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

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Abstract
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 it tattered to pieces. My age at this time is 66 years." 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 dissertation explores how Fiske and women like her experienced social and cultural change in antebellum America, and probes their personal reactions to growing older. Falling at the intersection of women's history, material culture study and the history of aging, this dissertation brings together objects, diaries, letters, portraits, and prescriptive literature to consider how middle-class American women experienced the aging process. Chapter 1 explores the physical and mental effects of "old age" on antebellum women and their needlework. It considers samplers

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modified later in life through the removal of the maker's age or the date when the sampler was made. Chapter 2 examines epistolary needlework, that which relates a message or story in the form of stitched words. Chapter 3 focuses on technological developments related to needlework during the antebellum period, particularly indelible ink and the rise of the sewing machine, and the tensions that arose from the increased mechanization of textile production. Chapter 4 considers how gift needlework functioned among friends and family members. The materials, style and techniques represented in these gifts often passed along an embedded message, allowing the maker to share her opinions, to demonstrate her skill and creativity, and to leave behind a memorial of her life. Far from being a decorative ornament or a functional household textile, these samplers and quilts served their own ends. They offered aging women a means of coping, of sharing and of expressing themselves. In the end, the study argues that these "threads of time" provide a valuable and revealing source on the lives of mature antebellum women.

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