

ALICE ROWLES RED SAMPLER EAC- 2003-10



Description: This cheery little sampler, that appears airy and somewhat delicate, may well have been worked in an English classroom during the last quarter of the Victorian era (*Sampler and Antique Needlework*, Vol. 13, p. 9). Completely cross stitched in a red, non-stranded cotton, the upper portion of the sampler contains five bands that feature two alphabets and part of a third, the stitcher's name and initials. The bands are separated by rows of various cross stitch patterns. There is also a cross stitch border. Seven small to medium large and relatively common late 19th Century motifs—dogs, plants and vessels—highlight, somewhat

symmetrical, the lower portion. Embroidered on an ecru, loosely woven evenweave linen, which is 21 threads to the inch, it measures 28 cm wide and is 31.5 cm long. Aside from the spacing of the letters, especially in some of the bands, all stitches throughout the sampler are worked in a noticeably tight tension, which adds to the overall open feeling of the sampler.

The sampler is neatly hemmed on the two sides and top with non-stranded cotton that matches the linen fabric and is approximately the same thickness as the fabric threads. The plain selvage edge is readily identified on the bottom. Meanwhile, the narrow cross stitch border in a V shape design, three stitches up and three down with the sides sharing the top and bottom cross stitches and there are no fabric threads between the hemmed edge and the beginning of the border. All of the cross stitches throughout the sampler are over two threads.

The first band contains upper case alphabet letters from A to O, including J, all of which are seven cross stitches high and over two threads. However there are a couple of discrepancies, as the embroiderer seemingly began the letter L one fabric thread too high, for which she compensated in the middle of the letter, enabling her to complete the L on the right line. She then began the M at the

same height as the L and did not compensate for this difference, so that the letter M, while seven cross stitches high, all over two threads, ends one fabric thread higher than the other letters. The only noticeable deterioration is the letter N, which has several threads missing. Underlining this band is a zigzag cross stitch pattern composed of two stitches on the bottom, one on the side and two on top, with the sides sharing a top and bottom cross stitch.

The remaining upper case alphabet letters, P to Z, form the second band. Interestingly, the Q, often times stitched in the style that appears like a reverse P, is shaped like an O with a tail that flows across the bottom. Even though there are only two fabric threads between the letters and in one instance between the Q and R, just one thread at their widest point, the letters are easily read, as there is sufficient space between the letters either at the very bottom or top to distinguish one letter from the next. There are also six fabric threads above the letters and two below, which gives prominence to the letters. The cross stitch pattern underlining these letters consists of three cross stitches on the bottom, one on each side and one on top, with each side sharing one bottom and the top cross stitch.

The third band displays the second alphabet in lower case letters from a to t, including j. The f is eight cross stitches high, and the other letters with high backs consist of seven cross stitches except the letters t and l which are just six cross stitches high. The lower half of the letters a, b, c, d, e, h, and even k for example, all measure five cross stitches high. The upper oval of the letter g is only four cross stitches high, with one cross stitch acting as a bridge to the lower section. It would appear that the only other exception is the letter r, which begins on the same line as its companions but sits two threads lower, meaning it is in fact six cross stitches high. A slightly more complex cross stitch pattern underlines this lower case alphabet. There are three rows of cross stitch with each cross stitch over two threads, then missing two fabric threads and then another cross stitch over two more fabric threads to the end of the row. Each of the following cross stitch rows begin two threads further to the left than the previous, thereby resulting in three diagonal rows of cross stitch. Unfortunately, the tails of the g and j, created before the cross stitch pattern, sit in some of the cross stitch pattern spaces.

The fourth band is a mix of the remaining lower case letters u to z of the above alphabet and the beginning of a third alphabet, with lower case letters a to k. It is interesting to note that the embroiderer has remained consistent with her choice of letters: the sometimes absent u or v are both included, just as the j was above and is also in the beginning of the third alphabet. This band does exhibit a few discrepancies. The letter u and the upper portion of y, however, is six cross stitches high. In contrast, the letters v, w, x and z are only five cross stitches high and thus sit two threads above the former. With regard to the upper width of the

letters, there are eight fabric threads between the very top cross stitches of the u and y, while there are six stitches in the same area of the v and x. The w with its two spaces has six fabric threads in the top first section and two in the following section. Similarly, there are a few differences in the lower case alphabet letters a to k that fill the remainder of this band. For instance, a and b sit on the same fabric thread and the a and the lower part of b is five cross stitches high. However, the letter c, while still five cross stitches high, sits two fabric threads lower; d sits still another thread lower but due to a fabric thread being missed, the lower portion of d is also five cross stitches high. The remaining letters, e to k, all sit on the same horizontal thread as d and while the lower portions of e, f, h and k are all five cross stitches high, the others are four cross stitches. Some three to six fabric threads below, depending on the variations of the above letters, a basic cross stitch pattern composed of three cross stitches on the bottom, one on the top and three on the bottom underline this band.

