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CHARMINGLY QUAIN AND STILL MODERN: THE PARADOX OF COLONIAL REVIVAL NEEDLEWORK IN AMERICA, 1875-1940

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Despite the self-conscious modernism of the early 20th century, American needlework was filled with images of flower baskets, cozy cottages, spinning wheels, and women in hoopskirts. It was dominated by seemingly old-fashioned and "quaint" techniques, such as cross stitch, patchwork, crewel, and rug hooking. In an era with teeming cities, radio, and cars pouring off the assembly line, needlework came to stand for a romanticized, seemingly simpler and nobler American past. And in an era when women were winning the vote and re-entering the professional work force, needleworkers, in turn, became identified with the domestic homebody of the past. In reality, 20th century Colonial Revival needlework was fully a part of its own time, reflecting many of the developments seen in other forms of contemporary art and design. Techniques and imagery were stylized, streamlined, and abstracted, and patterns were transmitted through the mass media. Unlike actual colonial needlework, this was a populist, democratic form with national dimensions and a new class of professional, named designers. This paper looks at the theme of continuity and change in relation to a social movement or idea, examining how its attitudes and ideologies affected the development, appearance, and perception of needlework, and how textiles simultaneously reflected and helped shape the national cultural agenda.

The Colonial Revival was both a visual or aesthetic style, and a symbolic movement that spanned a period of more than 60 years. Beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century when America was becoming increasingly industrialized and urban, many individuals began to romanticize the pre-industrial, rural past. They thought of the colonial era—which by popular definition ended about 1830—as a purer time, filled with virtuous, moral, and hard-working pioneers. By extension, everything colonial took on new meanings. Historic artifacts—especially household items like spinning wheels, chairs, textiles and china—were seen as still-extant, almost living pieces of that earlier, untainted time. They seemed to hold or embody the qualities of the past, and thus exert a kind of moral power. In turn, modern craftspeople and manufacturers began to produce colonial-looking objects and create colonial-looking environments.

In its earliest phases, the Colonial Revival was largely a reactionary response on the part of a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite that was losing its sense of dominance and control. The rising tide of immigration was changing the nature and character of the country, and many who were alarmed by depressions, labor unrest, and the apparent end of the frontier sought to set themselves apart by tracing their lineage to ancestors of "solid" pioneer stock. Those who most venerated the colonial, in other words, usually looked to it for a confirmation and reification of their own heritage and values. Although they were themselves predominantly well-off and urban, they "claimed" the virtues of the modest, hardworking, rural farmers of the past—as de-
scendants, they felt they inherited these same qualities.¹

**COLONIAL TEXTILES AS SYMBOLS: THE PRELIMINARY PHASE**

The primary emphasis or focus of the Colonial Revival was the domestic past. It was not the battlefield or the workplace these descendants were interested in; it was the home and its activities and accoutrements. Sewing and needlework were an integral part of the domestic scene, and even from the earliest manifestations of the Colonial Revival idea, needlework played a symbolic role. During the Civil War, when women of the north organized large fairs to raise money for the Union Army, they included theme-room restaurants based on their image of the colonial kitchen. Costumed characters appeared in front of huge fireplaces with swinging pots, carrying out re-creations of household activities. These Kitchens always included a prominently displayed spinning wheel, and often included a "dame," knitting by the fire, or a reenactment of a quilting bee. Tableaux-like reenactments were popular throughout the 19th century. It is generally agreed that they were the root or prototype of the colonial "period rooms" that proliferated in museums soon after.

The 19th century stage sets were at once serious and playful. On one hand, they alluded to a world of deeper meaning; they were statements about goodness, or moral virtue. But while they were instructive, they were amusements; the Kitchen at the Columbian Exposition, in fact, was located on the Midway, the acknowledged amusement area of the fair. The Victorians also took on the colonial ancestor role in other settings identified as entertainments. They dressed up for "Martha Washington tea parties," colonial balls or dances, "calico parties," and tableaux. Women's magazines offered suggestions for colonial theme luncheons and get-togethers. In May 1902, one reported on an entertainment called a "quilt make," where guests were invited to come in "anciente dress" to work on an old quilt top.²

Actual historic textiles were also on view at this time. For the Centennial, women's committees in the northeast set up "temporary museums" of colonial items. Embroidered household items like bedcovers were sometimes featured, although the most significant textile presence was in the form of clothing and accessories, usually associated with particular individuals. The Boston display, for example, included a baby cap worn by John Adams and a collar worn by George Washington.³ These garments were of interest not so much for their own sake, but because of the people whose character was seemingly infused within them. In sum, the dominant late 19th century interest in colonial textiles was associational, or symbolic. Textile activity was of greater concern than textile product. This was a preliminary stage in Colonial Revival needlework.

