



Chicago Historical Society



A SAMPLE OF WHAT?

Grade level: Late elementary and middle school

Estimated time: Three class periods

Topic: Samplers as primary sources

Subtopics: Domestic arts and gender roles

Teacher background information

Derived from *exemplum*, the Latin word for example, Webster's Dictionary defines a sampler as a cloth embroidered with designs, mottoes, etc. in different stitches to show a beginner's skill." Research reveals that although this definition is correct, it represents a simplistic view of samplers. While the true origin of samplers remains a mystery, the history behind them is compelling and complicated.

The popularity of samplers peaked between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Embroidery became popular during the 1500s, as the West emerged from the Dark Ages. Only the wealthy could afford the high cost of materials involved in embroidery, and it was used for two specific purposes: to mark clothing which was sent out to be laundered and to tacitly display their wealth and status.

In a world without sewing machines, factories, or modern machinery, women learned to embroider by hand. Originally, embroidery designs were passed from person to person. Hence, the sampler was born. The original sampler was a simple band of cloth which served as a pattern book for reference and could also be used to practice needlework skills.

Even though the first pattern book was printed in 1523, samplers did not become obsolete. In fact, there is documentation that shows that samplers were made in Holland, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, and England. As Europeans settled in the Americas, they brought this tradition with them.

By the seventeenth century, embroidery had become a part of every girl's training, regardless of class.

In the American Colonies, although families could purchase cloth and clothing from England, many made both at home. In a time when women were defined by their roles as wife, mother, and daughter, the domestic arts were a high priority. Every girl had to complete a sampler. They were used as a part of a girl's formal education. As the desire grew to educate all children (specifically for the purpose of reading the Bible) samplers were used to reinforce recognition of the letters and as a way of practicing needlework. As a result, many of the samplers from this period have the alphabet on them.

With the passing of time, samplers continued to evolve. Needlework became less complicated as the focus shifted and samplers were used to exhibit industriousness, piety, and to make a statement about the creator's character. Many samplers had moral or religious inscriptions. Becoming less functional, samplers started to become signs of achievement. Families proudly displayed them in their homes. In fact, by the 18th century, they began to resemble pictures. Borders were added, motifs were symmetrically placed, and samplers took on the proportions of a picture.

By the end of the 19th century, samplers had begun to lose their popularity. With the advent of the sewing machine and the Industrial Age, samplers were no longer considered necessary. While viewed as only a hobby today, samplers not only exhibited personal accomplishment, they represented a tradition and way of life in a young United States.



Key concepts

Samplers, in addition to being sentimental pieces, are primary sources of information about the past. The textile industry, though not exclusive to women, has been traditionally considered a woman's domain. This can be traced throughout history using various documents and sources.

Key questions

What is a sampler? Do samplers have any connection to women in later times and their roles in society? Why were samplers created? What kinds of things were put on samplers? What can we learn from examining samplers? Do you think that samplers are good primary sources?

Goals of this lesson

1. To help students understand the connection between women and the textile industry (sewing, embroidery, etc.) through time.
2. To teach students the importance of examining a primary source carefully.
3. To provide students with an opportunity to examine a sampler and develop an understanding of the importance of samplers as a part of American history.

Objectives

1. Students will cooperatively examine primary sources, making notes of their observations, and draw conclusions about them.
2. Students will develop presentations concerning these primary sources and analyze how they are related.
3. Students will examine a sampler, connecting it to the previously mentioned primary sources and attempting to gain information about its creator, origins, and basic meaning.
4. Students will use basic art supplies to "cross-stitch" their names.
5. Students will write a letter about samplers and incorporate the new information they have learned.

Materials

Master copies of the following documents, images and worksheets are provided.

1. Documents and images from the Chicago Historical Society collection:

- A. *Domestic Monthly* magazine, children's costume page, 1883 (one overhead and one per student in group 1)
 - B. Picture of Family with Sewing Machine, c. 1880–1910 (one overhead and one per student in group 2)
 - C. Picture of High School Program Card, c. 1912 (one overhead and one per student in group 3)
 - D. Picture of Women in Factory, 1903 (one overhead and one per student in group 4)
2. Eliza McCoy Sampler (one overhead and one per student)
Educator note: We recommend using color copies of the sampler, if possible. Color copies will make it easier for students to discern specific details.
 3. "Primary Source Investigation" worksheet (one per student)
 4. Overhead projector
 5. Pens or pencils
 6. Graph paper
 7. Basic art supplies (markers, colored pencils, crayons, and rulers)

Procedures

Educator note: Before beginning this lesson, students should understand the nature of a primary source and how it differs from a secondary source.

