

## MARY WILLIAMSON SAMPLER EAC-2003-13



**Description:** This large, multicoloured Berlin wool work sampler that would have been a showpiece in the embroiderer's home, while worn and faded 145 years later, still clearly defines that unique embroidery period. The extensive floral border, other blooms in the four respective corners just below the border and the focal point—a cozy looking home sheltered by various trees and shrubs with animals and birds nearby—are all favourite motif themes that were charted in popular magazines and readily copied by needlewomen throughout Europe, England and America (p. 204-05, Bath). Perhaps most important of all, however, is the fact that the embroiderer signed her name, Mary Williamson, and dated her work, 1859. Colours range from bright reds and blues to faded yellows, browns, beiges, mauve, greens and pinks, with some orange and black. It is all cross stitched over two threads on canvas, 24 threads to the inch, and measures approximately 59 centimetres square.

Fairly large blooms, buds and greenery shape the borders, which seemingly comprise of only three particular flower designs that are repeated several times along the respective sides of the embroidery. While the flowers are not readily identifiable, possibly because of the different colour treatments of each, one design is reminiscent of a pansy, another of a morning glory. Beginning at the top on the left, the first flower is primarily red with some pink and a few yellow cross stitches at the centre of the petals; the stem is red and pink with leaves stitched in muted greens and browns highlighted with a few red-rust cross stitches all over two threads. The next two flowers, that look somewhat like a pansy, are cross stitched in light yellow and have light tangerine centres. Following is a simpler, smaller flower, basically round except for the uneven edges suggesting individual petals, which looks a little like a morning glory stitched in the yellow and green wools. The next flower is the same design as the red, but worked in tan and light brown colours and, while the leaves are mostly green, one has three small areas cross stitched in rust. Two deep blue and yellow blooms like the above "pansy" yellows are next and second last in the row is another flower like the morning glory motif, cross stitched in medium and dark blue with a yellow and tangerine centre. The last flower is another red, treated like the above with red and pink cross stitches also outlining some stem and leaf areas. A portion of a lower leaf that is part of the red flower motif is highlighted in rust.

The right border displays the same flowers as on the left, but the arrangement and some colours are different. In addition, there are only eight flowers on the right side, compared to nine on the left. A marked difference is that there is practically no red, except in a leaf and stem at the very top. While there is one set of pansy-like flowers worked like the yellows on the left, another is worked in deep blue and tangerine. The flowers that are red on the left, are pink and beige tones on this side, while the morning glory designs are much the same with one stitched in the yellow and outlined in light green and the other in deep blue, both of which have a few cross stitches of orange in their respective centres.

Both top and bottom borders display nine flowers. While there are similarities, distinctions are easily noted, especially with regard to the red flower design. There are no red flowers along the top, although one rests on the bottom. However two other flowers on the top, somewhat designed like the red, are stitched in completely different colours: one is in shades of pink and beige, the other in mauve and beige tones that may be likened to mauve on the bottom border. There are two leaves and a bud highlighted in rust wool also on the bottom, while one leaf and a stem, partially stitched in rust wool, decorate the top. There are two sets of the pansy-type flowers, one dark blue with pink, the other in shades of light blue on both the top and bottom. The latter borders also begin and end with the morning glory motifs. Those in the upper left and lower

right corners are worked in dark and medium blues with yellow and tangerine centres. The motifs in the upper right and lower left corners of the respective borders are more muted, light blues with a tangerine centre are worked on the top right design, while the same morning glory design in the bottom left corner is cross stitched in soft yellows and greens.

A floral design decorates each corner below the border. On the left, a large rust-red rose with 10 yellow-green leaves rests on a two-toned brown stem. Several layers of petals are outlined in red wool, as opposed to the rust covering most of the rose. The veins of the leaves are stitched in a darker green. One bottom leaf is medium brown with its centre vein in dark green. Two leaves at the top harbour a small red bloom and a tiny red bud. All told, this motif at its highest point is approximately 51 cross stitches high and 54 cross stitches wide.

A smaller flower, possibly a rose, in a light beige with various sections outlined in a light terra cotta wool, graces the right corner. It is supported by nine leaves, all cross stitched in light green with darker veins. One leaf at the bottom is stitched in both medium and dark browns, while a small adjacent leaf is a very dark brown. This motif measures approximately 42 cross stitches wide by 39 high.

In the lower right corner a floral arrangement cascades over the sides of a basket. Two of the blooms in the centre front are stitched in red and rust with white, beige and pink outer edges. Other floral highlights decorating stems or shown in clumps are in deep blue, red, pink and rust. On either side, two relatively large, two-toned light green leaves flow over the edges of the basket; numerous other leaves help shape the rounded bouquet that measures approximately 41 cross stitches high by 34 cross stitches wide (p. 39, Milne).

The cornucopia motif with its array of flowers which decorates the lower left corner of this Williamson sampler, actually originated during the Berlin wool work era. While most of these cone-shaped containers were portrayed resting on the side with fruits or flowers flowing from the top in abundance, there are those, as the literature states, presented in an upright manner so that the bottom end might almost double as "the handle of the large bouquet" (p.87, Pl. VI, Grow, McGrail). In other words this standing cornucopia stitched in beige and yellow wools may be among the unusual. At any rate, the blooms it holds range from dark blue to bright red, and coral pink to yellow and off-white. There are five readily defined leaves in light green and yellow; other bits of stitched greenery appear amongst the flowers. This motif measures approximately 33 cross stitches high by 30 cross stitches wide.

Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of this sampler is indeed the main design in the centre of the embroidery. Almost all Berlin wool work, no matter the motifs—animals, landscapes, floral arrangements and family life—is

portrayed in a wholesome, positive manner; blemishes or conflicts were rarely, if ever seen. Pets were docile and homes peaceful. However, here again, the Williamson sampler provides some relief from the many idyllic portrayals. While a cozy little cottage in off-whites and pink with a tan roof peaks through an abundance of shadowy bushes and trees, mostly worked in muted greens, browns, yellows, tans, and pinks to give a sense of peace, all is not quiet. On either side of the bushes, two relatively large dogs, one light brown and white, the other tan, appear to be in pursuit and wanting to join in the activity that is obviously out of reach. High in the branches, a light red and green parrot calmly appraises the situation, while a chattering brown squirrel, perhaps the instigator of the excitement, appears to romp through the light green-yellow foliage. Skyward, and seemingly playing major roles in this ground-to-air sport, are eight different birds—deep blue, orange, light yellow and brown—all flapping their respective wings at once, enticing the dogs to coach from the sidelines. Shadows in blue-green and light yellow greens, yellows, beiges, and tan, with a few dark green and brown stitches for accent provide depth in the foreground that reaches almost to the borders on either side.

Whether leaves, branches, patches of grass on the ground or even the walls of the house, few lines are clearly defined; shapes are shaded and blended in an impressionistic, painterly fashion with all cross stitches are over two threads, except in one area. The birds overhead and the green parrot and brown squirrel in their lofty positions are all cross stitched over one thread.

The embroiderer's name, Mary Williamson, is centred below and cross stitched in a fine script style over one thread in a dark brown silk. The upper-case M and W, are 11 threads high, although in the case of the W there is questionable wear. The lower case letters are four threads high. Approximately 26 threads below and centred is the date 1859, also cross stitched over one thread in dark brown silk. The first three numbers are six threads high and the number nine is eight threads.

Unfortunately, fading is a serious problem. First off, some dyes such as the deep blue, red and rust shades have remained close to the original colour, readily seen from the back side as this embroidery is not framed. Many of the other colours that appear muted were in fact considerably darker or brighter; some appear almost as another colour, according to the cursory check this fragile embroidery permits. It is next to impossible to study and detail all colours on the reverse side as this embroidery is extremely frail. To turn a corner over is to invite a broken thread.

**History:** Mary Williamson's sampler, along with other family samplers, was donated to the EAC Heritage Collection by T.D.R. (Bob) Caldwell of Saskatoon in September, 2003. This embroidery was stitched in 1859 by Bob's great aunt, Mary

Williamson (an aunt of his mother, Gertrude Williamson Rowles) who lived in the Manchester area of England all of her life. Like the Hannah Sampler in the Caldwell collection, this sampler would have been worked by Mary Williamson when she was at least a young woman, rather than a young girl. These extremely popular charted patterns were designed for needlewomen, not young schoolgirls (Bath, 203-05).

From the early 1800s counted thread patterns were being produced in Berlin, Germany, but in 1820, Berlin manufacturers introduced the new, thicker Merino wools that required a larger stitch, and accordingly, many skilled designers rallied to the cause. Thousands of new designs were issued and hundreds of women were employed colouring the prints or charts for what quickly became known as Berlin wool work. Needlewomen in Germany, England and America eagerly purchased the women's magazines containing the patterns for everything from all manner of household decorations whether fire screens or table coverings to personal items such as slippers and pocketbooks and even travel items such as carriage bags and rugs. It was a craze that raged from at least the 1840s, or earlier, to the 1880s when colours and designs alike had run their course and become quite distasteful to much of the general public as well as artists, anxious to set new standards (Bath, 201-205).

While a great many stitch techniques were employed in Berlin wool work—Florentine, tent, basket weave, Milanese, Rococo, Gobel, knotted, fern, Herringbone and eyelet, to name a few—which explains to some degree the reference to the word sampler, only cross stitch was worked on this canvas. Even though this canvas is relatively heavy, the thick wool, combined with the double-layered cross stitch, may well have added to the stress of the canvas over the years.

However, while there is just one embroidery technique in this sampler, the noticeable differences in the colours of the wool prompt discussion about the dyes. As has been stated, this embroidery cannot be studied in detail from the reserve side due to its frail condition. However, it is apparent in studying the front side, as well as a limited study of the border areas on the back, that some wool colours are badly faded as compared to others. The deep, bright blues in all probability were indigo and the red would be made from cochineal, both of which would be treated with chemicals and known as aniline dyes. The other softer coloured wools, that appear very different on the back side of the embroidery, were likely created with vegetable dyes, which fade over a period of time (Bath, p. 210).

Mary Williamson may never even have considered how long her sampler would last or who would care about it, but certainly her embroidery is a valuable historic piece. It presents a unique window into the Berlin wool work era while, at

the same time documenting early family life in Canada. There is much that may be learned from this sampler of yesteryears.

**Materials:** Ecu canvas, 24 threads to the inch, Berlin wool in reds, blues, yellows, browns, beiges, mauves, greens, pinks, orange and dark brown, and dark brown silk floss.

**Condition:** Unfortunately this sampler is in extremely frail condition. There are numerous seriously worn areas around the embroidered motifs, possibly caused by the solid, heavy wool embroidery pulling away from the unstitched portions of the canvas. Nevertheless, once it is float mounted, it will be considerably more stable and is definitely well worth preserving.



Detail of centre motif and showing the fragile condition of this sampler.