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“Meshed with a Million Veins”: Seafaring Networks & the Norfolk Sampler

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The title of this article is taken from a line of a poem by the 19th-century Georgia poet Sidney Lanier and is presented as an homage to the location of the 2016 TSA conference. “And the marsh is meshed with a million veins” is Lanier’s description of “The Marshes of Glynn” in his poem of the same name, Glynn being one of the Atlantic coastal counties south of Savannah. I
have taken this alliterative evocation of the sinuous verge of land and sea as a metaphorical point of embarkation for a discussion of the distinctive needlework of another, more distant, coastal region with broad marshlands also emmeshed with a million veins, the county of Norfolk in eastern England, fronting not on the Atlantic Ocean but on the North Sea.

From the latter half of the 1700s well into the second quarter of the 19th Century, the schoolgirls of Norfolk produced vivid and imaginative samplers, combining floral borders and geometric frames in creative compositions, which nonetheless adhered to an unmistakable regional design schematic. These samplers are a reflection of the cultural geography of the county, the influence of trade, invasion and travel via its North Sea ports and Norfolk’s ancient mercantile history as a pre-eminent producer of woolen textiles. The fundamental elements of the Norfolk sampler, the lush floral border, the stepped lozenge cartouche, and the linked octagon inscription band can be connected to indigenous needlework traditions shaped by “a million veins”, the networks of the textile trade upon which the fortunes of the region were founded.  

Norfolk, on the east coast of England with ports on the North Sea, was historically well positioned to take advantage of commerce with Scandinavia, Germany and the Low Countries, and through them to the Baltic and to traditional trade routes to Eastern Europe, Anatolia, Asia Minor, North Africa and the Levant. Before the road improvements of the mid-18th Century it would have been as easy to travel from Norfolk to the European continent as to London. Even in the 20th Century the reputation of Norfolk as a land apart was summed up by the saying that “Norfolk is cut off on 3 sides by the sea and on the 4th by British rail.” Despite or perhaps because of its relative isolation Norfolk was historically both politically and commercially powerful. Until the latter decades of the 18th Century, when superseded by the industrial bases of the Midlands and the North, Norwich, the capitol of Norfolk, was England’s second largest city.

Norwich was a town whose fortunes were based on textiles, most of the 18th and early 19th-century sampler-makers were from families associated with either some aspect of textile production or as suppliers of commodities such as grocers, bakers or brewers. The area’s earliest participation in the textile business was founded on the qualities of the wool from the local sheep. During the Roman period, Norfolk wool would have been used at the textile production centers located along both the North Sea and English Channel. Following the decline of Roman influence in England, Norfolk was part of the Kingdom of East Anglia and before 1066 subject to incursions and occupations by the Danes, who settled dense pockets of the Broadlands, the marshy areas in the north and east of the county. These Danish settlements broadened and deepened the spectrum of cultural influences on the area and served as another conduit for the influence of Roman and late antique textile production practices.

Etymological studies of textile terminology during the late medieval period suggest an early Flemish influence in the development of the spun and woven wool industry, which flourished throughout eastern Norfolk. By the 14th Century Norfolk had become known for a type of wool

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yarn, rock spun “in his oile” from the tops of local pasture wool. Tops refers to the long fine fibers sorted from the carded wool. Both the yarn and the fabric woven from it became known as worsted after the East Norfolk village of that name where this type of spinning was first practiced. Worsted yarn was used for knitting, stitching hats, and for crewel, the thick, loosely twisted threads used in embroidery. In the 13th & 14th Centuries Norwich, Yarmouth and Kings Lynn were significant ports for the Hanseatic League. The Tudor period saw migrations of French and Dutch speaking weavers from the Low Countries who settled in Norwich and the surrounding countryside beginning at least as early as the 15th century. These highly skilled weavers from the Low Countries were known locally known as the “Strangers”. Their numbers were later supplemented by Huguenot refugees displaced by the religious upheavals in Europe during the following two centuries.

