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Early Modern Needlework Pattern Books: Tracing the International Exchange of Design

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Needlework pattern books, a genre that first appeared in the early 16th century as printing-press technology became widely available, were some of the first art books for the common people. Their pages offered charted, linear, and figurative designs in a wide range of complexities and styles. I use the term “needlework” to represent the group of decorative textile-arts which these books target. This includes a range of techniques that use a needle alone or with other tools, such as embroidery, lacemaking, knitting, and tablet and small-loom weaving. Students of women’s history may know the pattern books for their introductory pages that position the books as instruments in shaping docile women through domestic craft, as some second-wave feminist scholars, like Rozsika Parker,¹ have influentially argued. Myself a historical needleworker who has used these books, I always shrugged off the gendered, moral prefaces, skipping ahead to the artwork that inspired my embroidery. Embarking on my Master’s Degree in History, I was drawn to examining my own use of the pattern books as a launching point for understanding their original audience. The deeper I dig, the more questions I have, and the pattern books have become a valuable filter for examining the relationships I see between art, craft, class, and gender.

When I first started looking at the books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I saw them as the German pattern books, the Italian pattern books, the French pattern books, etc. But as I investigated more critically, I realized that they were really very multinational. Some books may have been collaborative efforts, bringing together artists and publishers from different countries to create a volume, but more often they were amalgamations pieced together by a printer/publisher who wanted to capitalize on a popular trend and who had no concerns for plagiarism.

I had planned to structure my presentation in chronological order, to trace for you the movement of the pattern books, their designs and ideas from point A to point B, to point C. But as others have pointed out this week, that’s a difficult thing to do when there is so much undocumented cross-pollination and parallel development. However, there are clearly elements in dialogue with each other, so it made more sense to weave it together as a multinational phenomenon, structuring it around larger themes, and highlighting some differences and similarities between nations. For today’s brief exploration of these currents of exchange, I will introduce how the printing press made early modern pattern books for needlework an affordable source of quality and international artwork, suggest their appeal to the emerging middle class who wanted to participate in fashion trends employing the elaborate needlework favoured by the elite, and discuss the gradual inclusion of the contradictory and controversial social discourse on women.

First, I want to explain precluding pressures that shaped the origins of the pattern books and why they met with such success. The artistry of design has long been separate from the craft of the embroiderer, with social class acting as one divider. The quality of the finished embroidery was

¹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

heavily influenced by the artistic ability of the drawer, so an embroiderer would desire to work from the best art they could afford for their craft. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Catharijneconvent have examples of professional and/or professionally trained artwork done directly on fabric to embroider over.² Wealthy patrons paid professional artists to create embroidery designs, which were then professionally embroidered in workshops or worked at home, often under tutelage. At the highest level, celebrated artists created embroidery designs for the richest and most famous in international society. For example, we know that Holbein, who was German, designed for the English King Henry VIII.³ The wealthy elite also had the luxury of being able to hire artists from all over Europe to teach their children to draw and paint, and train their artistic eye, as well as needlework tutors to develop their skill to a high level. This dual training enabled them to create some of their own needlework designs when they wished, bringing together art and craft for a small minority.⁴

For the non-elite in European society, far-reaching access to the highest quality art in the world was unattainable, but prosperous households did retain accomplished artists who supplied their patrons' needs, sometimes reaching across national borders to do so. The less-accomplished lowly artists who were simply called "drawers", did piece-work at the local level as independent artists-for-hire, including for professional needlewomen, who were themselves hired to sew small goods like handkerchiefs. The drawers were certainly hired by others in their social proximity who could afford to pay for simple designs to be drawn on their fabrics.⁵ A page in the 1532 needlework pattern book by the Italian artist Paganini demonstrates for his readers four methods of transferring designs to fabric.⁶ A page from a 1593 pattern book with a *German* title, *Das Neue Modelbuch*, shows a tool for pricking the designs, but incongruously the instructions to the reader are in *Italian*.⁷ Quite possibly the lower artists and independent needleworkers bought pattern books to facilitate their business and improve the quality of their work, with subsequent economic benefit, and putting international designs into the hands of many common people.

The appearance of printed designs did not diminish the value of original art - in fact, elites continued to seek to differentiate themselves from encroaching social movers, and relied on the originality and exclusivity of commissioning the best artists. Nonetheless, the social lines were beginning to blur visually in fashion, and embroidered styles that enjoyed continental popularity also helped blur national distinctions in dress.

In brief form, I've introduced to you to early relationships between art and craft and class, which restricted access to international artists, original designs, and artistic training that affected the

² Jacob Cornelisz or his workshop, 1520-25, cope, Catharijneconvent Museum BMH t5788b; Anon., ca. mid-17th c., embroidered panel, Metropolitan Museum of Art 64.101.1325.

