Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

‘Remember Now Thy Creator’

Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872

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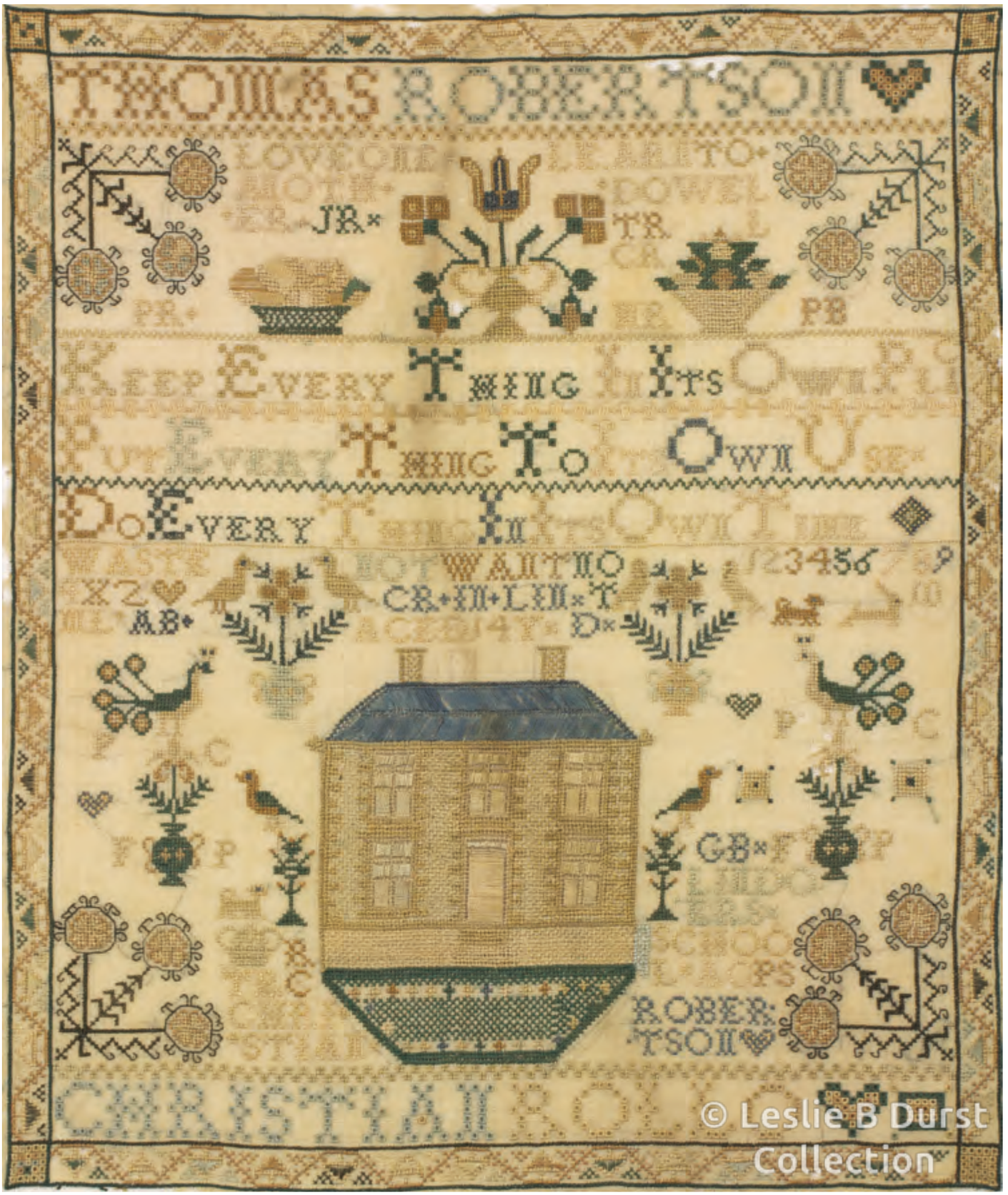
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CHAPTER 4

The elements of embroidered samplers

Embroidered samplers are the pieces that everyone thinks of first when they hear the word 'sampler'. Although this type of sampler was not necessarily designed to teach embroidery stitches in the way that the plain sewing sampler was meant to teach sewing techniques, it nevertheless used common embroidery stitches. It is not always clear how old girls were when they made the long band samplers of the seventeenth century, but those that can be assigned to a girl whose age is known suggest that they were the work of young teenagers, twelve to fourteen years old. Spot motif samplers could well be the work of adult women, as they usually have the clearer purpose of recording patterns and are less ordered than the band samplers, but because they lack names and dates this cannot be verified.

