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Stitching Life Together: 18th Century New England Embroidery as the Creation and Process of Female Experience

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Abstract

18th century New England was a place of rapid cultural change and value production. During this time, early colonial Puritan ideals were diluted by Anglican immigrants, British loyalists, the philosophical Enlightenment, and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. The colonies had to negotiate what it meant to be British and what it meant to be American - which ultimately led to a new country founded on Enlightenment ideals and the Roman Republic.

In the background of the historical recordings of planters, inventors, and the founding fathers, were their wives and daughters - witnesses to this cultural change whose experiences are frequently left behind because of their general lack of documentation. However, that does not mean they never produced artifacts that contribute to our understanding of their time period. Embroidery samplers were a standard part of a girl's education, and many of these pieces from the Boston area survive in museums and private collections. Artists were influenced by and copied motifs of contemporary fine art - such as pastorals and the Reclining Shepherdess - and incorporated these themes into pragmatic pieces for the practice of mending stitches. This thesis shows how common embroidery motifs and their evolution over the 18th century reflect public opinion, desired values, and the personal lives of young women who observed and influenced the creation of the United States.

1. Introduction

During the 18th century, the American colonies struggled to define themselves against the British monarchy, indigenous populations, and the neighboring French and Spanish colonies in the name of independence. These colonies were a massive imperial experiment, and their economic and governmental structures were controlled by powers across the sea and nearby resources. It was a time of turmoil but American culture quickly began to flourish and become distinct from the British.

As a young person myself, I wonder what it must have been like to grow up in the colonies during that century, and what people expected from their lives in a culture with very little history. What were people taught? What values did they encourage or shun? If men were off to join the Continental Army, what were women up to? I am looking for answers to these questions in their embroidery, an art taught to young women by both their teachers and parents.

My research focuses on New England social norms because most of the surviving pieces originate from there. In addition, New England was a hotbed of revolutionary activities since it held the most densely populated cities in the colonies. As a textile art, embroidery was closely intertwined with clothing and furniture fashions, and can provide insight into what colonists considered beautiful, moral, desirable, and what would reflect well on them in public to visitors in their homes. This means that a girl's embroidery says a lot about the people or institutions that suggested the design to her, and the embroideries of her daughter's generation would depict which of those values carried through. Over the course of the 18th century, embroidery motifs include human couples, pastorals, living things, and

the occupations of women. The imagery pulls directly from the fine art of the British and French, but transforms it into a functional skill that prepares girls for their future homemaking and indoctrinates the values from the reigning institutions. Girls and women had preferences for color, fashion, and design within their pieces, but embroidery really highlights the pressures from society as a whole - their parents' and teachers' politics, their marriage and career expectations, and pop culture curated by local merchants and printers. The meaning of the motifs they chose changed over the century, and the introduction of new motifs coincided with new expressions of agency and national identity. This thesis shows the social, political, and economic influences – such as resource accessibility, popular fine art, and the American Revolution – on common motifs of young women's embroidery in 18th century New England.

2. The New England Stitching World

Embroidery became a noble, feminine art during the European Renaissance.[1] In the 16th century, embroidery was a guild craft that the mercantile class pursued, but the practice became more diversified and amateur as the century went on. Upper class girls were educated in reading, writing, music, and needlework, the latter of which became primary by the 17th century. Embroidery feminized education that was "dangerously masculine," and later was considered the cure to idleness.[2] It became a domestic art associated with virtue, because a woman at home working on her embroidery could not be galavanting around town learning with the men.[3] Since embroidery became so intertwined with these ideal feminine values, people continued to teach embroidery to imbue those values on future generations. Most colonial samplers were made in the Northeast, New England area, and not the South. It is not clear why, but it may have something to do with the cold northern versus the humid southern weather, a difference in curriculum requirements, or the "Puritan Discipline."[4]

In the 17th century, the Massachusetts Bay Colony housed a strong Puritan population, which established a weekly ritual culture around the Protestant church. Members of the congregation attended services on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and one evening during the week as part of their public "ordinances."[5] "Discipline" refers to the personal and community accountability Puritans pursued in their devotion to the church and its morals.[6] Even though Puritan presence was diluted by other denominations during the 18th century, their culture of strict adhesion to law and order laid the foundation for New England society. Everyone was expected to behave in a certain way, or else face judgement from God and their peers. This attitude of moral purity drove people to participate in studious activities, such as embroidery, in their free time.

During this period, samplers in the Old and New Worlds were purely educational and served as a reference, and did not contain the aesthetic aspect that 18th century New England samplers did. In England, samplers were long, laborious fabrics that people used to practice stitches, patterns, and even needlepoint lace before committing it to a larger project. Samplers required thread-counted stitches – where each thread in the woven fabric needed to be counted evenly – and early American colonists simply did not have the time to complete that sort of project. Over time, samplers were shortened and beautified, and eventually their aesthetic value overtook their referential purpose and girls would produce samplers to show off their stitching skill and education.[7]

Embroidery was a skill taught to every young woman giving her the tools to mend and sew clothing and other textiles as a lady of the house, but only women from the wealthier classes had the spare time or resources to complete large projects. Girls who went to school to learn domestic skills would complete a sampler to showcase all the stitches they learned. The first sampler a girl would complete was called a "marking sampler" demonstrating basic embroidery techniques as well as her knowledge of the alphabet and numbers (Figure 1). Most samplers were completed between ages 8 and 12, but girls (and occasionally boys) could make them whenever they mastered the skills necessary. Unmarried young women from well-off families could continue on to a boarding or finishing school and would complete a larger pictorial sampler or needlework picture that communicated the family's values to potential suitors and visitors (Figure 2).[8] An especially advanced project carried out by older girls was their family's coat of arms (Figure 3). These pictorial embroideries were large and frequently used expensive metallic threads that made the image sparkle. Such an artifact told visitors about the family more explicitly than pastoral landscapes since it included specific symbols of heritage, affluency, and social standing.[9] There were two popular stitches for this kind of embroidery: the flat stitch and the economy stitch.[10] Both stitches leave most of the thread on the visible side, so that materials were not wasted on the back of the piece. This could be one of the reasons why these two stitches were popular in America.[11]