³ Maria Hayward, *Dress at the Court of King Henry VIII* (Leeds, UK: Maney, 2007), 360.

⁴ Susan Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010), 2, 117.

⁵ Frye, 136; Juana Green, "The Sempster's Wares: Merchandising and Marrying in the Fair Maid of the Exchange (1607)," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter, 2000), 1092; J. L. Nevins, "English Domestic Embroidery Patterns of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 28 (1939), 12.

⁶ Allisandro Pagannini, *Libro Quarto. De Rechami per Elquale Se Impara in Diuersi Modi Lordine E Il Modo De Recamare...Opera 1532*. Digital image. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

⁷ Anon., *Das Neue Modelbuch* (St. Gallen: 1593), Victoria and Albert Museum 95.O. Box 1.

quality of needlework, particularly in domestic production. Starting in the sixteenth century, the printing press was used to produce needlework pattern books, making the art they contained affordable and available to an expanding audience of craftspeople and middle-class women, who had previously been underserved.⁸ Suddenly the upwardly mobile were better equipped to emulate the fashionable embroidered dress and accessories of those they admired.

The pattern books developed to fill this unmet demand, but they were also the product of an expanding industry, business pressures, and technological evolutions. Which is what I will discuss next. The innovation that created needlework pattern books came from a business idea, and publishers developed the genre because it turned out to be a profitable idea. Early Modern Europe had a burgeoning capitalist economy, and book-publishing was a growing industry. Publishers printed new volumes and extra editions of needlework designs in response to demand and in pursuit of profits. Between 1523 and 1700, over 150 individual titles were published in an estimated 400 editions, with unknown numbers of print-runs, demonstrating an active and on-going interest.⁹

Printing press technology was well suited to documenting and spreading needlework designs, and one printer in particular saw the potential for expanding his business in this way. The earliest recorded pattern book was printed in Germany about 1523 by Johann Schönsperger, titled *Furm und Modelbüchlein*, though the earliest dated pattern book was his second one printed October 22, 1524 and titled *Ein New Modelbuch*.¹⁰ The son of a book publisher, Schönsperger owned a paper mill and worked printing textiles using woodblock designs,¹¹ perhaps like ones found in the textile collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts.¹² It seems the innovation that created the genre of needlework pattern books happened when he merged his experience and business investments after he got his book-printing license in 1523 and immediately turned out his first pattern book. And you can see, between these printed textiles, evidence of design-influence between Spain and Germany. There is also design similarity shown between two German sources - a quatrefoil design printed on a textile in the Victoria and Albert Museum and a design from Schönsperger's pattern book from 1529.¹³

It is hard to call Schönsperger an author, though, because he, and the early publishers who followed, did not create the artwork they printed. They were curators with a finger on the pulse of the market. They collected, plagiarized, and modified designs that they felt would be good

⁸ Frye, 117.

⁹ Arthur Lotz, *Bibliographie der Modelbücher* (London: The Holland Press Ltd, 1963), 7.

¹⁰ Margaret H. Daniels, "Early Pattern Books for Lace and Embroidery," Rev. of *Bibliographie der Modelbücher*, *The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1933), 2; Daniels, "Early Pattern Books Lace, Embroidery, and Woven Textiles: A Special Exhibition," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 33.3 (1938), 70-71.

¹¹ Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament: A Social History since 1450* (New Haven: Yale UP in Association with The Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), 27.

¹² Anon, printed linen textile, German, 16th c., accession no. 8611, Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest; anon, printed linen textile, Spanish, 16th c., accession no. 34.41.12, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; anon, printed linen textile, German, 15th c., accession no. 09.50.1092, MMA, NYC.

¹³ Johann Schönsperger, *Ein ney Furmbüchlein* (Augsberg, 1529), 2, Lotz 5, accession no. 18.66.1, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC; anon, printed linen textile, German, ca. 1400-30, accession no. 8303-1863, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

sellers, and occasionally hired new artists to add original designs. Publishers took designs and images from other sources that needleworkers were already using. For example, other pattern books (by outright plagiarism or by buying other printers' engravings), bestiaries (which were books filled with images of flora and fauna – both real and imagined), emblem books, loose-leaf designs sold individually, herbals (considered early botany books), and wherever else they found inspiring images.¹⁴

Schönsperger was quickly followed by other publishers who saw the profit to be made, with the first Italian-printed pattern book appearing in 1527. Pattern books were marketed to the rising middling class, who more and more had financial resources and free time, and who wanted access to affordable designs. Though I feel I need to emphasize that the women in this era who had the privilege of time and resources, did not consider needlework during free time to be “leisurely occupation”; rather needlework contributed to the household worth and proved they were not idle.¹⁵

The first pattern book published in France was *La Fleur de la science de Pourtraicture et patrons de broderie, facon arabicque et italique*, by Francisque Pelegrin in 1530. Pelegrin was actually from Italy, so he was also known as Francisco di Pellegrino. The only text is the introduction page, written in French, apparently by the publisher, introducing Pelegrin as a premier artist from Florence. The title promotes to its French market not only that it has Italian patterns, but also Arabic fashions.

