

THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF EMBROIDERY IN  
AMERICA    Ψ    Ψ

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*By Candace Wheeler*



*Painted by Dora Wheeler Keith*

CANDACE WHEELER

From the painting by her daughter Dora Wheeler Keith.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

*By*  
CANDACE WHEELER

*Illustrated*



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THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF EMBROIDERY IN  
AMERICA    ❧    ❧

## INTRODUCTORY ❀ THE STORY OF THE NEEDLE

**T**HE story of embroidery includes in its history all the work of the needle since Eve sewed fig leaves together in the Garden of Eden. We are the inheritors of the knowledge and skill of all the daughters of Eve in all that concerns its use since the beginning of time.

When this small implement came open-eyed into the world it brought with it possibilities of well-being and comfort for races and ages to come. It has been an instrument of beneficence as long ago as "Dorcas sewed garments and gave them to the poor," and has been a creator of beauty since Sisera gave to his mother "a prey of needle-work, 'alike on both sides.'" This little descriptive phrase—alike on both sides—will at once suggest to all needlewomen a perfection of method almost without parallel. Of course it can be done, but the skill of it must have been rare, even in those far-off days of leisure when duties and pleasures did not crowd out painstaking tasks, and every art was carried as far as human assiduity and invention could carry it.

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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A history of the needlework of the world would be a history of the domestic accomplishment of the world, that inner story of the existence of man which bears the relation to him of sunlight to the plant. We can deduce from these needle records much of the physical circumstances of woman's long pilgrimage down the ages, of her mental processes, of her growth in thought. We can judge from the character of her art whether she was at peace with herself and the world, and from its status we become aware of its relative importance to the conditions of her life.

There are few written records of its practice and growth, for an art which does not affect the commercial gain of a land or country is not apt to have a written or statistical history, but, fortunately in this case, the curious and valuable specimens which are left to us tell their own story. They reveal the cultivation and amelioration of domestic life. Their contribution to the refinements are their very existence.

A history of any domestic practice which has grown into a habit marks the degree of general civilization, but the practice of needlework does more. To a careful student each small difference

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THE STORY OF THE NEEDLE

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in the art tells its own story in its own language. The hammered gold of Eastern embroidery tells not only of the riches of available material, but of the habit of personal preparation, instead of the mechanical. The little Bible description of captured "needlework alike on both sides" speaks unmistakably of the method of their stitchery, a cross-stitch of colored threads, which is even now the only method of stitch "alike on both sides."

It is an endless and fascinating story of the leisure of women in all ages and circumstances, written in her own handwriting of painstaking needlework and an estimate of an art to which gold, silver, and precious stones—the treasures of the world—were devoted. More than this, its intimate association with the growth and well-being of family life makes visible the point where savagery is left behind and the decrees of civilization begin.

I knew a dear Bible-nourished lonely little maid who had constructed for herself a drama of Eve in Eden, playing it for the solitary audience of self in a corner of the garden. She had brought all manner of fruits and had tied them to the fence palings under the apple boughs. This little Eve

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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gathered grape leaves and sewed them carefully into an apron, the needle holes pierced with a thorn and held together by fiber stripped from long-stemmed plantain leaves. Here she and her audience of self hid under the apple boughs and waited for the call of the Lord.

The long ministry of the needle to the wants of mankind proves it to have been among the first of man's inventions. When Eve sewed fig leaves she probably improvised some implement for the process, and every daughter of Eve, from Eden to the present time, has been indebted to that little implement for expression of herself in love and duty and art. For this we must thank the man who, the Bible relates, was "the father of all such as worked in metals, and made needles and gave them to his household." He is the first "handy man" mentioned in history—blest be his memory!

If the day should ever come, not, let us hope, in our time or that of our children, when the manufacturer shall find that it no longer pays to make needles, what value will attach to individual specimens! If they were only to be found in occasional bric-à-brac shops or in the collections of some far-seeing hoarder of rarities, it would be

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THE STORY OF THE NEEDLE

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difficult to overrate the interest which might attach to them. How, from the prodigal disregard of ages and the mysteries of the past, would emerge, one after another, recovered specimens, to be examined and judged and classified and arranged!

Perhaps collections of them will be found in future museums under different headings, such as:

“Needles of Consolation,” under which might come those which Mary Stuart and her maids wrought their dismal hours into pathetic bits of embroidery during the long days of captivity, or the daughter of the sorrowful Marie Antoinette mended the dilapidations of the pitiful and ragged Dauphin; or:

“Needles of Devotion,” wielded by canonized and uncanonized saints in and out of nunneries; or:

“Needles of History,” like those with which Matilda stitched the prowess of William the Conqueror into breadths of woven flax.

Possibly there may arise needle experts who, upon microscopic examination and scientific test, will refer all specimens to positive date and peculiar function, and by so doing let in floods of light upon ancient customs and habits. It is idle

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to speculate upon a condition which does not yet exist, for, happily, needles for actual hand sewing are yet in sufficient demand to allow us to indulge in their purchase quite ungrudgingly.

I was once shown a needle—it was in Constantinople—which the dark-skinned owner declared had been treasured for three hundred years in his family, and he affirmed it so positively and circumstantially that I accepted the statement as truth. In fact, what did it matter? It was an interesting lie or an interesting truth, whichever one might consider it, and the needle looked quite capable of sustaining another century or so of family use. Its eye was a polished triangular hole made to carry strips of beaten metal, exactly such as we read of in the Bible as beaten and cut into strips for embroidery upon linen, such embroidery, in fact, as has often been burned in order to sift the pure gold from its ashes.

Not only the history, but the poetry and song of all periods are starred with real and ideal embroideries—noble and beautiful ladies, whose chief occupations seem to have been the medicining of wounds received in their honor or defense, or the broidering of scarfs and sleeves with which to



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## THE STORY OF THE NEEDLE

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bind the helmets of their knights as they went forth to tourney or to battle. In these old chronicles the knights fought or made music with harp or voice, and the women ministered or made embroidery, and so pictured lives which were lived in the days of knights and ladies drifted on. The sword and the needle expressed the duties, the spirit, and the essence of their several lives. The men were militant, the women domestic, and wherever in castle or house or nunnery the lives of women were made safe by the use of the sword the needle was devoting itself to comforts of clothing for the poor and dependent, or luxuries of adornment for the rich and powerful. So the needle lived on through all the civilizations of the old world, in the various forms which they developed, until it was finally inherited by pilgrims to a new world, and was brought with them to the wilderness of America.

## CHAPTER I BEGINNINGS IN THE NEW WORLD

**T**HE history of embroidery in America would naturally begin with the advent of the Pilgrim Mothers, if one ignored the work of native Indians. This, however, would be unfair to a primitive art, which accomplished, with perfect appropriateness to use and remarkable adaptation of circumstance and material, the ornamentation of personal apparel.

The porcupine quill embroidery of American Indian women is unique among the productions of primitive peoples, and some of the dresses, deerskin shirts, and moccasins with borders and flying designs in black, red, blue, and shining white quills, and edged with fringes hung with the teeth and claws of game, or with beautiful small shells, are as truly objects of art as are many things of the same decorative intent produced under the best conditions of civilization.

To create beauty with the very limited resources of skins, hair, teeth, and quills of animals, colored with the expressed juice of plants, was a problem very successfully solved by these dwellers

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BEGINNINGS IN THE NEW WORLD

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in the wilderness, and the results were practically and æsthetically valuable.

In the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D. C., there has happily been preserved a most interesting collection of these early efforts. The small deerskin shirts worn as outer garments by the little Sioux were perhaps among the most interesting and elaborate. They are generally embroidered with dyed moose hair and split quills of birds in their natural colors, large split quills or flattened smaller quills used whole. The work has an embossed effect which is very striking. A coat for an adult of Sioux workmanship, made of calfskin thicker and less pliant than the deerskin ordinarily used for garments, carries a broad band of quill embroidery, broken by whorls of the same, the center of each holding a highly decorated tassel made of narrow strips of deerskin, bound at intervals with split porcupine quills. These ornamental tassels carry the idea of decoration below the bands, and have a changeable and living effect which is admirable. In a smaller shirt, the whole body is covered at irregular intervals with whorls of the finest porcupine quill work, edged by a border of interlaced

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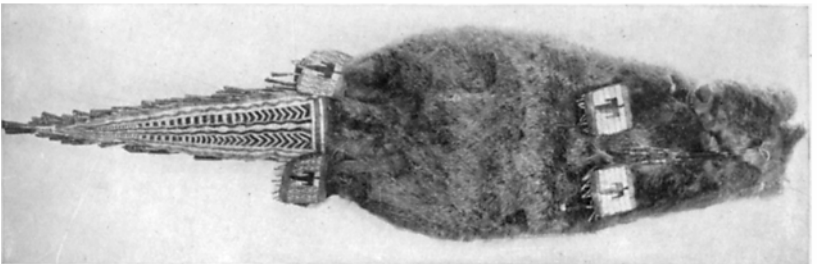
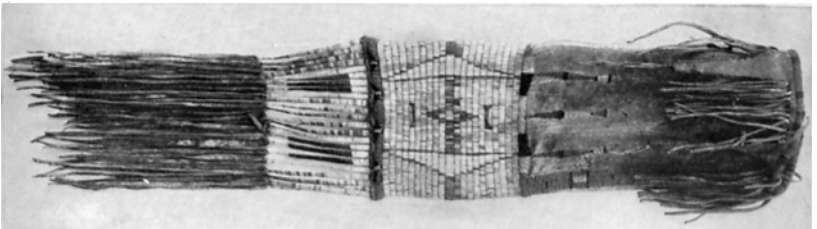
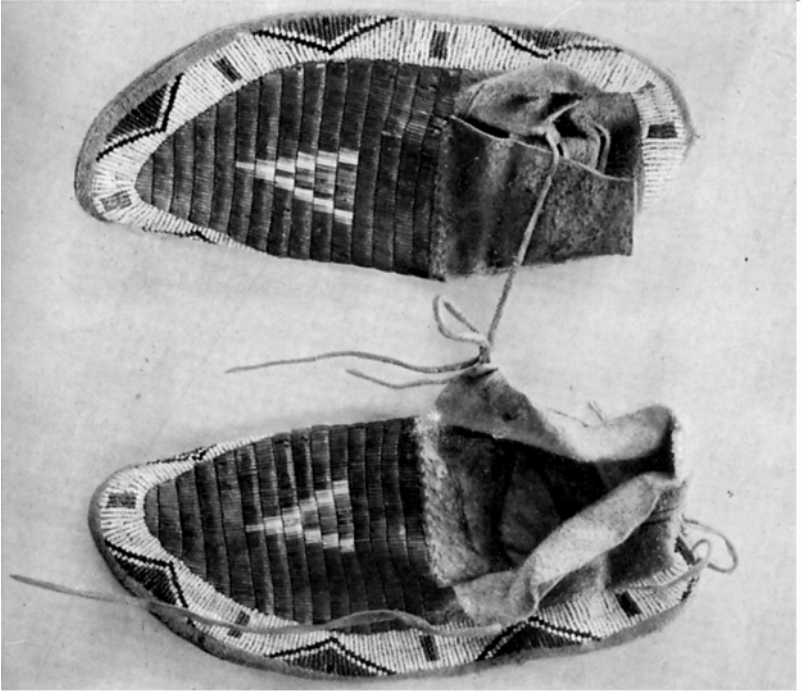
## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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black and white quills, finished with perforated shells. Many of the designs are edged with narrow zigzag borders of the split quills in natural colors carefully matched and lapped in very exact fashion. There is one small shirt, made with a decorative border of tanned ermine skins in alternate squares of fur and beautifully colored quill embroidery, not one tint of which is out of harmony with the soft yellow of the deerskin body. The edge of the shirt is finished in very civilized fashion, with ermine tails, each pendant, banded with blue quills, at alternating heights, making a shining zigzag of blue along the fringe. The simplicity of treatment and purity of color in this little garment were fascinating, and must have invested the small savage who wore it with the dignity of a prince.