The fifth and last band features the embroiderer's name, Alice Rowles, and the initials, B.S. All letters are seven cross stitches high over two threads. There is also a cross stitch on the bottom line at the end of Rowles, separating this family name from the initials of B.S. While it is not known to whom the young embroiderer may be referring, it was not uncommon for students to stitch their teachers' initials or names on their samplers (*Sampler & Antique Needlework*, Vol. 12, p. 18). Underlining this final band is a diamond cross stitch pattern. It begins with one cross stitch on the line which is the point on the left side, one cross stitch up to make the top point of the diamond, the next one on the line for the right point, another cross stitch below the line, making the bottom point of the diamond and then back to the line to begin a second diamond.

The bottom half of the sampler is filled with seven motifs fashioned in what appears to be a symmetrical arrangement, although it is not completely accurate. Two little dogs are somewhat centred at the top and on either side of the dogs there is a plant; a vessel sits below each plant and another vessel with a plant in it is located between the previously mentioned vessels.

With their tails raised and curled, the little dogs stand proudly facing each other, presenting mirror images that in fact are typical of a great variety of similar canine motifs embroidered on samplers from at least the 18th Century onwards (Milne, p. 58). The tiny heads of these little animals are fashioned with three graduated rows of cross stitch—one stitch on top, three making the second row followed by four cross stitches on the third that in fact create a pointed nose; the tiny neck has two short rows of cross stitches while the body, which is again designed in two rows—the top being nine horizontal cross stitches long and the bottom eight cross stitches—rests on the four short legs, each of which are two cross stitches high.

Not unlike the dogs, the plants and vessels are also slight variations of long-time embroidery favourites such as those seen on an early 19th Century Moravian sampler (Piecework, p. 52; Grow, McGrail, p. V11). The stems of the plants comprise 26 cross stitches, each over two threads. Four main branches are adorned by four flowers, another, identical flower, decorates the top of the stems on each plant. The bases of these blooms comprise two rows of three cross stitches, each of which widen to seven cross stitches in the third row, nine in the fourth row and seven again in the fifth row. The shape then narrows with two rows of three cross stitches each and finally one cross stitch on the very top. Both plants also have six short little branches alternating between the above-mentioned main stock.

The vessels or urns in the lower left and right corners are somewhat debatable, as the all-red embroidery does not distinguish between pot and flowers. However, on close examination, it would appear there are leaves rising out of the upper portion of the container, or in actual fact, the bouquet in the container. The vessel rests on a bottom of seven cross stitches and widens over seven rows to the top edge, which is seventeen cross stitches wide and even with the curled handles. The bouquet, suggestive of a pyramid, rises for six rows with two cross stitches at the very top. On the fourth row from the top, a leaf on either side of the bouquet, each of which comprises three tiny rows of cross stitches, sits apart from the floral arrangement. Even though they are all red, the images of the vessel and bouquet are very reminiscent of numerous fruit and flower baskets stitched throughout many generations (Milne, p. 44-45).

The vessel in the centre sits on an inverted cone-shaped base which is not quite centred under the vessel. The vessel displays a plant similar to those discussed above, although it features only three blooms and has a shorter stem of 15 cross stitches. Fairly substantial leaves, each with three rows of cross stitch that are four cross stitches wide, rise out of the pot on either side. Again, these popular images were printed in books and handed down from one family member to another (Sampler & Antique Needlework, Vol.12, p.18-19.).

History: Alice Rowles embroidered this sampler that was donated to the EAC Heritage Collection by T.D.R. (Bob) Caldwell of Saskatoon in September, 2003. While the dates of Alice's birth and her sampler are not known, there is evidence to suggest that her sampler is not unlike those fashioned by British elementary school children in the latter part of the Victorian era. Samplers stitched completely in red speak of the work of orphans and other school children; the alphabets, cross stitch border and motifs at the bottom are also commonplace on children's samplers (King, p. 1, 6-7; Sampler & Antique Needlework, Vol. 13, p.9, Sampler & Antique Needlework, Vol. 20, p. 30-31). It is possible that Alice could have stitched her sampler in the 1880s, perhaps when she was 10 or 12 years old, or even younger. Certainly her sampler attests to the practise of

young girls learning to stitch the alphabet so that one day they would know how to mark linens, either their own or those of others for whom they worked (*Counted Thread*, December, 1991, p. 13; Grow, McGrail, p. 25). In any case, Alice's little sampler is a particular piece of needlework history that speaks of another era, when children learned to embroider at school so that in later years they might be able to account for their precious linens (*Sampler & Antique Needlework*, Vol. 2, p. 5; *Sampler & Antique Needlework*, Vol. 20, p. 30).

Materials: Open evenweave linen, 21 threads to the inch,

Condition: This sampler is in amazingly good condition, especially considering the fact that it is likely more than 100 years old. The only really noticeable deterioration is the loss of several threads in the letter n in the first alphabet. There are, however, numerous knots in the border and elsewhere that are sitting on the right side of the sampler which prompt some queries. Over the years, would the knots have been pushed to the front of the embroidery due to the open mesh and inadequate storage practises, or is it possible that the knots were secured on the front of the sampler when it was being stitched?