First Efforts of an Infant’s Hand

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“Useful Transactions in Philosophy, And other sorts of Learning, for the Months of January and February, 1708/9. To be continu’d Monthly, as they Sell. London: Printed for Bernard Lintott, at the Cross-Keys, between the two Temple-gates, in Fleetstreet.” So reads the rather forbidding title page of a book recently presented to the Museum. The second issue of the periodical, for “March and April, 1709,” is bound with the first and here the title page adds “Price is.” Another slight difference between the two numbers is in the engraved frontispiece, which shows a noble classical dome with Latin inscriptions, silhouetted against a cloudy sky; the plate is repeated in the second number, but a little bird has been added. It flies off through the clouds, holding in its beak a label reading “Cuckoo.”

This merry note indicates clearly enough that the publication is a joke. It is one of the many satires directed against the Royal Society in the first century of its existence, of which the most famous is Swift’s account of the savants of Laputa. One of the “useful transactions” pokes fun at naturalists who record such trivial facts as the date when nightingales begin to sing; another gives Greek and Arabic translations of nursery rhymes; a third is a parody of a genuine contribution, on the invention of printing, to the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society in 1707, by John Bagford, a shoemaker and well-known book collector. Casting about for a subject that he felt was as paltry, inconsequential and ridiculous as possible the author of the parody produced “An Essay on the Invention of Samplers.”

Humor, notoriously, does not wear well. Perhaps the take-off on the Philosophical Transactions was as entertaining to the readers of 1709 as the sociologists’ jargon mimicked in The New Yorker is to us today, but what was once told as the wildest flight of fancy—that samplers might be the subject of scholarly investigation—has become fact. “The Gentlewoman who wrote the Discourse about the Invention of Samplers,” says the editor’s preface, “is of a very grave and sedate Temper, and can use her Pen in Prose or Poetry as well [as] her Needle; she is daily making new Collections of ancient Characters wrought in Embroidery, both upon Woollen and Linnen.” If this had been true and some genuine information about the samplers of 1709 had been provided, how interesting the article would have been today! Unfortunately, the one concrete descriptive statement is that, in memory of Philomela, “there are no Samplers which proceed in any measure beyond the first Rudiments, but have a Tree and a Nightingale sitting on it.” (Philomela, it will be remembered, “in a tedious sampler sewed her mind,” as Shakespeare wrote, when she had been deprived of her tongue.) This statement is not true, and the only deduction that can be made from the article as a whole is that by this date the sampler was looked upon primarily as an exercise in lettering.

The Gentlewoman says that she made her observations from “old Pieces of Linnen of such several Sorts and Kinds as I could find in Long-lane, Thieving-lane, Monmouth-street, and other Repositories of valuable Rarities” and that she took one such from a child’s breast, “appeasing it in the mean time with a piece of ginger-bread.” She describes an antiquary who owned a large chest of old linens, which he “valu’d extremely for their Variety of Marking, saying, that, if he could not get a very large Sum for ‘em, he would, at his Death, leave ‘em to some publick Repository.” All this, and much, much more, was clearly meant to be too silly for words.

A public repository today would indeed be happy to receive a chest of linens that were old in 1709. Failing this, the Museum is fortunate in having received as a bequest from the late Mrs.
Lathrop Colgate Harper a collection of over eight hundred samplers. Mrs. Harper, like her imaginary predecessor, traveled widely and bought samplers in flea markets as well as in reputable dealers’ shops. Like her too, she used her pen, in prose if not in poetry, for, under the name of Mabel Herbert Urner, she wrote the “Helen and Warren” stories, which, syndicated in the daily papers, gave so much pleasure to so many some thirty-five years ago. To collect and study samplers, in 1709 the most ludicrous activity imaginable, has become eminently worthwhile in the twentieth century; the scientists and antiquarians have indeed defeated the scoffers all along the line and today can investigate the habits of nightingales, the antiquity of nursery rhymes, and even the varieties of samplers without the slightest danger of ridicule.