The mother who evolved the scheme and manner of decoration carried her bit of genius in an uncivilized squaw body, but had none the less a true feeling for beauty, and in this mother task lifted the plane of the art of her people to a higher level.

The purely decorative ability which lived and flourished before the advent of civilization lost its distinctive simplicity of character when woven



*Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History, New York*  
*Left* —MOCCASINS of porcupine quillwork, made by Sioux Indians.  
*Right*—PIPE BAGS of porcupine quillwork, made by Sioux Indians.

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BEGINNINGS IN THE NEW WORLD

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cloth of brilliant red flannel and the tempting glamour of colored glass beads came into their horizon, although they accepted these new materials with avidity. Porcupine quill work seems to have been longer practiced, although a few headbands of ceremony are to be found among the tribes, and now and then one comes across a veritable treasure, an evidence of long and unremitting toil, which has been preserved with veneration.

Of course many valuable results of the best early embroideries still exist among the Indians themselves.

A very striking feature of both early and late work is the fringing, which plays an important part in the decoration of garments. The fringe materials were generally of the longest procurable dried moose hair, the finely cut strips of deerskin, or, in some instances, the tough stems of river and swamp grasses twisted, braided and interwoven in every conceivable manner, and varied along the depth of the fringes by small perforated shells, teeth of animals, seeds of pine, or other shapely and hard substances which gave variety and added weight. Beads of bone and shell are not uncommon, or small bits of hammered

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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metal. In one or two instances I have seen long deerskin fringes with stained or painted designs, emphasized with seeds or shells at centers of circles, or corners of zigzags. This ingenious use of a decorative fringe gave an effect of elaborate ornament with comparatively small labor.

Perhaps the best lesson we have to learn from this bygone phase of decorative effort is in the possibilities of genuine art, where scant materials of effect are available.

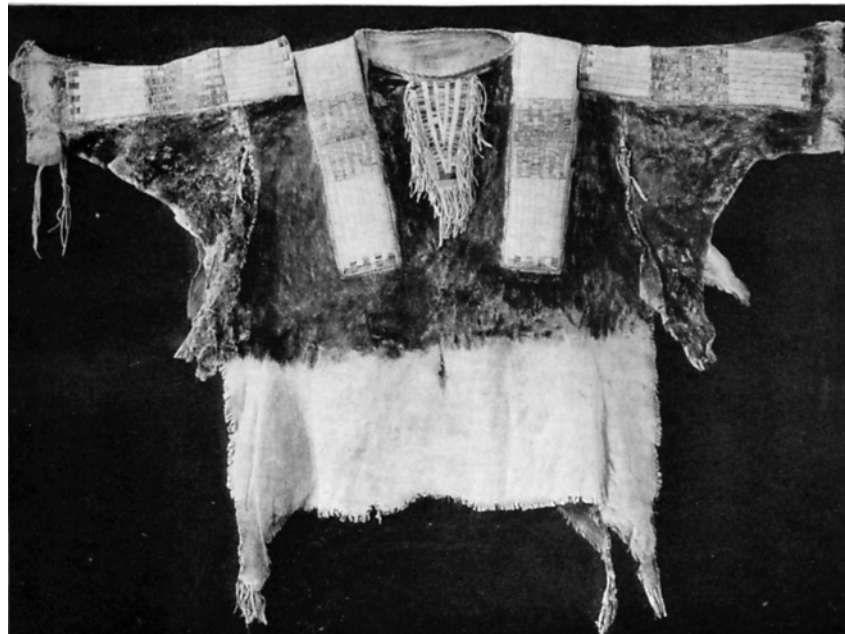
A thoughtful and exact study of early Indian art gives abundant indication of the effect of intimacy with the moods and phenomena of Nature, incident to the lives of an outdoor people.

Many of the designs which decorate the larger pieces, like shirts and blankets, were evidently so inspired. The designs of lengthened and unequal zigzags are lightning flashes translated into embroidery; the lateral lines of broken direction are water waves moving in masses. There are clouds and stars and moons to be found among them, and if we could interpret them we might even find records of the sensations with which they were regarded.

It would seem to argue a want of inventive



*Courtesy American Museum of Natural History, New York*  
MAN'S JACKET OF PORCUPINE QUILWORK  
Made by Sioux Indians.



*Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History, New York*  
MAN'S JACKET OF PORCUPINE QUILWORK  
Made by Plains Indians.



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## BEGINNINGS IN THE NEW WORLD

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faculty, that the aboriginal women never conceived the idea of weaving fibers together in textiles, but were contented with the skins of animals for warmth of body covering. The two alternatives of so close and warm a substance as tanned skins, or nakedness, seem to a civilized mind to demand some intermediate substance. This, however, was not felt as a want, at least not to the extent of inspiring a textile. Perhaps we should never have had the unique porcupine quill embroidery except for the close-grained skin foundation, which made it possible and permanent. Certainly the cleverness with which the idea of weaving has been used in the evolution of the Indian blanket shows that only the initial thought was lacking. The subsequent use of the arts of spinning and weaving, with the retention of the original idea of decoration in design and coloring, has made the Indian blanket an article of great commercial value.

Fortunately, these productions are valuable to their producers, and even to other members of the tribes, and were carefully preserved from casualties, so that there are still many examples of Indian manufacture, such as belts of wampum,

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and headbands of ceremony, to be found among existing tribes.

These early specimens are not only intrinsically valuable, but give many a clue to what may be called the spiritual side of the aborigines. They had not learned the limits of representation, and as this history deals with results of life and not with the impulse toward expression which lies at the root of design, we need not attempt more than a suggestion of some of the results. The unguided impulses of Indian art, as seen or imagined in their work, lies behind the work itself and can be read only by its materialization.

## CHAPTER II ❁ THE CREWEL- WORK OF OUR PURITAN MOTHERS

**T**HE crewelwork of New England was the first ornamental stitchery practiced in this country by women of European race, and in their hands made its first appearance even during the days of privation and nights of fear which were their portion in this strange new world to which they had come.

The seed of it was brought by that winged creature of destiny, the *Mayflower*, hidden in the folds or decorating the borders of the precious household linen which was a part of the gear of the first Pilgrims. In its hollow interior there was room for bed dressings and table napery, even when the high-posted bedsteads and tables which they had adorned were abandoned, or exchanged for peace of mind and liberty of action.

It may have declared itself in the very first years of settlement, before they had encountered the savage antagonism of the aborigines, and while they still had only the privations incident

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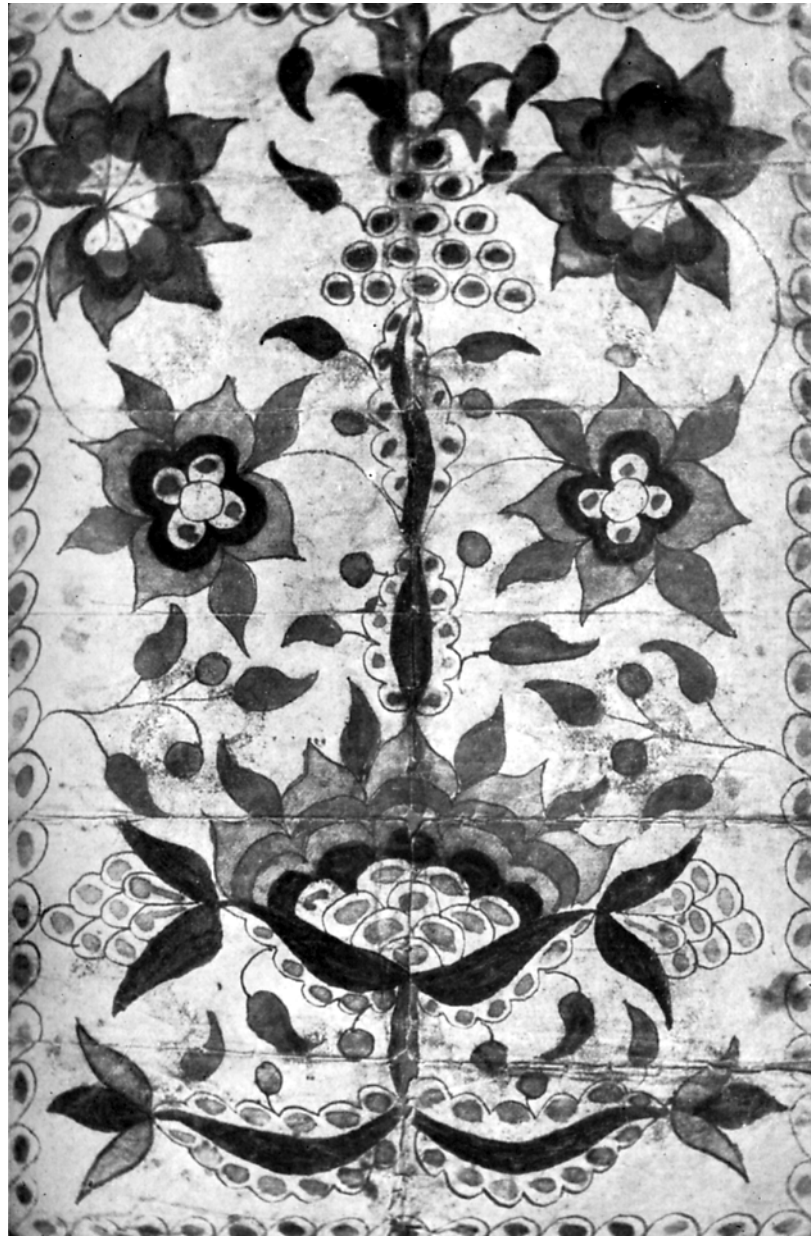
## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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to pioneer life; or it may have been after the long struggle for ascendancy and possession was over, and they could settle down in hard-won homes. Upon neighboring or contiguous farms there they gradually drew together the threads of memory concerning former peaceful occupations, and wove them once more into the warp of daily life. They could visit one another, exchanging domestic experiences, or reminiscences of spiritual struggles of their own or of fellow Pilgrims, and old-time hand occupations would be a mutual lullaby and an exorcism of anxiety.

The real beginning of embroidery as a national art was probably at a later period, for its previous practice would be but a continuation of old-world occupations or diversions of life.

