Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SAMPLER E106

The term sampler comes from the Latin exemplum meaning 'an example to be followed, a pattern, a model or example'. The first known dated English sampler was made in 1598.

Samplers taught a child (usually a girl, but sometimes a boy) basic embroidery techniques - decorative motifs, the alphabet and numbers. The letters and numbers learned while embroidering a marking sampler were especially useful, since it was important that any homemaker keep track of her linens, some of her most valuable household goods. This was accomplished by marking them, usually in a cross stitch, with her initials and a number.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries samplers tended to be long and thin. They were often random in design - different patterns and techniques being tried out, rather like someone practising various handwriting styles as they worked their way down a page.

In the eighteenth century samplers became increasingly rectangular, with decorative borders. They often included alphabets, and motifs such as animals, also flowers and houses, and they usually contained some sort of verse. When finished this kind of sampler would be hung by proud parents on the parlour wall.



This example, by Ellen Hamer, made in 1823 is typical of the early nineteenth century. It includes images of a church and other buildings, pots of flowers, cherubs and a simplified coat of arms. For its size the amount of stitchwork is rather sparse and there are some flaws in the execution - note the awkward top-left corner of the border.

The wonderfully dark rhyme in the centre is also rather clumsily set out. Line endings are ignored, perhaps because there wouldn't have been enough room if it had been arranged with four syllables per line:



The Leaves Are Green
The Rose is Red
Here is my Work
When i Am Dead
And When the Worms
Doth on Mee Feed
Here is my Name
For You to Read
Ellen Hamer

Maybe Ellen Hamer made this up herself, or it may have been more widely known. It echoes both children's rhymes and folksongs. The melancholy English folksong 'Sweet William' has the chorus:

The rose is red, the grass is green
The days are past that I have seen
And there is another where I have been
Sweet William's a-mourning among the rush.

A somewhat similarly merry-melancholy rhyme to this one was stitched on a sampler by a girl called Eleanor Armstrong, in 1857. It reads:



In the glad morn of blooming youth
The various threads I drew,
And pleased beheld this finished piece
Rise glowing to the view.
Thus when youth shall charm no more
And age has chilled thy blood
May I review my life and say,
Behold my works were good.

A similar version to this has also been found on a sampler from 1831. Perhaps the rhyme on Ellen Hamer's sampler, too, will turn up on other examples from the period.

Illustrations - more samplers from the Museum of Reading collection. Top: A sampler from the 1820s by Martha Richardson of Caversham. Bottom: A sampler by Phebe and Ellen Fox of Chipping Norton, about 1875.