A great deal, in fact, has been written about samplers; an article in this Bulletin, describing an exhibition of them in the Museum in 1930, gives their history from the first recorded use of the word in the sixteenth century. Few textiles, indeed, have been studied more extensively. Samplers have also received much more attention than any other works of art produced by the same group of people—namely, the very young. For though it is thought that the earliest samplers (without names and ages) were made by grown women as examples of stitches and patterns to be used later in their own work, and though occasional specimens by people of mature years can be found in every period, and there are even a handful of professional models, the vast majority were made by little girls. A sampler is usually, as the favorite verse of their makers expresses it, “the first efforts of an infant’s hand.” Walter de la Mare wrote in a note to his loveliest of all anthologies, Come Hither, “even the coarsest of old samplers has that tinge of the romantic which the mere passing of time never fails to confer on anything made by man, and gives in abundance to anything made by a child.”

In Le Corbusier’s huge apartment house in Marseilles, called Unité d’Habitation, a wall on the roof terrace was reserved for children’s murals, the architect himself presenting the first

*English sampler, 1644. Needlepoint lace and white embroidery on linen*
paints and chalks. Exhibitions of children’s pictures are frequently shown in some of the greatest museums. But this interest in and respect for childish achievements is a very modern thing indeed and it is impossible to find on a sampler any trace of what we now admire in children’s art. Only very occasionally, even, is the drawing of a figure so crude that one would believe it was outlined by the child herself without a model. In the same way, samplers show none of the extraordinary international resemblances so frequently seen in the paintings of very young children; they follow the stylistic changes of adult work, since, except for the craftsmanship and, one hopes, some element of personal choice in the motifs, that is what they are. There is great variety among those produced in different countries and at different periods, great similarity in the examples from a single place and century. One of the most interesting aspects of Mrs. Harper’s vast collection is that it includes samplers from so many countries, ranging in date from the seventeenth century down to almost the present day. The example shown on page 93, for instance, is one of the earliest signed and dated samplers in existence, inscribed “1644 Sarah Thral.” The illustration following it also represents a seventeenth-century sampler, whose beasts, birds, insects, and flowers are very similar to those found on contemporary stumpwork embroideries. In Mrs. Harper’s collection nearly every known variety is represented and there are groups that have not, so far, been studied in books on samplers. One of these is the type shown on page 95, consisting of scattered motifs in colored silks and metal thread on white taffeta or satin. A sampler of this type was included in each volume of Johann Friedrich Netto’s Zeichen-Mahler-und Stickerbuch zur Selbstbelehrung für Damen, published in Leipzig in 1795 and 1798. These are, of course, professional work, but on many of Mrs. Harper’s samplers, as finely stitched as by his skilled embroideresses, we find his broken columns and tree-flanked temples, his flaming altars in leafy bowers, his flower baskets, pollarded willows, and emblems of agriculture or of love.

But, in spite of the way in which patterns, pictures, and inscriptions are repeated over and over again, every large collection of samplers contains oddities, sometimes so curious that the imagination boggles at trying to conceive the state of mind, child’s or adult’s, that produced them. Why should a little girl make an ornamental acrostic square out of the words “Send your accounts”? Why did Elizabeth Gerrish, in her eighth year, copy the following piece of prose? “Mr. D. Lambert died without any previous illness, at Stamford, whither he had gone with an intent to exhibit himself at the races. He was in his 40th year, and upon being placed upon the famous Caledonian balance, a few days before his death, he weighed 52 stone 10 pounds, 14 lbs to the stone, which is 10 stone 10 lbs more than the famous Mr. Bright. His coffin was 6 feet 4 inches long 4 feet 4 inches wide 2 feet 4 inches deep being 112 superficial feet of elm, it was built on two axletrees and four clog wheels and upon these his remains were rolled to the grave. A regular descent was made by cutting away the earth for some distance. The window and wall of the room in which he died were taken down to allow the removal of the corpse—he died the 28th of June 1809.” Perhaps Daniel Lambert, who has his entry in the Dictionary of National Biography, where he is described as keeper of Leicester jail and “the most corpulent man of whom authentic record exists,” was a
German or Austrian sampler, about 1800. Embroidered in brilliantly colored silks on white taffeta

relation—or perhaps merely the most wonderful thing Elizabeth had seen in the seven years of her life.

