

Museum of the Month

Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art, and Family, 1740-1840

A retrospective review by Joy Ruskin Hanes

Visiting the exhibit of *Connecticut Needlework* at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) is a unique experience. Having read the catalogue (see Editor's Bookshelf), I expected the physical exhibit to be set up in a similar fashion. What a surprise to find, rather, that it was set up by topic.

The first gallery was labeled "Functional Items for Home and Family" and contained 18 items ranging from bed rugs and quilts to skirts, petticoats, pockets, aprons, a pair of shoes and a child's sleeved waistcoat. The items were artfully displayed with several free-standing exhibits in the center of the room. Next to two of the whole cloth quilts were line drawings showing the design, which in both cases would have been difficult to discern.

The second gallery was "Needlework Schools and Making Samplers." This contained 23 samplers ranging from the simplest marking samplers to the most complex pictorial examples.

The third gallery had only 10 pieces and was entitled "Pictorial." Three pastoral scenes by Faith Trumbull Huntington are European scenes showing pastoral activities. They confirm the tenet that this stuff is really art. Two of the pieces are overmantels, and demonstrate all of the talent and artistry that went into this type of work. They are far beyond something that proud parents would hang on the wall to show the accomplishments of their daughter, as are the rest of the silk embroidered pictures in this room. They range from mythological and biblical subjects to a beehive in gold and silver, probably made by a mother and daughter, as well as other floral and pastoral subjects.

The last gallery, "Needlework and Family," had 21 objects on display. The front half of the room is



Karen DePauw, curator for Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art, and Family, 1740-1840. Photo by Jonathan Rickard.

hung with several family records as well as silk memorials and coats of arms. The rear of the gallery contained the Punderson family needlework, including the iconic *The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality*, along with the 12 Apostles and other embroidered pictures, a set of bed hangings and Ebenezer Punderson's pocketbook.

Each gallery has its own guide which is a detailed description and family background for each piece. I found these guides to be invaluable, and personally thought they were a better way to learn about the material than explanations on the wall.

Karen DePauw, the exhibition curator, said "[Visitors are] amazed at the talent of these girls and the spectrum of needlework." She went on to say that the book focuses on the family connections, while the exhibit focuses on the different uses and types of needlework. She also noted that people are coming out of the exhibition with the idea that needlework really is a part of art

history. "These girls had both talent and creativity."

Although the exhibit is now closed, visitors can view some of the needlework items upon request. As well, CHS has almost 70 of the needlework items online (<http://bit.ly/dYDj3s>).

About the Connecticut Historical Society: Founded in 1825, the Connecticut Historical Society houses an extensive and comprehensive Connecticut-related collection of manuscripts, printed material, artifacts and images that document social, cultural and family history. The museum is located in the West End of Hartford, at the corner of Elizabeth Street and Asylum Avenue. For more information, call 860-236-5621 or visit www.chs.org.



Woman's Shoes, c. 1746. Hand-stitched and embroidered silk and metallic threads on silk and linen, leather and wood. Originally made and owned by Hannah Edwards (1713 - 1773). Gift of Hannah Whittlesey.

Two old labels attribute the embroidery of these shoes alternatively to Hannah Edwards and her older sister, Mary. Both attributions may be accurate. Two separate pairs of hands were almost certainly engaged in the embroidery. Perhaps each sister worked one shoe, in order to have them ready in time for Hannah's 1746 wedding. Mary and Hannah Edwards, two of the ten daughters of Esther Stoddard and the Rev. Timothy Edwards, had access to the highest levels of education available to colonial New England women. Belief that intellectual development fostered spiritual improvement, plus the availability of books and writing materials in a minister's home, meant that women in clerical families typically had better than average educational opportunities.



The Blue Gallery. "Needlework Schools and Making Samplers." Photo by Jonathan Rickard.



Pictures of the Twelve Apostles, 1776-1783, attributed to Prudence Punderson Rossiter (1758-1784), Preston or Norwich, Conn., or East Hampton or Great Neck, Long Island, N.Y. Photo by Jonathan Rickard.