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9-2012

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Dimock, Maggie, "Harriet Joor's Needlework and Stenciled Textile Designs: Pursuing the Arts and Crafts Ideal, One Stitch at a Time" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 676.

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## **Harriet Joor's Needlework and Stenciled Textile Designs: Pursuing the Arts and Crafts Ideal, One Stitch at a Time**

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Harriet Coulter Joor was an American textile and ceramic designer working in the Arts and Crafts tradition during the early decades of the twentieth century. Among today's art historians she is known primarily as an artisan at the famed New Orleans ceramics enterprise Newcomb Pottery. In recent years Joor's work as a freelance designer of embroidered household textiles for Arts and Crafts impresario Gustav Stickley's furniture and home furnishings enterprise the Craftsman Workshops has come to light. However, the full extent of Joor's professional career, which included many years spent as a teacher, writer, independent designer, and even a Western homesteader, has not been fully explored. Further, never before has the connection between needlework produced by Newcomb artisans and designs that Joor created for Stickley's company been carefully considered.

Joor was a tireless and prolific popularizer of the ideals underpinning the Arts and Crafts Movement – an artistic and philosophical movement originating in England at the end of the nineteenth century chiefly defined by its emphasis on the virtue of traditional hand craftsmanship, simple design, and a return to pre-industrial standards of skilled workmanship and simple living. Her dedication to spreading the tenets of this movement in the United States is reflected in a large body of published articles in popular shelter magazines. Joor's designs for stenciled and embroidered Arts and Crafts household textiles, available to consumers variously as finished goods, prefabricated kits, or as published design tutorials, served to shape and disseminate the aesthetic conventions of the Arts and Crafts Movement while simultaneously encouraging American women to engage in home handiwork projects of their own.

This paper examines Harriet Joor's most active years as a professional artist and designer between 1895 and 1915, during which time she began work as a pottery decorator at Newcomb, produced freelance needlework designs for the Craftsman Workshops and made frequent written contributions to Stickley's company magazine *The Craftsman*. It also emphasizes and analyzes the unique characteristics of needlework produced by artisans at Newcomb College, participants in a handicraft program conceived in keeping with the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement. As this paper demonstrates, Harriet Joor was responsible for bringing these unique embroidery conventions to Stickley's Craftsman Workshops and in turn introduced them to a larger audience through her writing and published designs.

Born in 1875, Harriet Joor came to New Orleans in 1888 at the age of thirteen when her father was appointed Assistant Curator of Tulane University's Natural History Museum. As an adolescent she enrolled in courses at the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, Tulane's coordinate school for women. Harriet (or "Hattie" as she was known to friends and family) showed an early interest and aptitude for art. Her graduation in 1895 coincided with the first course in ceramic arts offered at Newcomb College, the beginning stage in a new project proposed by Ellsworth Woodward, the head of Newcomb's Art Department. Many of the young women studying at Newcomb were in need of wage-earning jobs after graduation and the economically depressed, largely rural post-Civil War South was

not a fertile ground for employment. Woodward proposed that the college set up a model industry to teach its students valuable skills and provide an opportunity to earn profits from their labors. This was the seed that inspired the foundation of the now famous Newcomb Pottery.

Each piece of Newcomb Pottery was one-of-a-kind, thrown and decorated by hand. Ornamentation consisted almost exclusively of conventionalized plants and flowers of the Southern Gulf Region and Louisiana Bayou. Hattie Joor enrolled in Newcomb's ceramic course in 1895 and joined Newcomb Pottery's earliest team of decorators.

Buoyed by the continued success of the Pottery, Newcomb gradually introduced several other craft activities to the enterprise's repertoire including pierced metalwork, beaded lampshades, and bookbinding. In 1902 a needlework department was organized, a development in keeping with widespread reevaluation of the artistic identity and validity of embroidery in the context of the American Arts and Crafts Movement. During the nineteenth century embroidery declined as a popular activity among women in the United States until 1876, when the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition revived interest with displays of innovative artistic needlework from Europe. American embroidery received additional encouragement from several prominent firms including Candace Wheeler's New York Society of Decorative Arts, which promoted the development of artistic needlework as an art form. The burgeoning Arts and Crafts Movement stimulated interest in preserving local preindustrial activities, often including needlework and textile traditions. The Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework, dedicated to reviving the art of blue and white crewel embroidery in Deerfield, Massachusetts, is another example of an American embroidery enterprise founded during this period.<sup>1</sup>

Newcomb embroiderers did their part to establish needlework as a legitimate "artistic" craft rather than a mindless decorative pursuit by placing a thorough emphasis on design – historically the purview of male artists, but at Newcomb a task undertaken by the female embroiderers themselves. Uniting the roles of designer and artisan adhered to the goals of the Arts and Crafts Movement, whose practitioners denounced the fragmentation of the work process brought about by industrialization and factory production. Hence the Newcomb needlework department fit into the Arts and Crafts model more fundamentally than Newcomb Pottery where female designers were responsible for conceiving of and executing surface designs, but male potters threw and shaped the clay vessels on which they worked.