Figure 1. Maria Lalor, *Embroidered Sampler,* 1793, Silk embroidery on linen, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1993.100/

Figure 2. Keturah Rawlins, *Embroidered Picture,* ca. 1740, Linen embroidered with wool and silk, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/39.108.1/

Figure 3. Sarah Pierce, *Embroidered coat of arms of the Pierce family,* 1797, Silk, metallic thread, and metal spangles, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem.[9]

3. Readymade or Homespun

Depending on class and provenance, embroidery artists had differing levels of accessibility to materials. Wealthy people living on the coast could easily import patterns, yarn, and canvases from abroad. Materials available included Chinese silk, a worsted thread called crewel, and even fabrics with the designs already drawn on.[12] People who lived farther inland produced their own materials and would pull their patterns from local artists or design and draw the patterns themselves.[13] Wool was shorn from sheep for warm winter fabrics, and fibers were harvested from flax to create summer linens. Making linen is an especially laborious process because the plant must be grown, harvested, dried, smashed open, and then the interior fibers must be combed out. These fibers - wool and linen - were spun into yarn with either a spinning wheel or, more commonly, a drop spindle.[14] Fabrics were then woven from those yarns on looms Dyes were made from natural pigments found in the immediate environment.

Besides creating samplers, women would also embroider clothing, easy chairs, valences, curtains, and bed rugs. In Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book *The Age of Homespun*, she highlights a few bed rugs embroidered by the Foot sisters in Colchester, Connecticut, likely for the special occasion of a triple marriage in 1778 (Figure 4). Bed rugs are a type of heavy blanket that was very popular in Connecticut at the time - they consisted of one to three layers of wool fabric, with a needlepointed sheared loop pile covering the top layer, which produced a plush texture.[15] Colchester was a hub of textile production, and the Foot family serves as an example that showcases all these practices. The Foot Sisters' bed rugs were spun, woven, dyed, and embroidered by the sisters - since their parents were well-off farmers, they could afford to keep and work the wool and flax they produced. These bed rugs were embroidered with large flowers in a vase, surrounded by other floral embellishments. The Met has two other bed rugs from the Colchester area with almost identical motifs. These large flower designs can be traced to the Tree of Life motif present in many kinds of art, but especially in imported Indian palampores (another kind of bed cover available to the upper class).[16] In addition to imitating designer bed cover styles, the expansive floral motifs show up well in a pile-based medium - the loose fibers do not exhibit fine detail well. Ulrich also suggests that the thick embroidery covered up the less-than-professional quality of the weaving.[17]

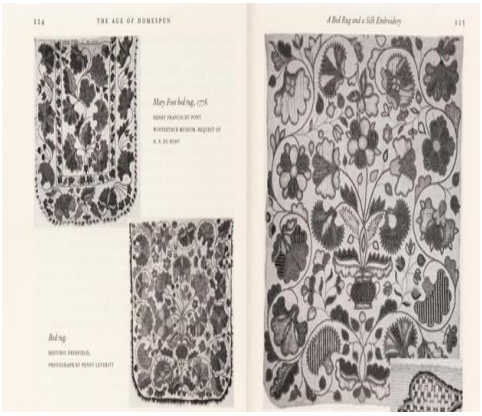

Figure 4. Mary and Elizabeth Foot and Sarah Otis, *Bed rugs*, 1778, Wool.[11]

Two of the Foot sisters, Betty and Nabby, left diaries that detailed their day to day life during the 1770s which were dominated by textile production. The diaries mention important events here and there (for example: "In the morning we heard that they had [sic] began to fight at Boston," referring to the Battle at Lexington and Concord), but mostly feature a laundry list of the girls' chores and the revolving door of friends and neighbors coming through.[18] The sisters' parents lived out in the country on their farm, so they were responsible for keeping the house. Betty also records some work she did for friends and neighbors where she could earn extra spending money or an I-owe-you from someone else. She sewed dresses for little girls, mended textiles, and produced cloth for others. This work used the skills she learned through her childhood embroideries and she was able to continue to express herself through embroidery on the special bed rug.[19] Since it was a wedding gift, it called for extra attention on the intricate floral motifs.

4. Stitching School

There are a few known embroidery schools in the area around Boston, pinpointed by the similarities between samplers made by girls who lived nearby. For example, Mistress Sarah Stivours had a school in Salem, Massachusetts, where she taught girls embroidery along with other skills they might need. Samplers from this school follow the same formula: a central box listing the alphabet, the maker, the date, and a poem; a border filled with flowers; a pastoral scene with a man and woman on either side of a tree across the bottom; and long stitches that seem to represent the sky across the top (Figure 5). Miss Stivours profoundly influenced what the girls depicted in their embroideries, but discrepancies in stitches, color, and size could show a girl's preference or level of skill.

Figure 5. Nabby Mason Peele, *Sampler*, 1778, silk and linen, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem.[9]

Miss Stivours is one of many single women who taught at these "dame schools."[20] She married in 1771, but she and her husband separated less than a year later. Widows, divorcees, and spinsters frequently turned to teaching as a way of supporting themselves without a husband, because it utilized skills they already had. However, this relationship status stigmatized the profession and led other adults to look down on the unmarried teachers. Becoming an embroidery school teacher meant a woman had obviously not married well, which was the primary goal for women in the 18th century. Finding a husband secured economic and social stability. Occasionally, schools were headed by couples, where the husband was the boys' schoolmaster and the wife was the girls' school mistress. This was the case for the Sucklings in 1751: "While George Suckling taught young gentlemen "English, Writing, and Arithmetic," Bridget Suckling taught young ladies "...plain Work, Dresden, Point (or lace) Work for Child Bed… and all other sorts of Needlework."[21] However, this was not the norm. The majority of embroidery schools were taught by one or more single women.

