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A Record of a Woman's Work — The Betsey Reynolds Voorhees Collection

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There has always been an interest in American needlework. Women have wanted to know what other women made, so the quilts, the bed hangings, and the samplers were collected. The fascination often centered on the antiquity of the textile or its historic association. Many times the pieces of needlework were preserved in a vacuum, with little information as to their age or creator.

Recent scholarship in American needlework has progressed greatly beyond these early efforts. Textiles are now studied in relationship to a whole. They are accurately identified, doing away with some of the historic romance associated with pieces. The needlework made by women is viewed as part of an entire period of style and living. Observations and research have led to conclusions as to regional designs and trends in needlework. Patterns and forms of stitchery are being attributed to schools.

Although these studies are thorough, many of the textiles are still researched out of context. Types of textiles are looked at relative to identical textiles—quilts to quilts, mourning pictures to mourning pictures. While this research has its place, a fact is often overlooked. Women did not make just one or two things; they made a "variety of domestic articles."¹ The questions who were the women who stitched these pieces, what all did they make, and how the one piece pertains to the whole of their ability often remain unanswered.

The study of the scope of a woman's ability and productivity

within the field of needlework is hampered. Textiles wear out over the years, get thrown away, or are dispersed. Women did not keep record books on the needlework they made, such as a cabinetmaker would have, because their work was not for sale. Any personal notebooks that might contain information on what a woman did were easily discarded as unimportant. Therefore, when one woman's work is preserved, a rich source of data is available. The collection can be examined and studied in relationship to its creator, but it can be a mirror to an era. The Betsey Reynolds Voorhees Collection is such a resource. Its size and the variety of objects within it can be the basis for many studies on the entire spectrum of needlework made by American women in the first half of the nineteenth century.

A grouping of approximately 170 pieces, the Betsey Reynolds Voorhees Collection contains artwork, needlework, letterbooks, and notebooks made by Betsey between 1800 and 1855. A woman of character and determination, she began work while in school and continued sewing and drawing through her married life, while raising four sons and involving herself in social issues of the time. Highly revered by her family, much of Betsey's art and needlework was saved from sale and oblivion by her youngest son and, subsequently, his daughter. In 1917 the Collection was given to the Montgomery County Historical Society, Fort Johnson, New York, which has preserved it since.

The Collection was always highly praised, but more for its association with a remarkable lady and her ancestors than for what it contained. The time has come to look at the Collection and the objects within it. They reveal much about Betsey Reynolds Voorhees, but the drawings, the textiles, the needlework and the notebooks can also disclose much about Betsey's contemporaries.

Betsey Reynolds was born December 9, 1790, the second of three children of Dr. Stephen and Lydia Bartlett Reynolds. Though residing in Montgomery County, New York, Betsey's mother was from Connecticut, and Dr. Reynolds had studied with a family friend in that colony. Probably for these reasons, Betsey was sent to Litchfield, Connecticut for her education. Family tradition held that she studied at Miss Sarah Pierce's Academy.² Though there is no record of her attending Miss Pierce's school,³ one of Betsey's notebooks includes a list of "Expenses while at Lichfield [sic]"⁴ and two notebooks contain compositions written while in that village.⁵

By 1810 Betsey was home in Minaville. On April 24, 1811 she married Dr. Samuel Voorhees. A young man from the neighboring town, Samuel had been studying medicine under Betsey's father. About 1820, they moved across the Mohawk River to the growing village of Amsterdam. They had purchased an imposing and already historic house on Main Street. Here Dr. Voorhees opened an office. Samuel and Betsey had three sons by the time they moved and a fourth was born in 1826. The Voorheeses maintained a position of respect in Amsterdam society. Their home contained furniture associated with historic personages. Dr. Voorhees put in a garden and hothouses in which he grew an assortment of fruits, vegetables, and flowers. After Betsey's death, the house and its furnishings, including Betsey's needlework, became somewhat of a museum. They remained in the Voorhees family until the early twentieth century.

Betsey's mother was a woman of artistic ability and perhaps from her Betsey learned the rudiments of stitchery. Her schooling also included instructions in needlework, for the list of "Expenses..." includes lace, Ribland [sic], skeins of silk, skeins of floss thread, flannel, and pelin [sic].⁶ Her accomplishments with the needle were displayed at an early age. Betsey's granddaughter told the story that, when a girl of seventeen, Betsey "attended the county fair in Johnstown, attired from head to foot in garments manufactured by herself from the raw material, to her shoes, gloves and ribbons, and her straw hat was braided by her own deft fingers."⁷ While this sounds like proud embellishment, if one looks at the Collection and the caliber of the textiles and knows from other records what else Betsey made, one is inclined to accept the granddaughter's story.