Newcomb embroideries were done on hand-loomed linens often using "interesting homespun cloths of linen and cotton woven in the mountains of Tennessee, and the flat reaches of Teche country."<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the philosophy that embroidery should be an accessible skill that could be acquired by any artisan, needleworkers at Newcomb worked primarily in four simple stitches that were easily learned and executed: the darning stitch, running stitch, buttonhole stitch, and cross stitch. Of these, the darning stitch was used most heavily and to virtuosic effect, a unique characteristic of Newcomb embroidery.

Darning stitch is essentially a simple running stitch carried in and out of the fabric to form a line of stitches on either face. When executed in a straight line along the same axis as the warp or weft threads of the ground fabric darning stitch can give the impression of being woven into the fabric surface. To

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<sup>1</sup> Dianne Ayres et al, *American Arts and Crafts Textiles* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 24.

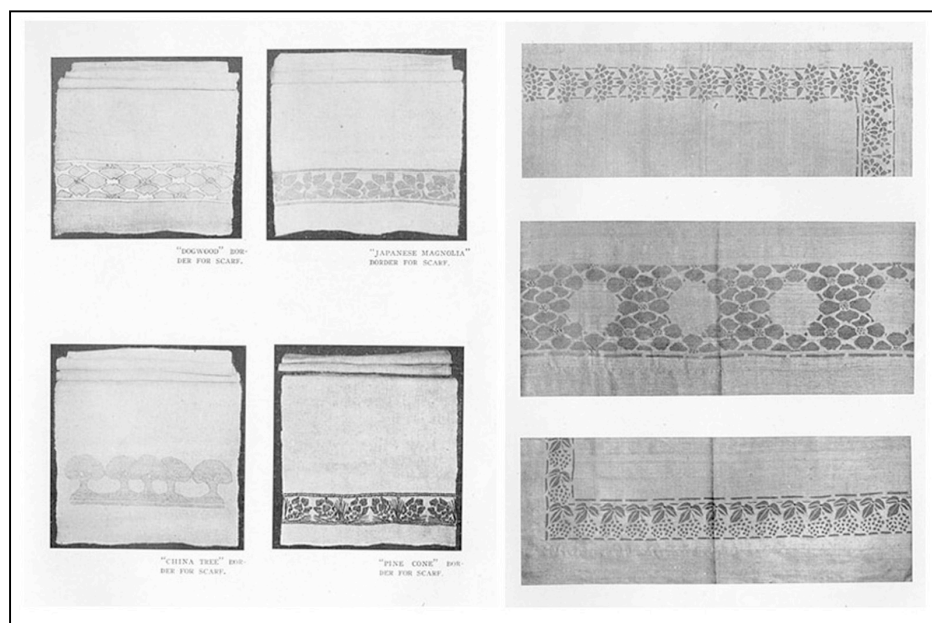
<sup>2</sup> Ellsworth Woodward, "Needlework in Newcomb Art School," *Brush and Pencil* 15:6 (1905), 316.

<sup>2</sup> Ellsworth Woodward, "Needlework in Newcomb Art School," *Brush and Pencil* 15:6 (1905), 316.

avoid any repetitive stacking or “brick” effects that might arise from repeated use of simple linear darning threads, Newcomb artisans learned to space their stitches at graduated lengths, a technique that also added color and interest to their designs.<sup>3</sup> The Newcomb needlework department was not run as a business enterprise in the same way as Newcomb Pottery; pieces were often not signed and a definitive record of artisans is lacking. But given Harriet Joor’s familiarity with the school’s needlework department and her demonstrated skill at embroidery, it can be confidently stated that she was involved in the venture.

