

## Georgiana Brown Harbeson

by Sally Garoutte

*HARBESON, GEORGIANA BROWN: b. New Haven, Conn. May 13, 1894, present address: 7817 Roanoke St., Philadelphia, PA 19118; artist, embroiderer, designer, author, teacher. Dght. of Caroline King and Charles Francis Brown; married John Frederic Harbeson June, 1916, married secondly Frank Godwin Feb. 1946. Two children, John Frederic, Jr. and Paul. Attended Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum College of Art. Needlepaintings exhibited Paris Exposition of Arts and Industries, Chicago Museum of Art, many New York City galleries. Author of AMERICAN NEEDLEWORK 1938, many articles on design and embroidery in VOGUE, McCALL'S, AMERICAN HOME, AR'S BAZAAR, NEEDLECRAFT, etc. Sets and costumes designed for nine ballets and four plays produced in New York. Named to the Professional and Executive Hall of Fame, 1966.*



Georgiana Brown Harbeson is without question the First Lady of modern stitchery. In the 1910's, most embroidery was done in cotton or silk floss using the set patterns which had evolved and then solidified from the once-free-spirited late Victorian needlework. Wool threads were only used for needlepoint or counted thread work on rigid canvas. Georgiana Brown Harbeson burst out of that cocoon in the early "twenties."

With a background in traditional painting from her years at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Ms Harbeson used her needle and her crewel yarns to devise and promote the art which she called Needlepainting, and which we now more frequently refer to simply as Stitchery. In contrast to the total surface coverage of needlepoint, Harbeson opened up her embroideries, allowing the background fabric to appear as background to the color and line of her stitches. Many of her designs were conceived as illustrations or cover designs.

After the breakup of her first marriage, Harbeson moved her studio to New York where she began exhibiting almost immediately. In 1931

a New York reviewer wrote: "You expect to see reproductions, and are confronted with embroideries which are a part of modern art, and which have been copied from nowhere. Your idea of needlework undergoes a radical change."

Pieces of her work were featured on the covers of NEEDLECRAFT between 1931 and 1935 --the first time needlework was ever commissioned for cover illustrations. Other works were featured in articles in WOMAN'S HOME COMPANION, McCALLS, and many other magazines of general interest and national circulation. Her work has been exhibited widely in invitational shows on the east coast and in Paris for more than fifty years. One exhibition of thirty Harbeson needlepaintings traveled for four years throughout the United States, including Hawaii. Two of her recent works were in Bucks County, PA exhibit in 1979.

Harbeson's book AMERICAN NEEDLEWORK was published in 1938 by Coward-McCann, and has been re-issued several times by Bonanza Books of New York. It is the first book of

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cont. from back cover. its kind, devoted to the broad spectrum of needlework done in America. It includes sections on Indian work, needlelace and quilts as well as histories of all kinds of embroidery from colonial samplers and crewel work right through to the time of publication. Forty years after its publication, in a world now containing hundreds of needlework books, AMERICAN NEEDLEWORK still stands out in its comprehensiveness and in the author's careful attention to giving credit to the individual women and men who have done the work.

Ms. Harbeson now lives in Germantown, PA and is nearing her eighty-sixth birthday. In a conversation a few months ago, she talked about the events in her life.

"I began needlework around 1920. I had been out of the Academy about two years, was breaking up with my first husband, and had to go to New York to make my living. I hadn't any training in the things most people did, so I thought about making needlework a career. No one else was doing it, and I thought here was an opportunity to do something better for women than had been done.

"In my day, they were snooty in the schools. People used to say 'Oh, that's in the Crafts department'. It used to annoy me when I went to the Academy. I used to sneak into the classes of the Illustration teacher, who was a man of broad interests, always suggesting books and new ideas to his students. Whereas my teacher never told me anything. He kept me a whole year in the 'Pink Antique' --that was a room filled with white plaster casts. I had never had any lessons in drawing, and I had to sit there a whole year and draw white plaster casts. You had to work it out for yourself with pain and suffering, trial and error.

"I used to do a fair amount of painting; in my early career I was president of the National Association of Women Artists. Sometimes I think of painting again, but I haven't. But I always make a painting or a full drawing before I begin an embroidery.

"My first work was with the idea of illustration. I thought a needle could be used for that as well as a brush. I wondered why embroidery couldn't be used as decorative spots, like illustrations. And I wanted to be paid what an illustrator would be paid. That was my objective --and also to try to design something of interest to women. I've always been interested in getting women to do modern and contemporary needlework, and to use their self-expression.

"In the thirties I did cover illustrations for Needlecraft Magazine. Florence Wilson, the editor, came to call on me af-

ter she had seen some of my work. She said she saw something spiritual in it. She was considered to be psychic, and wrote intertitions of my covers in the magazine. They often surprised me; I didn't know that that was what I was thinking.