Day 1

1. On the board, write: "A primary source is . . ." Solicit answers from your students to begin the lesson. This discussion should be a simple review of information they already know and should take less than five minutes.
2. Divide students into four groups. Distribute a "Primary Source Investigation" worksheet to each student and assign each group a different primary source (see "Materials" items A to D). Explain that each group will work together to examine the source and answer the questions on the worksheet. Ask each team to select one member (or you can assign) to represent the group and present their conclusions at the end of class.
3. Give students sufficient time to discuss among their groups and record their observations. Once

students begin, monitor the time to make sure that each group stays on task, and answer any questions they may have. Five or ten minutes before the presentations are scheduled to begin, remind students that time is almost up and ask them to finish preparing for their presentations. Educator note: During this time, make sure the overhead projector and the overheads of the primary sources are ready to use with the presentations.

4. Reassemble the class for the presentations. One at a time, ask each group representative to come forward and present his or her group's conclusions about their primary source. Display the appropriate primary source using the overhead projector during each presentation. After each presentation, allow students outside the group to ask questions or give additional observations. Afterward, add any important information or facts the students have overlooked.
5. Once the presentations are complete, brainstorm the following questions. What did you learn by examining a primary document? What are some of the challenges? What do all of these documents have in common? What theme appears in each one? (Try to guide students to reach the conclusion that each source has something to do with sewing and either involves or is aimed at women.)
6. Explain to students that they will examine another primary document in the next class. Remind them to keep this exercise in mind and challenge them to remember the things they learned.

Day 2

1. Begin by briefly reviewing the lessons learned in the previous class. Have students explain what they learned in their own words. Educator note: Make sure that the overhead projector is ready to use.
2. Place the copy of the Eliza McCoy Sampler on the overhead projector. As a class, brainstorm the following questions: What is this? What materials were used to make it? How is it related to the primary sources we looked at yesterday? (Guide the discussion so that students recognize the themes of sewing and creating something by hand.)
3. After a few minutes of brainstorming, explain that this is a sampler. Refer to the "Background

Information" section of this lesson, if necessary, to give students basic information about samplers and their history. As a class, write a definition of the word "sampler" and record in on the chalkboard.

4. Explain to students that they will examine the sampler for information about the past. Distribute copies of the Eliza McCoy sampler and write the following questions on the chalkboard.

Sampler Investigation Questions

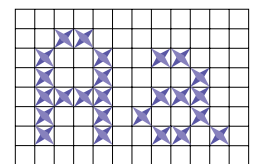
1. Can you determine the date of the sampler? What is it?
2. Why was the sampler was made?
3. Describe the design elements in the sampler. Why do you think these items were included?
4. Based on your observations, provide all of the details you can about the creator of this sampler.
5. Why does this sampler have historical value? What does it tell you about history? Why has a museum preserved it?

Instruct students to examine the sampler and answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper. Give students time to complete the assignment.

5. Hold a class discussion about the assignment. Have the students explain or support their answers. Complete the discussion by asking students to evaluate what is involved in examining samplers. Address the following: What surprising things did you learn about samplers? How might you look at a sampler differently if you were to see one in your history textbook?

Day 3

1. Hold a brief discussion reviewing what students have learned about samplers. Explain that the first samplers were very elaborate and could take a year or more to complete, but as time passed, samplers became simpler and cross-stitch, which is still used today, became one of the most popular sampler stitches. Demonstrate the "x" pattern of cross-stitch on the chalkboard.
2. Distribute sheets of graph paper, art supplies, and copies of Eliza McCoy's sampler. Instruct students to refer to Eliza's sampler as a guide to "cross-



stitch” their first and last names in marker or crayon on the graph paper.

