

ART ACTIVITY

Propagating “American” Womanhood

Background

Dating back to the colonial period, wealthy white girls were taught to complete elaborate needlework samplers as a way to showcase their domestic skills, education, and personal character. During the early Federal period, creating these samplers came to be seen as one of the ways women of all races and classes could demonstrate their aspirations to the ideal of “American” womanhood. Young girls had differing experiences with the creation of samplers across racial identity. While free Black parents and institutions like the African Free School wanted young Black girls to learn skills like needlework to demonstrate their equality in a racist society, young Indigenous girls were forced to learn these skills as a form of cultural erasure in western territories.

Task

Students will analyze samplers created by young Black and Cherokee girls and discuss what we can learn about their experiences with the propagation of white “American” womanhood in education during the early Federal period from their work. Then, considering that many young women of that time did not have the option to celebrate their own identities and culture with their embroidery, students will reclaim the medium and create their own sampler displaying a theme of personal significance to them.

Materials

- Embroidery floss in various colors

- Embroidery needles
- Embroidery hoops
- Evenweave fabric
- Scissors
- Graph paper
- Pencils

Art Vocabulary

- **backstitch:** A stitch made by doubling the thread back on part of the previous stitch to form a solid line of stitching on both sides of the fabric.
- **cross stitch:** A stitch in which pairs of diagonal stitches of the same length cross each other in the middle to form an X.
- **embroidery:** The art or process of forming decorative designs with hand or machine needlework.
- **sampler:** A decorative piece of needlework typically having letters or verses embroidered on it in various stitches as an example of skill.

Steps

- Invite students to think about their experiences in school in the 21st century.
 - What kinds of things do you learn in school?
 - Do you ever have the opportunity to celebrate your identity and heritage in school? What does that look like?
 - Can you remember a time you learned about an identity or culture different from your own? What did you learn? What was the experience like?
 - Why is it so important for students to be able to bring their own

perspectives and experiences into the classroom?

- Explain to students that during the Federal period school was different than it is today. Not everyone had access to education, and students of different genders were taught different skills and subjects. In some cases education was used to make all students the same, not celebrate their unique cultures and identities.
- First, introduce students to the [sampler](#) made by Sarah Ann Janeway, a young white girl from the colonial period. Lead an inquiry of the samplers using the line of questioning below.
 - What do you notice about this sampler?
 - What story do these images tell?
 - What might it have been like to create a sampler?
 - What does this sampler say about the person who made it, and the standards of success that were established for wealthy white girls during this time period?
- Next, have students look at the samplers made by Rosena Disery, Nancy Reece, and Ku-To-Yi (also known as Nancy Graves) during the Federal period. Lead an inquiry of the samplers using the line of questioning below.
 - What do you notice about these samplers?
 - What images, designs, and text are included in each one?
 - Based on your observations, what kinds of things were these girls learning in school?
 - Why do you think this continued to be seen as an important skill for young girls to have?
 - How are these samplers similar to the one made by Sarah Ann Janeway? Why were Black and Indigenous girls taught to copy these standards rather than highlight their own cultures and experiences?
 - These samplers ultimately symbolized different things for each of the girls that made them. For young Black girls like Rosena, creating these samplers was a demonstration of equality in a racist society. For

Indigenous girls like Nancy and Ku-To-Yi, the samplers represent the cultural erasure that Indigenous communities faced at the hands of white settlers and missionaries. What evidence do you see of these varying experiences when looking at these samplers?

- What can this tell us about education during this time period?
- Students are now invited to create their own samplers to see what it would have been like to learn this skill as a student in the Federal period. Recognizing that these skills were often taught as a form of assimilation, students will consider how they will instead create a sampler to celebrate their own culture, identity, or interests today.
- First, have students think about what kinds of things were embroidered on the samplers they analyzed. What words, phrases, or designs might they include in their own samplers to convey something of importance to them?
- Pass out graph paper and pencils so that students can plan their designs. The fabric they will be embroidering has holes that form a grid, so they can use the graph paper to help them plan out their stitches. A cross stitch will involve stitching an X across squares to form a tiled pattern, and a back stitch will entail stitching along the lines to create solid lines (see Embroidery Tips below for more info).
- Next, hand out materials. Each student should get an embroidery hoop, a piece of evenweave fabric cut larger than their hoop, a needle, and embroidery floss. Scissors can be shared at each table.
- Have students open their embroidery hoop and stretch the fabric over the smaller inner hoop, then place the larger hoop around the outer edge and tighten the screw on the hoop as they pull their fabric tighter.
- Students can then choose a color of embroidery floss and thread their needle, making a knot at the other end of the floss.
- Once they have threaded their needle, they can begin embroidering. Many samplers of the Federal period would have been made using a cross stitch, but

students can also use a simpler backstitch to introduce themselves to this new technique. See below for more information on how to make each type of stitch or have students watch this [tutorial video](#) of embroidery stitches for beginners. Allow them some time to practice their stitches before they begin their final design.

- Once students have finished their samplers, have them reflect on the following:
 - What was it like to create your own samplers? What was challenging or exciting about this process?
 - What would it be like if embroidery was one of the subjects you studied in school?
 - How did it feel to express yourself and your own identity through this particular medium?
 - What did creating your own samplers teach you about education during the Federal period?

- Extension: Have students study the work of contemporary BIPOC artists who are reasserting non-white ideas and symbols into their work. After studying these artists, students can create another sampler inspired by a modern approach to the medium. Some examples of contemporary embroidery work can be found here:
 - <https://stitchfloral.blogspot.com/2020/06/how-many-black-embroidery-artists-do.html>
 - <https://mymodernmet.com/yingifts-chinese-embroidery/>
 - <https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/g36980280/hispanic-artists-on-instagram/>
 - <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-11-artists-embroidery-radical-ways>
 - <https://mymodernmet.com/embroidery-artists/>

Embroidery Tips:

The holes in the evenweave fabric can be used as a guide to create straight lines and shapes.

Backstitching: Backstitching creates solid lines with a single embroidery thread. Begin by bringing your needle up from the underside of the fabric, then back down to close your stitch. Next, bring the needle back up through the fabric a stitch-length away from your first stitch, and then bring the needle back down where you closed your first stitch. Continue this stitch to create solid lines, rethreading the needle when you want to move on to different shapes or colors throughout your design.

Cross stitching: If students would like to experiment with different types of stitches, they can also try cross stitching. Cross stitching uses X-shaped stitches in a tiled pattern to form an image. Begin by bringing the needle up from the underside of the fabric and then back down through the hole diagonally across from it. Next, bring the needle back up through the hole next to the one you just made and back down through the hole diagonally across to make an X over your first stitch. Continue these stitches in a tiled pattern to create more filled-in shapes, rethreading the needle when you want to move on to different designs and colors throughout your sampler.