

Extraordinary embroidery: hidden histories of ordinary girls revealed through their sewing



Sampler with framing border, 1795. Inscribed 'Sarah Williamson'

Sampled Lives: Samplers from the Fitzwilliam Museum

On show until 8/04/2018 | Sasakawa Fan Gallery (34)

Catalogue written by Carol Humphrey | ISBN: 978-1-910731-07-9

Coloured silks and metal threads, white-work and needle lace... Over 120 beautifully embroidered samplers, some hundreds of years old, have gone on display in Cambridge in the exhibition *Sampled Lives: Samplers from the Fitzwilliam Museum*.

Each one meticulously stitched by a girl or young woman, the samplers and accompanying book give a glimpse of past lives: from mid-17th century English Quakers to early-20th-century school pupils. The skill employed in making them is remarkable – works by girls as young as nine years old are shown.

Very rarely seen due to their fragility and sensitivity to the light, several samplers have been newly conserved and cleaned for the show. This will be the first time so many fine examples from the Fitzwilliam's outstanding collection of samplers have gone on display together.

The sampler was an essential part of a young woman's education. It showed much more than just her ability with a needle and thread – it was a stitched CV, representing her competence to run a future home, or for seeking employment where such needle skills would be to her advantage.

Samplers were also a work of creativity and pride, some containing hidden messages in the symbols and images used, referring to the girls' political or religious beliefs. Many are stitched with

names and ages. In some cases it is the only surviving document to record the existence of an ordinary young woman.

As the centuries progressed the sampler also became part of exercises towards literacy. Stitched prayers and odes to charity and faith adorned the fabric alongside alphabets and numerals. The displays highlight the importance of samplers as documentary evidence of past lives, revealing their education, employment, religion, family, societal status and needlework skills. A fully-illustrated catalogue by Carol Humphrey, Honorary Keeper of Textiles, includes new high resolution photography to reveal the intricacy of the coloured silk stitches. It explores some of the personal stories that archival and genealogic research has revealed, as well as showing the evolution of different embroidery styles.

It is hoped that the exhibition and book of *Sampled Lives* will stimulate further research, revealing more about the hidden histories of their makers.

Carol Humphrey commented: "The samplers are a stunning example of the needlework of the past and a masterclass for anyone interested in the changing fashions and styles of embroidery over the centuries. Much has changed in the study of samplers during the last thirty years or so. Now samplers can be seen as a valid means of studying the circumstances and material culture of their makers. When researched in depth, they can reveal not only personal details about an individual girl but also provide a key to family histories. We hope that visitors will enjoy discovering more about the techniques and past lives revealed in the exhibition and the book, and that further discoveries will come to light in the future."

- Ends -

Notes to editors:

For all enquires please contact the Fitzwilliam Museum Press Office:

Sampled Lives press contact - Lucy Theobald +44 (0) 1223 331630 | lac59@cam.ac.uk

+44 (0) 1223 332941 | press@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00

CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday

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