3. After students have completed this task, evaluate the assignment. You may want to pose the following questions: Can you visualize how much harder this would be using thread and needle? Do you have a better understanding of the painstaking work involved? Do you have a better sense of why some samplers were so highly prized?
4. After the discussion, explain the homework assignment and allow students to begin it if time permits.

Homework assignment: Imagine you have discovered a sampler in your home, and it’s over one hundred years old! Write a letter to a friend describing the family sampler you have found and explaining what you have learned about samplers. You may add your own opinions about the sampler and what it means, but remember to include facts that reflect what you have learned in class. Be sure to use the proper format for a friendly letter, including a date, greeting, body, closing, and signature.

Suggestions for student assessment

Use the homework to assess student knowledge and understanding of the subject. You may also evaluate students based on their participation in discussions or their “cross-stitch” samplers.

Extension activities

1. Ask students to cross-stitch their names on a linen square. In advance, purchase linen, needles, thread in various colors, and plastic bags. In each plastic bag, place various colors of thread, a needle, and a square or rectangle of linen. In class, distribute a bag to each student and demonstrate how to cross-stitch. Instruct students to use their paper “cross-stitch” as a guide and explain that they may choose to use a pencil to mark the linen first.
2. Distribute portions of *Love Thy Neighbor: the Tory diary of Prudence Emerson* to your class. (The book chronicles the troubles thirteen-year-old Prudence Emerson and her family faced as Tories living in Greenmarsh, Massachusetts, at the start of the American Revolution.) Ask students to read the diary and note references to embroidery or sewing. Discuss these references and their significance. Note:

Love Thy Neighbor: the Tory diary of Prudence Emerson by Ann Turner (New York: Scholastic, 2003) is available at many branches of the Chicago Public Library or may be purchased at www.amazon.com.

Additional resources

- Baumgarten, Linda. *What Clothes Reveal: the Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*. Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002.
- Cobb, Mary. *A Sampler View of Colonial Life*. Brookfield, Massachusetts: The Millbrook Press, 1999.
- Earle, Alice Morse. *Home Life in Colonial Days*. Stockbridge, Massachusetts: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993.

Web resource

Sampler Motifs: The Meaning Behind the Symbols, www.needleworksamplers.com/Simply_Samplers/sampler_motifs.shtml

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

- State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.
- State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

Social Science

- State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.
- State Goal 18: Understand social systems with an emphasis on the United States.

Fine Arts

- State Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.
- State Goal 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present.

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CHILDREN'S COSTUMES.

TO "let well enough alone" is the commendable purpose of fashion this spring with regard to small women, their styles of dress remaining unchanged as to important points, yet displaying new and striking associations of color and trimming. The fancy for uncommon mixtures is even more conspicuous in children's costumes than in those adopted by grown ladies. Dresses of black and white cashmere for early spring are trimmed with bright scarlet velvet or Sicilienne, and often a skirt of this material will accompany a blouse of the most brilliant color. Prune-color and gold, gray and scarlet, terra-cotta and hydrangea-blue are some of the contrasts used.

Foulards, satteens, and other fabrics of mixed colorings made up for little and also for well-grown girls are combined with a plain material to correspond, and this matches in color the ground of the figure. The finish is either according or piping of the plain, used in all suitable portions of the costume. Sometimes the skirt-flounce shows several rows of narrow piping, and pleats or tucks passing down the front and back have a piping on the edge of each.

Little girls' dresses are half Mother Hubbard styles, the fronts being smooth, with a vest of rich color and fabric, and the back having a yoke and shirred breadths below. Light cashmeres and spring woollens show shirred yokes and pleated bodies, or pleated yokes and closely massed shirrs in the center of the body. Embroidery ruffles of the material or of batiste or silk Surah matching the dress make the trimming for such dresses.



FIG. 14.—For description, see page 38.

A great many buttons are employed on little girls' costumes, and small sizes are placed quite close together. The opposite order prevails for large girls' toilettes.

For spring wear the new Devonshire and Scarboro'

serges are made dressy with a trimming of striped plush in such bright mixtures as red, blue, green, and old gold. Narrow little fringes, such as are used upon Turcoman upholsteries for parlors, are made of silk and used sparingly upon little girls' dresses, their more elaborate toilettes showing lace and gauze in

ruffles, festoons, and what French dressmakers call half-sashes. Such showy dresses do not display buttons, as these are concealed under laps, hems, etc.

