c. 1750–60

Linen plain weave with silk and wool embroidery in tent, knotted, and satin stitches; silk and metallic thread overlaid stitches; mica windows; border of checked plain weave linen

21 x 25 inches (53.3 x 63.5 cm)

American

Gift of The School of Industrial Art, Philadelphia, 1949, 1949-12-1

FIRST LOOKS

Make a list of everything you see!

Who is in the center of the picture? What do you notice about what they are wearing?

What is this picture made of?

Is it finished? How can you tell?

SECOND LOOKS

Look for examples of plants, people, things, and animals whose scale is not lifelike.

Imagine taking a walk in this picture. What would you say to the two people?

Can you find thirty-five different creatures? Which one is your favorite? Why?

EMBROIDERED PICTURE

A man and a woman stand in the center of this picture, calmly looking out at us. They wear fashionable, European-style clothes and hairstyles common in the North American colonies around 1750. Surrounding them are two tall trees and many birds and animals, all framed by a checked border. This picture is an embroidery made with colorful silk and wool thread stitched through a piece of linen cloth. The girl who made it used different stitches, including tiny tent stitches—as many as twenty-four per inch. She even added shiny mica for the windows! Completing a detailed embroidery this size (just over two feet wide) probably took many months. Can you find the parts that she didn't finish?

Other embroidered pieces made during the colonial era, just before the American Revolution, have been found with similar designs. We know who made some of them—members of wealthy New England families. However, the girl who did this stitching is anonymous, and was probably not the same person who created the design. The design may have come from a teacher named Susannah Condy, who ran a school for girls in Boston. Teachers usually created needlework designs, often drawing them in ink on linen for their students, who then interpreted them using different colors and stitches.

Why do you think the squirrel is bigger than the black sheep? When this embroidery was made, around 1750, needlework teachers often borrowed other artist's designs and adapted them. This New England scene combines animals and plants inspired by English embroideries and other sources, and adds uniquely American details like the jaunty redwing blackbird in flight. Because the creatures were taken from different sources, some look bigger or smaller than they do in real life.

Girls in the North American colonies typically made several different

kinds of needlework, called samplers, to show off their stitching skills. One, containing alphabets and numbers, was called a marking sampler because it was mostly worked in simple cross stitches, which were also used to mark a family's initials on the household sheets and towels. A second sampler was usually fancier, with a poem, floral decoration, or even a scene, or it could be an elaborate embroidered picture like this one. These were usually placed in expensive frames and hung over the fireplace. Imagine what this embroidered picture would look like if it was completed and displayed!

WHO MADE EMBROIDERIES?

Although we aren't sure who made this embroidered picture, we know that needlework was part of everyday life in the North American colonies. Women and girls in the 1700s sewed everything by hand: clothes, sheets, tablecloths, and gifts. Because fabric took so long to make, it was extremely valuable and household items made of fabric were repaired over and over. Starting as young as three or four years old, girls and many boys learned to stitch, taught either by their mothers or at small "dame schools" led by a woman in the neighborhood. This was the only schooling that many girls ever had. Teenage girls from wealthy families were able to attend classes in fancier needlework techniques—used for furniture coverings, pocketbooks, and pictures like this one.

Teachers like Susannah Condy, who worked in Boston where this embroidery was made, ran schools that offered "patterns of all sorts" for household items that young women were expected to embroider to prepare for married life. The girls at such schools were also taught to be cheerful, competent, devoted, and obedient in order to attract husbands. While most girls' schools focused on needlework, after 1750 some expanded to include drawing, dancing, and English or French. Partly because of these limited opportunities, few women knew how to read—less than one in five in the 1600s and only about one in two by the 1850s.

Girls who were literate made samplers that included religious verses, the names of family members, or even messages to loved ones. Not everyone who did embroidery enjoyed the time-consuming, detailed work. One sampler by a ten-year-old from Maryland reads, "Patty Polk did this and she hated every stitch she did in it. She loves to read much more."

Teaching needlework was one of the few ways a woman could earn a living and live independently. Embroidery also served as a creative outlet for young women at a time when they were not allowed to attend art academies. Some women produced needlework that required incredible skill and

imagination. A variety of distinctive styles of embroidery developed in different regions of the colonies.

THE SEEDS OF WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE

During the 1700s, women in Europe and the North American colonies were the legal property of their fathers, then of their husbands. Women could only have their own businesses if they were unmarried or they inherited the businesses from their husbands. However, new ideas began to sweep through society. Thinkers like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin insisted that human beings were born to pursue their own happiness and fulfillment, not to serve God or kings and queens. To many, the term "human beings" included only white men, but some people, such as Franklin and Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, said that it also included women and minorities. Although the U.S. Constitution did not grant women the right to vote, some schools for well-to-do girls began to teach academic subjects. A few wealthy women even attended lectures, wrote poetry, and published articles and books. In 1792, the English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) wrote a book called *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She boldly claimed that men and women had equal abilities but unequal opportunities. The book was very popular and was read by many people in the late eighteenth century, including the president's wife, Martha Washington.

A woman who does not know how to sew is as deficient in her education as a man who cannot write. Let her condition in life be what it may, she cannot be ignorant of the use of her needle.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

Embroidered pictures were important status symbols in the 1700s.
What are some status symbols today?

Throughout history artists have copied other artists' works as part of their training. Many great artists have used others' ideas. How do you feel about copying?

Do you think of needlework as art or craft? Why?

RELATED ART PROJECT

Make a collage scene using photographs of two of your favorite people surrounded by some of your favorite animals, flowers, and trees and buildings that you cut out of magazines. Notice how the size and scale of the things in your collage relate to each other. Are some bigger or smaller in relation to each other than they would be in real life? Translate your paper collage into a fabric collage, by either sewing or gluing the pieces.

This object is included in Five Women Artists, *a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.*