

ETHNIC SAMPLER EAC-2005-11

Description: This intriguing and unusual sampler is a stunning example of how social history and traditions are interwoven in the needle art works of the world, no matter where the respective creators live. Nine distinctive images ranging from ancient symbols and designs to various animals and particular techniques reflect the cultures of the following areas from which they originate: China, India, Iceland, Armenia, Ukraine, Mexico, Panama, Egypt and the northwest coast of British Columbia inhabited by the Haida Indians. All of the motifs are contained within squares measuring 68 threads by 68 threads, and are embroidered primarily in bright red, green and yellow embroidery floss and perle cotton. Black and navy cotton threads provide a dramatic contrast. Aside from a surface interlacing stitch, counted thread techniques such as cross stitch, satin stitch, back stitch and pattern darning are worked throughout the sampler. Stitched on a natural linen with a count of 32 threads to the inch, it is completely backed or lined in the same fabric with a one-quarter inch hemstitch on each side and a one and a quarter hemstitch fold at the top and bottom, thereby allowing the brass hangar to pass through the opening. This sampler measures 10.8 centimetres by 62.7 centimetres.



Bone needles that date to 6000 B.C. are indicative of the needlework history of China, represented in the first square by two very old, traditional symbols. In each of the four corners there is the multicultural geometric swastika that speaks of long life, while the design in the centre represents a happy married life. The entire square is stitched in two-ply indigo or navy floss in cross stitch over two threads, all of which maybe likened to some embroideries in

northern China. Chinese stitchers are probably most famous for their intricate Pekinese fillings; short and long, chain, split, buttonhole and seed are some of the other techniques used in much of their work (Gostelow, 250-51; Chung, pp. 168, 31, 24, 22).



The second square features a particular adaptation of the Tree of Life, another long time favourite symbol of many cultures. In this case it aptly reflects India and in particular, the isolated Sind region of Pakistan (Gostelow, p. 242), with its counted satin stitch branches in bright emerald green number 8 perle cotton and the same colour of sequins. The latter decorate the open spaces created when in step formation, nine stitches are worked over six threads, each

stitch moving up one thread until the ninth is reached, and then moving down one thread with each stitch to the ninth when the pattern is repeated. All of the peaks or top threads in each row share the same hole as the lowest thread in the previous row. In addition to the satin stitch, Sind women frequently work their traditional peacock flower and wheel designs in chain, ladder, cretan and especially their own Sind stitch, remindful of Roumanian couching. Their embroideries embellish garments, wall hangings, quilts and covers (Gostelow, p. 240-41).



Highlighting the third square is the whale, a powerful image of the Haida Indians, symbolizing speedy attack and ferocity. While the Assisi style of stitching (Clabburn, p. 21), used here to create a bold image of the whale, is not typical of Haida work, it does capture the traditional use of bright colour and strong design of these early peoples, who maintained stable communities along the northwest coast of British

Columbia. Needless to say, the four pearl buttons are reminders of the once very significant button blankets. After 1850 and the appearance of European traders, button blankets made of imported cloth and pearl buttons replaced the Haida traditional woven blankets that were an expression of totemic images and symbols. Hudson Bay blankets became items of currency used in potlatches and feasts, often covered in "typical clan patterns of the killer whale". Hundreds of buttons edged the blankets and were used to create the whale motifs and other designs (Clabburn, p. 44).



A border portraying both medieval and Celtic influences, plus the image of a reindeer that enhanced a coverlet from eastern Iceland, dating to 1811, depicts Iceland in the fourth square (*Counted Thread*, Sept., 1991). The stag is stitched in two-ply Christmas red and green embroidery floss in cross stitch over two threads. The border is worked in two-ply black floss, also in cross stitch over two threads. Originally inhabited by Vikings

and the British Celtic people who adopted Christianity in 1,000 A.D., Iceland produced primarily religious embroideries, worked by embroiderers and nuns of wealthy families until the Reformation in the mid-1500s. It was at this time that secular embroidery quickly developed with embroiderers decorating everything from chair coverings to wall hangings and bed coverings for their homes; their national costume is embellished with metal thread work. In addition to cross stitch, many Icelandic embroideries are executed in satin stitch, pattern darning, split stitch, metal thread work, bullion knots, couching and drawn thread (Gostelow, p. 60-62; Clabburn, p. 140-141; *Counted Thread*, Sept. 1991).



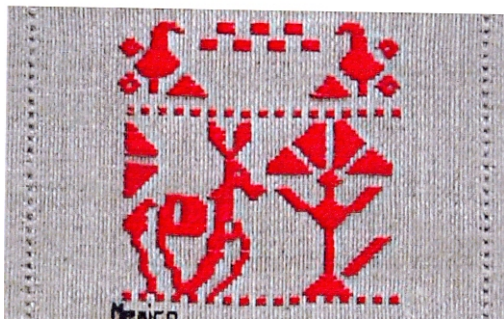
One of the three main embroidery techniques in Armenia, executed in the fifth square of the sampler, is created in three particular steps, each of which is worked in a different colour. Red threads identify the basic row of herringbone and green marks the second row of herringbone that weaves under and over the first row; yellow and navy are used for the interlacing stitches

that follow to complete this interlaced embroidery technique sometimes called Maltese. While it is best to work this stitch in contrasting colours until it is mastered, Maltese interlacing is traditionally worked in one, usually bright colour. Although it is not a counted thread technique, it is executed with great precision on either plain or evenweave fabrics, most often dark blue or black and occasionally red thread (Gostelow, p. 140-41; Nordfors, p. 104). Armenian embroidery that includes both satin and stem stitches originated in the city of Marash, now a part of Turkey, which along with Iran, shares its border with the Republic of Armenia (*Counted Thread*, June 1991).