Another teacher from Salem, Mrs. Abigail Rogers, taught later than Miss Stivours around the turn of the century. She had married for love in 1784, and was disowned by her family. Her husband, Nathaniel Rogers, was not able to establish himself as a merchant to support his growing family, and when he died in 1799, Mrs. Rogers was on her own. Although she was a renowned teacher throughout Massachusetts, she carried with her the shadow of a poor marriage that parents did not want for their daughters. She started a liberal, coed social club for young adults, where they could mingle and discuss academics with each other. While this did not appear disruptive on the surface – in fact, it was encouraged for young people to meet and find potential spouses – Mrs. Rogers was introducing the group to "radical" ideas of women's rights, which upset the status quo. Throughout the year 1800, during the transition from George Washington's Federalism to the new Democratic-Republican president Thomas Jefferson, local newspapers were attacking Mrs. Rogers for leading their young adults astray and promoting liberal ideas. Eventually the scandal died down and Mrs. Rogers continued to teach, but this case study highlights the precarious social position embroidery teachers found themselves in – they were valued for their ladylike skills and societal use as teachers, but ultimately represented upper class failure.[22]

5. Pastorals and Inanimate Motifs

The American continents were a prime target of colonization because the British, the Spanish, and others were able to successfully take over and later urbanize millions of square miles of land for themselves. Europeans considered this land uncivilized or uninhabited, despite the numerous indigenous groups who lived there. Pastorals became an extremely popular motif in 18th century art because they were the visual representation of what was to be gained by colonization: virgin land. Embroideries were no exception to this rule - any embroidery that showed a place was almost certainly depicting the landscape, with rolling hills and abundant nature (Figures. 2 and 6).

Figure 6. Eunice Bourne, *Embroidered overmantel with original frame*, 1745-1750, Wool, silk, metal wrapped thread, and glass beads on linen, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. https://collections.mfa.org/objects/67723

Colonization of the Americas was more than an invasion, it was a genocide. Researchers estimate 56 million indiginous people died between 1492 and 1600, largely due to disease but also as a result of aggressive armed conflict.[23] Europeans and subsequent white Americans also participated in cultural genocide - indigenous children were sent to boarding schools and forced to assimilate, resulting in the ironic creation of something called "Native American samplers" (among other things). Sophie Bailly and her cousin Rose were probably students at a school on Mackinac Island, Michigan. It was founded by Reverend William Ferry as a mission boarding school for indigenous and mixed-race children, and it employed the standard curriculum taught on the east coast, including samplers.[24] Sophie and Rose's samplers look very similar because they have the same motifs, which were likely stitched by everyone who attended that school. Notably, across the bottom of their samplers, they have stitched rolling green hills, a man and a woman, and a large bird in a tree; very common motifs for this level of sampler skill (Figures 7 and 8). These samplers were made in the 1820s, well after the Revolutionary period, but acutely demonstrate the progression of colonial desires. Prior to European contact, indigenous needlework was very different from European design. Indigenous groups in the northeast (what would become New England and the Great Lakes) primarily wore animal skins and furs, and decoration was applied through quillwork. Porcupine quills or bird feather spines were soaked in water to soften them, dyed, and then woven into animal hides in geometric patterns. Although some natural motifs were incorporated - such as the turtles on this quillworked bag - but nothing quite like the European pastoral existed (Figure 9).[25] Separating and reteaching indigenous children severed their connection with their families and cultures, and allowed colonies to continue expanding westward without having to remove the people who already lived there.

Figure 7. Rose Bailly, *Sampler #4500*, 1821, silk on linen, National Park Service, Porter, https://nscda.org/historical-activities/samplers/ .

Figure 8. Sophie Bailly, *Sampler #4456*, 1828, silk on linen, Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, https://nscda.org/historical-activities/samplers/ .

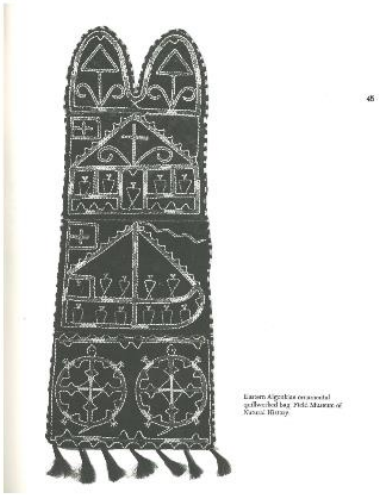

Figure 9. *Eastern Algonkian ornamental quillworked bag*, quills on animal hide, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.[4]

Smaller motifs in European pastoral embroideries included strawberries, dogs, sheep, and birds. In large pieces like Eunice Bourne's chimneypiece (Fig. 6) animals fill every available space and give the viewer plenty to look at. One reason she could have stitched these animals could be entertainment - stitching huge patches of one color thread takes a very long time and can be tedious. In addition, variety in color gives the artist a chance to use up thread she had leftover from a previous project. The animals could also be part of the romanticisation of nature that comes along with pastoral pieces. Specifically, sheep give artists an opportunity to use different stitches, like the French Knot, to create a different texture than the rest of the piece. A French Knot creates a little ball of thread on the surface of the fabric, and when bunched together they have a rough texture and curly appearance. Although pictorial pieces are less centered around education than samplers, girls still liked to show off the stitches they could do.

Likewise, strawberries are a common motif across different kinds of embroidery. They frequently are used to create borders in samplers, so they are easy to transition to a larger picture, like the chimneypiece - Eunice Bourne stitched them all across the bottom of her picture amongst the animals. English tradition assigns meaning to many plants and animals, and strawberries represent purity in Elizabethan art.[26] Strawberry plants have white flowers, red fruit, a sweet scent and taste, and "trefoil" shaped leaves, which are associated with Christian moral purity - strawberries are a "fruit of the spirit."[27] They were frequently depicted in Renaissance and medieval paintings of the Virgin, Adam and Eve, and Paradise, the latter of which was a basis for the European pastoral tradition that also carried over to American embroidery.[28] In a depiction of Madonna and Child by Martin Schongauer, he surrounded her feet with strawberry plants and incorporated the leaves into her crown "to show that she herself is the garden" and "her righteousness" (Figure 10).[29] The motif came to England from French and Flemish devotionals or books of hours, where strawberries were used as illuminated borders.[30] Although seemingly innocuous, strawberries were layered with hundreds of years of meaning prior to their use in 18th century fiber arts.