The devoted mothers of the American race, who sailed the seas in those far-off days, might have brought some favorite "piece" of embroidery among their most intimate belongings, wherewithal to while away the hours of weary days upon the limitless breadths of ocean. There would be intervals of calm between storms, and periods when even the merest shred of a home-practiced art would be doubly and trebly valued,



CREWEL DESIGN, drawn and colored, which dates back to Colonial times.  
*In the possession of the Dunham family of Cooperstown.*

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CREWELWORK

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like a piece of heavenly raiment to a naked and banished angel.

The most natural effort of the woman standing in the midst of such new and strenuous conditions as surrounded the Pilgrim mothers in America, would be to reproduce something which had meant peace and tranquillity in former days. We can imagine her, searching the closely packed iron-bound chests which held most of the worldly goods of the traversing pilgrims—those famous chests, the boards of which had been carefully doweled and faithfully put together to resist outward and inward pressure—packed and repacked with constant misgivings and hopeful foresight. In those crowded treasure chests it was possible there might be found skeins of crewel, and even working patterns which some hopeful instinct had prompted her to preserve.

While the Puritan mother was scheming to add embroidery to her occupations, she did not forget to train each small maid of the family to the use of the needle. Ruth and Peace and Harmony and Mercy made their samplers as faithfully as though they were growing up under the shade of the apple trees of old England

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instead of among the blackened stumps of newly cut forests.

So the old art survived its transplantation and rooted itself in spite of storms of terror, and during and after the test of fire and blood, and spread, after the manner of art and knowledge, until it became the joy and comfort of a new race, a vehicle of feminine dexterity and an expression of the creative instinct with which in a greater or lesser degree we are all endowed.

We can easily believe that stores of linen and precious china, as well as the small wheels for the spinning of the flax, could not be denied to the devoted women who chose to share the hard fortunes of their Pilgrim husbands and fathers. It is probable that in one form or another possessions of crewel embroidery were transported with them.

I know of no well-authenticated specimen which came in actual substance in that elastic vessel, but undoubtedly there were such, while many and many existed in the minds and memories of the women of the new colony, to come to life and take on actual form, color and substance when the days of their privations were numbered. If

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## CREWELWORK

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such actual treasured things existed and were preserved through the early days of colonial life, every stitch of them would hold within itself traditions of tranquillity in a world where homes stood, and fields were tilled in safety, because of the vast plains of ocean which lay between them and savage tribes.

In the earliest days of the colonies we could hardly expect more than the necessary practice of the needle, but when we come to the second period, when neighborhoods became towns, and cabins grew into more or less well-equipped farm-houses, Puritan women gladly reverted to the accomplishments of pre-American conditions. The familiar crewelwork of England was the form of needlework which became popular.

In looking for materials with which to re-create this art, they had not at that time far to seek. Wool and flax were farm products, necessities of pioneer life, and their manufacture into cloth was a well-understood domestic art.

Domestic animals had shared the tremendous experiment of transplantation of a fragment of the English race, and had suffered, no doubt, with their masters and owners, the struggles with



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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

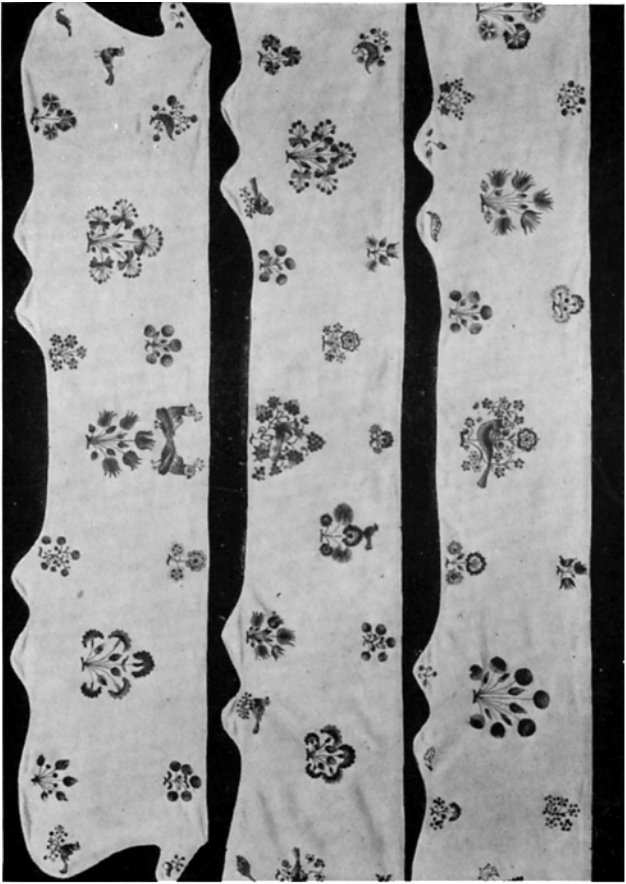
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savages and unaccustomed circumstances, but they had survived and increased "after their kind." Even through the strenuous wars against their very existence by uncivilized man, they lived and increased. Cows "calved," and sheep "lambled," and wool in abundance was to be had.

The enterprising Puritan woman pulled the long-fibered straggling lock of wool, sorted out and rejected from the uniform fleeces, carded it with her little hand cards into yard-long finger-sized rolls, and twisted it upon her large wheel spindle, producing much such thread as an Italian peasant woman spins upon her distaff to-day as she walks upon the shore at Baiæ.

If the pioneer was a natural copyist, she doubled and twisted it, to make it in the exact fashion of the English crewel; if adventurous and independent, she worked it single threaded. This yarn had all the pliant qualities necessary for embroidery, and was in fact uncolored crewel.

So, also, the production of flax thread, when the crop of flax was grown, and the long stems had struggled upward to their greatest heights, and finished themselves in a cloud of multitudinous



*Courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.*

ESTER embroidered in crewels in shades of blue on white homespun linen. Said to have been brought to Essex, Mass., in 1640, by Madam Susanna, wife of Sylvester Edeleth. To the right, raised embroidery on black velvet. Nineteenth century American.



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blue flax flowers, beautiful enough to be grown for beauty alone, they pulled and made into slender bundles, and laid under the current of the brook which neighbored most pioneer houses, until the thready fibers could be washed and scraped from the vegetable outer coat, the perishable parts of their composition, and combed into separateness. Then it was ready for the small flax wheel of the housewife. Every woman had both wool wheel and flax wheel, the latter of all grades of beauty, from those made for the use of queens and ladies of high degree—royal for elaboration—to the modest ashen wheel, derived from a long line of industrious and careful foremothers, or copied by the clever Pilgrim fathers, from some adventurous wheel which had made the long voyage from civilized Holland to uncivilized America.

For color, the simplest and most at hand expedient was a dip in the universal indigo tub, which waited in every "back shed" of the Puritan homestead. One single dip in its black-looking depths and the skein of spun lamb's wool acquired a tint like the blue of the sky. Immersion of a day and night gave an indelible stain of a darker

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blue, and a week's repose at the bottom of the pot made the wool as dark in tint as the indigo itself. For variety in her blues, the enterprising housewife used the sunburned "taglocks" which were too hopelessly yellow for webs of white wool weaving, and gave them a short immersion in the tub, with the result of a beautiful blue-green, tinged through and through with a sunny luster, and this color was sun-fast and water-fast, capable of holding its tint for a century.

We know how knots of living wool grow golden by dragging through dew and lying in the sun, and how the ladies of Venice sat upon the roofs of their palaces with locks outspread upon the encircling brims of crownless hats, in order to capture the true Venetian tint of hair. We do not know by what alchemy the sun *silvers* a web spread out to whiten, and yet *gilds* the human tresses of ladies and yellows the "taglocks" of sheep. Chemists may be able to explain, but simple woman, unversed in the mysteries of chemistry, cannot. Whatever may have been the science of it, this golden hue added to medium and dark blue a triad of shades, which proved to be most effective when placed upon pure white

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of bleached linen, or the gray-cream of the unbleached web.

The color seekers soon learned that every indelible stain was a dye, and if little God-fearing Thomas came home with a stain of ineffaceable green or brown on the knees of his diminutive tow breeches, the mother carefully investigated the character of it, and if it was unmoved by the persuasive influence of "soft soap and sun," she added it to a list which meant knowledge. It is to be hoped that this was often considered an equivalent for the "trouncing" which was the common penalty of accident or inadvertence suffered by the Puritan child. In truth, Solomon's unwholesome caution, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," was all too strictly observed in those conscience-ridden Puritan days. I had a child's lively disapproval of Solomon, since the curse of his sarcastic comment came down with the Puritan strain in my own blood, and I have a smarting recollection of it.

God-fearing Thomas and his brothers added to their mother's artistic equipment not only a list of variously shaded brown from the bark of the black walnut tree, and of yellows from the leaves

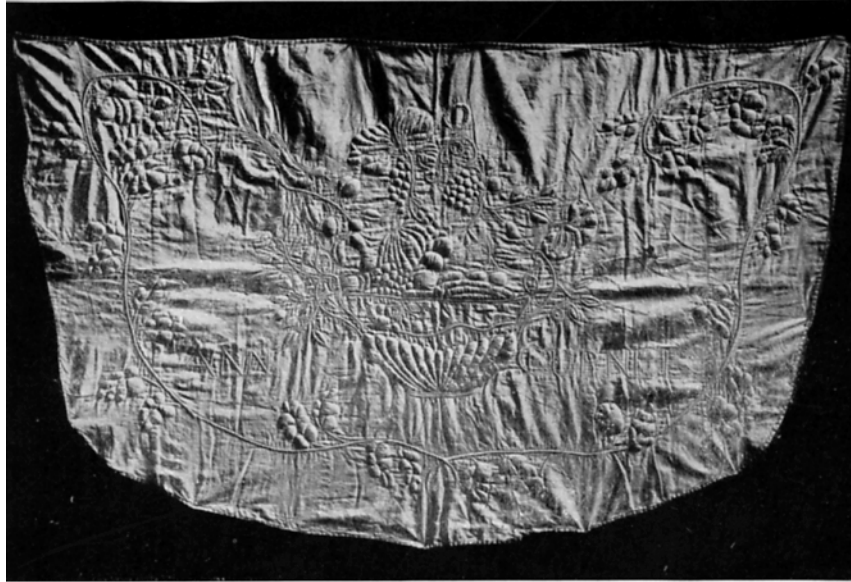
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and twigs of the sumac and wild cherry, but numberless others. She was an untiring color hunter, an experimenter with the juices of plants and flowers and berries, and with every unwash-outable stain. She set herself to the exciting task of repetition and variation. She tried the velvet shell of young butternuts upon threads of her white wool, and found a spring green, and if she spread over it a thinnest wash of hemlock bark, they were olive, and if she dipped them in mitigated indigo, lo! they were of the green of sea hollows. The butternut in all stages of its growth, from the smallest and greenest to the rusty black of the ripe ones, and the blackest black of the dried shell, was a mine of varied color; and the brass kettle of from ten to twenty quarts capacity, which served so many purposes in domestic life, could be tranquilly carrying out some of her propositions in the corner of the wide chimney while dinner was cooking, or in the ashes of the burned-out embers while the household slept.

