

# First Marking Samplers

*By Carolyn Beacroft*

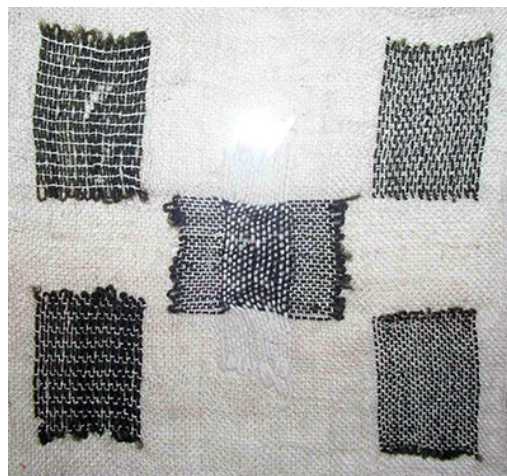
## Background

Samplers (the word comes from the French *essamplaire* meaning a work to be copied) were rough pieces of linen on which the stitcher practiced the various embroidery stitches. These swatches of material became her samples to act as a guide since she lacked books in which the stitches were drawn; hence the sampler word came into use.

Historically, the importance of embroidery stitches is evident. As early as 1524 the first book of patterns for stitching was printed. Paintings done in the 16<sup>th</sup> century show the subject dressed in elaborately embroidered clothing. Embroideries done by Mary Queen of Scots were famous at the time and have been studied and displayed for many years. For an in depth look at textiles read about Bess of Hardwick, a great needlewoman herself, and collector of a vast array of textiles in the Elizabethan period. Embroidery was big industry in the economic world of Europe.

Over the centuries, the sampler evolved into a vast area of study and today ranges from the humble efforts of young children to the sophisticated and artistic work of more mature women. Overlaps of design and skill occur in the various age groups so that it is often difficult to place a sampler in a specific category.

Few examples of the original *essamplaire* exist today. However, two from the 18<sup>th</sup> century show the stitches learned by a child:



*A practice piece circa 1885*



*A fragment of a practice piece done by a schoolgirl.*

## First Marking Samplers

The simplest samplers are the ones called first marking, a term that refers to the first attempt, usually by a child under 10, to stitch the alphabet and numbers on a piece of linen or scrim in cross stitch. Since women traditionally marked their household articles and their clothing, the young children learned early in their lives to make the letters and numbers that would be required to mark linen. The marking of linen was essential in a society that sent out the laundry to be done by local women living nearby.

Working on a scrap piece of linen was also a good way of reinforcing the education of the young girls and many of the early samplers are testament to the quality of the education being received. In some cases the alphabet is complete and in others some of the letters are missing. 'i', 'j', 'u', and 'v' are the letters most often dropped by the stitcher. Some of the very old samplers use an 'f' for 's'. Letters in some cases are out of proportion and spelling mistakes do occur.



*Harriet Smith spells her name wrong the first time.*





*abcb: The stitcher gets the d and b mixed up.*

First marking samplers are often in a font that modern writers would recognize as similar to Times New Roman, although there are examples of cursive script and a clean sharp style similar to Arial.

The material used is generally unbleached linen or scrim (an inexpensive thin canvas used for upholstery) and of a fairly loose weave measuring approximately 20 cm x 20 cm (8" x 8"). Some may be rectangular in shape and slightly larger. Since young children, who likely did not have hoops or frames, did these samplers the material was of a small size.

Borders around the outside of the piece were worked in a simple wave or line using a colour different than that of the letters. The cut edges of the material were rolled and finished.



*A first marking sampler showing the various scripts used, the date, name and age of the stitcher.  
Note: The stitcher forgets the 'v' in the second row of stitches, but remembers it in the lower case and the script section below.*



This is a good example of a variety of scripts. Note that the 'J' is absent consistently. The letter 'G' seems to be out of proportion and the '6' is larger than the others numbers.



Two samplers by the same child, Cornelia Hibbitt. Note the use of the darning stitch and the outline stitching.

The stitcher usually spelled out her full name, age and the year, and sometimes the name of her school. Initials of family members were sometimes included along with the name of the place or county. In most cases the data has come



down in tact but some people studying samplers have been aware of instances where the date has been picked out of an otherwise perfect and completed sampler. The speculation is that the stitcher herself, in later years, picked out the date to slightly adjust her age.



*Cornelia Hibbit's classic first marking sampler.*

*Images used in this article are from the EAC Sampler Registry files and used with the owners' permission.*