4. Martin Schongauer, *The Madonna of the Strawberries* (formerly in Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg)

Figure 10. Martin Schongauer, *Madonna of the Strawberries*, 15th century.[27]

Trees make frequent appearances in pictorial embroideries. Sometimes, as mentioned with bed rugs, the Tree of Life is utilized as a centerpiece motif. This is most common on bed coverings that require larger, more generic decoration, but miniature versions can be seen in sampler registers, as seen in the pieces made by Rose and Sophie Bailly in the early 19th century (Figures 7 and 8). The motif originates in West Asian cultures prior to the Greco-Roman civilizations, and has gone in and out of style all over the world since then - Christianity adopted the cross as a meaningful replacement for the Tree of Life motif, but the image made its way back to the West in a secular context through the importation of Indian and East Asian art.[31]

Trees are also used as landscape filler in pastoral pieces, akin to their fine art cousins. Take, for example, Fragonard's *The Lover Crowned* (1772) from his series, *The Progress of Love* (Figure 11). The main subjects of this painting, a young woman gifting her "lover" a flower crown, take up approximately one sixth of the canvas. The top half is filled almost entirely with foliage that takes on an impressionistic appearance. Individual leaves are only detailed enough to

distinguish light from shadow, and darker parts of the plants (and on the tall central tree especially) show very little definition. This type of leaf depiction is not possible in embroidery, unless the artist has access to many different shades of the same color and is working on a large scale without thread counts, because embroidery stitches do not have the nuance of oil paint. Therefore, artists must search for another source to base their work on that is more conducive to hard lines - engravings. Take a look at Eunice Bourne's chimneypiece once again, and compare her trees to the foliage in J. E. Ridinger's etching of *Eve Emerges from Sleeping Adam's Side* (Figures 6 and 12). Both pieces use individually drawn leaves clustered together in order to produce the shape of the tree, rather than embellishing a colored field the way a painter would. Although they appear cartoonish compared to finer arts, the two leftmost trees in Eunice's picture reach into the sky with the elegance of Fragonard's central bough. It is clear that this embroideress took inspiration from high class art for her household decoration.

Figure 11. Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Lover Crowned*, 1771-1773, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York. https://collections.frick.org/objects/173/the-progress-of-love-the-lover-crowned

Figure 12. J.E. Ridinger, *Eve emerges from sleeping Adam's side,* ca. 1750, etching, The Wellcome Collection, London. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/wxpa3qtk/images?id=fu2nactn

6. The Motif of Church and Family

Curiously, depictions of the Mother and Child are nonexistent in 18th century embroideries. When people appear, they are always adults and frequently shown in male-female pairs. This could partially be due to the popularity of the Adam and Eve motif in Boston during the first half of the century (Figure 13). Puritans, who were the founding settlers of New England, were preoccupied with purity, which included a reverence for the natural world and strict social

taboos. One of their core tenets was the understanding that man was "addicted" to sin, because of the original sin, where Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.[32] In their eyes, the New World represented a Biblical paradise to be settled, further promoting the story of Adam and Eve.[33]

Figure 13. Ruth Rogers, *Embroidered Sampler*, 1739, silk on linen, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/14085

Another explanation for the absence of the Mother and Child motif might be because it was a common motif for Catholic pieces, which the Puritans explicitly avoided. The example of *Virgen del Rosario*, an anonymous oil painting from the Spanish colonies (Figure 14) can illustrate the issue. This painting depicts the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus, wearing gaudy, gold robes, a crown, surrounded by cherubs and holy figures. The Virgin is lauded as a symbol of purity and motherly goodness – attractive qualities to every Christian society – but this type of art failed to represent Anglo-American values. Catholic Christians view the Virgin as a go-between for them and Christ, similar to the function of a priest. However, Protestant Christians (which the majority of New England colonists were) encourage individual relationships with God and Christ, and do not worship the Virgin Mary in the same way. As the 18th century progressed, the American colonies became increasingly anti-monarchy and would not have associated religious power with a crown or other royal luxuries. Power resided with regular people - early Americans desired taxation with representation, religious freedom, and companionate marriages. American embroidery and art rejected the frilly high life of European monarchies, but continued to depict Christian narratives.

Figure 14. Anonymous, *Virgen del Rosario*, 18th century, oil on canvas, Private Collection, Madrid. https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/anonymous-virgen-del-rosario-6204586-details.aspx

While embroideries almost exclusively show couples and single figures, some painted portraits featured families. For example, JF Rigaud painted two self-portraits that include his wife and three children. The painting highlights familial affection in the 18th century, while simultaneously showing his potential patrons his competence as a painter and his love for his family. In an earlier portrait that became a gift for a family member, Rigaud painted his wife's textile basket at her feet, which a floral embroidery spilled out of. This portrait almost explicitly declares his wife's virtue as a woman and a mother. In her article "A Rediscovered Self-Portrait by JF Rigaud (1742–1810): The Art of Family Affection in 18th-Century England," Lyrica Taylor points out the religious and gender role significance structure of his other self portrait: at the center, Rigaud's wife holds their youngest daughter, symbolically representing the Mother and Child. Rigaud and his wife are at the top of the portrait, with their son and other daughter below, arranged diagonally by gender, and highlighting the children's future roles as mother and father.[34] This sort of arrangement very rarely (and possibly never) appears in American embroidery, likely because the purpose of these pieces are entirely different, even though they promote similar values. Rigaud's self portraits were advertisements for his work as a portrait painter, and he included his family to show off his skill through their likeness, positions, and his wife's embroidery and lace. The embroideries were advertisements of a different purpose. These young women did not have their own families yet, so they emphasized their domestic skills over their eventual roles as mothers.