After several years at Newcomb Pottery Harriet Joor left New Orleans in 1905 to settle in Chicago where she embarked on new career as a teacher and independent designer and craftsperson. Eventually she established a studio where she made and exhibited her hand-built pottery, embroidery, and stenciled household textile items. Joor showed many pieces of her embroidered and stenciled textiles and clay work at the annual Art Craft exhibitions held at the Art Institute of Chicago, where her exhibited wares garnered the attention of fellow craftswoman and ceramic artist Adelaide Alsop Robineau, who identified Joor’s work as among the best individual exhibits in stenciled fabrics and needlework.<sup>4</sup>

1905 also saw Joor beginning her professional relationship with Gustav Stickley’s Craftsman Workshops, which began when several of her pieces of short fiction were published in *The Craftsman*. Part proselytizing tool and part sales catalogue, *The Craftsman* was a monthly magazine dedicated to spreading the literature and ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement and praising the furniture and home furnishing products manufactured by Stickley’s factory outside of Syracuse, New York. By 1907 Harriet Joor’s contributions to the magazine expanded to include textile designs for publication, drawing on her experience in the needlework department at Newcomb.



**Figure 1. Needlework and stenciled textile designs by Harriet Joor.**

<sup>3</sup> Rita Curry-Pittman, “Newcomb Art Textiles,” unpublished manuscript, The Newcomb Archives, Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Tulane University.

<sup>4</sup> “Art Institute Exhibition,” *Palette and Bench* 1:6 (1908): 142. Unsigned article, probably by Robineau.

Joor's needlework designs adapted several familiar *Craftsman* motifs – as well as others of her own devising – for execution in delicate embroidered stitches. These designs were featured in instructional articles in two late 1907 issues *The Craftsman*. The first of the articles described a group of embroidered home textiles; chiefly table runners, doilies and centerpieces, and the second featured curtains decorated by hand using elaborate applied stencils (Figure 1. Needlework and stenciled textile designs by Harriet Joor published in *The Craftsman* magazine. From “Needlework,” *The Craftsman*, November 1907, 221 and “Stencil Work,” *The Craftsman*, December 1907, 349). Each article was accompanied by photographs of the items described in the text, all designed and executed by Harriet Joor. Given Joor's past experience as a writer for the magazine it is likely that she also wrote the text in the accompanying articles, although no author is identified.

**TABLE SCARFS IN DARNED WORK  
OR STENCIL.**

**T**HE following group of scarfs are mostly made of hand-woven linen, on which the designs are done with the darning stitch, which is described in full on page 12. These scarfs can be furnished complete, or stamped linen together with all materials for working will be sent to those who wish to do their own needlework.

**TABLE SCARF. CRAB APPLE DESIGN.**

**T**HE color possibilities of this design are many. As shown here, the upper border and leaves are darned in dull soft green floss and the apples in old rose. This design blends with any color scheme.



**TABLE SCARF, CRAB APPLE DESIGN IN DARNED WORK.**

	25 x 72	15 x 90
	Mat. Com.	Mat. Com.
Hand-Woven Linen .....	\$1.10 \$2.00	\$1.20 \$2.50

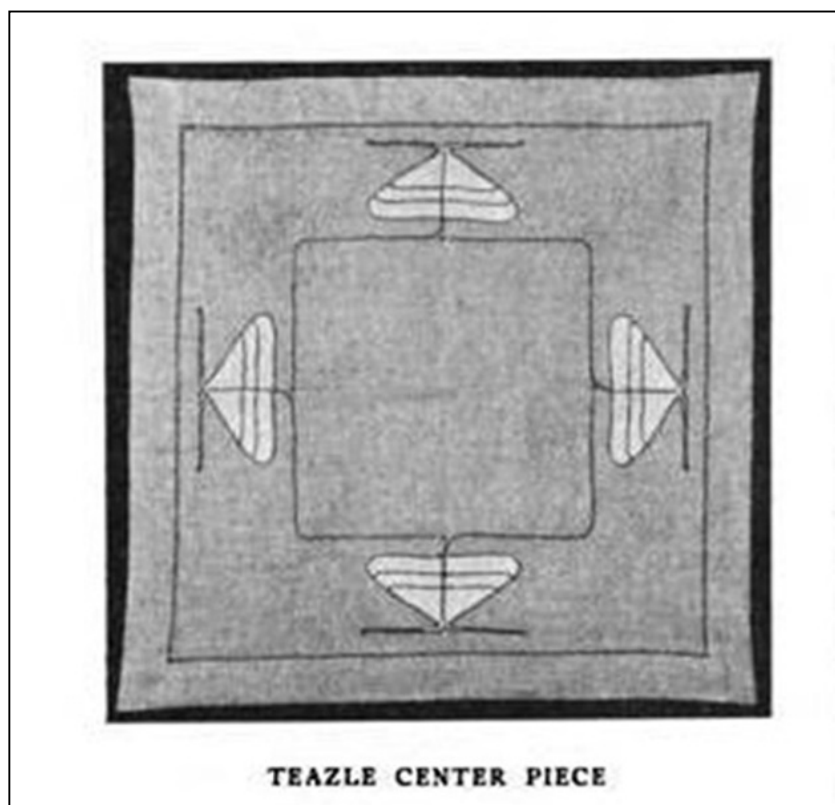
**Figure 2. Harriet Joor's Crab Apple Design.**