Thus, for hundreds of years the prosperity of Norwich, one of the largest English cities, was built around textile manufacture and the small to medium workshops of the merchant weavers and associated tradesmen who sustained the ranks of civic leadership. A successful master weaver/manufacturer needed the skill, versatility and design expertise to meet demands for the latest fashions and the sophistication to both recognize and lead international markets. The business was tightly structured. Pattern books and sample cards offering organized color swatches of their vast array of textiles facilitated the ability of Norwich manufacturers and their agents to sell their wares to Europe, the Scandinavian countries, North and South America, Russia and China. In the 17th and 18th Centuries the educated and wealthy well-traveled merchant manufacturers of Norwich were highly regarded for their contributions to the intellectual and cultural life of England. An examination of each of the three most distinctive motifs that make up the classic Norfolk sampler composition, the floral frame, the stepped lozenge cartouche, and the linked octagon inscription band, reveal relationships both to local traditions and the wider world to which Norfolk was linked through its international textile trade.

The luxuriance of the floral embroidery in the classic Norwich sampler and the depiction of mostly native or naturalized flowers is a reminder that Norfolk contains one of the most diverse natural habitats in England. An annual Celebration of Flowers, initiated by Dutch immigrants, was incorporated into Norwich’s busy calendar of festivities beginning in 1630 with the institution of a yearly Florist’s Feast that included a flower show and play. Visiting the city in 1671 as a courtier to King Charles II, the diarist and garden writer John Evelyn wrote of the sweet qualities of Norwich, citing among its amenities the flower gardens and, in almost the same breath, the textiles that underpinned its wealth. “The suburbs are large, the prospect sweet, and other amenities, not omitting the flower-garden, which all the Inhabitants excel in of this City, the fabric of stuffs, which affords the Merchants, and brings a vast trade to this populous

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4 Worsted wool does not require the fulling or shrinking process used to consolidate the fabric as does fabric woven from shorter, coarser wool fibers.
5 In the organization of the weaving trade in England “master weaver” was the term commonly used for the merchant manufacturers, however in Norwich the preferred terms were simply ‘Worsted Weavers’ in the earlier period and ‘Manufacturers’ in the later period. [www.norwichtextiles.org.uk](http://www.norwichtextiles.org.uk) A collaboration of Norwich Museums and Archaeology Service and Norwich School of Art and Design.
Town”. The stuffs to which Evelyn refers were specialized woven goods sought particularly by the burgeoning English middle class as a highly desirable but less expensive alternative to the imported, especially eastern, luxury goods that furnished the rich. These “stuffs” were the products for which Norfolk had an international reputation and market.

Within a national frame of reference the vogue for silk embroidered florals on needlework pictures, clothing, aprons and petticoats in the Georgian period and the unique naturalism of English silk designs of the mid-18th Century are directly related to the rise of natural history societies, botanical horticulture and English floricultural art. One such example of the nexus of horticulture, commerce and needlework, and a possible inspiration for the floral borders of the Norfolk samplers, was Robert Furber’s Twelve Months of Flowers of 1730, published as a catalogue of plants and seeds, but also suggested by the author for use as patterns for ladies’ embroideries.

In the context of Georgian domestic needlework, the free embroidered floral compositions of the Norfolk sampler were undoubtedly influenced by the contemporary popularity of crewel work adornments for bed hangings, curtains and upholstery. These English crewel needlework compositions were inspired by the costly embroidered cottons of India used to decorate the homes of wealthy English aristocrats. Crewel threads for embroidery were among the early specialties of the Norfolk worsted yarn industry. One can easily see a correlation between the floral borders of Furber’s title page, Indian palampores, and the floral framework of Norfolk samplers.

From among these expensive Indian textiles it was the luxurious Kashmir shawls that the Norfolk textile manufacturers sought particularly to imitate for their wider middle class markets both domestic and international. Shawl production in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries was a specialty niche with which Norwich entrepreneurs attempted to compensate for the slow dwindling of their former pre-eminence in the English textile market in the second half of the 18th Century. Some of the same surface-darned floral embroidery designs found on the shawls produced in Norwich can be found on the Norfolk samplers of the period. Soon superseded by woven and printed designs, the earliest rare examples of the Norwich-produced shawls were light, soft, woven silk and wool fabrics embellished with the embroidered flowers with which we are familiar from the samplers. It should also be noted that greatest number of highly accomplished darning samplers in England were also produced in Norfolk, thus reinforcing the connection between schoolgirl needlework and the influence of the local textile weaving industry.

