Useful HOURS
NEEDLEWORK AND PAINTED TEXTILES FROM SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COLLECTIONS

JUNE 1–SEPT. 2, 2013
Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art, Susan and Stephen Chandler Wing
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
Useful Hours: Needlework and Painted Textiles from Southern California Collections

explores the development of the needle arts in the United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries through a selection of more than 25 samplers, coats of arms, family trees, mourning pictures, pocketbooks, and narrative painted textiles made between 1763 and 1844. Most of these richly engaging compositions were stitched by girls between the ages of 8 and 19 as part of their preparation for marriage and later life. Such samplers were handsomely framed for display in the “best parlor” of the young needleworker’s home, where they could be admired by visitors and family alike. They served as symbols of the family’s wealth and social standing as well as of the maker’s refinement and eligibility for marriage. Today, these works are highly prized by collectors of American folk art for their fresh beauty and for the remarkable technical accomplishment of their creators. Because they represent rare examples of work designed and made by women, samplers are also valued today for the extraordinary insight they offer into the early training, daily lives, and social and cultural values of American women in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The exhibition is drawn in large part from the collection of Thomas H. Oxford and Victor Gail. The Gail-Oxford Collection, comprising more than 500 objects, from American furniture and painting, to ceramics, metals, and needlework, is a promised gift to The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. The Gail-Oxford material is supplemented by loans from other public and private collections in Southern California.

Detail, Family Tree, 1820. Elizabeth Stone (born 1808; death date not known)
“Useful Hours” takes its title from a verse stitched in a 1796 sampler by 10-year-old Anne “Nancy” Moulton of Newburyport, Mass. It reads:

How blest the maid whom circling years improve  
Her God the object of her warmest love  
Whose useful hours, successive as they glide  
The Book, the Needle, and the Pen divide.

This verse, which appears on several other samplers of the period, presents piety, self-improvement, and the productive use of leisure time through activities such as needlework, reading, and writing as the highest virtues to which a young lady might aspire.

Moulton was the daughter of a prominent Newburyport silversmith. Like most American girls in the 18th century, she was taught at an early age the basic, or “plain,” needleworking skills required to make, label, and repair her family’s clothing. Because she was raised in relative affluence, however, Moulton also studied more advanced “fancy” needlework and produced compositions that brought distinction to her family and identified her as a young woman of great gentility and refinement.

Learning advanced needleworking skills profoundly affected many young women in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Sarah Smith Emery (1787–1879) was immensely proud of the skills she acquired in the 1790s from her masterful teacher in Newburyport. Some 80 years later, in her Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian, she recalled with a near-palpable sense of joy that
The summer I was eight years old [1795] a Miss Ruth Emerson, from Hampstead, N.H., collected a select school. There were from 20 to 30 scholars, mostly girls; there were a few small boys. I believe tuition was but six cents a week. The lady promoted us into “Webster’s Spelling Book” and “Webster’s Third Part”—books then just coming into use. Miss Emerson was a most accomplished needlewoman, inducting her pupils into the mysteries of ornamental marking and embroidery. This fancy work opened a new world of delight. I became perfectly entranced over a sampler that was much admired, and a muslin handkerchief, that I wrought for my mother, became the wonder of the neighborhood.

This sense of pride in her accomplishments and in the community support her work engendered was deeply meaningful to the young needleworker and remained with her during her entire life.

As in Moulton’s sampler, many of the works in “Useful Hours” include the name and age of their maker—and some list the names of her parents, brothers, and sisters, as well. Those samplers offer a rare glimpse into the family history of the girls who stitched them, as well as extraordinary insight into the values, practices, and ethos of the period in which they were made.

In addition to shedding new light on the young needleworkers, their lives, and their families, “Useful Hours” also explores the important role of teachers who ran the regional schools and academies where these promising young women studied. In most cases, the instructors, in addition to teaching needleworking skills, drew or provided the designs for the linen and silk compositions their young pupils created. Thus, in a very literal sense, the teachers’ designs gave shape, form, and content to their young pupils’ work. While very few of the instructors’ names are known today, we are able to discern common subjects, stylistic approaches, and formats that allow us to identify regional schools and designers. “Useful Hours” investigates the relationship between several teachers and their pupils and attempts to distinguish the levels of creativity and inventiveness each brought to her work.