Like most girls, Betsey must have made items in preparation for her wedding. Only one piece remains, a candlewick coverlet. Made of two pieces of ribbed cotton, seamed down the center, Betsey embroidered a pattern of french knots and bullion stitch. The center motif is an urn filled with slender flowers. It is surrounded by a border of diamonds, then a border on three sides of swags and tassels. In making the coverlet, Betsey began a practice which has proven invaluable for research. The coverlet is dated 1811 and signed across the top BETSEY REYNOLDS.⁸

About thirty years later Betsey made another candlewick coverlet. Stitched on a heavy twill cotton, the coverlet is signed and dated

B.R. Voorhees 1844. It too has a center urn of flowers. There is a wide border of suns, each having a flower in the center. Though essentially the same pattern, there is a subtle difference. The pattern in the 1844 coverlet is heavy and massive in feeling, while the earlier piece looks light and airy. This difference could be accounted for by the change in styles in thirty years. It could also have been caused by areas of influence. Betsey had just returned from Connecticut when she made the 1811 coverlet. By 1844 she had lived steadily in New York over thirty-five years. There is a variance in New York interpretation of styles. These two coverlets could be examples of this difference.⁹

There is only one quilt in the collection. It is made with a fine cotton front and a loosely-woven linen back. The filling is cotton. The three layers are attached with very fine stitching and, after the design was completed, cotton was used to stuff the figures. In making the quilt, a pattern was planned similar in design to the two coverlets. The center medallion is a pomegranate, sprouting flowers and palm leaves filled with hearts. This is surrounded by a double border of running feather vine with flowers between. Around this is a wide border of sunflowers and grapes flowing from cornucopias, and more pomegranates and large flat leaves with hearts in their centers. At the top of the quilt are two sunflowers. There is a set of initials in the center of each flower—BRV and LR. The first initials obviously stand for Betsey. The other two letters could be for Betsey's mother, Lydia Reynolds, or for one of Betsey's three nieces each of whose name began with L. No matter for whom the quilt was made, it is a beautiful piece incorporating quilting and stuffing, which measures 89½ inches by 94½ inches.¹⁰ (Figure 1)

The duties of motherhood did not stop Betsey from sewing. She made many articles of clothing for herself and her sons. While many women may have been satisfied sewing fine, well-tailored outfits, this was not so for Betsey. Each piece that has been preserved contains exquisite embellishments. The decorative designs and stitchery exhibit careful thinking and execution, and can tell students of the 1820 to 1840 period what women were sewing.

Betsey made much of her own clothing for daily use. Even the smallest and most utilitarian pieces contain a diversity of decorative stitches. A collar is embroidered with dyed linen thread and includes

Fig. 1. White cotton stuffed quilt, c. 1820–1840. Made by Betsey Reynolds Voorhees. Cat. #247, Montgomery County Historical Society.

netted lace flowers.¹¹ Aprons are enhanced with satin-stitched cornucopias or french-knotted grapes, leaves and tatting.¹² There are also capes, shawls, and flannel wrappers. Each is enriched with inset lace, embroidery, or tambour work.¹³

There are five vests in the Collection made by Betsey for her sons. A red velvet and a cotton canvas vest are each embroidered in small satin stitch flowers down the front and on the pockets. A man's vest in striped wool flannel is covered in tambour work. Following the horizontal stripes, there are rows of Greek keys alternating with rows of stylized flowers. Two white cotton twill vests are decorated with freehand ink drawing. Even the small covered

buttons have a flower sketched on them. Each vest is signed. One was made for James, the other for Stephen, two of Betsey's sons.¹⁴

While sending some clothes to her eldest son, Betsey wrote this poem.

For you my fancy and my skill I tried
 For you my needle with delight I plied
 The work 'tho humble you will please to take
 And wear it grateful for your mothers *sake*¹⁵

Pieces of children's clothing made for other relatives are part of the Collection. Each is embroidered in a variety of stitches in white on white or has ink highlights.

When first looking at the ink decorated clothing, a hasty conclusion could be drawn that the flowers, hearts, and Greek keys are embroidery patterns never used. A closer examination of the patterns and the quality of the drawing dispels that thought. The designs are too detailed and fine, and in some cases include names or words. Ink sketching was obviously a method of enhancing clothing. An analysis of a linen handkerchief substantiates that conclusion.