Several months after Joor's designs were published in *The Craftsman* magazine, Stickley published the commercial catalog *Craftsman Fabrics and Needlework from the Craftsman Workshops*. Ten of Harriet Joor's original fourteen needlework designs were listed for sale, identified as “Table Scarfs [sic] in Darned Work or Stencil.” The photographs featured in the catalogue are identical to those originally printed in *The Craftsman*, indicating that Joor's unsigned, unattributed handiwork was used to advertise the products (Figure 2. Harriet Joor's *Crab Apple* design for an embroidered table scarf listed for sale in a 1908 *Craftsman* catalog, *Craftsman Fabric and Needlework from the Craftsman Workshops*).



Joor's experience as a Newcomb artist clearly informed her work for Stickley's company, and her designs are unique among the textile offerings of the Craftsman Workshops. Craftsman textiles prior to 1907, while usually based on natural floral and plant motifs, tended to be dramatically conventionalized and reduced to pure geometric component forms. The Craftsman *Teazle* design demonstrates this tendency (Figure 3. *Teazle* design for a centerpiece, a Craftsman textile design that predates Harriet Joor's association with the needlework department at the Craftsman Workshops. From "Our Home Department," *The Craftsman*, March 1905, xxiv). In contrast, Joor's designs for embroidered textiles, though conventionalized, remained closer in form to natural plant or flower species. This tendency for limited abstraction derived from Joor's background at Newcomb, a characteristic noted in a profile of Newcomb Pottery that appeared in *The Craftsman* magazine in 1903:

[...] the floral forms used in the pottery under consideration are simple, and conventionalized only to a barely necessary degree. They show the plant as a whole, rather than a section or the detail of a flower, which latter is the manner of the Paris and Dresden schools of design.<sup>5</sup>



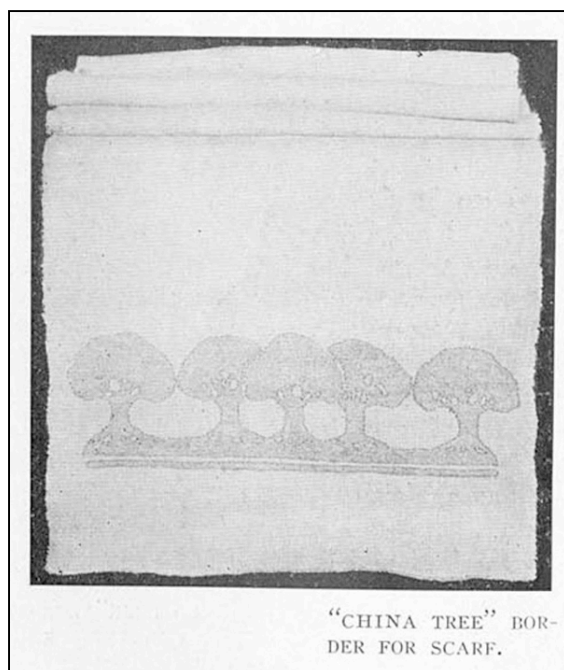
*Figure 3. Teazle design for a centerpiece.*

Many of Joor's Craftsman embroidery designs relied heavily on use of the darning stitch, echoing the conventions of Newcomb embroidery. Her stitches were placed to allow the ground to show through the interstitial spaces, resulting in a "shimmering, jewel-like effect,"<sup>6</sup> particularly well-illustrated in Joor's *China Tree* pattern (Figure 4. *China Tree* design for a table runner by Harriet Joor. From "Needlework,"

<sup>5</sup> Irene Sargent, "An Art Industry of the Bayous," *The Craftsman*, October 1903, 73.

<sup>6</sup> "Needlework," *The Craftsman*, November 1907, 226.

