

# Georgia's Girlhood Embroidery

By Kate Eagen Johnson

**ATHENS, GA.** — “A sampler is a window and all you have to do is open it up,” explains independent scholar and textiles historian Kathleen Staples. “You can take a textile and build history for everybody if you ask enough questions.” Staples, who is known throughout the arts field as Kathy, served as guest curator for “Georgia’s Girlhood Embroidery: ‘Crowned with Glory and Immortality’”



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Louisa Hanson Rogers (1804–1881) was a young adult when she went to live with relatives in Asheville, N.C., where she stitched this sampler in 1824. Two-ply twisted silk on balanced plain weave linen. Collection of Carole Carpenter Wahler.

One does not usually think of a sampler exhibition as trailblazing, but such is the case with this presentation of 28 needlework offerings, on view at the Georgia Museum of Art through February 28. Staples's co-curator in this effort was Dale L. Couch, the museum's curator of decorative arts and director of the museum's Henry D. Green Center for the Study of the Decorative Arts.

Couch, too, appreciates needlework's inclusivity. He says, "I could find all of us in the study of decorative arts and material culture. I could not find all of us in the history of war nor could I find all of us in art history. This aspect motivated me."

Queried how exhibitions, publications and programs at the Green Center fit into

the museum's mission, Couch notes that the institution "is the official art museum of Georgia and part of the University of Georgia. This university museum is dedicated to education above all else. Here the emphasis is on the universal. For example, recent exhibitions have featured Russian decorative arts and samurai armor. Contemporary Studio Craft turned bowls donated by Arthur and Jane Mason will be the subject of an upcoming exhibition. We look at decorative arts in broad terms. The regional is one focus within the universal. That said, we have given original voice to Southern decorative arts and we think that voice is enhanced by our universal scope."

Couch and Staples are storytellers in the best sense of the word. While it is obvious

that these scholar-curators are devoted to decorative arts objects in and of themselves, they have responded to what they consider a higher calling: to exploit artifacts as a way to conjure the people of the past and, in turn, to invite contemplation upon the larger lessons American history has to offer. Through their sensitive investigation, we learn about a sampler submitted to the government in support of a Revolutionary War widow's pension claim; that more than one of these samplers was worked by an adult rather than a child; how a sampler inscription or motif can reveal the resettlement travels of a family; and of the myriad ways samplers reinforced family and community ties.

Building on her exacting analysis of materials, construction techniques and motifs, Staples



Mourning samplers such as this one memorializing Joseph Smith are rarer than silk memorial embroideries. The maker counted the threads of the ground fabric to place letters and motifs rather than sketching the overall design on the fabric. The thread-counting technique was more commonly found among the samplers in this exhibition. Maker unknown, Decatur County, after 1840, two-ply twisted silk thread on balanced plain weave linen. Georgia Museum of Art.

studies the socioeconomic situation of the maker and her family, as well as “big picture influences” such as print sources. She then weaves all into a regional and national experience. She is extremely interested in contributions made by Native Americans, and free and enslaved Africans, noting, “They played a big role in the Southern experience with textiles.”

Asked about the genesis of the needlework exhibition and accompanying catalog, Couch recalls how, decades ago, he discovered a sampler with a lock-tight Georgia history in a private collection. When he mentioned it to others in the field, they told him, “There was no such thing as a Georgia sampler.” So, as early as the 1990s, he knew there was a need for further inquiry.

No doubt about it, Georgia samplers have faced survival challenges in regard to both climatic conditions and historical circumstances. Yet Couch and former Georgia Museum of Art curator Ashley Callahan managed to compile a list of more than 25 of these tender tributes, which Staples then enhanced. Perhaps her most important discovery is a group of needlework pictures created at St Vincent’s, a still extant Roman Catholic girls’ school in Savannah founded by the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in 1845.

For these and other samplers, Staples combed through genealogical resources — many of which were available online — to piece together the biographies of their creators. From a research perspective, Staples brought these girls and women to life in part



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Stylistic details and the phrase “Ended in Savannah” provided clues to the origin of this circa 1816 sampler by Frances Roe (b 1803). Staples discovered that the Roe family had moved from Philadelphia to Baltimore to Savannah. “The top section resembles Baltimore samplers.... It was completed in Savannah and so it is a great visual symbol of migration,” says the guest curator. Two-ply twisted silk thread on balanced plain weave linen. Georgia Museum of Art.

by tracking their male relatives, who typically possessed higher profiles in the documentary record.

*Georgia’s Girlhood Embroidery*, the scholarly volume accompanying the exhibition, emphasizes these portraits of archival artistry. In keeping with the graphic quality and instructional nature of classic sampler mottos, “message call-outs” sprinkled through the catalog point to telling construction and pictorial details, and highlight revelatory personal and cultural information about the makers and their circumstances. In her preface, Staples recognizes the exhibitions, catalogs and surveys of early needlework executed in the South that served as a foundation for this project. This resource list will be of supreme interest to students and collectors of Southern

ornamental needlework.

