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MYSTERIOUS TOKENS OF LOVE



While you are reading this, a number of researchers on both sides of the Atlantic, are sifting through hundreds upon hundreds of sampler images, trying to solve a long-standing mystery. It is possible that you can help them.

Once, 200 years ago, there was no mystery at all. To the young girls dressed in uniform white caps and checked aprons, spending their precious free time in silence or in pleasant conversation, nothing could have been less mysterious. They were simply stitching their sampler. From time to time, perhaps at the end of a thread, they would sit back, the better to admire their work, or the work of a friend nearby, and they would see common-place motifs, the same as those on all the other samplers which the girls in their 'Family' made.

If there was a mystery at all, it was that for a while they had forgotten about the cold from the northern moorlands, beyond the confines of the school walls, closing in about them; forgotten, too, the sour after-taste of the thin mutton stew called 'lob-scouse' served up for dinner (even though an empty ache in their stomachs belied the fact that they had recently eaten).

These Quaker girls at Ackworth School were glad to be relieved from the irksome monotony of stitching endless hems on the interminable numbers of sheets needed by the inmates of their school – their 'Family'. On the rare occasions when there were no sheets to hem, there was always the repair of the boys' clothes, torn or ripped in some rough re-enactment of the Trojan War, and when that was finished, child-bed linen taken in from the neighbourhood to be made up.

Now, at long last, working on their samplers, the girls could stitch for pleasure. They could choose their designs and choose the brightest of silks: pink, dark rose, yellow, leaf green and blue. How they afforded the coloured silks with their one penny a week pocket-money is the subject of conjecture. Perhaps the silks were special gifts sent from

home, by a fond mother missing her daughter's company – for they would not have seen their girls for the three or four years while they were away at school. But then, the families of the girls at Ackworth were considered 'not to be in affluence'. Perhaps the silks were philanthropic donations from more wealthy Friends. Or, perhaps the girls, following the model of the Quaker Provident Societies, may have pooled together their pocket money to buy silks to share amongst themselves.

Was there a sewing mistress sitting amongst them, who was grateful, also, to take her leisure away from the strictures of plain-sewing? Did the girls take their samplers over to her, to ask for some guidance with design or choice of colour, or even to copy some new motif from her sampler? One thing we can say from the samplers which remain at Ackworth, is that motifs and patterns were rarely copied exactly. There is usually some change in the counting, or variation in a small element of the design, which makes one motif different from all the others that, at first glance, appear the same.

The motifs, themselves, were probably given names by the girls to distinguish one from the other in conversation. "What are you going to stitch next?" One girl might ask of another.

"Wheat in the Field", "Four-way Rose", or "Turtle-Doves", might have been the reply. We have no way of knowing now, because the names were never written down to our knowledge. But, in societies where stitching and knitting motifs are still handed down from generation to generation, names are applied so that designs can be discussed and visualised with facility.

We can only guess whether the motifs had any moral or religious symbolism constituting a system of learning in itself. And if the motifs were symbolic, what then did they signify? The squirrel and the acorn are found in *The Rational Dame* – a school reading book. The message from the book is never to leave food to chance but secure provisions for lean times. The swan gliding over the lake is mentioned in one of Aesop's Fables, also a book in use at the school, and signifies

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the embrace of life after death. Then there is a garland of leaves around the words, "A Token of Love". A token of love for whom? A father? A brother? Someone ill? Someone in prison? In fact it was a form of chain letter, transmitting the knowledge of God's love from one mortal to another,

The motifs which appear frequently in octagonal or near-octagonal outlines or borders are called medallions. If the motif is pictorial and asymmetric, such as a swan, or a bird or an intricate passion-flower, then the medallion is stitched in the full round. When the motif is geometric, and is designed with 4-way symmetry then often only a half or a quarter of the medallion is stitched. These half- and quarter-medallions are typically arranged around the sides and corners of the sampler. At Ackworth it is usual that the unfinished edges of the medallions all face outwards. By contrast, samplers from other Quaker schools may face alternately inwards and outwards, displaying a greater economy of linen use.

Inside the border of half- and quarter-medallions the girls stitched a dense patchwork of motifs including the asymmetric picture medallions. Pots or urns of flowers were stitched in their entirety if asymmetrical; otherwise they were halved along a vertical axis of symmetry, like the medallions. Amongst all these motifs are frequently found letters of the alphabet. Sometimes paired like initials, maybe of friends or family members, sometimes scattered singly at random in the available remaining spaces.

Sometimes samplers appear to be dedicated to another girl as a gift. However, we know that even with this dedication, a sampler like Sarah Spence's stayed in the same family as the girl who stitched it. So perhaps those dedications were patterns for a smaller gift such as a pinball.

There is a core repertoire of approximately 100 motifs, although the motifs exist in many subtle variations as mentioned. This core repertoire is more or less common amongst samplers from other Quaker Schools of the same period. The size of medallions varies considerably from about 30 stitches square to 75 stitches square. A typical sampler has between 40 and 50 motifs and medallions. Some stitchers have estimated that each motif would have taken between two or three hours to sew. We do not know if this was the time available for stitching each day, or each week, but it is evident that the sampler involved many hours of work.

We know from school records the names of the girls who stitched the Ackworth samplers. We know how they dressed and what they ate. We know where they came from. We know when they came to the school and when they left.

We know which girls stayed on to become apprentices and later teachers. We know so much, and yet so little. The most tantalizing question of all remains unanswered: from where did those medallions originate?

They seem to have simply appeared, fully-formed in their entirety. There is no obvious sign of development or accretion of new motifs over time. This puzzle has two pieces. The first piece concerns the medallions themselves which are uniquely 'Quaker'. Where did they originate? Are they a development of motifs found elsewhere in Europe? We know that the Quakers, because of their refusal to take oaths, were denied access to the professions, and so the only alternative means for them to gain their living was to trade. And excellent and successful traders they were too, with business networks that spanned Europe and beyond. There are records of Quaker children being sent to Ackworth from St Petersburg, New York and Australia. British Quakers also travelled to meet with the large communities of Quakers in the Netherlands and Germany. Charles Fox records his travels to 'Hamborough' (Hamburg). Is it possible that a teacher was found from amongst the highly skilled needlewomen of Germany and the Netherlands to teach the Ackworth girls designs from her native land?

The other piece of the puzzle concerns the economy of representing 2- and 4-way symmetrical motifs. Why indeed labour to stitch a pattern in the round, when all the stitching information can be succinctly captured in half or even a quarter of the number of stitches? The closest exemplars of this economy of stitching are found on samplers from the Vierlanden region near Hamburg which now lies in Germany. In the first half of the 19th century, however, Danish rule extended to the Elbe and Altona, now a suburb of Hamburg, was the second largest city in Denmark. Could it be then, that there is a Danish origin to be considered?

If we ever solve this puzzle, there still remains at least one other mystery. If pattern information is condensed into a half or a quarter of the stitches that would be taken when worked fully 'in the round', then to what use were those patterns put when the medallions were worked for a 'real'? The only evidence we have of any end-products are knitted! From time to time, small round pin-balls turn up which bear similar geometric motifs to the Quaker medallions. These are usually knitted in silk in two colours, brown and cream. This license to produce small objects seems to contradict the stern and utilitarian ethos of Quaker education. Can it really be that the sole use of the medallion patterns was simply to embellish small tokens of love? But when was a token of love ever simple or small, or for that matter, without use?

