

Conference Draws Needlework Enthusiasts From Near And Far

By Laura Beach

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Hartford, Conn.

More than a 100 enthusiasts from around the country attended a one-day conference on early American needlework on October 30 at the Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library. The event coincided with the museum's new exhibition, "Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art, and Family, 1740–1840," on view through March 26.

After introductions by executive director Kate Steinway, exhibition curator Susan P. Schoelwer, now at George Washington's Mount Vernon, described her methodology and findings.

"Who taught the teachers?" asked Schoelwer, who relied on extensive genealogical research to document the transmission of style and technique in Connecticut before the rise of formal female academies. Women who created decorative needlework tended to be affluent and well-educated. Often, they were related to Yale-trained clergymen and other professionals.

Linda Baumgarten, curator of textiles and costumes at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, offered fascinating evidence from her ongoing study of quilted petticoats made in Connecticut and Rhode Island between 1740 and 1760. Unlike petticoats made elsewhere in the colonies, southern New England examples are quilted with fanciful figures of animals and people, some apparently drawn from English heraldry and print sources. Baumgarten is using computer-aided design software to copy the stitched patterns that, because they appear on monochromatic whole-cloth quilts, are hard to visualize.



Detail from a bed hanging embroidered by Prudence Geer Punderson, circa 1750–60. Courtesy Connecticut Historical Society.



Unionville, Conn., appraiser Regina Madigan, right, gets her catalog signed by exhibition curator Susan P. Schoelwer, center, and Connecticut Historical Society director Kate Steinway, left.

The day culminated with behind-the-scenes tours and book signings by Schoelwer, whose companion catalog, *Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art, and Family, 1740–1840*, is newly available from Wesleyan University Press in Middletown, Conn.

"Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art, and Family, 1740–1840" presents more than 70 samplers, silk embroideries and decorated clothing, bedding and accessories made by Connecticut women and girls. A final gallery is devoted to the needlework of one remarkable family and its best known member, Prudence Punderson.

The Connecticut Historical Society is at 1 Elizabeth Street. For information, 860-236-5621 or www.chs.org.

Antiques and the Arts Editorial Content

Dover, Mass., conservator Deirdre Windsor of Windsor Conservation gave a comprehensive talk on the challenges inherent in conserving antique needlework. Windsor stabilized many of the fragile silk embroideries in the CHS display. Especially interesting was her discussion of her painstaking treatment of a silk-embroidered picture by Prudence Punderson in the private collection of Arthur and Gigi Liverant of Colchester, Conn.

Linda Eaton, director of collections and senior curator of textiles at the Winterthur Museum, repeatedly demonstrates her talent for using textiles to bring history alive. Eaton's presentation centered on "Betsy Ross: The Life Behind The Legend." On view through January 2, the Winterthur display is a pendant to Marla Miller's acclaimed new book *Betsy Ross and the Making of America*. Ross, like many of the female entrepreneurs described by Schoelwer, gives lie to the belief that women were neither educated nor productive outside the home in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.

Elizabeth Abbe gave a noon-time tribute to Glee Krueger, a pioneering scholar of New England needlework. Krueger organized her brief remarks around a half-dozen samplers from her personal collection. The pieces related to examples in the CHS display.



"St Bartholomew," one of 12 portraits of apostles embroidered by Prudence Punderson Rossiter, 1776–1783. Courtesy Connecticut Historical Society.