I have a couple more examples along these lines. Paganino's 1532 pattern book has a title claiming designs collected from Germany, France and Italy. There is also a double-page with designs described as “camisa spagnvola moderna” - for a modern spanish shirt. As the phenomena of the pattern books moved west, England was the last to start printing in 1548. But that credit goes to a Frenchman! Thomas Geminus settled in England and published his influential *Morysse and Damashin renewed and encreased Very profitable for Goldsmythes and Embroderars*.¹⁶ The designs he advertises in his title are neither English or French. “Morysse” means moresque, an old form of “moorish” or in the style of the Moors of Spain - like the interlacing, intricate style seen in this coverlet. And “Damashin” means damascene, which refers to the metalworking technique developed in the Middle East, of inlaying gold, silver and copper into base metal. Both are very multinational in origin, and while Geminus' exotic designs were popular in the courts of King Henry VIII, his pattern book would have allowed the upwardly mobile to also participate in these styles.

Next I will explain just a couple of ways that these pattern books marketed to the upwardly mobile of the emerging middling sort and the growing merchant class. Two title pages from different pattern books - the images are almost exactly the same. Johann Siebmacher published his book of needlework patterns in 1604, and John Taylor (ever the imitator) had an engraver copy Siebmacher's copperplate for his own book in 1631. Taylor was a popular author who was himself upwardly-mobile with visions of grandeur. He capitalized on his humble beginnings and

¹⁴ Kathleen Epstein in Nicolas Bassée's *German Renaissance Patterns for Embroidery: A Facsimile Copy of Nicolas Bassée's New Modelbuch*, Edited and Translated by Kathleen Epstein (Austin: Curious Works, 1994), 4.

¹⁵ Frye, 127-28.

¹⁶ Hayward, *Dress at the Court of King Henry VIII*, 361.

self-styled himself as The Water Poet, which was a reference to his past work as a ferryman on the river Thames. It was there, with his noble audience captive while they crossed the river, that he spouted his poetry and rhymes until he eventually won enough patronage to earn his living by his pen. He was savvy about manipulating an audience. By including images of people, such as the women on these title pages, the authors promoted the more elaborate fashions that could be achieved by using the patterns within the books, and implied a promise about lifestyle enhancement, a marketing tactic we are familiar with today. In the title here, Taylor also called out the fact that these patterns were printed with copperplates. He was promoting the newer print technology that created sharper, more detailed images than woodcuts, and which probably made his book a little more expensive, and therefore more exclusive and desirable by those desiring upward mobility. There is also a moral lesson here, but I will come back to that.

Some of the pattern books included fashionable images in the patterns, further emphasizing the promotion of imitation. My impression is that this approach by publishers was a later development. In 1597, Siebmacher's title page showed images more about industry than promised luxury, and the designs also do not include fashionable people.

If the current fashion included elaborate needlework styles, such as we see during the 16th and 17th centuries, requiring highly-skilled designers, then a tension would have been created between its desirability and its affordability. The ease of obtaining pattern books helped alleviate that tension, as they were a source of designs better than what people could previously afford access to. To state it using the term "supply and demand," the books met an already existing demand – and presumably (as the supply and demand dialectic tends to do) the supply also simultaneously created further demand.

We can learn a lot from a detail of a wealthy Swiss mayor's daughter in a family portrait.¹⁷ They were not nobility. Meyer had his start as a money changer and was the first mayor of Basel to come from a guild rather than the elite. The use of extensive embroidery on her dress shows the viewer that he has attained a new level in society, making his daughter eligible to marry within this higher station, and able to blend in as "one of us".

The visual disorder caused by dressing above one's station was commented on by both lawmakers and social critics. The opening of "An Acte for Reformation of Excess in Apparel," in 1533 (24 Hen. VIII ch.13) states that the "inordinate excess" in apparel had caused "the subvercion of good and politike ordere in knowledge and distincion of people according to their estates, pre-emyneces, dignities and degrees." Sumptuary acts and proclamations intended to address public concerns about visual disorder by regulating the public display of consumption practices across the nation. Almost every Western European nation had sumptuary laws. Their existence in the Early Modern period helps us understand that the very behaviors that they sought to control were happening often enough to cause social unrest. And while social commentary also criticized the infiltration of foreign styles, lawmakers were more concerned with the social order. One of the most well-known of the English criticisms against foreign fashions was *Tyrannus or the Mode: in a Discourse of Sumptuary Lawes* by John Evelyn.¹⁸ He said, "For my own part, though I love the French well (and have many reasons for it) yet I would

¹⁷ Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Meyer Madonna 1526-28*, digital image, *Wikimedia Commons*.

