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A look at Early Connecticut Needlework

Guest Review by Joy Ruskin Hanes

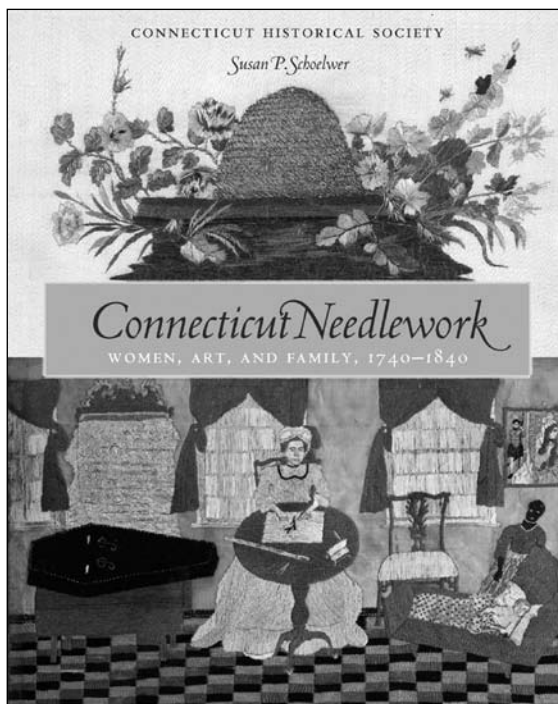
Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art, and Family, 1740-1840

By Susan P. Schoelwer, with forward by Kate Steinway
Connecticut Historical Society, distributed by Wesleyan University Press, 2010
220 pp., 225 illustrations (205 in color)
Softcover \$30; Hardcover \$65

Does anyone remember the old days when dealers and decorators used samplers for lampshades? Yes, they actually cut them up to fit onto a prefabricated shade and put them on old glass or pottery lamps (no doubt drilled so the wiring wouldn't show). And that's not all! There were little tables where samplers were set in, and sometimes there was a piece of glass on top and sometimes not. The tables also were made using silk embroideries. You may still find some of these at shows or flea markets. When I first started dealing, I wanted to buy these items and "save" them, but it was often too late, as they had been cut to fit and thus lost their integrity.

How far we have come from those days. Today the study of schoolgirl needlework is a well established field, with specialist dealers and exhibits, symposia, books and hundreds of serious collectors and scholars. Two exhibitions of Connecticut needlework were recently on display: One at the Florence Griswold Museum (a first of its kind for this bastion of American Impressionist painting) and the other at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

The book that accompanies the CHS exhibit is written by Susan P. Schoelwer and is an impressive tome from the first glance. The cover has a detail from Prudence Punderson's *The First, Second and Last Scene of Mortality* and right away anyone who loves American antiques is ready to take the plunge. The reader should definitely take the time to read the 15-page introduction (big pages, small print, tons of information), which will make anyone's head reel. That is because Schoelwer wants to take the study of



Front Jacket: Top: Detail, Lee-Brace Family Beehive Picture. The Connecticut Historical Society, photo by David Stansbury, Springfield, Mass. Bottom: Detail, Prudence Punderson's "The First, Second and Last Scene of Mortality." The Connecticut Historical Society, photo by David Stansbury, Springfield, Mass.

American needlework in an entirely new direction.

Many of us grew up on Bolton & Coe's *American Samplers* (originally published in 1923, but still very much the "bible" of samplers in the 1970s) and then were thrilled to see Glee Krueger and Betty Ring come out, in the 1980s and 90s, with amazing studies of the schools and schoolmistresses involved in

needlework. After that, a number of smaller books and exhibitions came out addressing particular schools or regional work, such as the Litchfield Academy, Nantucket samplers, Ohio samplers, etc., and all of us who love this stuff have shelves full of these smaller books and pamphlets.

It must be noted that Schoelwer is not addressing plain sewing, which was a requirement of every class of American girl, but rather the needlework produced by the middle and upper classes. She is not so much looking for the schools and schoolmistresses as she is looking for familial relationships among the women who created the needlework. As an example, she discusses the Stoddard-Williams-Edwards tradition, beginning with Esther Warham Mather Stoddard (1644-1732), continuing with her daughters, granddaughters, great-granddaughters and great-great granddaughters—five generations of needleworkers. She explains that needleworking traditions were passed down in families just as men's trades were passed from father to son. She also points out that most of the women who produced this needlework were from clerical families, mostly associated with Yale. In Connecticut, most clergymen were educated at Yale, and besides preaching to their congregations, they were often teaching in their homes. The ladies of the house would sometimes be assigned to assist with the teaching, indicating that they would also be more educated than the average housewife.