In their diversity, the works chosen for “Useful Hours” underscore the wide-ranging interests of young needleworkers during the period as well as the practical and aesthetic applications of their remarkable skills. Among the types of objects included in “Useful Hours” are stitched coats of arms, pockets and pocketbooks, darning and marking samplers, pictorial samplers, mourning pictures and memorials, and family trees.
Coats of arms—insignia bearing crests, family names, inscriptions, and sometimes including elaborate decorative ornamentation—became immensely popular in America in the second half of the 18th century. These symbols of a family’s wealth and social aspirations were painted on canvas and paper, etched in silver, inscribed on bookplates, as well as embroidered on silk. According to numerous inventories of upper-middle class homes during this time, both stitched and painted coats of arms were often framed and displayed in the most prominent room of the house, where they could be seen and enjoyed by visitors as an indication of the family’s wealth and elevated social standing.

This needlework composition with the inscription “By the name of Ives 1763” was one of two Ives family coats of arms stitched by 17-year-old Rebecca Ives Gilman in 1763. Rebecca Ives was the only daughter of Capt. Benjamin Ives and Elizabeth Hale Ives. In the year she stitched this coat of arms, Rebecca married Joseph Gilman in Salem, Mass. They then moved to his family home in Exeter, N.H., where Gilman became a prominent businessman and community leader.

In 1788, the family moved to newly developing western settlements near present-day Marietta, Ohio. Over the next several years, Joseph Gilman was appointed to offices of increasing responsibility and influence, including an appointment from George Washington to a position as judge of the Northwest Territory. After her husband’s death in 1806, Rebecca remained in Ohio until about 1812, when she moved to Philadelphia to be near her son, Benjamin.

Throughout her life, Rebecca maintained an especially close relationship with her older brother Robert Hale Ives. It’s quite likely that she stitched the first coat of arms as a gift for her beloved brother and the second one for herself. She dated her coat of arms 1763, the year she gave up her maiden name “Ives” to become Rebecca Gilman. In doing this, she may have wished to acknowledge her own family lineage through this coat of arms “by the name of Ives.”
POCKETS AND POCKETBOOKS

Because most American women’s clothing in the 18th century lacked fixed pockets, detachable pockets such as these were tied around the waist and worn either over a dress or under an overskirt. Decorated in a variety of patterns, including the combination of the flame and diamond-within-diamond designs seen here, they were used to carry a great variety of items, from keys and papers to sewing implements and tools. They were worn both singly and in pairs. However, it is extremely unusual for a pair such as this to survive intact.
Pocketbooks such as this were used by both men and women. While men’s purses were used to carry coins, bills, paper money, invoices, and receipts, women typically used theirs for jewelry, sewing implements, and other personal items. A stitched set of initials or name facilitated the return of the purse if lost or stolen.

Needlework pocketbooks were usually made in one of two shapes: a single envelope that closed with a flap or a double form that folded in the center with equal-sized pouches on either side. Most of these were stitched in a variety of floral and abstract patterns in crewel—a two-ply worsted yarn—on linen. As status symbols denoting wealth and social standing in the community, pocketbooks were frequently stitched by a loving wife or daughter and presented as gifts to parents or husbands.

**MARKING AND DARNING SAMPERS**

In its spare color and minimal decoration, this sampler possesses the fundamental qualities of usefulness, plainness, and simplicity associated with Quaker needlework. A darning sampler, it was stitched in 1804 by Ann Gibson, a young student at the Westtown School in Chester County, Penn., an academy run by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.
PICTORIAL SAMPLERS

This unusually large piece, with its meandering floral border, depicts a pastoral landscape in which wild and domesticated animals—cows, sheep, dogs, and birds—peacefully coexist. It’s related to a group of pictorial compositions with similar designs known today as “Shady Bower” samplers. The heart and trefoil bands stitched here, as well as the checkered sawtooth border, were popular motifs in Newburyport. Undoubtedly one teacher in the area created the designs used by many of her students. Needlework scholar Tricia Wilson Nguyen has identified a Miss Betty “Betsy” Bradstreet (1738–1815) of Newburyport as the possible teacher.

Born in Newburyport on Oct. 19, 1786, Anne “Nancy” Moulton was one of 12 children of the American silversmith Joseph Moulton (1744–1816) and his wife Abigail Noyes Moulton (1744–1818). As the stitched inscription states, Moulton made the sampler when she was 10. However, as indicated in the unstitched pattern drawn in pencil below the central flowering tree, Moulton did not complete it. It’s also intriguing to note that the two numbers indicating the year of Moulton’s birth do not appear on her sampler. A label on the back of the frame suggests that Moulton may have removed the stitches later in life in a vain attempt to conceal her age.
As she proudly states at the top of her composition, Eunice Hooper stitched this extraordinarily lively and complex sampler when she was just nine years old. Hooper’s remarkable work is part of a small group of pictorial samplers, all produced about 1790–91, by young women living or studying in Marblehead, Mass., a prosperous fishing village north of Salem.