**COLONIAL NEEDLEWORK AS "INDUSTRY": THE ARTS AND CRAFTS PHASE**

There was a significant shift about the turn of the century, when the foreign influx was at its height. Colonial dress-up and stage sets did not disappear, but they were usually relegated to more "serious" settings, such as organized pageants, and
they were typically reverent and sentimental. "Professionals" often arranged the imagery. In a kind of two-dimensional echo of the tableaux-like room, entrepreneurs like Wallace Nutting and Mary Northend began to market images of the colonial interior, usually featuring a costumed woman on a braided rug in front of a fireplace, and communicating a sense of peace, repose and an almost spiritual calm. The needleworker began to be associated with that feeling.

I characterize the period from approximately 1900 to World War I as the Arts and Crafts phase of Colonial Revival needlework. Nutting and Northend were among the tastemakers--individuals of the dominant white Yankee culture who offered advice about what was and was not attractive and appropriate. Aligned with both the Arts and Crafts and Progressive movements, these "missionaries of the beautiful" often initiated handwork projects to help poor, rural women make a living and improve themselves by reviving old crafts. Needlework, which was associated with positive values and required little equipment or outlay, worked well for the reformers.

The Deerfield Blue and White Society epitomizes the phenomenon I am discussing. Well-educated women from the Connecticut River Valley studied examples of local 18th century crewelwork and designed modern adaptations. They trained local women to produce pieces for sale to summer tourists and well-connected individuals in Boston and other cultural centers. When we compare their pieces to colonial-era originals, we see a greater formality, perfectionism and control. Founders Margaret Whiting and Ellen Miller admitted they didn’t trust the needlework skills of contemporary women. They insisted on selling only completed work rather than patterns, because they were afraid their fine designs would be compromised by poor workmanship.

The Blue and White Society was formed in 1896. At approximately this same time, Frances Louisa Goodrich, a midwesterner with a Yankee heritage and art school training, started Allanstand Industries in the hill country of North Carolina. Following the settlement house model that was the hallmark of the Progressive movement, she instituted a number of craft programs, hoping to impart values like "industry" and "thrift." She began with rag rug weaving, using scraps of silk sent by northern churchwomen, because this type of activity was standard at settlements like Hull House. (Note that the Blue and White Society also produced rug rugs and other colonial-looking items.) Allanstand Industries eventually became particularly known for overshot coverlets. Like Whiting and Miller, Goodrich also imposed her aesthetic on Allanstand products, and thus transformed the look of native products. For example, Appalachian women saw a woven coverlet as a set of separate pieces that could be easily dismantled for washing, and put it together accordingly. Goodrich saw a coverlet as a single visual unit, and stressed perfect, matching seams, achieved with even beating. She introduced a different type of loom to effect this. She too stressed restraint, balance and symmetry, and a feeling of spaciousness. Tellingly, these were the very terms Mary Northend used to characterize the colonial style in a 1921 article in Good Housekeeping. Other Colonial Revival values--simplicity, honesty, organic unity--were also congruent with those of the Arts and Crafts movement and were
evident in many other similar self help-type projects.

Arts and Crafts reformers were among those who contributed to the sweet, home-body image of women that pervaded the Colonial Revival. Even Gustav Stickley called the colonial style an example of "old-time quiet...in a breathless age." Women were seen to embody this sense of quiet. A popular subject in both literature and art at this time was Priscilla Mullins, a character from Longfellow's Courtship of Miles Standish. She was a romantic figure, always shown with a spinning wheel, awaiting her beau. She epitomized repose. Men liked her docile, unassuming quality, but women liked her too. She was industrious rather than idle, and because spinning was necessary for the very survival of the colonial people, her work was valuable. Turn-of-the-century women embraced the image of the toiling colonial foremother because she represented a time when women's work was acknowledged and respected. Some of them wrote books and articles detailing the labors of their grandmothers and thus presenting a unique kind of domestic history. These writings preserved significant historical detail, but they were completely colored by a sentimental image of the domestic. Alice Morse Earle's 1895 Colonial Dames and Good Wives, for example, includes a poem that describes the spinning wheel as the colonial woman's "piano," on which she spun her children to sleep:

Then labor was pleasure, and industry smiled
And the wheel and the loom every trouble beguiled.