A large linen handkerchief made by Betsey is one of the most fascinating pieces in the Collection. A wide border of what looks like lace makes one wonder whether it was drawn or a method like silk screening was employed to produce the effect. The center square is more intriguing. Betsey sketched a portrait in three of the corners—George Washington, Henry Clay, and Zachary Taylor. Under each is the man's signature. In the fourth corner is an eagle with the legend "To Stephen R. Voorhees—From his Mother—".¹⁶ The handkerchief proves that drawing was an acceptable decoration for textiles. The handkerchief also demonstrates that while Betsey sewed out of love for her family, much of the work was done for her own pleasure and self-expression. Stephen R. Voorhees, for whom the handkerchief was made, was blind.

Betsey's feelings on needlework were aptly expressed in a letter to a cousin.

It [needlework] is in fact but a species of painting where the needle is used instead of the brush to diffuse the shade. In ancient Rome tho the fine arts were considered to be under the superintendance of Apollo and the Muses, yet painting

was by them particularly appropriated to Minerva there by uniting the qualities of wisdom with that of genius, and joining with most finished dexterity of art the more profound sagacity of science—¹⁷

Her dexterity of art practiced with a needle was to blossom in the next decade.

The reorganization of the New York State Agricultural Society in 1841 provided for an annual state fair and encouraged each county to institute their own fair.¹⁸ These state and county fairs provided a vehicle for Betsey to display her fine needlework. In 1846 at the age of fifty-five Betsey won her first awards at the Montgomery County fair and was to continue entering and winning premiums until 1854.¹⁹ The articles made for and displayed at the county and state fairs show the wide variety of needlework made by Betsey and other women during these years. Awards were given to Betsey for such items as woolen blankets, an embroidered cravat, stockings knit from linen, cotton, wool, and worsted wool, a Cott coverlid [sic], woolen coverlid, woolen carpets, suspenders, and table covers.²⁰ The list is numerous. Some of these articles are in the Collection with their entry cards.

"1 Pair Rose Blankets Woolen" displayed at a state fair is one of the finest examples of rose blankets. This type of blanket had been made in the eighteenth century, and these thick, richly embroidered samples indicate that their production continued into the mid-nineteenth century.²¹

A set of four folding cards were put together for display at a fair. Glued to both sides of the panels of each card are samples of tied cotton fringe. Some are missing, but there are over forty pieces of fringe, no two alike.²²

The American Institute in New York City held annual fairs for the exhibition of domestic and machine-made goods. Betsey displayed some of her needlework at the Institute in at least 1844 and 1855. She made copious notes on her trip to the 1844 exhibition, including a list of eighty-nine articles she displayed.²³ It is no surprise that she won a silver cup "For the greatest variety of Household Manufacturers."²⁴ The list includes articles similar to those Betsey showed at the county fairs, but there were many different pieces. The list encompassed such items as "1 Cambrick Quilt, 1 printed

Fig. 2. Pair knit wool stockings signed and dated B. Voorhees 1820. Cat. #1373. Pair knit tan linen stockings signed B R VOORHEES AMSTERDAM EX-CELSIOR, c. 1840-1850. Cat. #1387, Montgomery County Historical Society.

shirt and belt, 1 Knit Comfort, 1 Emb. Table cover w. beed, 1 pr. of Bracelets, 1 pr of mittens, and 1 wg chair cover.”²⁵

Some of the needlework can be dated because of some of the stories associated with them. In 1825 the Marquis de Lafayette toured the United States. His reception in Amsterdam was very poorly planned and few of the residents turned out to greet Lafayette. Betsey wrote to him in 1828, apologizing for her neighbors, and enclosed a pair of stockings she had knitted.²⁶ A similar pair of stockings, a fabric book in which she stitched a Lafayette ribbon, and a cross-stitched punch card envelope of Lafayette’s thank you are thereby datable to 1828.²⁷ (Figure 2)

A plowing match was held at each county fair. Dr. Voorhees entered several of the first matches. Then in 1852 the Agricultural Society sponsored a special competition for “The old men...”, which Samuel Voorhees entered. For the event Betsey made him a

Fig. 3. Linen smock with embroidery, 1852. Made by Betsey Reynolds Voorhees. Cat. #1107, Montgomery County Historical Society.

smock of homespun linen.²⁸ (Figure 3) The tatted lace edging and four large hearts she embroidered on the corners of the collar made the smock far superior to a farmer's shirt. Whether it was the smock or a "stiff Milk punch" which spurred him on, Dr. Voorhees won the match over two professional farmers.^{29,30}

The Collection contains many more items, all of which provide a source of reference on the wide spectrum of needlework from the first half of the nineteenth century. Some of the artwork in the Collection reflects trends found in needlework, thereby giving more material for study.

Betsey Reynolds Voorhees was a remarkable lady, as many of her friends testified.³¹ Whether her ability and her work were outstanding for the time or only comparable to what all women were doing has yet to be determined. The existence of this Collection supplies a basis for this and much further research.

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