White cashmere is the most fashionable material now employed for little girls' handsome dresses, the chosen trimming consisting of expensive silk embroidery in brilliant colors, or a pattern-work of silk braid.

For cold days in spring, there are now entire suits of ribbed Jersey cloth or English coteline. The waist is plain, and the skirt kilt-pleated, the joining seam at the hips being covered by a sash of satin merveilleux, trimmed on the ends with balls. A Jersey suit of this kind is of dark blue, and the sash of a lighter shade.

The Greenaway models, still in vogue for very little girls, are much worn in fine wool fabrics over tucked waists and full sleeves.

GIRLS' COATS, SACQUES, ETC.

Very few young girls wear black wraps, the preferred styles being of dark brown, seal-brown, tan color, fawn, and mastic. A vicuña cloth sacque trimmed with seal brown ribbed plush is of doe-color, and fastens with buttons and loops of silk chenille.

Tall girls are wearing the graceful redingote and



FIG. 13.—For description, see page 37. For quantity of material, see page 40.



FIG. 15.—For description, see page 38.

long walking-coat and the stylish French sacque with folded sleeves. Such garments are usually of cloth, the dress skirt corresponding, and are fastened with handsome repoussé buttons. Walking-coats are also of flax-gray vicuña cloth trimmed with gray silk cord



Family with sewing machine, c. 1895. Chicago Historical Society: ICHi-03911

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|---|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| M | Sewing Norton | Geom Moser | Study Hald | Eng ⁴ Hulband | Gen Lupman | Sing |
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| W | Sewing Norton | " | Sewing | " | " | Geom H. |
| T | Sewing Norton | " | " | F. H. D. Huntz | " | Sing |
| F | Sewing Norton | " | Study Long | Eng ⁴ | " | Geom H. |

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Women working in a factory, 1903. Chicago Historical Society: ICHS-20249



Sampler by Eliza McCoy, c. 1800. Chicago Historical Society.

PRIMARY SOURCE INVESTIGATION

The primary source your group received is a copy of a collection item from the Chicago Historical Society. Examine it carefully and use it to answer the following questions. Remember to work together as a group.

1. Look at your source carefully. What is it? Is this a picture or a document? Describe it.

2. Does the source include a date? _____

If yes, what is it? _____

If not, what year do you think it may be? Why?

3. Study your source carefully and write down your observations.

A. If this is a picture, who are the subjects? What are they doing? What are their facial expressions?
Are they posed? If so, what might this mean?

B. If this is a document, what is it? What was its purpose? Who is the intended audience?
Are there any bolded words? If so, what is their significance?

4. Look closely at your primary source and think carefully. What does it tell you?

What story is attached to this source?

5. Why does this source have historical value? What does it tell you about history?

Why has a museum preserved it?

After you have answered these questions, discuss your overall impression of the source, and help your speaker prepare to present your conclusions to the class.

HISTORY LAB | FEEDBACK FORM

Please give us your feedback! After reviewing and using this *History Lab* lesson, please send us your feedback. Your ideas and honest assessment will ensure that these lessons keep improving and will provide us with useful insight for future teacher fellows. To fill out this form online or discover additional *History Lab* activities, visit the educators section of the Chicago Historical Society's website at www.chicagohistory.org.

Name: _____ E-mail: _____

School: _____ Grade you teach: _____

Are you a CHS member? (circle one): yes no

Name of unit you are evaluating _____

Name of lesson you are evaluating: _____

1. On a scale of one to five (with five being the best) rate this lesson in terms of the quality of the student learning experience it provides (circle one):

5 4 3 2 1

2. What were the strengths of this lesson? _____

3. What aspects of this lesson needed additional fine-tuning? _____

4. What advice, tips, or suggestions would you give to future users of this lesson? _____

5. Where does this lesson fit in your course of study (scope, sequence, unit)? _____

6. If applicable, how did the use of primary sources impact student learning? _____



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Thank you for your time. Please send the completed form to:

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