

# Northwest Sampler Guild: Interview of Glee Krueger

by Becky de Vries-Wong

## **What is your background?**

At the University of Wisconsin I was an Art Education major, but I took home economics related art courses and additional courses in art history in undergraduate and graduate school while at Madison. I also worked for an interior designer doing the buying and window displays etc. before working for The Art Institute of Chicago.

## **How did you get started in your study of samplers?**

I began collecting samplers in 1963, with the purchase of a boy's sampler in a faux-grained frame from the late Edward Grosvenor Paine of New Orleans. I had admired all the needlework in the Textile Study Room displays while I was a staff member of the Decorative Arts Department of the Art Institute. The Textile Study Room was a sub-division of our department with a number of galleries. I also worked with more than 1,000 entries for the Midwest Designer Craftsman exhibit, a touring show, and this experience enabled me to meet each artisan entering work and to meet the weaver Dorothy Liebes, one of the jury.

## **Do you do needlework yourself or are you more interested in the historical aspects of samplers?**

Yes, I do stitch, and love it! But research with primary source materials takes huge chunks of time and effort. However, I feel, doing both is a necessity, they augment each other and I think any contemporary craftsman is a better designer and artisan if he or she has spent time in the museums, historical societies, etc. studying their exhibits.

## **Where have your travels taken you in your study of samplers?**

I have worked primarily in New England, but have visited museums in the West, South, Midwest, Canada and Mexico. I keep returning to see museum exhibits, historical society shows, private collections, antique shows, auction previews and flea markets. I have spent thousands of hours in libraries reading manuscripts, newspapers and have borrowed through inter-library loan many early newspapers to read the advertisements of early American and English teachers seeking pupils. Several hundred of these were published in *New England Samplers to 1840* for Old Sturbridge Village in 1978, and a few more appeared in the Kapnek catalog, I have attended lectures of Tina Levey and Thomasina Beck and others when they were in New England speaking. I also corresponded with the late Dr. Burnham of Canada and the late Averil Colby, all wonderful scholars.

## **Are you still active with museums or are you independently studying?**

I have freelanced since leaving the Art Institute of Chicago in 1959 when we moved to Battle Creek, Michigan. I was active in the local art center there and in the new museum in Kalamazoo. I had my first one-woman painting exhibit in Kalamazoo. I was also invited to show at the University of Michigan invitational exhibits as well as to judge the outdoor art exhibitions in the state. I also exhibited in Connecticut at galleries and shows, taken prizes and sold my work.

## **Where do you find your best resources for studying historic needlework?**

Resources for needlework are of course, the pieces themselves, whether found in homes, antique dealer stock, auctions, museums, historical societies, etc. Also helpful to study, are letters, early newspapers, portraits, diaries, teacher account books, school records, tuition bills to parents, rewards of merit, early

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books for children and adult women, and early graphics- prints which were sold inexpensively and used for designs for young women creating needlework at schools, particularly in silk. Build up a helpful reference library of your own and use it! Learning techniques of genealogical research will also be worthwhile. The richer a background you have in American history, the easier it will be for to learn something significant about needlework practitioners and their preceptresses and the institutions where they studied, as well as the artists who taught them to paint on silk or finished their work for them.

## **What is your favorite part of the research process?**

Beginning a new study - identifying a piece of needlework, who made it, and where, who the teacher was, and or the school responsible for it or if a silk embroidery, what the print source was that was copied or interpreted.

## **Do you collect samplers and historic needlework yourself?**

Yes, I collect samplers and other forms of needlework, especially American but I have English, Scottish, Spanish, Italian, German, French, Mexican and Ceylonese pieces. I have been collecting needlework implements, both the rural and the sophisticated imports. I have work pockets, needle books, sewing birds, spool-holders, housewives, pin cushions, quilt patterns in tin, paper and cardboard, shears, thimbles, needles, thimbles; Shaker pieces, early sewing books, and patterns. I started collecting needlework and tools when prices were modest. Today both are costly, or can be.

## **Do you have a favorite style or period?**

I enjoy early Asian, European and English needle arts for their superior technical mastery and beauty, but the American needlework from the 18th c. to about 1835 often has great individuality in design, and I find it extremely appealing. Each period and area has qualities to charm one. You just have to learn about it to whet your appetite for what you see.

