

A Stitch in Time: The Needlework of Aging Women in Antebellum America

Aimee E. Newell

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A Stitch in Time: The Needlework of Aging Women in Antebellum America Aimee E. Newell Drawing from 167 examples of decorative needlework?—?primarily samplers and quilts from 114 collections across the United States?—?made by individual women aged forty years and over between 1820 and 1860, this exquisitely illustrated book explores how women experienced social and cultural change in antebellum America.

The book is filled with individual examples, stories, and over eighty fine color photographs that illuminate the role that samplers and needlework played in the culture of the time. For example, in October 1852, Amy Fiske (1785?–?1859) of Sturbridge, Massachusetts, stitched a sampler. But she was not a schoolgirl making a sampler to learn her letters. Instead, as she explained, "The above is what I have taken from my sampler that I wrought when I was nine years old. It was w[rough]t on fine cloth [and] it tattered to pieces. My age at this time is 66 years."

Situated at the intersection of women's history, material culture study, and the history of aging, this book brings together objects, diaries, letters, portraits, and prescriptive literature to consider how middle-class American women experienced the aging process. Chapters explore the physical and mental effects of "old age" on antebellum women and their needlework, technological developments related to needlework during the antebellum period and the tensions that arose from the increased mechanization of textile production, and how gift needlework functioned among friends and family members. Far from being solely decorative ornaments or functional household textiles, these samplers and quilts served their own ends. They offered aging women a means of coping, of sharing and of expressing themselves. These "threads of time" provide a valuable and revealing source for the lives of mature antebellum women.



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