

**Ian Potter Museum of Art - 'Miegunyah' Student Award 2018**

**Catherine Gay – Report**

**Object: Decorated Alphabet Sampler, Mary A. Wilson, 1871, Acc. No. 1973.0054.000.000**



**Objectives and Initial Questions**

For the 2018 Miegunyah Student Award I selected the above sampler, which was made in 1871 by Mary A. Wilson, aged 13. The project was to be an extension of my Honours thesis, which I completed this year in the discipline of history. I tested the hypothesis that girls' material culture- the items they collected, collated and created- could be used to draw broader inferences about their lives. Like most children, girls' living in Victoria left behind very few textual records. The possessions that they created and used can therefore serve as evidence of their existence. I aimed to further this argument during my project. I intended to use this piece as an example of girls' needlework in nineteenth century Victoria, as a touchstone for my broader contention. My research began with the question, what can Mary's needlework sampler tell us about girls who lived in nineteenth-century Victoria?

I wanted to avoid an analysis that privileged adult ideals or negative conclusions. Many historical examinations of children have focussed on how adults viewed the roles of children. Similarly, many scholars have focussed on the subordinate position and oppression of girls. Also

attempting to avoid an overtly positivist reading, I wanted to prove objects serve as evidence of girls' agency. I thus theorised that a needlework sampler, as it was created by a girl, can reveal how that girl, and girls' more broadly, viewed themselves and their place within nineteenth-century Victorian society, and exhibited agency.

### Strategy and Findings

I began with a close examination of the sampler itself. I noted the materials used and the imagery. Then I compared it to samplers from the same period in Museums Victoria's collection. These were primarily those by the Winter sisters and Beatrice Adams. I concluded that as the samplers were very similar in style and materials, Mary's could be used as evidence of the broader type. I then consulted secondary literature on the history of sampler making, primarily Margaret Eleanor Fraser's 2008 thesis on colonial Australian needlework.

I attempted to find the identity of the maker. A brief genealogical search concluded that Mary A. Wilson was most likely Mab Grimwade's great-aunt. Mab's mother was born Agnes Wilson, so Mary was likely a sister, or perhaps a cousin. As it is an anomaly in the Grimwade collection, which consists primarily of paintings and prints, this suggests it was of sentimental value and probably made by a family member. I decided, however, that the broader significance of the sampler as an example of the type, rather than individual biography, was more pertinent to my study.

I then turned to secondary literature to understand the position of girls' in nineteenth century Victoria. Significantly relevant works I read included; Deborah Gorham and Carol Dyhouse's texts on Victorian English girls, which gave broader context as to societal expectations for women; Jennifer Helgren and Colleen A. Vasconcellos's *Girlhood: a global history*, which situates the idea of girls' as agents.

To assess the significance of samplers in colonial Victoria, I looked to more specific secondary works. Fraser's abovementioned thesis proved the authoritative text on nineteenth-century Australian samplers. Lorinda Cramer's work on women's plain sewing provided an interesting analysis, which I was able to adopt into my contention. She argued that women's sewing could transform rough, 'uncivilised' colonial space into comfortable homes. This helped colonists to Victoria cope with the trying circumstances of settler life.

I wanted to move beyond a middle-class, western-centric study. Mary, if related to the Grimwade's, was most likely well-off. I questioned whether working class and Aboriginal girls were creators of needlework too. This inquiry led me to examine a story I had come across in Bain

Attwood's *The good country: the Djadja Wurrung, the settlers and the protectors*. It told of Ellen, a 13-year-old Koorie girl whose crocheted items were sent to Queen Victoria in 1863. I looked for evidence that Aboriginal women and girls were taught to sew, which I found in the anthology *Letters from Aboriginal Women in Victoria*. I looked at Aboriginal girls and women's fibrecraft, like crochet and baskets, in relation to Tracey Banivanua Mar's framework of 'imperial literacy'.

### Research Outcome

This research project took me on a wandering path away from, then back to, the original object. I ended up focussing on how Mary's sampler, as an example of the genre, could be viewed within existing historical analyses. I have presented this in an essay form, which I have submitted to the Ian Potter Museum as part of this project.

Two main points emerged from my synthesis of secondary literature. Firstly, I determined that Cramer's argument could be extended to include girls' sewing too. A daughter's needlework, like a wife's, would have also improved 'quality of life' for settler families. Secondly, Aboriginal girls' fibrecraft could be viewed within Banivanua's framework of 'imperial literacy'. I contended that Ellen's crochet is an example of Koorie girls 'exploiting' western knowledge systems for their own gain. In conclusion, Mary's sampler is a material manifestation of Victorian girlhood. Needlework was a collective girlhood experience in the nineteenth century. It was a skill and practice that young women from all social strata would have learnt. Samplers, like Mary's, are hence useful as material evidence, to draw conclusions about how girls' lived in nineteenth-century Victoria. A sampler is also a manifestation of agency- how girls directly effected their own lives and the lives of those around them.

### Selected Bibliography

Attwood, Bain. *The Good Country: The Djadja Wurrung, the Settlers and the Protectors*. Clayton, Vic: Monash University Publishing, 2017.

Banivanua Mar, Tracey. 'Imperial Literacy and Indigenous Rights: Tracing Transoceanic Circuits of a Modern Discourse'. *Aboriginal History* 37 (2013).

Cramer, Lorinda. 'Making a Home in Gold-Rush Victoria: Plain Sewing and the Genteel Woman'. *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 213–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2017.1293705>.

Dyhouse, Carol. *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981.

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Fraser, Margaret Eleanor. 'With My Needle: Embroidery Samplers in Colonial Australia', 2008.

<http://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/39834>.

Gorham, Deborah. *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. London: Croom Helm, 1982.

Grimshaw, Patricia, Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith, and University of Melbourne, eds. *Letters from Aboriginal Women in Victoria, 1867-1926*. Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 2002.

Helgren, Jennifer, and Colleen A. Vasconcellos, eds. *Girlhood: A Global History*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2010.

### Objects Consulted from Museums Victoria

Item HT 38738, Sampler - Eliza Winter, Alphabet with Birds & Flowers, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853.

Item HT 38899, Sampler - Alice Winter, 'Remember Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth', Melbourne, circa 1866

Item HT 38901 Sampler - Alice Winter, 'Honour Thy Father and Mother and Forget Not All Their Kindness', Melbourne, circa 1867.

Item HT 38902 Sampler - Eliza Winter, Alphabet & Numerals, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853.

Item HT 38903 Sampler - Decorative Motifs & Borders, Winter Sisters, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853.

Item SH 940966 Sampler - Beatrice Adams, St Mary's School, Hotham, Victoria, 31 May 1866.