All of these motifs highlight the progression of modest, religious art and values to romantic, more secular (but still Christian) narratives that became popular towards the end of the 18th century. These values are also reflected in almanacs at the time. Almanac publishers were key players in negotiating a balance between Puritans, Anglicans, and science - according to Thomas S. Kidd, author of *The Protestant Interest : New England after Puritanism*, publishers were rarely government or religious officials and had no serious stakes in the pamphlets besides profit margin.[35] Almanacs included agricultural calendars, poems, essays, astrological information, and local information concerning travel times and events.[36] These pamphlets were produced for mass consumption, had to appeal to a great number of people, and therefore illustrated the general public opinion about religion, nature, government, and science.

Early in the century, New England almanacs promoted "Britishness" and anti-Catholicism through their inclusion of certain events in the calendar and other monarchy-related content.[37] For example, Sam Clough's 1703 almanac celebrated Queen Anne's succession to the throne by listing every monarch since 818 CE, followed by a poem calling her "true Faith's defender."[38] As a Protestant queen, she legitimated that branch of Christianity over Catholicism - to be English, and later British, was to be Protestant. In addition, most calendars included November 5th, The Gunpowder Plot - the day that "marked the foiling of Guy Fawkes's attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605" and King William's invasion against Catholic King James II in 1688.[39] This day dripped with anti-Catholic sentiment and became an umbrella for Protestants to unite under. However, calendars rarely included Christian holidays such as Easter or Christmas because Puritans purposefully separated themselves from extravagance. In Samuel Sewall's diary he states: The Puritans "came hither to avoid anniversary dates" like Christmas, because they represented Roman Catholic influence that remained in the Anglican denomination.[40] As people continued to immigrate into the colonies over the next 50 years or so, they brought Anglican, Quaker, Baptist, and other influences that diluted the Puritan culture that used to dominate the Boston area.

7. Women's Occupations as an Embroidery Motif

In many pastoral samplers and landscapes, a reclining shepherdess appears. The example of Esther Stoddard's pastoral can serve to highlight this (Figure 15). While her project is dominated by rolling hills and animals, the reclining shepherdess in the lower left region of the picture is the focal point. She is resting against a tree, with her shepherd's crook at her feet and a small spotted dog jumping up into her lap. As a shepherdess, this woman's job is to look after sheep (shown standing to her left) while they graze in the fields. In addition to showing off the landscape and its natural beauty, the reclining shepherdess motif also highlights the woman's control over and association with nature. Although there are no signs of human civilization in this landscape besides the red building behind the hills, her presence implies that the land is occupied and controlled. This power is so absolute that the shepherdess feels comfortable reclining by the tree while the sheep graze. Her expression and body language suggest she is extremely relaxed, despite the flurry of activity happening around her. She is a part of the natural landscape.

Figure 15. Esther Stoddard, *Embroidered Picture of a Reclining Shepherdess,* ca. 1755, wool on linen, Historic Northampton Museum & Education Center, Northampton. http://historic-northampton.org/collections/recliningshepherdess.html

The reclining shepherdess was a popular motif in both embroidery and fine art around the 18th century. She is especially prevalent in the French Rococo period, which glorified harmony, sensuality, and abundance in nature. In 1689, Adriaen van der Werff painted *Shepherd and Shepherdess* (Figure 16), depicting an amorous shepherd couple in a pleasure garden. The woman's dress has fallen, exposing her breasts, while she looks directly at the viewer. The shepherd is enamored with his partner and holds her reclining form in his lap. The painting is very sensual but clearly shows power in the shepherdess's hands, not unlike the figure's presence in embroidered pastorals.

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Figure 16. Adriaen van der Werff, *Shepherd and Shepherdess*, 1689, oil on wood panel, Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shepherd_and_Shepherdess_1689_Adriaen_van_der_Werff.jpg

Francois Boucher, a prominent artist in the Rococo period, has multiple pieces featuring reclining shepherdesses, including *Shepherd and Shepherdess*, and *Shepherdess and Child* (Figures 17 and 18). Both show the shepherdess with another person: in the first, she is a young girl reclining on a young boy's lap, and in the second, she is seated next to a small child apathetically. The first appears to be a more innocent depiction of the scene than in van der Werff's painting because the teenagers are resting in a garden and the boy is about to give the girl a flower, but there is no whiff of sexual or passionate love. A cultural artifact from the Elizabethan era was the association of shepherdesses with innocence, discipline, and virtue.[41] These values and images frequently made their way into American embroideries, along with the motifs of strawberries and Adam and Eve.

Figure 17. Francois Boucher, *Shepherd and Shepherdess*, 1760, oil on canvas, Staatliche, Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe. https://g.co/arts/mFCXxy7uYZWZFgvVA

Figure 18. Francois Boucher, *Shepherdess and Child*, ca. 1766, black and white chalk on brown paper, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston. https://collections.mfa.org/objects/168722/shepherdess-and-child?ctx=84df6b1a-9def-4d9a-8f4f-43903347bda8&idx=9

The shepherdess with the child seems entirely uninterested in the child beside her as she stares off into the distance behind them. Although pictures of women and children are typically assumed to be a mother with her children, there is nothing to suggest that in this drawing besides the alternate title, *Young Peasant Woman with Her Son.* These depictions of shepherdesses in fine art combine to create the typical motif of a shepherdess in 18th century American embroidery: she is reclining out in a garden or her fields, expressing her individual agency, looking directly at the viewer, and ignoring whoever might appear with her. In embroideries, a woman might be depicted with a suitor, but he usually appears on the other side of the frame, and she is never depicted with a child. The reclining shepherdess is an expression of power, sensuality, and virtue, making her a popular role model for young women - she represents both the purity desired by reigning institutions and the rebellion against them.

