

# PAPER AND SILK: POLITE ACCOMPLISHMENTS FROM THE LITCHFIELD FEMALE ACADEMY, 1792 - 1833

By Glee Krueger

The Connecticut town of Litchfield was the handsome setting for one of America's most prestigious schools for young ladies. It was created in 1792 by its resourceful, 25-year-old founder, Sarah Pierce, who nurtured her charges with a rich academic program. As Nancy Hale, a Glastonbury pupil, noted in her letter to her sister, Hannah, Miss Pierce wishes her students "to...ornament their minds."

Though the directress encouraged the intellects of her pupils, as well as their growth in self-discipline and strong religious and moral values, she was pragmatic enough to realize that some parents and pupils expected more ornamentals in the curriculum. Thus, she offered the students of her academy painting, music, and needlework along with the solid branches of history, geography, chemistry, rhetoric, arithmetic, and others.

Before the Sarah Pierce school flourished in Litchfield, and the Patten (1785) and Royce (1799) schools opened in nearby Hartford, numerous prominent Connecticut families sent their girls to be schooled in Boston and Newport. Governor Jonathan Trumbull dispatched his 11-year-old daughter, Faith, to Elizabeth Murray's Boston school in 1754. Here she embroidered the handsome black silk background chimney-piece with silk and metal threads, paint and mica, now in the collections of the Connecticut Historical Society. Mary Wright, the only child of Middletown farmer, Joseph Wright, went to Newport in 1753 and 1754, undoubtedly to Sarah Osborn's school, where Rev. Fish of Stonington sent his daughters, Mary in 1751 and Rebecca in 1754.

With the establishment of these Connecticut schools, many girls traveled to Litchfield from distant states, from Canada and Florida, even from Ireland. Here, they enjoyed a festive social life, as the town also hosted Tapping Reeve's Litchfield Law School.

While at Litchfield, the young women began their needlework with the usual basic sewing, mending, hemming, glove-making, and samplers. These samplers were of the simple marking or alphabetical variety, containing block and script letters in upper and lower cases plus the numerals one to nine. Decorative elements were stitched, such as houses, four-heart clusters, vine borders, and even a striped-



Figure 1: Sally Phelps autumn harvest scene, circa 1805.

winged eagle. Catherine Bliss Ely of Saybrook, age 8, used yellow and white silks on her green linsey-woolsey ground sampler dated July 24, 1811. A family record-type sampler was made by Susan Dodd Bulkley in 1826 and inscribed as a gift for her grandmother. The only sampler to name the school was inscribed, "Sarah Perry/Miss Pierce's/Litchfield 1822."

But the majority of surviving pieces are silk embroideries expertly stitched and enhanced with watercolor details in sky areas and in facial features and appendages. Such is the elegantly colored, exquisitely embroidered autumn harvest

scene by Sally Phelps of Litchfield (Fig. 1). Sally selected a seasonal theme favored in England and the continent for several centuries in printmaking, painting, and needlework.

In 1802, two students from Glastonbury, Nancy Hale and Cyrintia Sacretia Smith, chose "The Cottage Girl" as their design source (Fig. 2). They embroidered similar pictures, copying an aquatint of the same title, "The Cottage Girl"/London Publish'd June 25, 1799 by J. Le Petit, No. 22 Suffolk Street, Middlesex Hospital. Both panels have swags of roses at the top and paired cornucopias at the base of the oval, a characteristic of early work from

All examples are the property of The Litchfield Historical Society, Litchfield, Connecticut

Litchfield. The simple country girl standing with firewood in one arm and a basket of berries in the other was given lavish treatment, with colorful silks, silk chenille, silver and gold threads, and watercolor.

A third silk embroidery was made by Susan Masters of New Milford, CT. "October 15th 1808 Malvina," reads the gold lettering on the eglomise mat and frame on Susan's picture. Exquisitely embroidered and sensitively painted, Susan's design (Fig. 3) is one of a statuesque female in a classical white dress leaning on her silver-threaded harp. It was inspired by the work of Scottish poet, James MacPherson, who published alleged translations from Gaelic of a third century poet, Ossian. These poems became popular in Scotland and abroad. At the time a three-act ballad opera "Malvina" was written by George McFarren, and performed in the Theater Royal, Drury Lane, London.

Besides these adornments for the wall, one of the earliest embroideries in silk was made prior to 1797 by Betsy Tryon as a panel for a fire screen. It also features a lady harpist in a seated version. The making of embroideries for firescreens was also practiced at the Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts and elsewhere.

Still another form of silk embroidery made at Litchfield was called printwork. This needlework imitated etchings and engravings in black threads or a neutral grisaille palette. With such limited, subdued coloring, Caroline Litchfield Newcomb created a mourning picture in memory of her maternal grandparents and six siblings. Esther Bevier, also from New York state, embroidered and painted a memorial as a tribute to her father, Philip DuBois Bevier. Castles as well as mourning pictures were standard subject matter for printwork. Esther depicted Warwick Castle in 1800; her sister, Rachel, not to be outdone, chose Dudley Castle as her subject.

Esther also embroidered a scene known as "Susan's Farewell," with a single maid standing on shore waving to departing ships. Esther's design is based on the 1720 poem of Englishman John Gay, titled "Black eyed Susan." The poem was set to music by the dramatist Charles Dibdin. Subsequently, transfer-printed jugs shipped from Liverpool to American ports were embellished with this design, which Esther chose to use. A reversed image of "Susan's Farewell" appears in an anonymous child's silk embroidery with bold coloring and grape clusters above the image and cornucopias below, obviously a product of Litchfield. It may be seen in the collections of the Nathan Hale Home-



Figure 2: "The Cottage Girl," circa 1802.

stead, Coventry, CT, Antiquarian and Landmarks Society, Inc.

Many close friendships began at Litchfield. Before the November 1818 marriage, at the First Church Congregational, Middletown, of Hartford student Jerusha Clark to Henry Peck of New Haven, a group of Litchfield students quilted an appliqued rose-whig quilt as an engagement present for her. The quilt has a center field of nine blocks of the rose-whig variation, quilted with plain red and green calico cottons. A thin vine border and two bands frame the central panel. The quilt has a cotton batt and backing and the running stitches are quilted in a diamond pattern (Fig. 4).

Besides the needlework created at Litchfield through the years, students produced an enviable variety of painting on silk and paper. Numerous large-scale watercolor mourning pictures on silk—historical events, genre subjects, local and foreign landscapes, and birds and flow-

ers—were defined by the paintbrush. A handsome survivor is the painted pasteboard wall pocket made by Litchfield student and teacher, Mary Wallace Peck. Even diminutive watch papers were painted with both animal and floral motifs and presented to teacher John Pierce Brace by some of his affectionate students.

Several beauties in the Litchfield Historical Society collections are the stencilled theorems made by Catherine Jerusha Bockee. One of her theorems is stencilled on velvet with pink roses and morning glories. Her theorems on paper include red carnations (Fig. 5) as well as a grape cluster and lilies. A glance at the crisp workmanship shows her mastery of the technique as she followed in the footsteps of her mother, Martha Oakley, as a second generation student attending the school.

Though the polite accomplishments of ornamental handiworks were always of lesser importance to Sarah Pierce, her quest for excellence spilled over into the



Figure 3: A woman with harp by Susan Masters, 1808.

decorative arts. The many pieces of great beauty created by students compare favorably with any other school of this federal period. And they provide us with a lasting legacy of this pioneer teacher, Sarah Pierce.

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Figure 4: Engagement Quilt, circa 1818.



Figure 5: Red Carnations Theorem, circa 1818.