

Future Textiles, publ. by Berg, London 2009

With their rich history of instructing, educating and inspiring, needlework samplers are unique in their ability to communicate important values or offer sources of amusement. Samplers were first seen during the early Renaissance in the convents and courts of Europe, where they were an integral part of women's education. As girls learned to stitch letters, numbers, biblical verses, moral maxims and pictorial elements, they developed needlework skills necessary for a future of domestic duties.

Few records document the roles of Western women as well as these intricately-stitched samplers. Some of those made between the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century are especially interesting to art historians today. As historians identify vestiges of imagination, memory and emotion in the samplers, traditionally tropes ascribed to fine art, their parallels with the artworks of the period become more apparent.

Digital technology provides textile practitioners with innovative processes that liberate them from tedious, repetitive stitching, yet many artists prefer the homespun appeal of handcrafted textiles. Dutch artist Annet Couwenberg merges both processes in works created through a method she describes as digitised embroidery. Repetition is a theme in Couwenberg's work, and digital technology enables her to repeat a single motif in different sizes, stitch patterns, orientations and colourways. Couwenberg cites seventeenth-century Dutch samplers as an inspiration behind some of her work, rooting them in the tradition of creating popular motifs or precisely-stitched ciphers that are easy to identify and decode. As digital scans outline a precise pattern for Couwenberg to work from, she rejects their regularity by making random stitches or incorporating unexpected materials into her work.

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