Perhaps the most distinctive element of the Norfolk sampler is the stepped lozenge as seen on the Eliza Dearn sampler of 1768 in the collection of the Norfolk Museum & Archaeology Services and The Keziah Hawkes Sampler of 1803 (Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College.) In heraldry the lozenge is “the form of escutcheon upon which women place their arms. Specifically for spinsters and widows…hence an unmarried woman from earliest times placed her arms on a lozenge perhaps in allusion to the spindle or distaff.”8 The lozenge, therefore, is a motif replete with a panoply of ancient and transnational cross cultural symbolism evocative of unmarried and independent women, widows and female teachers. The ubiquity of the lozenge on Norfolk

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samplers large and small leads me to believe there is a particular symbolic meaning to this signature motif which resonated with the sampler teachers and female educators of 18th-century Norfolk. The central lozenge of the classic Norwich sampler takes on additional significance in the context of English Enlightenment discourse on female education, the popular interest in medievalism and heraldry, and the employment of local artists in the recording of monuments and ruins of medieval Norfolk. Some of these same Norfolk artists were known to supplement their income through the design of patterns for schoolgirl needlework. The dual association of the lozenge with spinning and weaving and as the form of escutcheon upon which women place their arms, make it particularly appropriate for the Norfolk sampler. Examples of the prevalence of this heraldic association can be found in two publications of 1795, Brydson’s *Summary View of Heraldry* and Porny’s *Elements of Heraldry* that states “The lozenge … signifies a spindle, which is a woman’s instrument.” The same writer also presents the theory that the figure alludes to a cushion, quoting the 1638 *Guide to the Study of Heraldry* of Sylvester de Petra who “would have the shield to represent a cushion, whereon women used to sit and spin, or do other housewifery.”

The lozenge as a cushion theory reminds us also of the tasseled sewing pillows represented on Dutch samplers. Also Dutch in association are hatchments, commemorative lozenge shaped shields that adorned the widow’s door during the period of mourning, that were both a Dutch and English tradition. The association with the spindle, and thus textile production, and the link between samplers and education, teaching being the traditional occupation of an unmarried woman or spinster, as well as widows, make the heraldic interpretation of the lozenge a compelling one.

Apparent also in the design of 18th-century Norfolk samplers is the influence of Anatolian, Caucasian, Persian and middle-eastern carpets. While the imported rugs themselves were becoming increasingly available to the English middle class in the 18th Century, the imitation of the highly prized Anotolian and Eurasian rugs had for hundreds of years been a goal of English manufacturing. Norwich manufacturers were reputed to have been among the earliest Europeans to attempt to reproduce these eastern carpet designs for a domestic market. Among the scarce English-produced examples from the sixteenth century is a cut pile carpet belonging to Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, believed to have made at Norwich. The Verulam carpet has a repeating continuous pattern of carnations and intertwining stems with a large lozenge in the center bearing the royal arms of England with the letters E. R. (Elizabeth Regina) and the date 1570. Another rare example of 16th-century English carpet manufacture, now in the collection of the Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery, displays a central coat of arms with the date 1571 on a reticulated field of intersecting diamonds surrounded by a double twining floral border. Yet another 16th Norfolk manufactured carpet and the Ann Hart Norfolk Sampler of 1740 (Cooper-Hewitt Museum) both reveal the inspiration of the guls of eastern carpet inspiration. Inventing a method of imitating the appearance of the Middle-Eastern carpet within the production capabilities of domestic manufacturers continued to be a goal of English textile designers and entrepreneurs well into the 18th Century. The English Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce founded in the mid 1700s sponsored as one of its first projects a prize for the best imitation of a Turkey carpet using English wool. There may also be some earlier link, yet to be explored, between Norfolk and

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10 The 1911 Classic Encyclopedia. [http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Carpet](http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Carpet). The Verulam carpet also bears the arms of the borough of Ipswich in Suffolk and those of the family of Harbottle.
the routes of the Spanish wool & carpet trade. The linked octagons of the Norfolk samplers share with their Spanish counterparts allusions to Egyptian Mamluk textile designs.