The story of Betsey Ross, a woman whose patriotism was embodied in--and limited to--the stitching a flag, was also both fabricated and elevated to the status of a myth in this era.

A self-professed "mania" for collecting colonial objects took hold at the turn of the century, but for the most part, the early collectors were drawn to china, furniture and silver, not needlework. Except for antique garments and accessories, American textiles were little studied or sought after before World War I.

COLONIAL NEEDLEWORK FOR ALL: THE INTERWAR PHASE

The full-blown flowering of Colonial Revival needlework was in the interwar period. Textile collecting "took off" after about 1920, as did research. Books on samplers and American embroidery came out in 1921, and the new Antiques magazine featured articles on related topics. Books on collecting also began to include more about needlework. In fact, collecting, scholarship, and a kind of female bonding grew together. In Collector's Luck, Alice Van Leer Carrick gushed about a recent book on coverlets. "Nobody can really 'see' coverlets until they have read this...wonderful, radiant...book. The woman who wrote it believe[s and rejoices] in other women and...their work." Articles on colonial needlework also began to proliferate in women's magazines like Ladies' Home Journal and Good Housekeeping, and needlework "experts" began to tour the country, lecturing to eager women's groups. In a sense, textile scholarship was being claimed as women's territory.

Even more than this type of sisterhood, the fundamental shift in the interwar period
was a new attitude toward doing colonial-style needlework. It was no longer conceived of as something only for set-apart, rural or disadvantaged women. Settlement-based self-help projects generally faded out after the war, and it became a fad, even for urban women, to make their own quilts, rugs, samplers, and household furnishings. By 1923, *Ladies' Home Journal* ran an article called, "Why Not Make Your Own Rugs? Everybody is Doing It." The modern woman could identify with her colonial predecessor, in other words, by doing what she did. In effect, she could step into the Nutting photograph and become its calm, soothing woman. As Marie Webster told her readers, "piecing and quilting make for feminine contentment and domestic happiness." A book on hooked rugs exclaimed, "Our own troubles and worries fade, and with our rugs...we find ourselves in a fairy world...a dream, a fantasy...a bright and happy experience."  

This new sense that everyone could do it was in part due to a general sense of democratization and popularization that evolved in the 1920s. The colonial past was no longer seen as the sole provenance of the wealthy Mayflower descendant; everyone could in some sense appropriate it. Elitist hierarchies and assumptions were both challenged with broader-based visions and thrown off center stage by the burgeoning popular mass media. But the new approach was also a response to the changing position of women in the home. Because the home's economically productive functions had largely disappeared, the woman who was based there was largely reduced to a new, more symbolic role. She was less of a manager, more of a worker, tied to domestic tasks--she was being transformed into a housewife, and was encouraged to find her personal satisfaction through that identity. Even short stories in women's magazines emphasized women's happiness through homey tasks. The image was locked in by a strong revival of sentimentality about mother and home; in the depression years, in particular, this was tied to a much sought-after sense of comfort.

The increasing numbers of women who began to produce colonial-looking needlework were given a great deal of guidance; they found ample advice, instruction and designs in the mass media. The concern with improved artistry that had been directed at the disadvantaged during the Arts and Crafts period was now extended to every housewife. A new kind of needlework professional emerged. She no longer worked with a settlement house type project; instead, she wrote books and articles, and designed and marketed patterns, and she saw herself taking needlework to a new artistic level. Carrie Hall explained that needlecraft had first been a necessary part of pioneer homemaking, later became part of an awakened desire for beauty in the home, and was now becoming an art form in its own right. Anne Champe Orr, similarly, said her goal in designing quilts was to raise them from utilitarian coverings to art pieces.