These samplers, several of which have richly embroidered black backgrounds, frequently depict vivid scenes from everyday life: a woman reading a book, viewed through a window; another woman standing on a porch next to a handsomely dressed gentleman; and harvest imagery. These are combined with idealized classical images—a helmeted figure riding in a chariot, and a welcoming maiden dressed in classical attire and sandals. Such moments, both real and ideal, occur beneath a sky teeming with birds and butterflies in a lush landscape.

With its two-storied house and expansive porch viewed from the side, Eunice Hooper’s composition is closely related to a sampler stitched in 1791 by Sukey Jarvis Smith, the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Bristol, R.I. Smith was visiting her sister in Marblehead in 1790 and the two young women undoubtedly studied with the same teacher who provided their needlework designs.
MOURNING PICTURES AND MEMORIALS

Images of grieving figures standing beside neoclassical urns and tombs are called mourning pictures, while the more specific contemplative tributes to deceased relatives and friends are known as memorials; both became popular in this country in the first decades of the 19th century. These compositions often combine intricate needlework used for the trees and landscape with watercolor painting to render greater detail in the grieving figure’s face, hands, and costuming.

Elizabeth Allen was born in 1792, the daughter of Capt. John Allen (1764–1811) and Hannah Robinson Allen (born in 1767; death date not known). Both her mother’s and her father’s families lived in Barre, Mass., a rural community west of Worcester in the central part of the state. Her parents had been married in Barre on Dec. 18, 1788. Elizabeth stitched this tender tribute to her deceased father when she was 19. She died just five years later in 1816.


FAMILY TREES

This sampler was stitched by Elizabeth Stone in 1820 when she was just 12. While her death date is unknown, we do know from information she stitched in the sampler that Elizabeth was the eldest child of William Stone (1781–1856) and Elizabeth Coolidge (1784–1874), who were married in Watertown, Mass., on April 9, 1807.

This “tree of life” or “apple tree” sampler, with its three-sided flower and leaf border and its use of yellow fruit for the female siblings and white fruit for the boys, is typical of needlework produced in Middlesex County, Mass., in the first quarter of the 19th century. The linked or overlapping heart motif at the base of the tree is also typical of work produced in this region.
TEACHER AND STUDENT

While over the course of time the names of most teachers have been lost or forgotten, there is one unusual sampler that includes the name of the young needleworker’s instructor along with the names of her mother and father. This sampler is among the exhibition’s highlights.

This sampler was stitched in 1840 by Isabel Arthur, daughter of William and Jane Arthur. In addition to acknowledging her mother and father in her sampler, the young needleworker stitched the name of her teacher, Mary Tidball, in a prominent location above the rooftop of the centrally placed house.

Several other wool-on-linen samplers of this period all done in a similar style—with brightly colored, broadly patterned, and highly stylized trees, flowers, and houses—feature the same teacher’s name, Mary Tidball. The samplers range in date from 1836 to 1852 and were done in western Penn. Mary Tidball’s school was located near the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Bethel Park, Penn., southwest of Pittsburgh.

—Harold B. “Hal” Nelson, Curator of American Decorative Arts The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
CURATOR TOUR
June 12 (Wednesday) 4:30 p.m.


TASTE OF ART: THE FAMILY TREE
June 22 (Saturday) 9 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Explore the early American domestic arts of needlework and cookery with Maite Gomez-Réjon from ArtBites. After a tour of the exhibition, participants will prepare a meal from the classic 1824 cookbook *The Virginia House-Wife*, which was a popular wedding gift for 19th-century brides. Members: $85. Non-Members: $95. Registration: 626-405-2128.

EMBROIDERY WORKSHOP
July 27 (Saturday) 9 a.m.–4 p.m.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries most girls learned cross-stitch at a very young age and produced samplers that were often hung with great pride in the family home. At the turn of the 20th century, a new form of conventionalized design was developed and became prevalent in surface embroidery. Join Ann Chaves of Inglenook Needlework Studio and create a small table runner, with a botanical motif, based on an Arts and Crafts style design. The runner will be embroidered with purl cotton thread on fine Belgian linen. All supplies included in the class fee.


"Useful Hours: Needlework and Painted Textiles from Southern California Collections" is supported by the Susan and Stephen Chandler Exhibition Endowment and funds from Steve Martin for exhibitions of American art.