within this collection. As we stumbled across a photograph of Mab working on a piece of embroidery in their home, we could not help but wonder if the reason these pieces are in this collection is because of Mab's nostalgia and fondness of embroidery.

All three of the embroideries are different, reflecting the world in which they were made as well as the worldview of the girl who crafted it. These pieces are marks of existence made by young children. They represent how they spent their time, their skills, their thoughts and interests. Needlework historian Margaret Fraser has argued that "samplers were prescriptive, not descriptive" and, therefore, represented adult understandings of girls rather than the girls themselves.³⁴ Girlhood historians disagree with this position, arguing that there is agency to be found within the sources made by girls.³⁵ Affording girls agency within the materials that they created was an important theoretical framework for this research project and one in which we applied to the embroideries within this collection. We believe that the choices of what to stitch into their samplers, which colours to use, what flowers are included in the border, even the act of stitching their name is all proof of their agency. For us, connecting with the girls was an important element of our research. Connecting to them through craft and making our own creative response felt like a natural choice as through the process of making a sampler of our own, we could better understand the choices made by the girls whose embroideries lie in the Grimwade Collection as well as actively engaging with the concepts of girlhood and the practice of embroidery itself.

We adopted an embodied practice-led research framework to guide the creative response element of our research. As advocated by researchers Stephen Scrivener and Peter Chapman, embodied practice-led research creates "an object of experience, [whereby] the creative product is as

³³ John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas, *Miegunyah: The Bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade* (Miegunyah Press: Melbourne, 2015), viii.

³⁴ Fraser, *Embroidery Samplers in Colonial Australia*, 61.

³⁵ Jennifer Helgren and Colleen A. Vasconcellos, *Girlhood: A Global History* (New Jersey; New York; London: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

We began with acquiring the necessary materials we would need and practicing our stitches. For Gillie that meant buying embroidery kits and learning from scratch, and for Ilika it entailed referring to basic cross-stitch patterns to refresh her skills. We made a pilgrimage to Morris & Sons in the Melbourne CBD and bought a selection of cotton and silk thread in different colours and ordered 28 count beige linen from their online store. We had our materials, so it was time for us to begin.

We studied sampler designs from the pictures we took at the Guild, patterns we found in *The Sampler Motif Book* by Brenda Keyes, embroidery and sewing history books and vintage patterns we found in newspapers and women's magazines. We decided to include a map of Australia. We wanted this sampler to have an immediate indicator of where the sampler was made, and we were influenced by the Acton map sampler. We didn't want the map to be a representation of national pride but more a reflection of the place where we met and where we live. Ilika drew a map of Australia in graphite lead and Gillie stitched over it using a back stitch and red thread. Starting with the red thread was our nod to the traditional use of red thread in Victorian samplers. We decided to include unfinished loose threads in the map to convey the violence of Settler Australia.

Ilika used cross-stitch to include an alphabet in red thread. The alphabet featured in many of the Victorian samplers we had looked at, and we wanted to nod to the literacy traditions of eighteenth-century English samplers. After the alphabet was completed, we began to incorporate personal motifs. Gillie embroidered a shamrock as an Irish motif as a nod to her Irish heritage. In one of her embroidery kits Gillie found a pattern for lavender flowers which she had grown up around, so she worked those in. Ilika added a peacock and a marigold as her motifs, found in the *Sampler Motif Book*. She liked the colours and the shapes these motifs added to the overall piece. We liked the idea of the map resembling a family crest as many early settlers would have included, so we included a feather stitch around the sides of the crest.

When working on our sampler we were often limited by our skill sets and had to work with patterns which were geared towards novices. This made us think about how young girls working on their pieces would have gone through similar motions, working on patterns that they knew how to use as well as working in patterns they thought were pretty. We knew we wanted to incorporate a border similar to the map sampler. Gillie had learnt to do a whipped back stitch which looked similar, we chose to use a mix of two thick silk threads - green and pale purple.

As we finished working on our sampler, we both felt an immense sense of pride regarding what we had been able to achieve. This project was a steep learning curve for us, and we found that through working on this project together we had been transformed ourselves. The quiet nights spent working together or separately we found comfort in the mundane and therapeutic activity of stitching. The sampler travelled with us from Brunswick to Parkville, then Coburg, to East Melbourne and North Melbourne and finally, to Albert Park and then back again. We spent nights watching TV,

making dinner and talking about our lives as we worked on this piece. We learnt a new skill and connected with all the girls before us who've made samplers like ours. Like us, these girls would've also sat together practicing their stitches, making something beautiful, learning the alphabet and marking their existence while sharing stories about their lives. We left a needle piercing through the fabric as if we would come back to it. Our grey graphite lead marks are still visible, and you can see where we've tried out stitches and then tried again. This embroidery is a work-in-progress as it represents our continual thinking into embroidery and this project as whole (fig. 6).

Conclusion

Throughout this project we encountered a steep learning curve. We learnt new skills and practised old ones. Meeting the embroiderers at the Guild showed us that there is a community committed to embroidery education and practice. We learnt about how embroidery and sewing were integral to passing down family history, and how samplers were markers left of a young girl's existence. We became familiar with Beatrice and Mary. The journey of the three embroidery pieces from the Grimwade Collection was long and winding. They continue to inspire and surprise those who find them. Through this project we learnt about these pieces and what it takes to make one.



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