A common motif of people and couples in 18th century pictorial embroideries – as opposed to samplers – is the "fishing lady," usually featured in the center of the frame. Fishing was a pastime for the upper class colonial society, and men would socialize through angling clubs. Andrea Pappas, an art history professor at Santa Clara University, cites a housekeeping manual called *The Accomplish'd Lady's Delight* by Hannah Wooley that lists angling along with cooking, beauty, and home remedies, suggesting that fishing was a skill that a proper lady of the house should know.[42] This motif was especially common in Boston finishing school embroideries, but also appears in portraits, prints, and on decorative porcelain. The artist who transferred the fishing lady from prints to embroidery patterns is unknown, but scholars currently suspect it was copied from a set of playing cards.[43] Since the lady frequently appears in large embroidery pieces with a partner, as well as with couples on either side, Pappas believes she represents a woman's agency during 18th century courting rituals.[44] After a suitor proposes, a woman has the power to accept or decline - she has caught him on the line and can either reel him in or release him back into the pond. Pappas cites Eunice Bourne's chimneypiece (Fig. 6), which features a fishing lady with a suitor, as an illustration of courting at the time.[45]

The chimney piece depicts three scenes of couples - probably the same couple - at what appear to be different stages of their relationship. On the left, the lady is demonstrating her domestic skills by using a drop spindle. She is seated, facing the gentleman who is walking toward her. Both people are wearing hats. There are two smaller figures in the foreground who represent the public, where young adults would typically meet if they had not grown up together. The middle scene shows the fishing lady seated on another rock, with the gentleman behind her. Both figures have removed their hats, showing their close relationship and respect. The lady has a fish on her line, which Pappas suggests is an allegory for the gentleman's proposal.[46] This is where the lady has power in the relationship – in her basket are several more fish to show her angling expertise, and possibly other suitors. She is facing away from the gentleman while he gestures to the third couple, suggesting that she is not entirely interested in him as a partner. The third couple is walking arm-in-arm, showing that the gentleman has made his case well and she has chosen to marry him.

The composition of the people in this piece feels like patchwork, because it is. Women would design their pieces by copying engravings and images from objects around them and composing a new scene like a collage. The last couple in this chimneypiece has been traced back to an engraving by Claudine Bouzonnet Stella. She copied her uncle's artwork - including a 16 piece collection called *Les Pastorales* - and published them as prints in 1667.[47] Although sources have not been identified, the variations on the reclining shepherdess and the fishing lady that Bourne stitched also likely came from popular prints at the time.

This piece could have been informed by the trend of British "conversation pieces" that occurred earlier in the century. This term describes small, multi-person portraits that border on genre paintings.[48] The definition changed over the course of the century, but it began with family portraits of domestic or ordinary scenes. As the genre progressed (before the label was determined), "high life genre scenes" were also described as conversation pieces.[49] Since we do not know what Eunice Bourne or her peers looked like, we do not know if the female figures in the embroidery were recognizably her or some other person in the community, but if they did represent real people this piece would fall nicely into the conversation category.

A relevant portrait to consider is *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* by Thomas Gainsborough (Figure 19). This portrait carries the same combination of couple and landscape that samplers and pictorial embroideries use. The couple is facing out toward the viewer, resting under a tree, and their agricultural field stretches out behind them. There are white animals in the pen in the distance, likely sheep, and a small dog looks up at the couple. The woman is seated, like common embroidery motifs of the reclining shepherdess and the fishing woman, and there is an empty space in her lap between her hands. There is much speculation about what Gainsborough intended to paint there, but some scholars have posited that the space was reserved for the newlyweds' future baby.[50]

Figure 19. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews,* ca. 1750, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London. https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/thomas-gainsborough-mr-and-mrs-andrews

There are a few other motifs in Bourne's piece that also suggest that the three scenes are part of a romantic narrative. In the first scene, the trees have no flowers; in the second, the central tree has a few flowers, and in the final scene there is a tree covered in pink flowers. These plants show love blossoming through the couple's relationship. In addition, the lady's dress changes color from a subtle tan, to bright red, to a pretty white. The color red is often associated with romance and passion, which suits the central scene well. White dresses are also associated with weddings - however, this interpretation is mistaken since white wedding dresses were only made popular by Queen Victoria in the mid-19th century. The third scene also features mated ducks in the pond in the foreground, easily reflecting the couple behind them. Through the use of many romantic motifs from the world around her, Eunice Bourne created a fantasy with her free time.

During this period, courtship was initiated by men, and they sought out a few different traits in their potential partners: "good temper and a virtuous demeanor… beauty, wealth, and intelligence."[51] At the end of the century, children were inheriting less land from their parents (therefore limiting their parents' marital control), there were more women than men living in the towns, and so young people were allowed to indulge in less formal romantic relationships prior to marriage.[52] One practice - called "bundling" - allowed women to spend the night with a suitor before they got married, but this act of sexual liberation was snuffed out by upper classes as the century came to a close.[53] This was not everyone's opinion though; John Adams wrote in his autobiography that he could "not wholly disapprove of Bundling."[54] Betty Foot writes in her diary about how her cousin Ellen had been "sparked" by her lover, and that he would come over in the middle of the night and keep Ellen in bed past eight in the morning (Betty did not seem too pleased about this).[55] The couple was married a few weeks after this entry, but the ceremony itself was more or less insignificant in the diaries. Although parents discouraged their children from being promiscuous, the changing culture allowed young adults to have more agency in their romantic lives.

These images of working women - the reclining shepherdess and the fishing woman - were a cultural compromise in terms of the amount of power a woman had over her own life. To a girl's parents or teachers, these figures represented good role models that promoted innocence, purity, affluence, and discipline. However, their underlying

meanings gave young women an outlet for agency. A lone shepherdess demonstrated power over her flock and the land they grazed, and could choose to be promiscuous if the opportunity arose. The fishing woman showed her power by participating in an activity only the affluent had time to do, and by metaphorically catching and releasing her suitors. The very existence of these intricate designs proves that these young women spent much of their time embroidering instead of getting up to no good, preventing idle hands. However, embroidery is not a mentally challenging activity, so these scenes offered young women romantic experiences to daydream about while they worked. That is not to say these women did not get to shepherd or fish or spend time with their suitors, but it is clear these women spent a lot of time embroidering.