It was interesting and skillful work to extract these colors, and the emulation of it and the glory of producing a new one was not without its

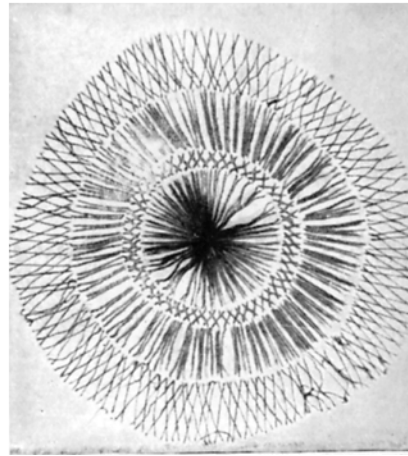


QUILTED COVERLET made by Ann Gurnee.



*Courtesy of Bergen County Historical Society, Hackensack, N. J.*

HOMESPUN WOOLEN BLANKET with King George's Crown embroidered with home-dyed blue yarn in the corner. From the Burdette home at Fort Lee, N. J., where Washington was entertained.



*Courtesy of Bergen County Historical Society, Hackensack, N. J.*

CHEROKEE ROSE BLANKET, made about 1830 of homespun wool with "Indian Rose" design about nineteen inches in diameter worked in the corners in home-dyed yarns of black, red, yellow, and dark green. From the Westervelt collection.

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excitement. There was a certain "fast pink" which was the secret of one ingenious ungenerous Puritan woman, who kept the secret of the dye, when rose pink was the unattainable want of feminine New England. She died without revealing it, and as in those days there were no chemists to boil up her rags and test them for the secret, the "Windham pink," so said my grandmother, "made people sorry for her death, although she did not deserve it." This little neighborly fling passed down two generations before it came to me from the later days of the colony.

Yellows of different complexions were discovered in mayweed, goldenrod and sumac, and the little-girl Faiths and Hopes and Harmonys came in with fingers pink from the handling of pokeberries and purple from blackberry stain, tempting the sight with evanescent dyes which would not keep their color even when stayed with alum and fortified with salt. All this made Mistress Windham's memory the more sad. A good reliable rose red was always wanting. Madder could be purchased, for it was raised in the Southern colonies, but the madder was a brown red. Finally some enterprising merchantman



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introduced cochineal, and the vacuum was filled. With a judicious addition of logwood, rose red, wine red and deep claret were achieved.

The dye of dyes was indigo, for the blue of heaven, or the paler blue of snow shadows, to a blue which was black or a black which was blue, was within its capacity. And the convenience of it! The indigo tub was everywhere an adjunct to all home manufactures. It dyed the yarn for the universal knitting, and the wool which was a part of the blue-gray homespun for the wear of the men of the household. "One-third of white wool, one-third of indigo-dyed wool, and one-third of black sheep's wool," was the formula for this universal texture. Perhaps it was not too much to say that the gray days of the Pilgrim mother's life were enriched by this royal color.

The soft yarns, carefully spun from selected wool, took kindly to the natural dyes, and our friend, the Puritan housewife, soon found herself in possession of a stock of home-manufactured material, soft and flexible in quality, and quite as good in color as that of the lamented English crewels. The homespun and woven linens with which her chests were stocked were exactly the

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ground for decorative needlework of the kind which she had known in her English childhood, long before questions of conscience had come to trouble her, or the boy who had grown up to be her husband had been wakened from a comfortable existence by the cat-o'-nine-tails of conscience, and sent across the sea to stifle his doubts in fighting savagery.

Probably the Puritan mother could stop thinking for a while about the training of Thomas and Peace and Harmony, and the rest of the dozen and a half of children which were the allotted portion of every Puritan wife, while she selected out intervals of her long busy days, as one selects out bits of color from bundles of uninteresting patches, and devoted them to absolutely superfluous needlework.

What a joy it must have been to ponder whether she should use deep pink or celestial blue for the flowers of her pattern, instead of remembering how red poor baby Thomas's little cushions of flesh had grown under the smart slaps of her corset board when he overcame his sister Faith in a fair fight about nothing, and what a relief the making of crewel roses must

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have been from the doubts and cares of a constantly increasing family!

She sorted out her colors, three shades of green, three of cochineal red, two of madder—one of them a real salmon color—numberless shades of indigo, yellows and oranges and browns in goodly bunches, ready for the long stretches of fair solid white linen split into valances or sewed into a counterpane. Truly she was a happy woman, and she would show Mistress Schuyler, with her endless “blue-and-white,” what she could do with *her* colors! Then she had a misgiving, and reflected for a moment on the unregeneracy of the human soul, and that poor Mistress Schuyler’s quiet airs of superiority really came from her Dutch blood, for her mother was an English Puritan who had married a Hollander, and her own husband revealed to her in the dead of night, when all hearts are opened, his belief that “Brother Schuyler had been moved to emigrate much more by greed of profitable trade with the savages than by longings for liberty of conscience.”

She went back to her “pattern,” which she just now remembered had been lent her by poor

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Mistress Schuyler, and was soon absorbed in making long lines of pin pricks along the outlines of the pattern, so that she could sift powdered charcoal through and catch the shapes of leaves and curves on her fair white linen.

Her foot was on the rocker of the cradle all the time, and the last baby was asleep in it. The hooded cherry cradle which had rocked the three girls and four boys, counting the wee velvet-scalped Jonathan, against whose coming the cradle had been polished with rottenstone and whale oil until it shone like mahogany.

Should the roses of the pattern be red or pink? and the columbines blue or purple? She could make a beautiful purple by steeping the sugar paper which wrapped her precious cone of West Indian "loaf sugar," and sugar-paper purple was reasonably fast. So ran the thoughts of the dear, straight-featured Puritan wife as she sorted her colors and worked her pattern.

At this period of her experience of the new life of the colonies, the chief end of her embroidery was to help in creating a civilized home, to add to what had been built simply for shelter and protection, some of the features which lived and

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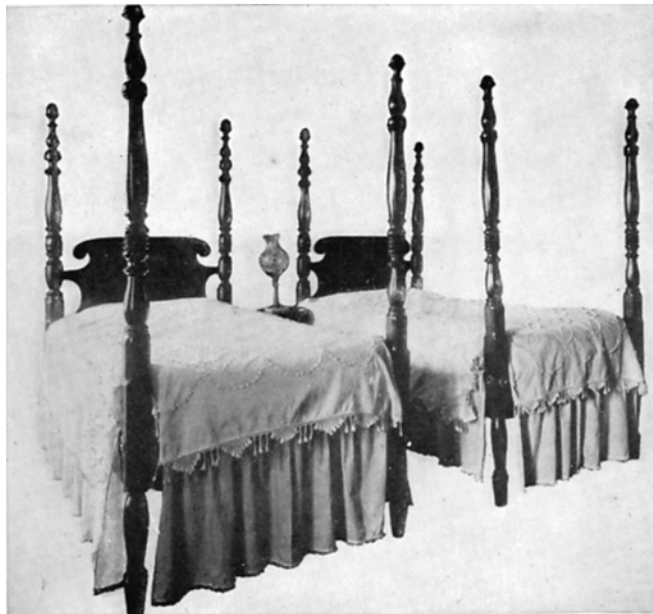
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grew only in the atmosphere of safety and content. Hospitality was one of the features of New England life, and the first addition to the family shelter was a bedroom, which bore the title of the "best bedroom," and a tall four-post bed, which was the "best bed." The adornment of this holy altar of friendship was an urgent duty.

When I began this allusion to the "best bedroom," I left the housewife sorting her tinted crewels for its adornment, and she still sat, happily cutting the beautiful homespun linen into lengths for the two bed valances, the one to hang from the upper frame which surrounded the top of her four-post bedstead, and the other, which hung from the bed frame itself, and reached the floor, hiding the dark space beneath the bed. The "high-post bedstead" had long groups of smooth flutes in the upward course of its posts, and no footboard, a plain-sawed headboard and smooth headposts. There must be a long curtain at the head of the bed, which would hide both headboard and plain headposts, and this curtain she meant should have a wide border of crewel-work at the top and bunches of flowers scattered at intervals on its surface.



BED SET, Keturah Baldwin pattern, designed, dyed, and worked by The Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework, Deerfield, Mass.



*Courtesy of Colonial Rooms, John Wanamaker, New York*  
BED COVERS worked in candle wicking.

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None of Mistress Schuyler's "blue-and-white" for her! It should carry every color she could muster, and the upper valance should have the same border as the head curtain. The lower valance would not need it, for the counterpane would hang well over, and she meant somehow to bend the border design into a wreath and work it in the center of the counterpane, and double-knot a fringe to go entirely around it, the same as that which should edge the upper valance.

It was a luxurious bed dressing when it was finished, and nothing in it of material to differentiate it from the embroideries which were being done in England at the very time. There were no original features of design or arrangement. The close-lapping stitches were set in exactly the same fashion, and, considering the absolute necessity of growing and manufacturing all the materials, it was a wonderful performance.

It was not alone bed hangings which were subjects of New England crewelwork; there were mantel valances, which covered the plain wooden mantels and hung at a safe distance above the generous household fires. These were wrought with borders of crewelwork, and finished with

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elaborate thread and crewel fringes. They were knotted into diamond-shaped openings, above the fringes, three or four rows of them, the more the better, for in the general simplicity of furnishing, these things were of value. Then there were table covers and stand covers and wall pockets of various shapes and designs, and, in short, wherever the housewife could legitimately introduce color and ornamentation, crewelwork made its appearance.

In the very infancy of the art of embroidery in America, the primitive needlewoman was possessed of means and materials which fill the embroiderers of our rich later days with envy. Homespun linen is no longer to be had, and dyes are no longer the pure, simple, hold-fast juices which certain plants draw from the ground; and try as we may to emulate or imitate the old embroidered valances which hung from the testers of the high-post bedsteads and concealed the dark cavities beneath, and the coverlet besprinkled with bunches of impossible flowers done in home-concocted shades of color upon heavy snow-white linen, we fall far short of the intrinsic merits of those early hangings.



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There are many survivals of these embroideries in New England families, who reverence all that pertains to the lives of their founders. Bed hangings had less daily wear and friction than pertained to other articles of decorative use, and generally maintained a healthy existence until they ceased to be things of custom or fashion. When this time came they were folded away with other treasures of household stuffs, in the reserved linen chest, whence they occasionally emerge to tell tales of earlier days and compare themselves with the mixed specimens of needlework art which have succeeded them, but cannot be properly called their descendants.

The possession of a good piece of old crewelwork, done in this country, is as strong a proof of respectable ancestry as a patent of nobility, since no one in the busy early colonial days had time for such work save those whose abundant leisure was secured by ample means and liberal surroundings. The incessant social and intellectual activity demanded by modern conditions of life was uncalled for. No woman, be she gentle or simple, had stepped from the peaceful obscurity of home into the field of the world to war for its prizes

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or rewards. If the man to whom she belonged failed to win bread or renown, the women who were bound in his family starved for the one or lived without the luster of the other.

I have shown that even in the early days of flax growing and indigo dyeing the New England farmer's wife had come into her heritage, not only of materials, but of the implements of manufacture. She had the small flax wheel which dwelt in the keeping room, where she could sit and spin like a lady of place and condition, and the large woolen wheel standing in the mote-laden air of the garret, through which she walked up and down as she twisted the yarn.