Orr was one of the most influential tastemakers of this new needlework age--she served as needlework editor of *Good Housekeeping* from 1918-1939 and employed over 160 women in her needlework business. Like many of her contemporaries, she perpetuated Arts and Crafts aesthetic preferences, including symmetrical design and large amounts of open space. In quilts, she favored applique and central medal-
lion designs. At the same time, her images were typically abstracted and stylized, as befit the post-war aesthetic. Interwar designers claimed colonial needlework, in other words, but they made it "new" and up-to-date. As Kate Franklin argued in 1926, "Why should we slavishly copy our grandmother's...patterns?" Ladies' Home Journal declared categorically that there was no more "fussiness" in handwork; everything was to be simplified and modern. ¹⁵

Needlework suppliers had begun publishing instruction books in the late 19th century, but it wasn't until the 1920s when patterns were published in daily newspapers that mass marketing really skyrocketed. Designers wrote newspaper and magazine columns (often using pseudonyms like "Aunt Martha"), offering instructions for a small fee. They also found jobs with quilt batting companies that included patterns on their packages; Anne Orr received 500,000 pattern requests on a single day. Magazines also sponsored quilt contests that drew huge numbers of visitors to department stores and fairs, and further stimulated the excitement about colonial-type needlework. Contest winners sometimes became instant celebrities who were broadcast on the radio and hounded for patterns by admirers all over the country.

By the 1930s a needleworker could get by with relatively little skill; she could choose pre-cut pattern pieces, pre-stamped designs, complete kits, or even partially finished work. At the same time, designers assumed that many customers would make changes or adaptations in the patterns, and individuals typically progressed from simple to more complex projects. The vast number of patterns on the market stimulated innovation, so while there was much derivative work, there were also highly accomplished designs.

Flowerbaskets, swags, wreaths, and bowknots were perhaps the most popular embroidery motifs of the interwar era; they appeared on everything from rugs, bed and table covers to personal accessories. The iconic basket was stylized, reduced to a smooth, streamlined shape. Simplicity and reduction of form--even the kind of disintegration of form associated with cubists and other modern painters--was reflected in technique as well as imagery. Straight lines were often worked in a broken fashion, creating the suggestion of a line as much as a line itself, and shapes might even be reduced to mere points, created by French knots. Solid blocks of color, similarly, were frequently worked in cross stitch, meaning that borders were alluded to rather than filled in. This very simplicity has been looked upon in later eras as evidence of lack of skill or design sophistication, but in the 1920s it was up-to-the-minute stylishness. As a 1928 Needlecraft article stated, "The old fashioned sampler of our great grandmother's day, with its fine, careful stitches, seems incongruous now." ¹⁶

Samplers were important in Colonial Revival needlework. They were easily worked, and were prominently hung in the home, functioning as a symbol of domesticity and harmony by alluding to an imagined happy past. In reality, interwar samplers were entirely different from their colonial prototypes. Colonial samplers were
typically made by schoolgirls, who followed their teachers’ designs. They symbolized prosperity and achievement, since they indicated that the girl’s family had produced a refined young lady. Stitching was detailed, filling most of the background space. The stitched messages were dictated by adults, but they were written from the child’s point of view. They expressed filial loyalty and a kind of gloomy piety – there were countless verses about the importance of virtue and the difficulties of life on earth, and about death and eventual rewards in a heavenly sphere. Interwar samplers were not about refinement; they typically came from stamped patterns, used only one or two stitches, and required little training. They featured a narrative central image that functioned as a single composition. Made by adult women, they romanticized the earthly plane: most referred to family life, motherhood, the comforts of the home, friendship, and sweet love. Despite dreamy colonial imagery, in other words, they expressed contemporary sentiments, and were used to keep painful things at bay. In referring to a sampler called "Home Keeping Hearts," Woman’s World tellingly remarked, "Longfellow’s friendly verse offers solace to the "stay-at-home;"... she need no longer envy her sister’s place in the 'work-a-day' world."

Images of home were also seen in other media. For example, the same sentimental imagery prevailed in hooked rugs. Though techniques were altered for a more modernistic look (narrow strips created flatter textures, pictorial elements were outlined), pictures of cozy houses, complete with blazing hearths and cheerful flower gardens, were typical. Revival style embroidery also often included images of teacups, cooking pots and other visual references to the cheer of the colonial kitchen. While these hearkened back to the New England Kitchen-type stage settings, they had another purpose—they romanticized and ennobled the tedious labor of the contemporary housewife. Needlework was also applied to new types of textiles during the 20’s and 30’s: to bags that held vegetables, clothespins, and other laundry items; to pot-holders; dishtowels, and tray covers. The modern American woman was now directly involved with the backstage labor of cooking, cleaning, washing, and hostessing. Colonial references of this type helped overlay her activities with a deeper meaning and a kind of charm.