*The Craftsman*, November 1907, 221). In this design, the darned threads run horizontally across the table runner's short edge and are arranged in a chevron pattern to achieve the illusion of a randomized placement of stitches, echoing the graduated placement of stitches in Newcomb embroidery.



**Figure 4. China Tree.**

Because of their inherent simplicity and relative ease of execution Joor's designs were ideally suited for marketing as embroidery kits, which were more affordable than their ready-made counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Kits offered consumers the opportunity to engage in their own handicraft projects, ultimately furnishing their homes with goods made with their own hands – in a more accurate fulfillment of the goals of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Although in truth the Arts and Crafts ideal as proposed by figurehead William Morris would have individuals designing and embroidering their own household textiles without the help of a removed, anonymous professional designer, as historian Eileen Boris has noted in reference to the handicraft revival associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement:

“the fact that much of the pottery thrown, cloth woven, and metal hammered was amateurish meant less than the engagement of so many in the process of making. In its own way, the handicraft revival was a democratic movement; Every man, woman or child could be an artist.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In 1908, embroidered table runners from the Craftsman Workshops sold complete for \$2.00 for a seventy-two inch runner or \$2.50 for a longer ninety inch model. A kit containing the materials for home embroidery retailed for only \$1.10 for the seventy-two inch length of linen, and \$1.20 for the ninety inch version. (Prices are as listed in the 1908 commercial catalog *Craftsman Fabric and Needlework from the Craftsman Workshops*).

<sup>8</sup> Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 192-193.

Building on the success of the articles featuring her designs in *The Craftsman*, Harriet Joor began contributing instructional articles on the subject of textile design, home furnishings, and handicrafts to popular American magazines, publishing over forty articles between 1909 and 1915 in *House Beautiful*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Country Life*, *Good Housekeeping*, and several others, including *The International Studio* and *The Craftsman* (Figure 5. "Draperies for the Dining Room," an article describing the process of stenciling furnishing textiles by hand written by Harriet Joor. *The Craftsman*, May 1911, 216).



Figure 5. Draperies for the Dining Room.

Harriet Joor's articles not only demonstrated the aesthetics of home furnishings in the Arts and Crafts mode, they also modeled the ideological lifestyle that defined the Arts and Crafts Movement, which emphasized hand production and the joy of artistic work. Joor associated herself with the Arts and Crafts approach in the minds of her readers and thus presented herself as a model practitioner of the Movement's ideals. In late 1910 Joor dramatically demonstrated her devotion to these ideals when she left Chicago and took up residence in a rural prairie community in South Dakota, living off the land as a homesteader.

The alleged rationale behind this move was health-related; doctors in Chicago diagnosed Joor with "frazzled nerves" brought on by the hectic urban environment and recommended that she leave the city. However, rather than decamp to a relaxing Western spa town, Joor instead took up a homestead claim where she erected a sod cabin (or "soddy") and lived for roughly five years. The scope of Joor's life and work are greatly impacted when considered in light of her time spent as a homesteader. Although her



Newcomb education invested her with a firm background in the style and aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts Movement and her work as a writer and designer for Stickley's company certainly suggests an active engagement with its ideals, her unconventional move to South Dakota and the self-reported peace and contentment she found there speak to her deep devotion to its aims and ideologies. In her case, the basic tenets of the Movement boiled down to an embrace of simple living amid nature and handmade things.

With this in mind, Joor's goals as a magazine writer are further shaded with meaning. Beyond simply cultivating a professional outlet for her designs, Joor presented her artistic and craft work – and to a degree, her life – as a model for aspiring amateur artists to follow. Joor used the written medium to spread the message of the Arts and Crafts Movement to a large audience, becoming a popularizer as well as a designer. Interpreted in this way, Joor's career presents historians with a fuller comprehension of the character of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the United States.

Harriet Joor's life after 1915 when she left South Dakota to return to her home state of Louisiana was marked by stability and placidity. Although she continued to write and publish she did so sparingly and her professional life was devoted to teaching art classes at the high school and college level. Joor never married, and her unassuming life and lack of direct decedents may have contributed to her limited legacy following her death in 1965. Her contribution to the field of American Arts and Crafts textiles went largely unknown during her lifetime, and only in the last decade has her important work for Stickley's Craftsman Workshops been recognized. In the coming years, as increased scholarly attention is focused on Newcomb Pottery and its artisans – and on women designers employed by Gustav Stickley – Joor's story and that of many of her contemporaries will come into sharper focus.

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