Later, the colonial dame, if she belonged to the prosperous class—for there were classes, even in the beginning of colonial life—had her beautifully shaped mahogany linen wheel, made by the skillful artificers of England or Holland, more beautiful perhaps, but not more capable than that of the farm wife, whittled and sandpapered into smoothness by her husband or sons, and both were used with the same result.

The pioneer woodworker had a lively appreciation of the new woods of the new country, and

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made free use of the abundant wild cherry for the furniture called for by the growing prosperity of the settlements, its close grain and warm color giving it the preference over other native woods, excepting always the curly and bird's-eye maple, which were novelites to the imported artisan.

I remember that "curly maple" was a much prized wood in my own childhood, and that after carefully searching for the outward marks of it among the trees of the farm, I asked about the shape of its leaves and the color of its bark, so that I might know it—for children were supposed to know species of trees by sight in my childhood. "Why," said my mother, "it looks like any other maple tree on the outside; it is only that the wood is curly, just as some children have curly hair." Even now, after all these years, a plane of curly maple suggests the curly hair of some child beloved of nature.

The beautiful curly, spotted and satiny maple wood was, however, "out of fashion" when the roving shipmasters began to bring in logs of Santo Domingo mahogany in the holds of their far-wandering barks, and the cabinetmakers to cut beautiful shapes of sideboards, and curving legs

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and backs of chairs, as well as the tall carved headposts and the head and footboards of luxurious beds from them. It was not only that they were a repetition of English luxury, but that they made more of themselves in plain white interiors, by reason of insistent color, than the blond sisterhood of maples could do. Cherry, which shared in a degree its depth of color, held its world for a longer period, but no wood could withstand the magnificence of pure mahogany red, with the story of its vegetable life written along its planes in lines and waves, deepening into darks, and lightening into ocher and gold along its surfaces.

If the cabinetry of New England is a digression, it is perhaps excusable on the ground of its close connection with the crewelwork of New England, of which we are treating, and to which we shall have something of a sense of novelty in returning, since at least the complexion of our colonial embroidery has experienced a change.

So, in spite of the success of the early Puritan woman in producing tints necessary to the various needs of colored crewelwork, the supremacy of indigo as a dye led to a lasting fashion of em-

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broidery known as "blue-and-white." It was the assertion of absolute and tried merit in materials which led to its success. We sometimes see this emergence of persistent goodness in instances of some human career, where indefatigable integrity outruns the glamour of personal gift. This was the fortune of the "blue-and-white," which not only created a style, but has achieved persistence and has broken out in revivals all along the history of American embroidery. It has been somewhat identified with domestic weaving, for the loom has always been a member of the New England family, the great home-built loom, standing in the far end of the kitchen, capable of divers miracles of creation between dawn and sunset.

On this much-to-be-prized background of home-spun linen the different shades of indigo blue could be, and were, very effectively used, and it is worthy of note that it repeated the simple contrasts of the Canton china or the "blue Canton" which were the prized gifts brought to their families by the returning New England seamen in the profitable "India trade," which soon became a commercial fact.

"Blue-and-white" had at first been evolved by

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tight-bound circumstances. Excellent practice in shades of blue had given it a certified place in the embroidery art of America, but we do not find it in collections of old English embroidery. It is one of the small monuments which mark the path of the woman colonist, narrowed by circumstances, which created a recognized style. It is not to be wondered at that blue-and-white crewel-work made a place for itself in the history of embroidery which was a permanent one. The circumstances of Puritan life being so simple and direct would induce a corresponding simplicity of taste, and simplicity is apt to seize upon first principles.

Every colorist knows that strong but peaceful contrast is one of the first laws of color arrangement, and the unconscious yoking of white and blue placed one of the strongest color notes against unprotesting and receptive white. This made a new manner or style of embroidery. Its permanence may have been influenced by the art of one of the oldest peoples of the world, and as we have said, the prevalence of Canton china upon the dressers and filling the mantel closets and serving the tables of the rich, was

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beginning to appear in all houses of growing prosperity, even where pewter ware and dishes carved from wood still held the place of actual service.

The Puritan housewife could arrange her grades of blue according to the Chinese colors of this oldest domestic art of the world, and be correspondingly happy in the result. Chinese design, however, had no influence in the growing practice of embroidery, and here also an instinctive law prevailed. She recognized that even the highly artificial landscape art of her idolized plates would not suit the flexible and broken surfaces of her equally cherished linen, or the surroundings of her life.

It was small wonder that this became a favorite style of embroidery and has in it the seeds of permanence. A table setting of snow-white or cream-white homespun, scalloped and embroidered in lines of blue crewels, shining with the precious Canton blue, was, and would be even at this day, a thing to admire.

The first deviation from the habitual crewel-work is to be found in the "blue-and-white," for although the same stitch was employed, it

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was more often in outline than solid. The designs were sketches instead of "patterns" as had formerly been the case. Although this variety of work comes under the head of colonial crewelwork, there was in it the beginning of the changes and variety effected by differing circumstances and influences—those vital circumstances which leave their traces constantly along the history of needlework. It was owing to various reasons that outline embroidery largely took the place of solid crewelwork.

The question of design must have been a rather difficult one, as there were no designs, and almost no sources of design for needlework, and at this stage of the art in New England original design seems not to have suggested itself. It would certainly have been quite natural to have copied pine trees and broken outlines of hills, but as this class of embroidery was almost entirely used for hangings and decorative furnishings, the Pilgrim mothers seem to have had an instinctive sense that such design was incongruous. Consequently they copied English models. We find designs of crewelwork of the period in English museums identically the same as in the New England



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work, thorned roses and voluminously doubled pinks, held together in borders of long curved lines or scattered at regular intervals in groups and bunches.

My grandmother explained to me in that long-ago period, where her great age and my inquisitive youth met and exchanged our several and individual surplus of thought and talk, that to a certain extent ladies of colonial days copied many of their designs from what were called India chintzes. These chintzes seem to have been the intermediate wear between homespun of either flax or wool and the creamy satins or the thick "paduasoy," the more flexible "lute-string" silks, worn by great ladies of the period, and the wrought India muslins for less conventional occasions. India chintzes were printed upon white or tinted grounds of hand-spun cotton, in colors so generously full of substance as to have almost the effect of brocaded stuffs, and adaptations from their designs were suitable for embroidery. I remember the three-cornered and square bits of India chintz which my grandmother showed me in long-preserved "housewives," or "huz-ifs," as she called them. They

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were lengths of domestic linen on which small squares or triangles of chintz were sewn, making a series of small pockets, each one stuffed with convenient threads or bits of colored sewing silks, or needle and thimble. These were pinned at the belt of the active housewife, and hung swaying against her skirts if she rose from her sewing, or were conveniently at hand if she sat patching or embroidering. I remember that some of my grandmother's "huz-ifs" still held threads of different colored crewels wound on bits of cardboard, and any embroiderer might envy the convenience of such holders.

I do not see, in fact, why there should not be a revival of "huz-ifs," a pleasant new fashion, founded upon the old, holding in harmonious variety all the wonders of modern manufacture, as well as making mementos of former gowns of one's own and of one's friends. They might be studied gradations of color and design, and be enriched by harmonious bindings. If my dwindling time holds out, perhaps I shall institute or assist at such a renewal of old conveniences, in spite of sharp contrast of purposes, adding to home costume a grace of pendent color.

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I was talking of design, when "huz-ifs" intruded, and was saying that at the period when "blue-and-white" took on the "outline practice" design was a difficult question; indeed, it is always a difficult question for embroiderers. It is so important a part or quality of the art of embroidery. In fact, it is the business of the successful embroiderer to know as much about design as she must about stitchery and color.

After the advent of "blue-and-white," embroidery took on many different features. Curiously enough, when it was confined to decorative uses, its character immediately changed. Crewelwork of the period was not given to hangings and furniture, but to clothing. An embroidered apron became of much more importance than a bed valance or counterpane. The young girl began by embroidering her school aprons with borders of forget-me-nots and mullein pinks, in colored crewels.

I remember seeing among my grandmother's savings an apron of gray unbleached linen, quite dark in color, with a border of single pinks entirely around it. The design had evidently been drawn from the flower itself, and the whole

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performance was essentially different from that of a slightly earlier period. The materials of homespun linen and home-dyed crewels were the same. The thing which was different and showed either a cropping-out of original thought or a bias toward the style of embroidery lately introduced by the famous school of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, was an over-and-over stitch instead of the old crewel method. This over-and-over stitch was apparent in all crewel embroidery devoted to personal wear, but was never found in articles used for house or decorative purposes. It was certainly a proper distinction, as the *flat* of crewel was not capable of shadow and was more inherently a part of the textile, as much so, indeed, as a stamped or woven decoration would have been.

It was not long before the over-and-over stitch demanded silks and flosses instead of crewels for its exercise, and silk or satin for the background of its exploits. There were satin bags covered with the most delicate stitchery, and black silk aprons with wreaths of myrtle done with silks or flosses, and, finally, satin pelerines exquisitely embroidered in designs of carefully shaded roses.

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Although nothing remarkable or epoch-making happened in the art of embroidery, it retained an even more than respectable existence. The skill, taste, and love for the creation of beauty, which were the heritage of the race, were kept alive.

### CHAPTER III ❁ SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

A CHAPTER upon Samplers, by right, should precede the discussion of colonial embroidery, although the practice of mothers in crewel-work was simultaneous with it. They were carried on at the same time, but the embroidery was work for grown-up people, while samplers were baby work—a beginning as necessary as being taught to walk or talk, to the future of the child. Fortunately, the very infant interest in samplers has tended to their preservation, and when the child grew to womanhood the sampler became invested with a mingling of family interests and affections, and she, the executant, came to look upon it with motherliness. The loving pride of the mother in the child's accomplishment also tended to the care and preservation of the first work of the small hands.

As late as the twenties of the eighteenth century, infant schools still existed and samplers were wrought by infant fingers. Eighty-five years ago, I myself was in one of a row of little chairs in the infant school, with a small spread of canvas

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lying over my lap and being sewn to my skirt by misdirected efforts. My box held a tiny thimble and spools of green and red sewing silk, and I tucked it under alternate knees for safety.

*Sarah Woodruff!*—I wonder where she is now?—sat next to me in my sampler days, and her canvas was white, while mine was yellow. Her border was worked with blue, and mine with green. With a child's inscrutable and wonderful awareness of underlying facts, I knew that Sarah Woodruff's father was richer than mine, and that the white canvas and blue border, which the teacher said "went with it," was an indication of it. I have it now, the little faded yellow parallelogram of canvas, on which the germ of the very fingers with which I am now writing wrought with pains-taking care—"Executed by Candace Thurber, her age six years." They have since had various fortunes and experiences, these fingers, and have wrought to the satisfaction, I hope, of their foregone line of Puritan ancestors.

The sampler has special claims upon the world, because it is probable that all forms of textile design originated with it. In fact, design for needlework began with small squares formed

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by crossing stitches at the junction of textile fiber.