Three imaginative little borders in a combination of back and cross stitches in the sixth square are meant to reflect Ukraine and its prolific, colourful and lavish embroideries that have embellished ecclesiastical and secular works for centuries. The top border shows the creative use of back stitch worked in two ply black floss and highlighted with red and black cross stitches over two

threads. The second border demonstrates the strong sense of colour of Ukrainian women embroiderers: complementary red and green tones enhance a simple design. The third border again highlights the winning combination of back and cross stitches to create tiny birds parading on a row of black cross stitch over two threads. Ukrainian embroidery is readily recognized because of its bold colour variations and particular techniques. Aside from the two stitches mentioned above, Ukrainian embroideries often feature unique designs worked in a type of flat stitch, "Nastyluvania"; cut and drawn thread and an unusual stitch worked from the back side that might be likened to weaving, which is called "Nyznka" (Ruryk p. 33, 45, 65, 52).



The seventh square features the traditional embroidery of Mexico, rich in both its pre-historic and historic past of influences and beliefs that are often translated into particular designs and bright colours. In this case, the design is taken from a tablecloth and napkins that originated in the town of Acatlan in south central Mexico where the people are totemic, understanding a particular relationship of animals to humans

(*Counted Thread*, Dec., 1985). It is worked entirely in red, two-ply floss in pattern darning, a technique whereby ground threads are counted and the embroidery cotton is woven across the fabric. In addition to pattern darning, Mexican embroideries include a wide range of stitches from satin, fishbone, stem and back to the prolific cross stitch, couching and French knots. At least 50 different cultures of Mexican peoples have retained their traditional costume styles, which continue to distinguish villages and regions (Chloe, p. 82-5, 234, 9). Much effort has been made by the government to preserve this work, while making sure that the quality of the designs and techniques are maintained.



Decorating the eighth square is a two-toned green turtle, meant to reflect the creators of the historic mola—a blouse styled with front and back panels—now almost synonymous with the Cuna Indians, who live on the San Blas Islands, approximately one mile from the mainland of Panama (Clabburn, p. 174). Today, their colourful, many layered, reverse appliqué molas are world renowned: the first models from the mid to late

19th Century comprised only two colours in simple designs, much like the turtle on this ethnic sampler, which, in fact, was adapted from an early mola. Both the turtle and its border are completely cross stitched over two threads in two-ply dark and medium green embroidery floss with two-ply black floss fashioning the eyes. Originally isolated somewhat from the world, the San Blas people decorated their unique molas with motifs that were significant to them—plant and animal life, geometric shapes and pre-Christian spiritual images to name only a few. As the San Blas artists became aware of the outside world, so the mola developed and the artistry became more sophisticated. Political figures, sports, a myriad of consumer goods seen in magazines and even English lettering are translated into fabric images that absolutely fill the front and back surfaces of the mola. Similarly, the earlier accents of beads, shells and bits of broken mirrors are now replaced with embroidery techniques such as chain and running stitch. (Gostelow, p. 14-15; Meilach and Menagh, p. 119-126).



The ninth and last square on this small, but informative sampler, from both an historic and needlework point of view, represents “the land of linen”, otherwise known as Egypt, where fragments of cloth have been found dating to 4500 B.C. (Wilson, p. 12). However, the sampler design is a repeat pattern from an Egyptian textile fashioned sometime between the 13th and 14th centuries A.D.,

during the Mamluk period, when Egypt was ruled by a military caste (New World Dictionary; *Counted Thread*, Dec. 1985). It is completely executed in cross stitch in navy two-ply embroidery floss. Bone needles, both notched and with eyes of Egyptian origin and now in the British Museum, date to 3,000 B.C., although the earliest Egyptian embroideries still existing today can only be traced back to the first Egyptian Christians, later known as Copts (*Counted Thread*, March 1992).

Coptic embroideries were worked primarily in chain, cross, satin, stem, split and whipped running stitches. By the 15th Century, some samplers were being executed in double running, split and pattern darning in silk on linen featuring geometric box designs reminiscent of Islamic artistry. Master dyers, Egyptians since prehistoric times have enjoyed colours such as yellow from safflower, blue from indigo and red from the madder vine (Gostelow, p. 200).

History: Betty Hamilton, who is a member of the Island Stitchery Guild in Nanaimo, British Columbia, designed this Ethnic Sampler course in 1998. Upon request, Betty graciously shared her historic research and embroidery charts with the Regina Stitchery Guild. Members in both the Tuesday afternoon and Thursday evening stitch-in groups in 2000-2001 enrolled in the course under the instruction of Karen Goodman, the Regina Stitchery Guild program person. Janice Routley, a charter member of the Regina Stitchery Guild and an appointee of the Embroiderers' Association of Canada, embroidered this sampler and while the course provided instructions for an Ethnic Pillow Sampler, Janice fashioned an Ethnic Sampler hanging. She also included the names of each of the respective cultures that the squares represent. In 2005, Janice Routley donated this sampler to the Heritage Collection of the Embroiderers' Association of Canada.

Materials: Natural linen with a count of 32 threads, navy, dark and medium green, red, yellow and black embroidery floss, red perle cotton, green perle cotton green sequins, four white pearl buttons and brass hardware with a chain.

Condition: This unusual little Ethnic Sampler is in excellent condition, although some of the hemstitch threads on the back appear worn.