

HELEN HENDERSON'S PEACOCK SAMPLER EAC- 98-11



Description: A study of peacock designs and colour, this modern day sampler is definitely worthy of a second, closer look. At the top of the sampler, a large peacock in full regalia, we might say with tail feathers spanning out around a relatively tiny head and body surveys the clan—six pairs of small peacocks that parade down the length of the sampler. All of the peacocks are cross stitched over two threads in tones of turquoise, green, navy blue, blue and mauve in two strands of cotton floss. In the centre of the sampler, with the peacocks on either side, a row of linear printing, cross stitched also over two threads in a medium fuchsia reads "embroidery on linen is fun but not" which is followed by "for beginners !!! !!! !!!" cross stitched horizontally beginning at the left side of the sampler. While most of the sampler would appear completed, one peacock, the second from the bottom on the right side, is missing his legs, under body and much of his tail feathers. It would seem that the embroiderer intended her sampler to be symmetrical and, if that was the case, then it's likely that the ground on which the large peacock at the top stands, has also not been completed, as the left side is very sparse in comparison to the right. Both the sides and casing along the top of the embroidery are simply basted in place, while the bottom edge is a selvage. Embroidered on white linen, 28 threads to the inch, this sampler is 24.8 centimetres wide and 77.1 centimetres long.

The large peacock at the top stands approximately 120 threads high and 112 threads wide. Blocks of "feathers" eight threads square with at least two diagonal arms consisting of two or three cross stitches, sometimes on the top of the square or jutting out from corners, are the basis of the tail design. They are all stitched in three shades of turquoise, some of which are outlined in one thread of navy floss that matches the head and neck of the peacock. The implied fullness of the lower body is designed in three scallops, with the left and right comprised

of several graduated rows of cross stitch in dark turquoise along the outside edges, with green cross stitch nestled into the folds of the feathers just above, and then a semi circle of dark turquoise cross stitches hugging the navy neck. The very bottom of the bird, which is eight cross stitches wide, and the legs and feet are all embroidered in two strands of navy floss. Two curved cross stitched lines in turquoise floss, one flowing through the other, provide a sense of ground on the right side; the left side shows only one small line in turquoise cross stitch.

Needless to say, all of the peacocks in the body of the sampler are much smaller than the lead peacock at the top. The first pair measures approximately 54 and 56 threads high. The bird on the left features a somewhat triangular turquoise tail with four dark mauve squares, each of which are accented with two diagonally-placed cross stitches. The entire bird, including the tail, is outlined in one strand of the dark mauve floss and the feet, breast and profile outline of the peacock are all worked in the same mauve floss. Carefully spaced V-like shapes of three cross stitches highlight the tail, breast and head of the peacock.

Perhaps less colourful than its mate, the all-turquoise peacock on the right, although designed in a side view, pretty much reflects the top peacock with its feathers in blocks of eight threads square and gradated lines of cross stitch forming the neck, breast and wing areas. One difference is the fact that while the peacock at the top is done in three shades of turquoise floss, only the dark and medium shades are stitched in the first peacock on the right side.

The second peacocks are identical in mirror image. Standing approximately 45 threads high, they are very angular birds with three triangles shaping the main parts of their bodies. Both have feathers shaped in a cross stitch turquoise triangle with the wide angles facing away from their bodies and the points resting on the end of their backs. Each has smaller diamond cross stitched turquoise shapes with the upper point matching both the end of the feathers and back points, while the very opposite points are where the legs and feet appear. Similarly, each bird's body is a triangle cross stitched in dark mauve the same as the long neck and head areas. All three triangles are designed with some open, unstitched spaces to add interest.

The third pair of peacocks is a little more fanciful, although the same height as the second. The bird on the left is cross stitched all in the darkest mauve and turquoise threads. While the head, neck and upper body are turquoise, the breast, under body, legs and tail are all deep mauve. As always, the tail glorifies the peacock and this tail exhibits six branches, three to five cross stitches long and each of which are headed up with a dark mauve circle that has one tiny open space in its centre. The partner on the right is almost a twin, except that its colours are a medium mauve in the head, neck and upper body just as the breast, under body, legs and tail are a lighter turquoise. This bird is also further enhanced with its entire shape—head, body, all tail parts, feet and legs—outlined in a single strand of dark mauve floss.

The next two peacocks are turquoise with their tail feathers in three layers turned back toward their heads. The peacock on the left is stitched in shades of light to medium and

dark turquoise floss, while the one on the right is all worked in the medium turquoise. Both birds appear smaller because their tails are not fanning out behind them, but in fact they are the same height as the two pair above them, approximately 45 threads high.