In sequences these squares formed lines, blocks, and corner, and in double-line juxtaposition made the form of border probably the oldest ornamental decoration in the world, generally known as a Roman border. This decoration escaped from textiles into stone and building materials, and in fact appeared in the elaboration of all materials, from the fronts of temples to the ornamentation of a crown. The most ancient examples of design are founded upon a square, and this points inevitably to the stitch covering the crossing of threads, the cross-stitch, which preceded all others and remained the only decorative stitch until weaving sprang into so fine an art that interstices between threads are unnoticeable. Then, and not until then, the long over-stitch, the *opus plumarium*, which we call "Kensington," was invented, and served to make English embroidery famous in early English history. This was the stitch used by the Pilgrim mothers in their crewel embroidery, as we use it to-day in most of our decorative presentations.

In spite of the achievements of the *opus plu-*





SAMPLER worked by Adeline Bryant in 1826, now in the possession of Anna D. Trowbridge, Hackensack, N. J.

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SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

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*marium*, we are indebted to simple cross-stitch, to the obligations of the mathematical square of hand weavings, for all the wonderful borderings which have been evolved by ages of the use of the needle, since decoration began. We do not stop to think of the artistic intelligence or gift which made mathematical spaces express beautiful form, any more than we stop in our reading to think of the sensitive intelligence which drew a letter and made it the expression of sound, and yet most of us use the result of some exceptional intelligence and feel the exaltation of what we call culture.

The stitch itself is entitled to the greatest respect, as the very first form of decoration with the needle—an art growing out of and controlled by the earlier art of weaving. Decorative bands of cross-stitch come to us on shreds of linen found in the sepulchers of Egypt and the burial grounds of the prehistoric races of South America. I have seen, in a collection of textiles found in their ancient burial places, the most elaborate and beautiful of cross-stitch borders, wrought into the fabrics which enriched Pizarro's shiploads of loot sent from Vicuna, Peru, to the court of

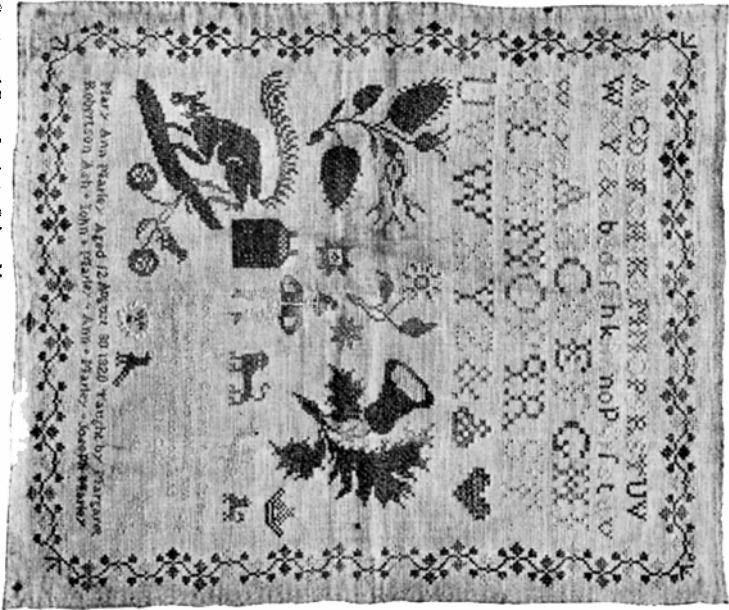
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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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Spain at the time of the wonderful and barbarous "Conquest." All of the old "Roman" borders are found in this collection, the best designs the world has produced, those which architects of the period used upon the fronts and in the interiors of their first creations. And here arises the ever recurring question of thought-sharing between the most widely removed of the earlier human races. How did early Peruvians and far-off Latins think in the same forms, and how did they come to select certain ones as the best, and cleave to them as a common inheritance? But leaving the puzzle of design and returning to the cross-stitch, which was its first interpretation or medium, and to the little Puritans who shared its acquaintance and practice with the women of all ages, we may see how the New England sampler opened the door of inheritance.

As Eve sewed her garments of leaves in the Garden of Eden, so each one of these little Puritan Eves, so far removed in the long history of the race from the first one, was heir to her ingenuities as well as her failings, from her patching together of small and inadequate things, to her creative function in the kingdom of the world, as well as to



Courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.



Courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

Left — SAMPLER embroidered in colors on cerise linen, by Mary Ann Marley, aged twelve, August 30, 1820. From Providence, R. I.  
Right — SAMPLER embroidered in brown on cerise linen, by Martha Carter Fitzhugh, of Virginia, in 1793, and left unfinished at her death.

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SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

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her attempts to sweeten life, and to her failures and successes.

The learning to do an A or a B in cross-stitch was the beginning of household doing, which is the business of woman's life. The decorative and the useful were evenly balanced in sampler making. All this skill in lettering could be applied to the stores of household linen in the way of marking, for cross-stitch letters, done in colored threads, were a part of the finish of sheets and pillowcases and fine toweling which made so important a part of the riches of the household, and it led by easy grades of familiarity to more comprehensive methods of decoration. In truth, the letters first practiced in cross-stitch opened the door to all future elaborations, and were the vehicle of moral instruction as well; for little Puritans took their first doses of Bible history in carefully embroidered text, and their notions of pictorial art from cross-stitch illustrations. One finds upon some of the early examples pictures of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with the ever present author of sin, climbing the stem of the tree of life, or Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder,

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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intersecting clouds of blue and smoke-colored stitches.

These pictorial samplers are certainly interesting, but those which confine themselves to simple cross-stitch with borders, and the name of the little child who wrought them, touch a note of domestic life which is more than interesting.

The sampler was purely English in its derivation and followed the English with great fidelity, although redolent of Puritan life and thought. Sometimes, indeed, it carried cross-stitch to the very limit of its capability in an attempt to render Bible scenes pictorially, but for the most part it was confined to the practice of various styles of lettering consolidated into text or verse.

The material upon which they were worked was generally of canvas, either white or yellow, and this was of English manufacture. As all manufactures were things of price, later samplers were often worked upon coarse homespun linens, which, barring the variations in the size of the threads inevitable in hand-spinning, made a fairly good material for cross-stitch.

Sampler making was a home rather than a school taught industry, going down from mother



*Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

*Left* — SAMPLER worked by Christiana Baird. Late eighteenth century American.

*Right* — MEMORIAL PIECE worked in silks, on white satin. Sacred to the memory of Major Anthony Morse, who died March 22, 1805.



*Courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.*



SAMPLER of Moravian embroidery, worked in 1806,  
by Sarah Ann Smith, of Smithtown, L. I.

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## SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

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to daughter along with darning and other processes of the needle, and having no relation, except that of its dexterity, to the distinct style of decorative embroidery called crewelwork, which accompanied it, or even preceded it.

The collecting of samplers has become rather a fad in these days, and as they are almost exclusively of New England origin, it gives an opportunity of acquaintance with the little Puritan girl which is not without its charm. As most of their samplers were signed with their names, the acquaintance becomes quite intimate, and one feels that these little Puritans were good as well as diligent. Here is Harmony Twitchell's name upon a blue and white sampler. What child whose name was Harmony could quarrel with other children, or how could this other, whose long-suffering name was Patience, be resentful of the roughnesses of small male Puritans? Hate-evil and Wait-still and Hope-still and Thanks and Unity must have sat together like little doves and made crooked A's and B's and C's and picked out the frayed sewing-silk threads under the reproofs of the teacher of the Infant School, Miss Mather of Miss Coffin or Miss Hooker, whose father was



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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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a clergyman, or even Miss Bradford, whose uncle was the Governor?

All this is in the story of the sampler, and so the teaching and practice of the canvas went constantly forward. The method was so simple, quite within the capacity of an alphabet-studying child. To make an A in cross-stitch was to create a link between the baby mind and the letter represented. There was no choice, no judgment or experience needed. The limit of every stitch was fixed by a cross thread, one little open space to send the needle down and another through which to bring it back, and the next one and the next, then to cross the threads and the thing was done. Yes, the little slips could make a sampler, every one of them, and when it was made, sometimes it was put in a frame with a glass over it, and Patience's mother would show it to visitors, and Patience would taste the sweets of superiority, than which there is nothing to the childish heart, nor even to mature humanity, so sweet.

There were Infant Schools in my own days, little congregations of children not far removed from babyhood, who were taught the alphabet



Courtesy Mrs. E. M. Sanford, Madison, N. J.



Courtesy Mrs. E. M. Sanford, Madison, N. J.

Left —SAMPLER worked by Nancy Dennis, Argyle, N. Y., in 1810.

Right—SAMPLER worked by Nancy McMurray, of Salem, N. Y., in 1793.



Courtesy Colonial Rooms, John Wanamaker, New York

PETIT POINT PICTURE which belonged to President John Quincy Adams,  
and now in the Dwight M. Prouty collection.

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## SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

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from huge cards, and repeated it simultaneously from the great blackboard which was mounted in the center of the room. In the schools, as well as at home, every little girl-baby was taught to sew, to overhand minutely upon small blocks of calico, the edges turned over and basted together. When a perfect capacity for overhand sewing was established, the next short step was to the sampler, and the tiny fingers were guided along the intricacies of canvas crossings. The dear little rose-tipped fingers! the small hands! velvet soft and satin smooth, diverse even in their littlenesses! They were taught even then to be dexterous with woman's special tool, the very same in purpose and intent with which queens and dames and ladies had played long before.

The sampler world was a real world in those days, full of youth and as living as the youth of the world must always be, but now it is dead as the mummies, and the carefully preserved remains are only the shell which once held human rivalries and passions.

### Quilts

The domestic needlework of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, should not

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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be overlooked in a history of embroidery, it being often so ambitiously decorative and the stitchery so remarkable. The patchwork quilt was an instance of much of this effort. It was unfortunate that an economic law governed this species of work, which prevented its possible development. The New England conscience, sworn to utility in every form, had ruled that no material should be *bought* for this purpose. It could only take advantage of what happened, and it seldom happened that cottons of two or three harmonious colors came together in sufficient quantity to complete the five-by-five or six-by-six which went to the making of a patchwork quilt. Nevertheless one sometimes comes across a "rising sun" or a "setting sun" bedquilt which is remarkable for skillful shading, and was an inspiration in the house where it was born, and where the needlework comes quite within the pale of ornamental stitchery.

This variety of domestic needlework, and one or two others which are akin to it, survived in the northern and middle states in the form of quilting until at least the middle of the nineteenth century, while in the southern states, especially in

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## SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

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the mountains of Kentucky and North Carolina, it still survives in its original painstaking excellence.

Among the earlier examples of these quilts one occasionally finds one which is really worthy of the careful preservation which it receives. I remember one which impressed itself upon my memory because of the humanity interwoven with it, as well as the skill of its making. It was a construction of blocks, according to patchwork law, every alternate block of the border having an applied rose cut from printed calico in alternate colors of yellow, red, and blue. These roses were carefully applied with buttonhole stitch, and the cotton ground underneath cut away to give uniform thickness for quilting. The main body of the quilt was unnoticeably good, being a collection of faintly colored patches of correct construction. The quilting was a marvel—a large carefully drawn design, evidently inspired by branching rose vines without flowers, only the leafage and stems being used, and all these bending forms filled in with a diamonded background of exquisite quilting. The palely colored center was distinguished only by its needlework, leaving the rose border to emphasize and frame it.