8. The Motifs of Portraits and Homes

In addition to stitching more or less generic images of women, artists could also embroider self portraits. Prudence Punderson, a young woman from Connecticut, created a piece called *The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality* around 1775 (Figure 20). It is composed of three combined scenes, similarly to Eunice Bourne's piece. On the right is an enslaved black girl caring for a baby in a cradle, in the center is a young white woman seated at a table, and on the left is a coffin monogrammed with the initials "P.P." lying on another table. These figures appear in the same lavishly decorated room, with curtains, a checked floor covering, a picture on the wall, and a mirror draped with cloth - all of which represent the family wealth.[56] These items (and the enslaved person) were all accounted for in an inventory of the family's property from around the same time, and taken with the initials on the coffin it can be assumed that this portrait represents Prudence in the three stages of existence: birth, life, and death. Pictures like the one Prudence depicted on the wall were typically part of a series that told a Bible story.[57] At this time, framed pictures nearly always had some sort of narrative meaning, whether it was an explicit historical or mythological story or, as was the case in portraits, it upheld a narrative around the person depicted.

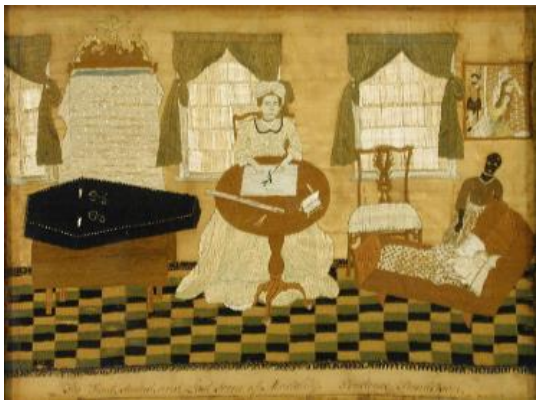

Figure 20. Prudence Punderson, *The First, Second, and Last Scenes of Mortality*, ca. 1783, silk on linen, The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford. http://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Citizens%20All%20Doc7.pdf

Especially during the creation of the United States, portraits became political. Robert Blaire St. George, author of *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture*, states "It is clear that in the mime show of the portrait… certain fictions and ideals are being asserted that helped the early modern family adjust to the status of new economic and social relationships."[58] While the founding fathers were scrambling to construct a new governmental power system, a new economic system was also developing - without a king, New England elites like Prudence's father became the biggest fish in the pond. These upper class citizens benefited from the status quo, so they sought to reestablish a hierarchy by representing themselves as the "republican order."[59] Portraits were a way of establishing the power narrative visibly and publicly, where "private interests assume[d] public significance."[60] Wealthy people recognized that the new government would afford the common man more power through voting, so they had many of their possessions depicted with them in their portraits, like the curtains and furniture in Prudence's self portrait, in order to remind others of their wealth and influence, and therefore their perfect lifestyle. People could even exaggerate their status in portraiture as a form of subtle propaganda.

In addition, many subjects had their neoclassical homes portrayed in the background of their portraits. This served two purposes: showing off wealth, and visibly establishing a new fashion that associated the subject with the

classically inspired government. According to St. George, "any new power which wants to assert itself must also enforce a new chronology; it must make it seem as though time had begun with it," in other words: this is the genius of the neoclassical era.[61] By basing the new system of government on the Greek democracy and Roman republic, early Americans rooted themselves in traditions older than the British monarchy. The United States became a closely related descendent of the Roman Empire, which provided credibility on the world stage.

Artists and architects immediately began to adopt classical art styles in order to emulate republicanism. This is apparent in buildings like Monticello, but it trickles down into embroidery as well. For example, Mary Munro stitched a beautiful sampler with a brick building, columns, and amphoras in 1788 (Figure 21). These neoclassical elements became symbols for wealth, security, equality, anti-monarchy, and other parts of the new American identity. Munro was a student at a well known girls academy in Providence, Rhode Island, where she was taught by Mary Balch. While the brick building featured in Mary Munro's embroidery is unknown, other pieces from Miss Balch's school have been identified according to the iconic Providence buildings they depict. By instructing girls to embroider neoclassical motifs and buildings, teachers instilled in them a sense of patriotism.

Figure 21. Mary Munro, *Embroidered Sampler*, 1788, silk on linen, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/14093

9. New Century, New Country

Following the American Revolution, embroidery motifs remained largely the same. Young girls still needed to practice simple stitches with the alphabet and basic figures, the majority of the new country was still Protestant, and plants never went out of style.[62] The biggest changes seen around the turn of the century were the introduction of memorial pieces, increased use of neoclassical motifs, and a shift from general pastoral scenes to specific narrative moments in pictorial embroideries.

On December 14th, 1799, George Washington died.[63] As the first president of the United States, General Washington filled the void left by King George in the minds of the American people - it is important to remember here that British culture made a point of arranging the calendar and therefore the citizens' lives around important dates of the monarchy.[64] In this way, many citizens felt as if "our country mourns a father," placing a symbolic familial relationship on the country's first executive.[65] This led to national mourning events and activities, as well as the production of memorial objects like engraving prints, dishes, and embroidered pictures.[66] One of the engravings available was *America Lamenting Her Loss At the Tomb of General Washington*, published by James Akin and William Henry Harrison in January, 1800 (Figure 22). This engraving features several motifs that appear in contemporary mourning pieces, whether they memorialize the former president, a family member, or remain blank intended for a future death in the family. It is also the source material for an anonymous embroidery made around 1810 (Figure 23). Both pieces feature a central obelisk topped with a funeral urn, a female mourner (a personification of America) kneeling at the obelisk, a weeping willow tree to her right, and an eagle front and center. According to Lengel, "the weeping willow tree symbolized the vernacular expression of life, knowledge, and death."[67] The obelisk, and the central depiction of

Washington's bust on the engraving, are derived from neoclassical architecture and monuments. The bald eagle is one of the United States' first national symbols, inspired by the Roman's symbol of the golden eagle. In 1782, while Congressional committees designed the official seal, they decided on a bald eagle holding thirteen arrows and an olive branch under the phrase "E Pluribus Unum," and from that point on the bird represented the US in various allegorical contexts.[68] The US was also personified as a woman in this piece, which falls in line with Washington's symbolic fatherhood of the nation and the subsequent value of Republican Motherhood.