"A number of pieces were commissioned by The Woman's Home Companion and American Home. I did some for House and Garden, Harper's Bazaar and the Ladies' Home Journal --all in crewel. At that time, most of the interest was throughout the middle west and far points of the country. The publications went out everywhere.

"My studio was on 56th Street. I did a lot of teaching. No one was teaching crewel embroidery then, but I thought women should have a needle art that could be more selfexpressive than needlepoint on printed patterns. Later, I came back to Philadelphia and did a lot of teaching. I began the first group in Philadelphia, which became one of the first sections of the Embroidery Guild.

"I keep telling the people in the Guild that they should get evaluations for their needlework, because most people are back in the Victorian Age as to what things are worth. Women don't value their own work and never have. The market, therefore, doesn't pay attention.

"I think my next big interest will be anthropology. I'm awfully interested in our antecedents. I've done one piece with an Indian theme --sort of an Aztec head. I did

3-6 2' THE NEW YORK TIMES, T  
AT OPENING OF WOMEN'S NATIONAL EXPOSITION YESTERDAY



In the weaving room of the American Hand Arts section. Left to right: Crown Princess Martha of Norway, Mrs. Georgiana Brown Harbeson, chairman of the section, and Mrs. Vanderbilt Webb, chairman of rooms of the section, watching Mrs. Marguerite G. Brooks operate the loom which she invented.

it last year when I was ill in bed. I don't like being ill. Don't have the time for it."

Georgiana Brown Harbeson has been the recipient of many awards and honors throughout her career. Her earliest were prizes in composition as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, in 1916. Her most recent were three awards (including the Governor's Award) in a Philadelphia stitchery exhibition in 1979. Perhaps her greatest satisfaction, however, has come from the realization that her ideals and philosophy on the worth of women's work and the value of self-expression in needlework have touched the spirits of needleworkers all across the nation. Homage should be paid to this Great Lady of Needlework.

Ed Note: Covers by Mrs. Harbeson appeared on NEEDLECRAFT MAGAZINE in July, October, and December, 1931, February, April, June and August 1932, April, July, October and December 1933, March, July, and October 1934 and July 1935. Many of the magazines contained the "interpretations" of the covers mentioned in the article.

*We regret we have been unable to find a complete list of Mrs. Harbeson's writing and magazine illustrations. Any references by our readers would be appreciated.*

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### Letters to the Editor

• Thought you might be interested in a few additions to Peto bibliography.

1. Winter 43-44 McCALL'S NEEDLEWORK & CRAFTS "Wild Goose Chase" by F. Peto.
2. deJonge, Eric (ed) "Country Things " From the pages of ANTIQUES. contains reprints of articles by F. Peto.

Cuesta Benberry  
St. Louis MO

• I enjoy the JOURNAL very much. It has developed into an informative publication. I really enjoy each issue and read it from cover to cover. I especially liked the article about the "shortage of fabric" during the early years of our country. The next myth I would like to see broken is: If our grandmothers had sewing machines they would have used them to make quilts. This is a standard statement of machine quilting advocates.

I have nothing against piecing on the machine, if it is well done, but I really wonder if those ladies would have done it by machine. My grandmother did have a sewing machine but still did a lot of hand work. My great-aunt, who lived for a time

The Fall and Winter 1979 issues of QUILTERS' JOURNAL contained articles about Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party. At that time there was no scheduled future exhibit. We are pleased to announce that it will be shown at the University of Houston at Clear Lake City, Texas, March 9 - June 1, 1980.

In conjunction with this showing, the Through the Flower Corporation, a nonprofit corporation which hopes to find permanent housing for The Dinner Party as well as short exhibitions, has announced an International Quilting Bee 1980. The exhibition will consist of a collection of triangular honor quilts each honoring a contemporary or historical woman or woman's group. They will be displayed together in Houston to form one large quilt. At the end of the exhibition ten of the honor quilts will be chosen by a jury of craftspeople to be auctioned. All others will be raffled with proceeds going to support the educational, artistic and informational goals of the group as well as the permanent housing drive for The Dinner Party and the programs of Through the Flower/North.

For further information on how to participate in the International Quilting Bee, contact Susan Brenner, Through the Flower/North, 450 Alabama St, San Francisco 94110.

with my grandmother, was a quilt maker. She was the family seamstress and as such used a sewing machine. But the quilts were hand made.

What do you think?

Thelma Barr  
Springfield, VA

• For the past year I have enjoyed reading the QUILTERS' JOURNAL and find the articles have been of much value to me in my interest of Quilt Art.

I was particularly interested in the letters of Florence Peto and do hope you'll share more of them in future issues. Do you know if the Peto book "Historic Quilts" is still available?  
ED NOTE: This was just one of many requests for Mrs. Peto's book. Unfortunately we do not know where to find one.

• Oh how I enjoyed the Winter issue and Florence Peto's letters. How wonderful of Emma Andres to share them with us all!

Barbara Hedman  
Omaha, NE