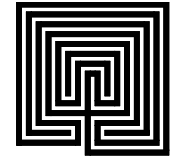


# Two Labyrinths on English Needlework Samplers



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In times past, the women and girls who stitched intricate and delicate samplers would not have considered themselves artists, and accordingly they left little, if anything, of a biographical insight into their personalities and lives. Generally, we have only a name, a date, and the legacy of the designs they chose. These designs, with their specific motifs, verses, arrangement, and colour, serve to provide insight into the life and times of their nearly-anonymous makers.

Stories, poems, songs – even the scantiest of jottings of families and loved ones – contributed to the composite life story of the Anonymous Women who ornamented every phase of her experience from girlhood through old age with handiwork of startling power and invention.<sup>1</sup>

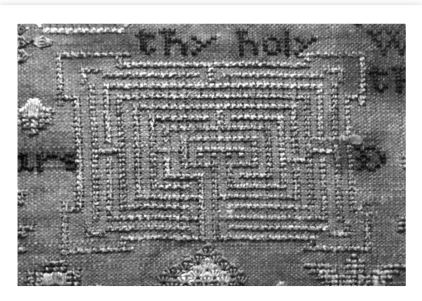
The earliest surviving English samplers date from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, and by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century girls, often as young as five years of age, would stitch simple samplers. Working designs of increasing complexity as they became older and more experienced, their needlework skills would accompany them throughout life. Instruction often took place in schools and female academies where “elegant accomplishment” sometimes took precedence over scholarship.<sup>2</sup> They sourced their designs from collections that were regularly published and stored in the libraries of schools and teachers where they would be available to the students who passed through on their way to adulthood.



A recent addition to the Labyrinthos collection of labyrinthine artefacts is a late 18<sup>th</sup> century embroidered sampler, approximately 50 cm (18 inches) square, created by Ann Lewis “at Mrs Lees Dewsbury yorkshire in the year of our Lord 1798 Aged 12 Years” Rather faded, but otherwise in good condition for a piece of fabric over 200 years old, the sampler is decorated with two large birds (probably meant to be parrots), a number of heraldic devices, biblical figures in the form of Noah and his Ark, and Adam and Eve standing either side of the Tree of Knowledge, complete with serpent wrapped around its trunk. To the right of the tree is a rectangular labyrinth 8 x 5 cm, probably originally embroidered in blue silk. Winding its way between the various designs and devices (technically known as ‘spot motifs,') embroidered on the fabric are the lines of a poem *Whenever I take my Walks Abroad* written by Isaac Watts

(1674-1748), a prodigious hymn-writer and theologian and author of various volumes of hymns, including *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, published in 1715, in which the poem on the sampler first appears.

*Stitched sampler signed by Ann Lewis of Dewsbury, Yorkshire, 1798.*  
*Labyrinthos Collection*



While searching for further information on the author of the sampler and who her teacher may have been, we were rather surprised to find an almost identical sampler preserved in the important collection of samplers in the Kirklees Museum Collection, held at the Tolson Museum in Huddersfield, Yorkshire (accession no: KLMUS 2011.18).<sup>3</sup> This example, embroidered by Mary Blackburn in 1785, was also created at Mrs. Lees in Dewsbury and has very similar design elements including birds, biblical figures and an almost identical, slightly rectangular, labyrinth stitched in black, floating directly above Noah in his Ark. This time the text



woven around the motifs is from a verse entitled “O that the Lord Would Guide my Ways,” and once again the author is Isaac Watts – clearly his uplifting moral rhymes were popular on the bookshelf where these two girls were taught their needlework skills.

The fact that two samplers survive with remarkably similar designs, from 13 years apart, and both created at Mrs Lees in Dewsbury, would suggest that Mrs Lees (or Lee, there is no apostrophe to indicate either way on the samplers) was a teacher, either at a ‘Dame School’ (a private elementary school, often located in the home of the teacher) or at one of the charitable schools in the town – Dewsbury, as a wealthy milling and mining town, had a proud tradition of providing education for its children from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, long before the introduction of compulsory education – although we have been unable to trace her in the early trade directories, first published in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wherever

her classes were held, Mrs. Lees was surely providing her girls with patterns for them to copy motifs for their embroidery projects. Such patterns were available in pattern books, and also in publications of the time, especially the fashion monthly *Lady’s Magazine*, published from 1770 to 1837. Clearly one of the books or magazines in her library must have contained the labyrinth design that appears on both of the surviving samplers.



The design of the labyrinths is at first sight rather unusual – rectangular, with protrusions at the four corners – but the pattern of the pathways is in fact a familiar seven-circuit medieval design, first found in Serlio’s influential book *Libri cinque d’architettura*,<sup>4</sup> a design used in circular form for the pavement labyrinths at San Vitale, Ravenna and the Castel Sant’ Angelo in Italy, and for the turf labyrinth in England, at Clifton, Nottingham, this time rendered in square form. This square design, with the same protrusions, or bastions at the corners that appear on the samplers first appears in Thomas Hill’s famous English-language gardening book *The Profitable Art of Gardening* (also the source of the design of the Saffron Walden turf labyrinth), first published in 1579 and widely reprinted thereafter.<sup>5</sup>

A copy of Hill’s engraving was surely in one of the pattern books or magazines on Mrs. Lees’ bookshelf in Dewsbury in the late 1700’s. Whatever the exact source, it further proves how widespread the labyrinth symbol had become in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, at all levels of society – even schoolgirls would have known the designs!

<sup>1</sup> Bank, Mirra. *Anonymous was a Woman*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1979; p. 9

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 10

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kirkleesimages.org.uk/Samplers.php>

<sup>4</sup> Kern, Hermann. *Through the Labyrinth*. Prestel, 2000; p. 248 (no.470)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 248 (no.471-472)