It is a common belief that female schools did not exist until after the American Revolution, but the author has discovered advertisements for them in Boston as early as 1706. She also notes that many girls traveled great distances to go to school, depending on many factors, including family connections.

Schoelwer concludes her introduction by telling us that the female art of needlework was equal to other educational pursuits in its importance in early Connecticut life.

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A chronological look at Connecticut needlework

The meat of the catalogue consists of the 70 objects included in the exhibition in chronological order. The author points out that "leafing through the illustrations thus provides a quick visual timeline of changing forms and tastes in Connecticut." The method of describing each item is simple and precise: First the maker and physical description including measurements, date, place of origin, techniques used and materials; next the context of the object historically with a discussion of related objects; then any family history involved including provenance and family history.

The first object described is a cushion cover made by Elizabeth Gores between 1637 and 1643. It is the earliest known piece of Connecticut needlework, and was made by Elizabeth in London and brought here. Its ownership has been traced through nine generations. To put the piece in context, Schoelwer illustrates a purse with similar motifs from the Metropolitan Museum in New York that was made in the early seventeenth century in England. She also shows a portrait of Martha Coit Hubbard Green, painted in 1758 by John Singleton Copley. This lady had possession of the needlework in the early 1740s, possibly because she used it as an example in her own school (this is just supposition), and returned it to the family after she married in 1744.

The second piece I will mention is Catalogue Number 52, Sophia Ellsworth's Family Memorial. I have particular interest in this piece, as I sold it to CHS way back in the 1980s. I had done some research on the family, but the researchers at CHS took the research one step further to determine that Sophia had worked this at the Polly Balch School in Providence, R.I.

In her description, Schoelwer discusses the practice of printwork, which is "distinguished by the conceit of using expensive needlework to imitate a less expensive print."

After describing the stitches and technique, she relates the piece to a memorial print for George Washington printed in 1800, and then discusses the reasons for her attribution to the Balch School.

The family history is interesting on two counts: That Sophia Ellsworth worked this piece a decade after the deaths it memorializes, and that the family had trekked out to Erie, Penn. in 1795 where Daniel Ellsworth (Sophia's father) ran a store, and became the first white man to be buried there. [There is more to the story, but you'll have to read the book.]

Many collectors have been aware of the work of Prudence Punderson, but here for the first time all of the known work associated with the family has been

assembled. The physical exhibit space at CHS has all of this work in one area so that it may be viewed in context. Included are the embroidered pictures of the 12 apostles, a hand-held fire screen, a sampler by Prudence's sister Hannah, Ebenezer Punderson's pocketbook and the cover piece, *The First, Second and Last Scene of Mortality*. We have all seen images of this work, but I highly recommend viewing it in person, as it is a breathtaking piece. Schoelwer gives these needlework lots of press, with a good close-up as well as a comparable image.

In conclusion, my recommendation is: **Buy this book!** Whether you are a needlework aficionado or simply love American history and antiques, this is a window into the lives of women that we have not seen before. It is meticulously researched, at once scholarly, yet exciting. And how often do we experience that combination?

About the authors: **Susan Prendergast Schoelwer** is curator at George Washington's Mount Vernon. She previously served as director of museum collections at the Connecticut Historical Society. **Kate Steinway** is the executive director of the Connecticut Historical Society Museum & Library.

About our guest reviewer: **Joy Ruskin Hanes** is a third generation antiques dealer, and has been an active partner, with husband Lee Hanes, in Hanes & Ruskin Antiques [www.hanesandruskin.com] since 1980. They specialize in investment quality antique American furniture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and appropriate accessories, including needlework.



Sophia Ellsworth's Family Memorial. Joy Hanes had a particular interest in this piece - she sold it to CHS way back in the 1980s.



Sampler by Hannah Punderson. The Connecticut Historical Society, photo by David Stansbury, Springfield, Mass.

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