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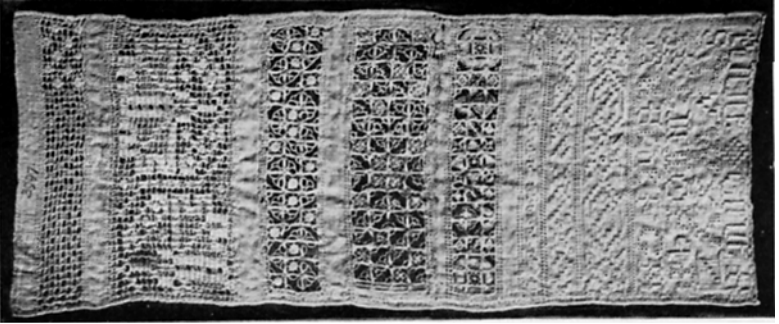
## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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There was a bit of personal history attached to this quilt in the shape of a small tag, which said:

“This quilt made by Delia Piper, for occupation after the death of an only son. Bolivar, Southern Missouri, 1845.”

The same kind friend who had introduced me to this quilt, finding me appreciative of woman's efforts in fine stitchery, took me to call upon other pieces which were equally worthy of admiration. One was a white quilt of what was called “stuffed work,” made by working two surfaces of cloth together, the upper one of fine cambric, the lower one of coarse homespun. Upon the upper one a large ornamental basket was drawn, filled with flowers of many kinds, the drawing outlines being followed by a back stitchery as regular and fine as if done by machine, looking, in fact, like a string of beaded stitches, and yet it was accomplished by a needle in the hand of a skillful but unprofessional sewer. The picture, for it was no less, was completed by the stuffing of each leaf and flower and stem with flakes of cotton pushed through the homespun lining. The weaving of the basket was a marvel of bands of buttonholed material, which stood out in appropriate thick-



*Courtesy the Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.*

*Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art*

- Left* — SAMPLER in drawnwork, écreu linen thread, made by Anne Gower, wife of Gov. John Endicott, before 1628.
- Center* — SAMPLER embroidered in dull colors on écreu canvas by Mary Hollingworth, wife of Philip English, Salem merchant, married July 1675, accused of witchcraft in 1692, but escaped to New York. *From the Curwen estate.*
- Right* — SAMPLER worked by Hattie Goodeshall, who was born February 19, 1780, in Bristol.

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## SAMPLERS AND A WORD ABOUT QUILTS

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ness. The centers of the flowers had simulated stamens done in knotted work.

I think this stuffed work was rather rare, for I have only seen two specimens, and as it required unusual and exhaustive skill in needlework, the production was naturally limited. The practice was one of the exotic efforts of some one of large leisure and lively ambitions who belonged to the class of prosperous citizens.

“Patchwork,” as it was appropriately called, was more often a farmhouse industry, which accounts for its narrow limits, since, with choice of material, even a small familiarity with geometrical design might bring good results. It might have easily become good domestic art. Geometrical borders in two colors would have taken their place in decorative work, and the applied work, so often ventured upon, was the beginning of one very capable method. The skillful needlework, the elaborate quilting, the stitchery and stuffing are worthy of respect, for the foundation of it all was great dexterity in the use of the needle.



## CHAPTER IV MORAVIAN WORK, PORTRAITURE, FRENCH EMBROIDERY, AND LACEWORK

**W**HILE the ladies and house mistresses of New England were busy with their crewelwork, the children with their little samplers, and farm house-mothers sewed patchwork in the intervals of spinning and weaving, an entirely different development of needlework art had taken place, beginning in Pennsylvania. Embroidery in America did not grow exclusively from seed brought over in the Mayflower. It sprang from many sources, but its finest qualities came from the influence of what was called "Bethlehem Embroidery."

The advent of this style of needlework was interesting. It originated in a religious community founded in 1722 at Herrnhut, Germany, by Count Zinzendorf. It was a strictly religious, semimonastic group of single men and single women, whose hearts were filled with zeal for mission work. At that period, I suppose America seemed a possible and promising field for such efforts, and accordingly forty-five of the brothers and as many of

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the sisters turned their faces toward this new world. One can fancy that when the thought first entered their minds, of coming to a land peopled by savage Indians, with but a bare sprinkling of "the Lord's people," they trembled even in their dreams at the thought of the cruel incidents they might encounter in that wilderness toward which they were impelled by apostolic zeal, and the unquiet sea upon which they were about to embark foreshadowed an unknown future. But there was small danger for them upon the sea; surely they could not sink in troubled waters, these ethereal souls! The heavenly quality of them would upbear the vessel and cargo. They would come safe to land, no matter how tempestuous the elements!

I suppose, at all periods of the world, prophet and martyr stuff might be sifted out from the man-stuff of the times if the race had need of them. In normal states of growth, we call them "cranks" and look for no results from their existence. But the elusive spirit of love never dies. It appears and reappears in the history of all races and times, and leaves its mark upon them in various shapes of beneficence.

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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These missionary brothers and sisters had chosen as the theater of their labor that part of our broad land which was pleasantly christened Pennsylvania, and selecting a portion of the southern area, they founded their colony and called it "Ephrata."

It existed for forty years, constantly increasing its membership, and living a life reaching out toward a perfection of goodness which seemed quite possible to their apostolic souls.

Time, however, brought changes of circumstance and of mind, and after many philanthropic phases, in 1749 the mingled elements and aspirations of the enlarged congregation were merged into two boarding schools, one for boys, which was the germ of Lehigh University, and another for girls at Bethlehem, which, under the careful fostering of the sisters, became the birthplace of the famous Moravian needlework. So were melted into the modern form of scholastic instruction the various efforts of religious activity, the eternal reaching out for conditions in human life in which it is easy and natural to be good and happy. It had not been accomplished in this semimonastic life, but the efforts toward it had their influence,



NEEDLEBOOK of Moravian embroidery, made about 1850.  
*Now in the possession of Mrs. J. U. Myers, Bethlehem, Pa.*



*Courtesy of Claire Reynolds Tubbs, Gladstone, N. J.*

MORAVIAN EMBROIDERY worked by Emily E. Reynolds, Plymouth, Pa., in 1834, at the age of twelve, while at the Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem, and now owned by her granddaughter.

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and, you may judge by the quality of its founders, had never died.

The two schools very early in their history seem to have established a reputation for learning and culture which made them a desirable influence in the formative lives of the children of the most thoughtful, as well as the most prominent and prosperous, American families. Indeed, the school for girls became so popular as to lead to an extension and founding of several branches in other of the southern states. The art and practice of fine needlework became a popular and necessary feature of them, distinguishing them from all other schools. "Tambour and fine needlework" were among the extras of the school, and charged for, as we learn from school records, at the rate of "seventeen shillings and sixpence, Pennsylvania currency."

It was not alone tambour and fine needlework, as we shall see later, that was taught by the Moravian Sisters, but the ribbon work, crêpe work, and flower embroidery, and picture production upon satin. These pictures, however important as performances, were not the most common form of needlework taught by the

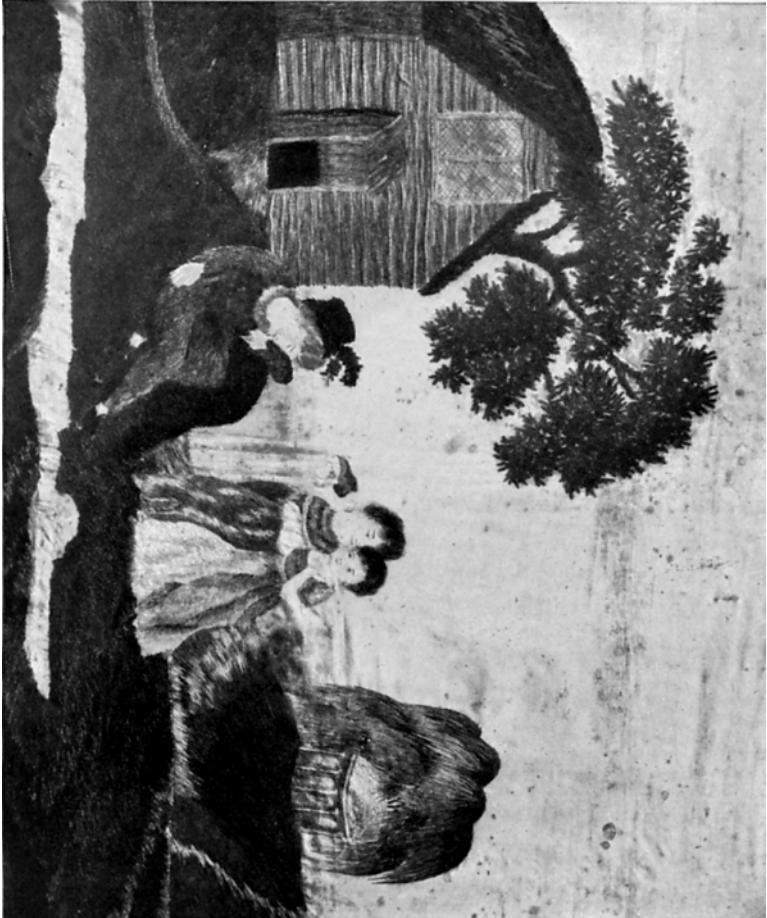
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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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Sisters. Flower embroidery was the usual form of practice, and it was of a quality which made each one a wonder of execution and skill. The materials were satin of a superb quality for the background, or Eastern silk of softness and strength, and the silks used in the stitchery were generally "slack twisted" silk threads of very pure quality, and in certain cases, where they would not be likely to fray, lustrous flosses of Eastern make. The stitch used in these flower pieces was an over-and-over stitch, or what was called satin-stitch, which was without the lap of Kensington stitch. There was in every piece of embroidery done under the instruction of the accomplished and devoted Sisters certain virtues, certain effects of conscientious and patient work, mingled with the love of good and beautiful art, which were plainly visible. It had in all its flower pieces, and they were many, the quality of beautiful charm. The ministry of nature may have had something to do with this, since the lives of the executants were open to its influences.

One can make a mental picture of those early days beside the peaceful "Lehi," where the Sisters taught and nurtured the young girls of



MORAVIAN EMBROIDERY from Louisville, Ky.

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very young America, and trained them in such beautiful and womanly accomplishments. The scattered bits of needlework which remain to us are so fine, so clear, so thoroughly exhaustive of all excellence in technique, that they are to the art of embroidery what the ivory miniature is to painting. We cannot but hail the memory of the Sisters of Bethlehem with respect and admiration.

I became familiar with the work of this community when I was arranging an historic exhibition of American Embroidery for the Bartholdi Fair in 1883. Few people may remember that, among the means for the installation of the Bartholdi Statue of Liberty which welcomes the world at the entrance to the harbor of New York, was an effort called the Bartholdi Fair, held in the then almost new and very popular Academy of Design at the northwestern corner of Fourth Avenue and Twenty-third Street. Knowing the value of Bethlehem work, I made an effort to secure a representative collection, with the result of gathering a most interesting group of specimens, mainly by the interest and help of Mr. Henry Baldwin of Lehigh University, to whom I was referred for assistance in my purpose. I have



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before me now the correspondence which ensued, a most painstaking, kind and patient one on his part, giving me much interesting history of the Bethlehem mission, as well as its life and progress. Among the legends is one—that during our Revolutionary war, Pulaski recruited some of his Legion at Bethlehem, and ordered a banner, which was carried by his troops until he fell in the attack upon Savannah. This banner is now in the rooms of the Maryland Historical Society, and I find the question of its having been an order from Count Pulaski, or a gift to the Legion, is one of very lively interest in the community.