¹⁸ John Evelyn, *Tyrannus or the Mode*, ed. J. L. Nevinson, Luttrell Reprints (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1951), Intro.

be glad to pay my respects in any thing rather than my Clothes, because I conceive it so great a diminution to our Native Country.”

Embroidery was also a commodity in upward mobility. During a time when household wealth was determined by the store of goods it held, value could be added to the family worth through beautifully crafted items of needlework, allowing women an active role in the household economy. They could also create embroidered gifts to “foster mutual obligation,”¹⁹ which “made women active participants in cultural exchange” and allowed them a stronger tool in forging alliances.²⁰ The more complicated and elaborate designs that the pattern books gave the upwardly mobile access to gave them the opportunity to create more valuable items for their households and as gifts, in addition to the inherent power of hand-made works to evoke the giver, thus increasing their power to forge relationships and forward a family’s social rise.²¹

So, back to the two similar title pages to talk about the gendered moral message that I mentioned earlier. Both images have below each of three women the words “wisdom”, “industry”, “folly”. These refer to Bible proverbs. Proverbs 14 says, “Every wise woman buildeth her house: but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands,”²² Proverbs 31 tells of the virtuous woman who “seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.”²³ The image implies that this book will help women be better Christians because it will aid the work they do with their hands to contribute to building up the household.

The books often had dedicatory pages written to a woman of nobility, extolling their virtues as role models for all women. For example, the Italian author Vinciolo’s 1606 third-edition pattern book, which was licensed to be published in France, is dedicated to King Henri III and, at length, to the queen, followed by a short sonnet about women winning the hearts of great men through their labors at needlework.²⁴ Who knows if the queen ever actually saw it, but the publishers were angling for the attention of the upwardly mobile by associating the virtues of a good queen with an activity that could also be argued to be vain and frivolous. As an additional moral draw, or maybe to counteract these concerns about the vanity of embroidery, authors sometimes reference iconic virtuous women from antiquity who were linked to textile crafts (for example, Arachne from Greco-Roman mythology and Penelope from *The Odyssey*). But even then, it was more often a veneer that put a pious shine on something clearly promoting material values. The publishers were justifying supporting women’s participation in book culture, fine artisanship, and social improvement, all the while pursuing their own profits.

The merits of women and their proper role in society was one of the social debates that emerged during a time of political crisis in England at the end of the sixteenth century, as it has in other times, and constituted the first pamphlet war about the “woman problem”. It was called a war because both sides volleyed their opinions in response to each other within the public sphere.

¹⁹ Lisa Klein, "Your Humble Handmaid: Elizabethan Gifts of Needlework," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (1997), 471.

²⁰ Klein, 462.

²¹ Klein, 476.

²² Bible, King James Version, Proverbs 14:1.

²³ Bible, Proverbs 31:13.

²⁴ Federico Vinciolo, *I Singolari E Nuovi Disegni per Lavori De Biancheria* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano D'Arti Grafiche, 1909), ed. Greg Lindahl, facsimile of Vinciolo's 3rd edition dated 1606, 9-14.

Even women entered the battle, the most famous being Jane Anger with *Her Protection for Women* (1589). They followed the conventions of pamphlets on other topics, and the rhetorical style of the period. As part of the broader print culture of the time, their misogynist nature has been thoroughly examined by scholars of women's studies and print culture. Helen Wilcox summarizes nicely for me the larger context in which the needlework pattern books and the first pamphlets against women entered the print market: "When women's voices, alongside the rhetoric of gendered urban experience in texts by both women and men, are added to the clamour emerging from pre-modern London, it becomes possible to envision a much more flexible relationship of writer, gender, text and urban space."²⁵

So, while the first needlework pattern books were virtually free of subtext regarding female domesticity or gender roles, their popularity at the time that the "woman problem" flared made them a natural vehicle for taking the debate to a wider audience in England. In other countries, publishers didn't need the pamphlet war to see that it was in their benefit to tie their books to the ancient triumvirate of women, textiles, and virtue. It gave them a convenient excuse for why they were marketing designs of intricate and elaborate embellishments to an emerging female audience.

In conclusion, early modern needlework pattern books offer a unique filter for evaluating the international context of the textile practice of embellishment as well as their loaded social messages. The printing press made the books an affordable source of quality and international artwork, popular with the emerging middle and merchant classes who wanted to participate in fashion trends employing the elaborate needlework favoured by the elite across western Europe. It is unclear whether or not they bought into the gendered moral messages, but I for one, use them anyway.

²⁵ Helen Wilcox, "'ah Famous Citie': Women, Writing, and Early Modern London," *Feminist Review*, Vol. 96 (2010), 38.

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