Figure 22. James Akin, Joseph Write, *America Lamenting Her Loss At the Tomb of General Washington,* 1800, engraving (ink on paper), George Washington's Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon. https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/sc-16/

Figure 23. Anonymous, *America Lamenting Her Loss at the Tomb of General Washington,* ca. 1810, silk, metallic thread, watercolor and ink on silk, Private Collection. http://antiquesamplers.com/memorial/american-lamenting-washington.htm

Michelle Burnham, an expert in early American literature, argues that this personification of the new nation is rooted in the popularity of "female captive" novels immediately prior to and during the Revolutionary war.[69] Initially, the Puritans viewed print works as tools for their Discipline, because reading was a private act of improving one's mind and relationship with God; however, as the population grew and diversified, print was utilized for "resistance to authority" and discourse in the new public sphere.[70] The captive female trope had existed for many decades before the war, but during that time American colonists saw themselves in the archetype through their rocky relationship with

Britain - the colonies were the slave, child, or captive, and the British crown was the master, parent, and captor.[71] At the time, power was associated with corruption, so the underdog trope of a captive had to be represented by someone indisputably pure and virtuous: the young woman.[72] In this way, the American Republic was "constructed in the image of a woman," and therefore easily personified as one in patriotic embroideries and other popular images.[73]

Part of the Revolutionary version of the female captive was her ability to fight back against her oppressors. This can be seen in the woodcut on the title page of *A Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, where she is shooting a musket at racist caricatures of indigenous people who have come to capture her. This is not a scene in the novel (instead she escaped with her child in her arms), and the woodcut was likely inspired by the famous Boston Massacre engraving that hit the papers three years prior to the 1773 edition of the book.[74] During the Revolutionary War (and during subsequent wars, especially during the 20th century) women gained extra agency in the public sphere due to the absence of their male family members and the need for strong political opinions and actions. Women exercised that agency through boycotts and petitions against British companies, public protests and riots, production of war goods (such as extra clothing and rations), and even participated in or near battles as nurses, cooks, companions, spies, smugglers, or by dressing up as male soldiers.[75] This led to a national respect for women, and especially their roles as mothers and teachers after the war - they were the first connection a child had to the world around them, and therefore they had a lot of influence. Burnham calls this reverence "the cult of republican motherhood."[76] So, how are these values reflected in embroidery?

Two particular pictorial embroideries come to mind - *These Are My Jewels*, wrought by Lydia Bowels Austin circa 1803, and *Cornelia and the Gracchi*, stitched by Lydia Very in 1808 (Figures 24 and 25). They both were very likely copied from an engraving called *Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi*, published by Bartolozzi in 1788, which was copied from a painting by Angelica Kauffmann (Figures 26 and 27). All four pieces feature a woman in the center holding a child's hand, two boys to the left, and a noble woman seated on the right, who is holding fine jewelry. They are all dressed in brightly colored tunics and togas, and appear to be inside a stone or concrete building, with a plain column in the background. This image comes from a Roman legend about Cornelia:

> "Cornelia, the daughter of the Great Scipio and wife of the consul Sempronius, was one day in company with some Roman ladies, who were shrewing their trinkets and admiring their jewels, and whose minds seemed wholly occupied about their dress; observing Cornelia sit silent among them, they ask to shew them her jewels upon which with a true maternal pleasure she called her children to her and presenting them to the company of ladies said; 'these are my ornaments; these are my jewels whom I have endeavoured to educate to the good and glory of their country.'"[77]

Cornelia represented the ideal republican mother, who prized her children above all else. The children are carrying a slate and a scroll emblazoned with the letters "ABC," to express that they are educated. Images such as these were popular because they idolized the Roman culture, which the early US tried to imitate. Other legends like Cornelia made their way into the American psyche, providing lots of artistic inspiration and role models to embrace. It is no surprise that this art made its way into homes through embroidery - these motifs represented teachable values and a woman's agency.

Figure 24. Lydia Bowles Austin, *These Are My Jewels*, ca. 1803, silk on silk, National Museum of American History, Washington D.C.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1321726

Figure 25. Lydia Very, *Cornelia and the Gracchi*, 1808, silk on linen, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem.[9]

Figure 26. Francesco Bartolozzi, *Cornelia, Mother of Gracchi*, 1788, colored stipple engraving on paper, National Galleries Scotland, Edinburgh.
https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/24982/cornelia-mother-gracchi-1788

Figure 27. Angelica Kauffman, *Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi, Pointing to Her Children as Her Treasures*, ca. 1780, painting, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

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10. Conclusion

In the 18th century, New England culture changed drastically. The century started with the Puritan led Massachusetts Bay colony from England, whose population began to change as England formed the British Empire and more people immigrated to the New World. The colonies grew in fits and starts, encroaching on indigenous land and having trouble balancing their economy with Britain. This escalated into the Revolutionary War, and ended with the creation of the United States. The new country had to fabricate foundations and values that opposed their previous leader, and they ended up emulating classical art, writing, and governmental theory.

Throughout the century, there was a constant: women embroidering. Their motifs reflected the culture as it trickled down from executive governmental officials and the fine art world. American women embroidered Adam & Eve, the Fishing Lady, the Reclining Shepherdess, pleasure gardens and expansive pastorals; love stories, self portraits, and animals; and after the Revolution, they incorporated neoclassical, republican design and narratives into their artwork. Narratives of romance and occupations showcase the parts of women's lives where they felt most in control. Women, especially in the upper class, were able to choose what direction their lives took through their suitors, their jobs, their hobbies, and their chores. Artists stitched what they wanted to have: freedom, power, and love. The motifs were inherited and passed on, but their variations provide great insight into the lives of young women in the New England colonies.

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