Colonial Revival needlework was often worked in sets; the same pattern might be worked in different scales and even different media on a variety of household textiles (sampler designs might for example be adapted for rugs and aprons). The textile was not seen so much as a finished work in itself, but as part of an overall interior design scheme – the finished work was the room as a whole. The housewife was responsible for creating this kind of focus and visual coherence. "Modern women make a study of [a] particular room," explained a 1935 book on quilts. "They strive for overall harmony, and choose items to go with their dominant color scheme. In the colonial era women had to make quilts with what was available, but today we can be more selective and artistic." The dominant palette was light: white was favored in many Revival contexts, although it had not been popular in the 18th century, and the bright and primary colors of earlier times were toned down and mixed with pastels. Anne Orr described her quilt colors as "delicate," and elsewhere "flesh" and "peach" tones were particularly heralded for embroidery.
Men were strongly involved in most aspects of the Colonial Revival, but Colonial Revival needlework was so completely a woman’s world that it rarely even alluded to men. The only images considered suitable for men’s spaces were sailing ships, which were relatively gender-neutral. The only way that males were actually pictured were as fantasized gentlemen—not farmers—of the past, and even then, they were usually seen only in shadowy, stylized silhouette. Interestingly, reproduction colonial furniture—which men were involved with—was typically quite true to the original. Revival needlework, as we have seen, was heavily transformed.

Paradox was perhaps the hallmark of Colonial Revival needlework. It was evident in everything from the title of a popular woman’s magazine, Modern Priscilla, to a 1915 sampler juxtaposing fighter planes of the Great War with women in hoop-skirts. It was very apparent in telephone screens worked in the shape of colonial women, or in descriptions of new designs that were simultaneously meant to be "modernistic" and to "bring to mind the quaint box-bordered flower-beds of an old-time garden." Occasionally truly forward-looking designs were worked in old-fashioned techniques, but these were far overshadowed by those with saccharine references to the past.

EFFECTS OF THE COLONIAL REVIVAL PHENOMENON

In the end, the abstracted quality of Colonial Revival imagery and the countless references to homey charm and quaintness contributed to a general devaluation of needlework of all kinds. On one hand the designs were so simplified that they appeared childlike, and could be dismissed as something that mature people would outgrow. At the same time, the constant pairing of textiles with characters like Aunt Martha and references to "grandmother’s day" led to an association with hopelessly out-of-date old ladies—the complete antithesis of the modern woman. Despite the professionals’ insistence on "improved," "modern" design, the "old-fashioned" rubric eventually made the work seem dated, stuffy and unimportant. The emphasis on quickly worked pieces and the plethora of pre-stamped patterns also meant that needlework was no longer perceived as demanding or difficult; again, it was easily dismissed. Even the legacy from earlier phases of the Revival contributed to the general devaluation. Nineteenth century associations, connecting colonial textiles with amusements, dress-up and play, and Arts and Crafts-era associations, connecting them with charity projects done by the disadvantaged "other," still reverberated in the popular consciousness. They made the work seem frivolous, distant, and slightly demeaning.

Colonial style needlework was supplanted to some extent in the later 1930s by so-called "peasant" embroidery, but it only really went out of style with the non-saccharine realities of World War II. However, its legacies, and particularly the attitudes that it helped create, are with us still. Even today, in order to assess, understand, and fully appreciate Colonial Revival needlework, we must bring to light the prejudices we carry, and try to see how these pieces were seen and experienced in their own time.


8. Gustav Stickley, "From Ugliness to Beauty," The Craftsman 7 (December, 1904), 315.

9. Marling, 42.


18. Hall and Kretsinger, 28. The quotation is paraphrased.


20. Lydia Le Baron Walker, Homecraft Rugs (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1929), 47.

These sampler designs--"Home Keeping Hearts" and "Mother and Child"--were offered by Woman's World magazine in the late 1920s. The patterns came with the requisite embroidery floss, and frames could be purchased separately. Note the grand colonial-looking house on the "Home Keeping Hearts" sampler, and the old-fashioned clothes that mother and child wear on the other.
Corner details on two textiles from the Helen Allen Collection at the University of Wisconsin illustrate the kind of modernistic dissolution of form evident in Colonial Revival needlework. Top: corner of bridge table cover (EAE 1627) with cross stitch and pulled-thread design. The stylized flower basket is reduced to a suggested outline shape. Right: luncheon cloth (EAUS 539) with some lines worked in broken stitch and French knots.