Equally unusual but more comprehensible (at least from a grownup’s standpoint) are the ferocious sum in compound division—£4909/8d ¾ 7½ ÷ 31718—set Mary Ann Sadler, aged nine years, at St. Mark’s School, North Audley Street, Grosvenor Square, London, to be recorded on canvas (her answer is £18 9 7¾ and who will contradict her?); the set of punctuation marks—,,,:?!—with which “Eliza: Dymond Hull F. Bridge” finished off each line of letters and numbers in 1799; the fashionably dressed lady, with reticule and flower, placed beneath the inscription “Prepar to meet thy god” by Betty Glover in 1837; the label “Habitation of Content” given by Mary Carey of Dulwich to a house (one hopes, her own); the combination of French and English inscriptions on a sampler of 1719—made in England, of course, for when did French children care about their neighbors’ language? Then there is the handsome brick building identified as the “Methodist Ep. Church St. Louis Worked. at E.B Hms [?] School Brunswick Chariton County. Missouri. by Susan. Bushey. February 1st. 1838,” and, an instance in which pathos blends with De la Mar’s “tinge of the romantic,” a rhymed version of the longest psalm in the Bible, embroidered on six samplers by six members of “The Orphan School Near Calcutta in Bengal, East Indies” in 1797. Each little girl
Dutch sampler, 1798. Embroidered in colored silks on linen
wrote her English name at the foot of her sampler and some of them had room to add, “In Reading this if Any Faults You See Mend Them Yourself And Find No Fault With Me.” Though palm trees punctuate the rows of buildings that decorate the top of each sampler, there is no other indication that these laborious masterpieces were made so far away from “Home.” Similarly, Marie Amard wrote “Tripoli” in large letters on her sampler in 1808, but gave no other indication that she was not working in France. Some Turkish samplers, however, have, as might be expected, native designs and Arabic inscriptions.

Samplers from the European continent, in which Mrs. Harper’s collection is unusually rich, exhibit fewer quirks and quiddities. In England, as is well known, the sampler lost its original character as a practice sheet of stitches and patterns (still preserved in seventeenth-century examples) and became ornamental, usually showing a picture and a verse. Only the darning samplers preserved their early purpose and even in these the darned squares are usually carefully arranged around a spray or vase of flowers. On the continent, for the most part, the sampler kept more closely to the early conception, and, until well into the nineteenth century, seventeenth-century designs are repeated on Dutch, German, and Spanish samplers.

The Dutch liked their windmills and ships and a few favorite Biblical stories. The sampler on page 96 shows the return of the spies from Canaan carrying “a branch with one cluster of grapes” so huge that “they bare it between two upon a staff.” It is inscribed “Anno 1798. H S out iaar 11” (eleven years old). The arms of Amsterdam appear below the date and the house with a stepped gable is typically Dutch. New Testament subjects (except for the Crucifixion on German samplers) are less common, but the Dutch sampler shown on page 99 illustrates the parable of the Wise and the Foolish Virgins.

Little German girls repeated over and over a few motifs taken from Johann Sibmacher’s Neues Modelbuch, first published in Nuremberg in 1601, such as the seated stag in the detail shown at right, the peacock, and the Agnus Dei. Curiously enough, few other subjects from this popular book were used. The sampler from
Italian sampler, about 1800. Embroidered in brilliantly colored silks on linen.
which our detail was photographed is nearly six feet long and shows several other favorite German motifs, such as the Crucifixion, the Temptation, and a lobster.

The Italians seem to have forgotten their early lace patterns and by 1800 were embroidering, in neat rows like those we see on page 98, a quaint mixture of objects, a garden gate usually prominent among them. The shape, the corner tassels, and the houses in the sampler illustrated are also typical of Italian samplers of this period.

Knitting and crochet samplers were produced at, literally, great length; some examples among the many in Mrs. Harper's collection are eleven, twelve, fourteen, and nearly fifteen feet long, with fifty or sixty different designs on each.

Despite the inevitable repetitions, samplers in such numbers and from such a variety of countries provide an enormous storehouse of patterns and techniques. Here is indeed a cornucopia of ideas now readily available at the Museum to amateur and professional craftsmen and designers. All these will owe a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Lathrop Colgate Harper, who for so many years made collections of ancient characters, wrought in embroidery, to such good purpose.

The article referred to is "A Special Exhibition of Samplers," by John G. Phillips, Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, XXV, 1930, pp. 100-105. The pattern books mentioned can be seen in the Print Room, the samplers in the Textile Study Room.

All the samplers illustrated came to the Museum by bequest of Mrs. Lathrop Colgate Harper, 1957.

Detail from a Dutch sampler, xviii century. Embroidered in colored silks, chiefly red and green, on linen