The fifth peacock on the left side is the bird whose partner on the right is only partially stitched. For some unknown reason the embroiderer either decided to change the colour scheme a little or perhaps ran short of floss. At any rate, the bird on the left is stitched in two stands of blue cotton and the one on the right, while missing half its body and tail, is also embroidered in the blue floss. Interestingly, the tail feathers of the bird on the left are marked off in blocks of eight threads square, much like the large peacock at the very top of the sampler. The blocks are cross stitched over two threads in two strands of green and blue floss. The peacock on the right was just nicely begun when it seems it may have been forgotten. However, its head, neck and a portion of its back are embroidered in cross stitch over two threads with two strands of blue embroidery floss. The tail feathers, while barely showing, are in navy floss.

The last pair of birds is perhaps the most stunning. Again, they are mirror images of each other, with long goose-like necks and oval bodies. Each peacock has tail feathers that are designed in a large triangle—50 threads wide and 50 threads high—featuring different colours. The medium mauve is the predominant colour of the tail of the peacock on the left, as it is 22 threads wide and 50 threads high at its pinnacle. Other colours include the medium shade of turquoise that is six threads wide and 26 threads high, a lesser band of dark mauve and lastly, a tiny navy triangle that fits against the rear of the navy body. The beak and feet are an orange shade. The bird on the right is exactly the same, except for the tail, which is coloured slightly differently. Its main colour is the turquoise, followed by the deep mauve, lighter mauve and finally, the tiny navy triangle that also rests against the navy body. And, just like its partner, this peacock also features an orange beak and feet.

All of the letters in the printed message, “Embroidery on Linen is Fun but not for Beginners !!! !!! !!!” are crossed stitched over two threads in two strands of fuchsia and five cross stitches high.

Somewhat bold in the colour combinations and a little bit whimsical, this sampler serves to remind stitchers that experimentation is always a learning experience and that the maker of this sampler was a very special person embroiderers would do well not to forget.

History: Helen Elizabeth Henderson, a much esteemed, long time member of the Lakeshore Creative Stitchery Guild, fashioned this delightful sampler of multicoloured peacocks. It was donated to the Heritage Collection of the Embroiderers’ Association of Canada in 1998 by the Lakeshore Creative Stitchery Guild.

However, just as several detailed histories of Helen Henderson on file in the EAC Heritage Collection attest, this Montreal embroiderer was more readily recognized, far and wide as “the teddy bear lady.” Over some 30 years—from the early 1960s until her

death in 1993—Mrs Henderson stitched by hand nearly 4000 bears that journeyed to homes all over the world. Her reasoning was that she could make a bear while talking to people, and her son, John, has enthused that “she loved to talk to people in streetcars, buses and airplanes.” Seemingly wherever she went, she came home having made at least one new friend.

Born in 1902, she attended Trafalgar School and Bentley Priory Finishing School in England before graduating in 1927 from McGill with a degree in Physical Education. Two years later she married Dr Arthur Henderson. She devoted much of her time in the early years of their marriage to raising their two children, John and Ann. Dr Henderson died in 1976.

A talented extrovert with many interests, she taught English country dancing and then went on to study art in the 1930s. The latter complemented her fibre art skills, which ranged from counted thread embroideries such as Hardanger and Swedish pulled thread that she often designed herself, to bobbin lace making and knitting. She also studied embroidery at the Embroiderers’ Guild in London, England. Passionate about the outdoors, Mrs Henderson was “a pioneer cross-country skier” in addition to enjoying such sports as golf, scuba diving and skating. A keen walker, she walked to Christ Church Cathedral every Sunday. Her love of nature and wildlife prompted her to support various conservation projects, such as an ecological museum located on the West Island, the study of bald eagles and a zoo in the Channel Islands.

While her illustrious teddy bear career did not net her a place of honour in the Guinness Book of Records, simply because they had no suitable category for such an achievement, the Guinness people did send her a special certificate in 1988 that recognized her outstanding work and “magnificent teddy bears.”

Materials: White open evenweave linen, 28 threads to the inch, stranded cotton in green, blue, navy blue, orange and fuchsia, three shades of turquoise, and two shades of mauve.

Condition: Other than the fact that it is not completed, it is in very good condition. Unfortunately, the embroidery threads on the back have not always been properly finished off and other threads, carried across open areas instead of being finished and started again, show from the front.