## **What transitions have you seen in this field of history and how it is viewed?**

With the bi-centennial came a great enjoyment and appreciation as a whole for American historical objects, needlework included. Prior to that time, Frances Little, Candace Wheeler, the Colonial Dames, and Georgianne Brown Harbeson had written about American textiles of various kinds. Then Muriel Baker explored crewel, Mildred Davis followed, and Martha Steams, Margaret Berwind Schiffer, and Susan Burrows Swan came along using primary source material and creating in-depth studies. Betty Ring, Betsy Garrett, Gloria Seaman Alien, Mary Jane Edmonds, Sue Studebaker, Kimberly Smith Ivey, Patricia Herr, Rita Conant and John La Branche and Olive Graffum - have added specific material to the field. Lynn Templeton Brickley enriched the field with her scholarship on the Litchfield Female for Harvard.

In 1978 when I wrote the catalog and curated the Kapnek exhibit at the Museum of American Folk Art, it was the first show devoted to a sampler collection in years, and it rekindled the enthusiasm of the bi-centennial. And when the death of Mr. Kapnek occurred in August 1980, and the family chose to part with much of his collection, the soaring prices at Sotheby's indicated there were a whole new group of sampler collectors or would-be patrons bidding. Betty Ring's own wonderful collection at the museum and subsequent Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee exhibit whetted many more appetite for samplers and school pieces. With her two-volume book, there is still increased focus, and now many new collectors are entering the collecting arena.

But with the flourishing program of women's studies and black studies, sociologists have been using needlework data as a further study tool, and the work of many including Mary Beth Norton and Laurel

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Thatcher Ulrich with their broad and exciting interpretations brings a whole new richness and greater understanding to the studies made in the past.

## **What is your favorite piece of information that you have uncovered about a piece of needlework?**

I was responsible for learning that linsey-woolsey was a ground used in American samplers. I am indebted to Malcom Delacorte, former conservator of textiles at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York for testing the fibers from several of my samplers to prove this point. Heretofore, they had been called "green linen" grounds.

The finding of an 18th century teacher's account book. To be published, hopefully.

Another subject that fascinated me was putting together an exhibit of the needlework of an 18th c. woman, Mary Wright Alsop of Middletown, Ct. for a fall 1986 show at the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford. This was the first study of an 18th century woman's stitchery in the United States. The research was done from 21 linear feet of manuscripts at Yale's Sterling Library and many other sources. We borrowed pieces from Winterthur, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Deerfield, Middlesex County Historical Society and Yale as well as several living descendants. Although there were only 18 objects, 6 of these were recorded in the 1776 inventory of the Alsop family. The show was published as a double issue of the Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin.

The most recent experience to be published was the finding of an embroidery family record sampler in Connecticut and identifying the black child whose family was represented. This was the family of Sarah Ann Major Harris, the 20-year old who entered the private school of Quaker teacher Prudence Crandall, at Canterbury, Connecticut in 1832, so she could return to Norwich to teach black youngsters there.

## **What advice would you give to someone who is interested in starting to study historic samplers? What would be a good starting ground?**

Take the plunge! There is lots of room for much research in this field. And many corrections and additions are needed. We are really just getting started. Get acquainted with local or area museums and historical society collections, antiques dealers, etc. Perhaps some of you will have time to be part-time docents or volunteers. Working with collections in some capacity is a good way to start.

- **Make a copy of an old sampler. By the time you complete one you will know it by heart.**
- **Pretend you have been asked to describe a sampler for an article in a paragraph or two, and write about this piece of needlework describing it for someone who has not seen it. If you can do this well, you will have understood the essence of what is before you.**
- **Keep a notebook of pictures and clippings re samplers. Or a file folder, scrapbook etc.**
- **If you are a beginning collector, you might write or type up a worksheet about the sampler, which includes the following bits of information about the piece in question. Name of object (map sampler, family record, marking sampler, etc.), name of artisan who made it, teacher's name or school, provenance, date, inscription, materials, number or horizontal and vertical threads per square inch, stitches used, materials, coloring,(compare with DMC chart if you wish), dimensions, verse or motto source, price, line by line description, genealogy, publications it is included in similar pieces, references, etc.**

I understand that there is a large and superb sampler collection at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM. It was supposedly given by Alexander Girard's father who amassed the collection during his

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lifetime. Most historical societies and museums have their collections in storage, so one has to make an appointment or arrangements to see them.