In her main essay "Needlework and Female Education in Colonial and Antebellum Georgia," Staples addresses such topics as orphan and charity schools, and education for African Americans. In conversation, Staples stresses observations made in the catalog regarding differing aspects of female education, South and North. Unlike in the North, in the South there was no tradition of training girls in ornamental needlework at academies as a back-up skill in case they fell on hard times and had to support themselves financially. Since there was virtually no training of female seminary teachers in the South, women who taught in Southern schools were often hired from the North. In counter-flow, some girls from Georgia journeyed North for

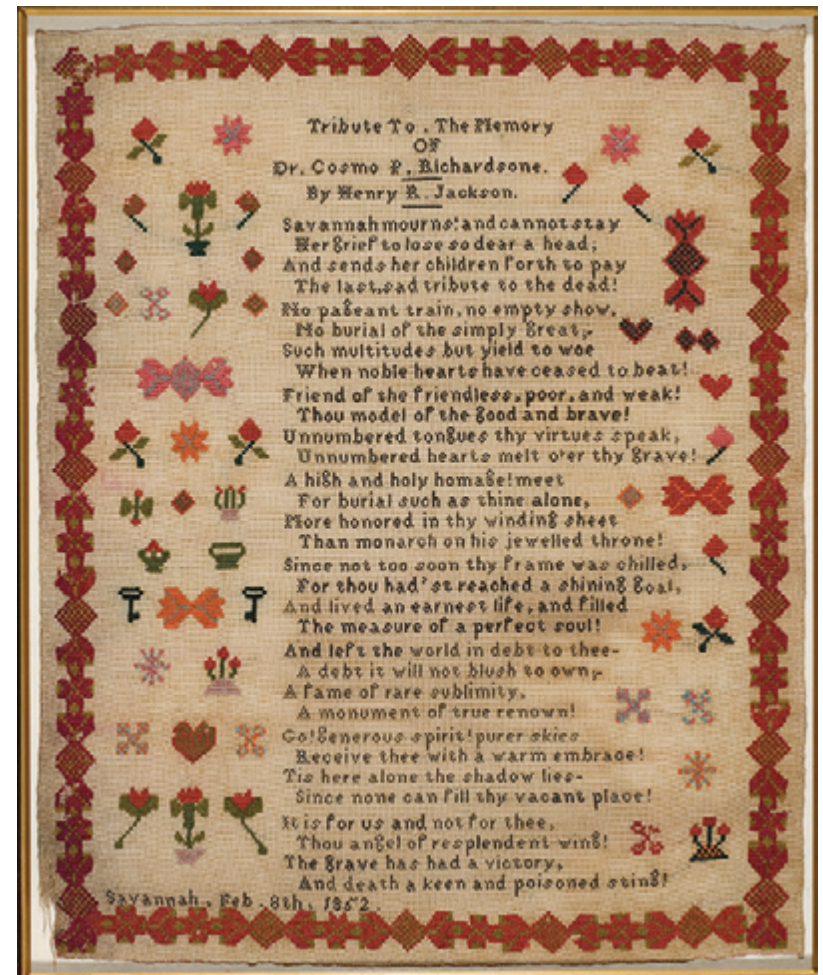
their education, attending such institutions as the Moravian-run Bethlehem Young Ladies Seminary in Pennsylvania and Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy in Connecticut. Catalog appendices chart the particulars of the Georgia girls who attended these two schools.

The impetus to mount a sampler exhibition also derived from the Green Center's aim to address the range of Georgia-related decorative arts through a targeted exhibition program organized by media. The museum has explored topics of silver and painted furniture. "Cherokee Basketry: Woven Culture" opens for three months on January 23.

The "Georgia Silver" exhibition in 2006 illustrates the Green Center's methodology of

expansive embrace. Couch and his colleague Ashley Callahan employed this term to refer to Georgia-made wares, silver created elsewhere for use in Georgia and silver that migrated to the Peach State. He likens this enveloping spirit to the variety of people who call themselves Georgians today. According to Couch, “The modality of scholarship changes as we complexify our identity.”

He explains, “Now that we have the Green Center, we have made formal partnerships with the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts and others. This allows us to take advantage of more professionals’ perspectives and so we brought in Kathleen Staples on this exhibition to get the breadth of view. That is one of the goals of the Green Center, and this exhibition is an example of its



An unknown needleworker, perhaps a family member, commemorated the life of Cosmo P. Richardsone, a beloved Savannah physician and community leader in this circa 1852 sampler. Plied merino wool yarn on balanced plain weave linen. Miller Collection.

success." Couch elaborates, "I have organized the exhibition but Kathy was the primary intellectual voice."

*Georgia's Girlhood Embroidery: 'Crowned with Glory and Immortality'* by Kathleen Staples, with essays by Dale L. Couch and Jenny Garwood, is published by the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia. The catalog's foreword is by Madelyn Shaw, curator of textiles at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

The Georgia Museum of Art is a 90 Carlton Street in Athens. For information, 706-542-4662 or [www.georgiamuseum.org](http://www.georgiamuseum.org).

## Upcoming Conferences

Two conferences associated with "Georgia's Girlhood Embroidery" are on the Georgia Museum of Art's calendar for early 2016 and include both Staples and Couch among the speakers. Both will be at the University of Georgia in Athens.

The 2016 MESDA Textile Symposium "Interwoven Georgia: Three Centuries of Textile Traditions" will be held January 14–16. Topics range from Eighteenth Century silk production to girlhood embroideries, bed furnishings, the contributions of African Americans to textile production, and chenille fashions of the Twentieth Century. Additional speakers are Jenny Garwood, Laurel Horton, Madelyn Shaw, Ashley Callahan and Lynn Tinley. Details may be found at [www.mesda.org](http://www.mesda.org).

Additionally, Couch has organized "Folk and Folks: Variations on the Vernacular," the Eighth Henry D. Green Symposium of the Decorative Arts. It is planned for February 4–6. Eighteen speakers will present on a range of Southern arts and material culture topics. Among them are independent scholar Sumpter Priddy III, who will deliver "'The Tree of Life, My Soul Hath Seen': Painted Dower Chests in Walton County, Georgia," and Jeanne Cyriaque, African American programs coordinator for the State of Georgia, who will discuss "Three Georgia Women of Achievement and the Homes They Left Behind." For details, [www.georgiamuseum.org](http://www.georgiamuseum.org).



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