As imported rugs became widely available we see both major and minor design motifs assimilated into Norfolk samplers. The Hannah Bowen sampler of 1824 (location unknown) echoes themes of the Ghiordes Prayer rug where the columns of the prayer rug have become side panels, while in another subset of these rugs – The Kiz Ghiordes, traditionally believed to have been woven by young women as marriage carpets, the hanging lanterns in the mirror imaging of the prayer niche morph into flowers as on the Eliza Dearn sampler (Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Services).

The appreciation of Eurasian carpet design and the ascendance of English Neo-Classicism share the same wellspring, the increased exposure to the arts and culture of the ancient Mediterranean world brought to life through the travels and subsequent architecture and design publications of such taste makers as The Adams brothers. I would, however, suggest that rather than being entirely a response to contemporary stylistic trends, the reason the, as yet unidentified, Norfolk sampler designers fostered a regional style unique within the repertoire of English samplers is that there was something latent in the Norfolk design sensibilities that retained a connection to the influence of late antique textile trade routes. This affinity may be best read in the final sampler motif under discussion here: the linked octagon inscription band with its visual correspondence to the textile wares of the Late Antique Roman and Byzantine Empires, English and Scandinavian commerce with whom was facilitated by the Viking traders whose eastern water routes ranged from the North Sea and the Baltic through Eastern Europe and south to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

The linked octagon band of the Norfolk sampler in its multiplicity of forms with the red deer in a climbing pose and striated pine tree as recurring motifs, finds its closest contemporary counterparts in the home-woven panels made for marriage ceremonies that, from the mid-18th century on, were the most distinctive artistic products of Scania, the southernmost province of Sweden. As scholars have noted, these Swedish marriage panels incorporate striking patterns from Roman, Byzantine, and Persian textile arts with local symbols of fertility and long life, one of which was the red deer. Before 1658 Scania, on the southern tip of the Scandinavian peninsula, was a province of Denmark, thus, like Norfolk, within the orbit of Danish design influences.

Recent archaeological studies in England and Scandinavia have focused on the increasing evidence for stronger trading connections between the Vikings and the Byzantine Empire, Persia, and the great cities of the western Silk Road. In the post-Roman period the European textile trade shifted from the Mediterranean to the North Sea advanced by the seafaring expertise of the Vikings. Isotopic and DNA analysis from skeletal remains and their associated grave goods have revealed the presence of persons of wealth originally from Byzantium, North Africa and areas along the Eurasian trading routes who lived and died in England and Scandinavia. In addition to Islamic coins, recovered artifacts include silk textiles from Byzantium and Persia, as well as domestically produced wools woven in Persian inspired patterns. Sweden’s oldest known Anatolian carpet, a 14th-century early Ottoman animal carpet known as the Marby carpet from the church where it was rediscovered in 1925, compares dramatically with both a 16th-century
Scanian weaving and the linked octagon deer & pine tree bands of Norfolk sampler, as well as with 17th-century Anatolian animal carpets also featuring octagonally framed confronting deer.

In the 18th Century as Britain continued on her trajectory to becoming the leading industrialized nation and major sea power, the country also became the largest market for the timber, tar, pitch and iron ore that were Sweden’s largest exports. After London and Hull on the North Sea in Yorkshire, Great Yarmouth and Kings Lynn in Norfolk and Ipswich on the Norfolk border were 3 of the 4 largest recipients of these goods, reinforcing the ancient North Sea cultural and commercial ties. On the northern coast of Norfolk, Blakeney and Wells-next the Sea, now largely silted up, were still thriving North Sea ports, while after 1750 Norwich textiles began to be exported directly out of the port of Yarmouth rather than through London.

The Scanian weavings and the Norfolk sampler bands no doubt owe their development to shared transnational and indigenous traditions, the common hereditary influence of imported source materials made available to them by the Danish Viking traders and ongoing cultural contact promoted by their mutual proximity to the thoroughfares of the North Sea. Similarly the sea lanes of the evolving textile trade, which for hundreds of year was the backbone of the Norfolk economy, brought to the area international design inspiration, mediated through the waves of emigration from the Dutch and French speaking Low Countries and the far ranging travels of the well educated textile merchants, the Master Weavers and their commercial representatives. Thus Norfolk, a place of relative geographic isolation within its own country but fronting on the shore of a wide and varied world of seafaring, was at once both parochial and international, absorbing and assimilating patterns, colors and symbols and transforming them into the most distinctive of English regional samplers.