

HANNAH'S SAMPLER EAC-2003-12

Description: Although Hannah was unable to finish her sampler for whatever reason, there are numerous elements within the embroidery that are indicative of Berlin wool work common from the 1840s to at least the 1870s. Totally cross stitched in colourful Merino wools that were developed in Berlin, Germany, this sampler, which fortunately appears not to have faded, provides a valid sense of the range and richness of colours available in the mid 19th Century. Variations of the strawberry border, floral designs and picturesque portraits of young women, that as this sampler displays, were all favourite motifs during this extremely popular needlework era. Hannah's large sampler is worked on linen 27 threads to the inch and measures approximately 50 by 43 centimetres.

Sadly, the strawberry border, meant to be symmetrical, has numerous flaws that lessen the beauty of this embroidery. Each strawberry consists of four rows of deep rose wool starting at the top and moving down with the lower portion having eight graduated rows of pink wool to the final one stitch on the eighth row. However, there are a few variations and, while there are six strawberries along both the top and bottom, they are not precisely under one another. Similarly, their immediate corners vary. Still other strawberries do not match because they are moving in opposite directions. In another instance, a strawberry that appears to be incorrectly placed is only partially stitched. Diagonal from the latter, two strawberries, one horizontal and one vertical, are encased in a rectangle of solid olive green cross stitch.



Detail of border and rose oval .

This is the only corner treated in this manner. There are also similar variations in the green cross stitched stems that crisscross to make interesting diamond shapes.

Centred and approximately 20 horizontal threads down from the border, an almost solid oval of roses, buds and leaves is

cross stitched in various colours of wool such as pinks, deep rose, off-whites, numerous shades of brown from dark to light tan and olive greens. While the oval measures

21.2 centimetres at its widest point and is 6.5 centimetres high, there are bits and pieces of this section left unstitched.

The largest portion of stitching is worked in the lower half, where a young girl, dressed in a brilliant full-length red skirt with an overskirt of white, accented in folds of light blue that compliment a dark blue bodice, appears to be plucking roses from a very healthy looking rose bush. She is flanked by greenery and a docile-looking fox on either side, each with beautiful coats of reddish tan fur and underbellies of white. The immediate foreground is subtly shaded in browns and greens, as is the surrounding foliage. Somewhat in the background, a beautifully stitched tree or large shrub appears to twinkle in the sunlight. It is a pastoral scene typical of Berlin Wool Work embroideries stitched between 1835 and 1850.

While small spaces in the background of this pictorial area that are without designs or motifs seems to have been cross stitched by the original embroiderer using the designated medium brown wool, other portions on the right side were stitched by later family members, according to the history provided by the donor (EAC files). It would seem this is likely true, as the brown wool on the right just above the fox suddenly stops as a little patch of olive green is worked. Next are a few rows of black that widen and change to at least three rows of a dark green, followed by a row of the olive colour. Under the black rows there are several rows of a dark olive green and then six rows of black again with several black stitches on the left that appear to have worn away. The stitching throughout this area is a mix of cross stitch, tent and upright Gobelin, sometimes over two threads, in other places over three. It is possible that the above-mentioned lower right corner, where the strawberries are encased in an olive green rectangle of solid cross stitch, was also worked by a later family member.

Thirteen horizontal threads below the garden scene and on the left, the embroiderer has cross stitched her name, Hannah, in two strands of silk. Each stitch is worked over two threads. The upper case H is seven cross stitches high or 14 fabric threads; lower case letters are five cross stitches high, including the lower part of the lower case h in Hannah.

Aside from being unfinished and badly worn, this sampler has been somewhat coarsely mended in at least four areas. While it is not unusual for a sampler of this age to be worn, this embroidery has endured additional stress because of the way it is stitched. As can be readily seen in the solidly embroidered areas, the cross stitch is much too heavy and bulky for the fine linen threads of the background fabric and it is around these areas that the fabric threads have pulled apart. Tent stitch in the Merino wool would have readily covered the fabric and would have been half as bulky.



Detail of lower left corner of sampler.

History: Hannah's sampler was donated to the EAC Heritage Collection by T.D.R. (Bob) Caldwell of Saskatoon in September, 2003. It was stitched by Bob's great great grandmother, Hannah Renshaw Gaskell and his great grandmother Mary Ann Gaskell (1852-1908), who were born and lived their lives in England. Samplers such as this were not designed for schoolgirls, but rather needlewomen (Bath, p. 203-05). The Caldwell history, documented in the Heritage Collection files, explains that the family has a portrait of Hannah as a young woman dated 1847. It is possible that Hannah could have embroidered this sampler from approximately that date to at least the 1860s if in fact she did not die at an earlier age. Hannah's daughter, Mary Ann may have worked on it as early as the late 1860s, but in all probability it would have been later and possibly after her mother's death. (See historical notes in the Bibliography.)

Berlin wool work became a favourite pastime for women not only in Germany, where the work originated in the early 1800s, but also in England and America, where needlewomen eagerly purchased the imported materials and mass-produced patterns. The craze was further popularized as themes of England's Great Exposition of 1851 were featured in the charted designs. Artists in Europe, as well as America, deplored the colours and patterns that allowed complex designs to be copied. Still, Berlin wool work continued to flood the market until the 1880s. During this time, it could be found on everything from carpeting to all manner of household and personal items such as tablecloths, bell pulls, cushion covers and fire screens to slippers, pocketbooks, tobacco pouches and purses. Even carriage bags, blankets and rugs were ornamented in Berlin

wool work. Hannah's sampler serves as a reminder of this historic embroidery and its social implications.

Materials: Even weave linen, 27 threads to the inch, and Berlin wool in the following colours: rose, pink, olive green, dark green, medium brown, tan, light tan, reddish-brown, beige, light blue, dark blue, off-white, pink and black, and black silk.

Condition: Unfortunately, this sampler is in less than fair condition. There are numerous worn areas where the fabric threads are broken and holes have developed; in numerous other places stitching threads are worn and missing. In addition, there are four substantial mends in the fabric adjacent to the solid embroidered sections. One of the reasons the fabric has pulled away to such a degree in these particular spots is because the fabric threads could not support the heavy wool that is cross stitched. As mentioned above, if tent stitch had been used, the pull on the fabric would have been considerably less. On the positive side, the embroidery appears relatively clean and the wool colours are exceptionally bright—colours on the reverse are the same as those on the front indicating that the embroidery has not faded.