This exhibit of 1883 was as complete an historical collection of American needlework as was possible, and I have a list of ten articles loaned from collections in Bethlehem, which reads as follows:

1. Embroidered pocketbook of black silk with flowers in bright colors. Former property of Bishop Bigler.
2. Embroidered needlebook of white satin with bright flowers, date 1800.
3. Embroidered needlebook of white satin with bright flowers and vines, dated 1786.

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4. Sampler, dated 1740.
5. Yellow velvet bag embroidered with ribbon work.
6. Black velvet bag embroidered in crêpe work with flowers.
7. White satin workbag embroidered in fine tracery of vines.
8. A box with embroidered pincushion on top.
9. A blue silk pocketbook with very fine ribbon work.
10. A paper box done with needle in filigree.

It will be seen by this list how varied were the forms of needlework taught at Bethlehem. The crêpe work mentioned in No. 6 is, probably owing to the perishable character of its material, very rare, but was extremely beautiful in effect. Bits of colored crêpe were gathered into flower petals and sewed upon satin, roses laid leaf upon leaf and built up to a charming perfection, while the stems and foliage were partially or wholly embroidered in silk.

The ribbon embroidery of No. 5, has been revived by the New York Society of Decorative Art and practiced with great success. The flower embroideries, in the specimens exhibited,

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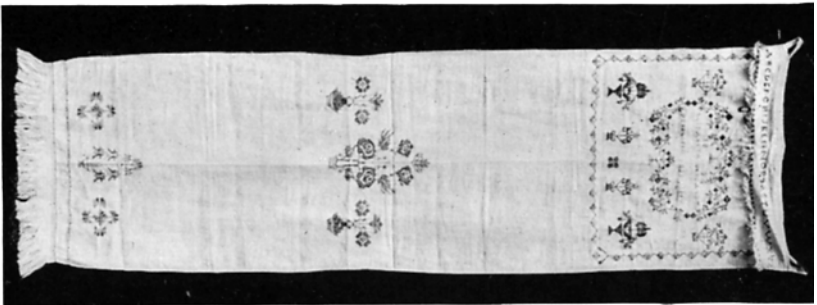
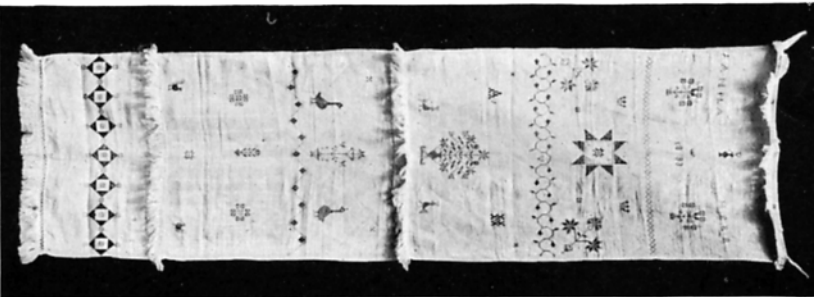
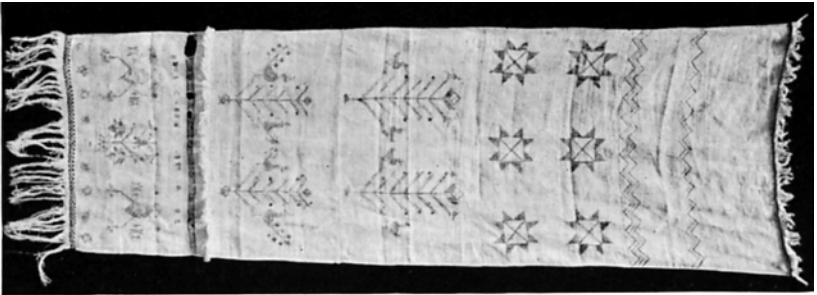
## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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were of two sorts—the small groups being done with fine twisted silks in a simple “over and over” stitch, called at that time “satin stitch,” alike on both sides, except that on the right side the flowers and leaves were raised from the surface by an under thread of cotton floss called “stuffing.” This did not prevent, as it might easily have done, an unvarying regularity and smoothness, which was like satin itself, thread laid beside thread as if it were woven instead of sewed.

In the larger flowers, the sewing silk had been split into flosses, or perhaps the prepared flosses were used in the “tent stitch,” which is now known as “Kensington.” The colors of all these specimens were as fresh as natural flowers, speaking eloquently in praise of early processes of dyeing.

These things seem to fairly exhale gentility, that quality-compact of everything superior in the life of early American womanhood. I have especially in mind one cushion where flowers, apparently as fresh in color as when the cushion was young, are laid upon a ground of silk of the pinky-ash color, once known as “ashes of roses.”



LINEN TOWELS embroidered in cross-stitch. Pennsylvania Dutch early nineteenth century.

*Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art*

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MORAVIAN WORK

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The real charm of the thing, that which lends it a tender romance, is the legend worked upon the back of the cushion in brown silk stitches which are easily mistaken for the round-hand copper-plate writing of the period—"Wrought where the peaceful Lehi flows." One seems to breathe the very air of the secluded valley, peopled by brethren and sisters set apart from the strenuous duties of the builders of a new nation, and distinguished for learned and devoted effort toward the perfection of moral, and spiritual, rather than the conquests of material, life.

The Sisters had many orders from the outside world, as well as from visitors, and the profit upon these helped to maintain the school. Many of these orders were in the shape of pocket-books, pincushions, bags, etc., having a bunch, or wreath, or cluster of flowers on one side, wonderfully wrought in silken flosses or sewing silks, and on the other, some pretty sentiment or legend done in dark brown floss in the most perfect of "round-hand"; so perfect, in fact, that it would require the closest scrutiny to decide that it was not handwritten script.

These plentiful orders for things were induced

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by the several attractions of the situation, the remoteness from warlike and political disturbances, and the relationship of so many young girl lives, as well as the interest which attached to the school and community, making a constant demand in the shape of small articles of use or luxury, decorated by the skillful fingers of the Sisters.

Parallel with this fine practice of flower embroidery, was a period of far more important needlework, which we may call Picture Embroidery. This also owed its introduction to the Moravian School of Bethlehem, although it was probably of early English origin, going back to that period when English embroidery was the wonder of the world; and the *opus plumarium*, or feather-pen stitch, or tent stitch, or Kensington stitch, as it has been known in succeeding ages, first attracted attention as a medium of art.

Passing from England to Germany it became purely ecclesiastical, and even now one occasionally finds in Germany, and less often in England, bits of ecclesiastical embroidery of unimaginable fineness, commemorating Christ's miracles and other incidents of Bible history.

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I know of one small specimen of ancient English art, covering a space of five by seven inches, where the whole Garden of Eden with its weighty tragedy is represented by inch-long figures of Adam and Eve, and a man-headed snake, discussing amicably the advantages of eating or not eating the forbidden fruit.

Such elaboration in miniature embroidery made good the claim of English needlework to its first place in the world, since nothing more wonderful had or has been produced in the whole long history of needlework art. It was undoubtedly from this school, filtered through generations of secular practice, that the Moravian picture embroidery came to be a general American inheritance.

To adapt this wonderful method to the uses of social life was an admirable achievement, and whether by the sisters of the Moravian school, or the growth of pre-American influence and time, we do not certainly know, the fact remains, however, that it was here so cunningly adapted to the circumstances and spirit of colonial and early American days as to seem to belong entirely to them, and it would seem quite clear that Bethle-

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## DEVELOPMENT OF EMBROIDERY IN AMERICA

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hem was the source of the most skillful needle-work art in America. It was there that the fine ladies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who sat at the embroidery frame in the intervals when they were not "sitting at the harp," acquired their skill.

It was the romantic period of embroidery that makes a very telling contrast to the earlier crewel and later muslin embroidery of the New England states. The pieces were seldom larger than eighteen or twenty inches square, the size probably governed by the width of the superb satin which was so often used as a background. Not invariably, however, for I have seen one or two pieces worked upon gray linen where the surface was entirely covered by stitchery, landscape, trees, and sky showing an unbroken surface of satiny texture. Pictures from Bible subjects are frequent, and these have the air of having been copied from prints; in fact, I have seen some where the print appears underneath the stitches, showing that it was used as a design. These Scripture pieces seem to have employed a lower degree of talent than those having original design, and were probably the somewhat perfunctory





*Courtesy of Elizabeth Lehman Myers*

**Left** — "THE MEETING OF ISAAC AND REBECCA" — Moravian embroidered picture, an heirloom in the Reichel family of Bethlehem, Pa.  
Worked by Sarah Kummer about 1790.

**Right** — "SUPPER LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME" — Cross-stitch picture made about 1825, now in the possession of the Beckel family, Bethlehem, Pa.



*Courtesy of Elizabeth Lehman Myers*

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MORAVIAN WORK

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work of young girls whose interests were elsewhere. One picture which I have seen was treasured as a record of a very romantic elopement—the lover in the case, riding gayly away with his beloved sitting on a pillion behind him, and no witnesses to the deed but a small sister, standing at the gate of the homestead with outstretched hands and staring eyes.

The most important picture which I have seen in portrait needlework came to light at the Baltimore Exhibition, and was a piazza group of five figures, a burly sea-captain seated in a rocking chair in a nautical dress and his own grayish hair embroidered above his ruddy face, his wife in a white satin gown seated beside him, and his three daughters of appropriately different ages grouped around, while the ship *Constance* was tied closely to the edge of the blue water which bordered the foreground of the picture. The composition of this picture was evidently the work of some experienced artist, for its incongruous elements kept their places and did not greatly clash. Taken as a whole it was an astonishing performance, quite too ambitious in its grasp for the novel art of needlework, and yet a thing to de-

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light the hearts of the descendants, or even casual possessors.

The Moravian teaching and practice spread the principles of needlework art so widely that it developed in many different directions. The wonderful silk embroidery applied to flowers was, like the arts of drawing and painting, capable of being used in copying all forms of beauty. It was sometimes, not always, successfully applied to landscape representation, and grew at last into a scheme of needlework portraiture, in this form perpetuating family history. It was sometimes used in conjunction with painting, the faces of a family group being done in water color upon cardboard by professional painters who were members of the art guild, who wandered from one social circle to another, supplying the wants of embroideresses ambitious of distinction in their accomplishments. The small painted faces were cut from the cardboard upon which they had been painted and worked around, often with the actual hair of the original of the portrait. I have seen one picture of a Southern beauty, where the golden hair had been wound into tiny curls, and sewn into place, and the lace of the neckwear



*Courtesy of Mrs. R. B. Mitchell, Madison, N. J.*

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC. Kensington embroidery by Mary Winifred Hoskins of Edenton, N. C., while attending an English finishing school in Baltimore in 1814.