By the eighteenth century, girls were working embroidered samplers. Over time more information was added, with names, dates, ages, places and schools or teachers. From this further information it is clear that girls mainly worked these pieces between the ages of seven and fourteen. Factors that would influence when they made them would be their competence with a needle, whether they were at school or at home and what income level their parents enjoyed. Until the mid-nineteenth century, most embroidered samplers were made at private schools or at home, either with the mother or, more probably, with a teacher. The criteria for the choice of making the more decorative samplers as opposed to the plain sewing samplers are not clear, but there are hints that, as in Elizabeth Grant's case, it was a reward for good work as a plain needleworker.[120] More embroidered samplers than plain sewing samplers survive and, decorative and attractive as they are when framed, they have attracted more interest and attention in Britain. It is, moreover, usually easier to deduce where they were made. Much of this chapter is relevant to samplers made all over Britain, but to begin to understand what the characteristics of Scottish-made samplers are, it is first necessary to analyse elements that make up embroidered samplers: the fabric, the threads and the stitches as well as the patterns worked on them. Each of these elements changed or was modified over time.

OPPOSITE. 4.1 Christian Robertson's sampler shows one of the corner motif patterns. Christian was born on 27 April 1813 and christened on 6 May 1813 in Abdie, Fife. Her parents were Thomas Robertson and Christian Rollo, who married on 18 January 1806, also in Abdie, Fife. 15¼ in (38.7 cm) x 12¾ in (32.4 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

FABRIC

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, samplers were worked on plain white linen. Narrow band samplers appear to have

acquired their shape because they were taken from the end of a piece of linen, so their length was the same as the width of the linen. Linen was woven in many different widths, weights and degrees of fineness. The measurement for cloth in many parts of Europe was the ell, but each country measured it differently.[121] Linen was woven in Scotland but most of the fine linen used came from the Netherlands and Flanders. There are few, if any, surviving linen items for which we know the source of the cloth, so identifying the linen used for early Scottish samplers is not feasible. It is possible that some samplers in Scotland were worked on re-used linen rather than new fabric. Cloth of all kinds was an expensive and valuable commodity, so Scottish housewives, like their contemporaries elsewhere, had to be good at recycling. As there is little indication that samplers were originally seen as pieces to be framed, it would not matter whether new or old fabric was used.[122]

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sampler makers used linen of varying degrees of fineness but there are other fabrics that are particularly associated with their work. For example, later in the eighteenth century the use of a slightly yellowish wool fabric was popular. This was known as 'boutcloth', and was used for sifting dry goods such as flour, so it was a relatively cheap material. It came in a fairly narrow width, usually about twelve inches (30.5 cm), with blue selvedges, and was of an even weave. The blue lines can be seen on samplers either at the top and bottom or down the sides, indicating which way the fabric was used. Using the selvedges like this meant that no hems were needed on two borders. A sampler with a diamond centre design uses a very fine gauze (illus 4.2). It is perhaps this fabric that is referred to in the account of Mrs Stevens to Lady Whitefoord in 1724. Mrs Stevens kept a school and charged for various items for embroidery, including 'Gauze for a sampler' at 5d [pennies].[123]

Another fabric that came to be used later in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century is a fairly coarse brownish fabric resembling sackcloth. Bishop Robert Forbes visited a sackcloth factory in Inverness in 1770, where he saw hundreds of little children spinning and working the looms, with a mistress instructing them.[124] Sackcloth often has an uneven weave that affects the embroidery worked on it. It would appear to be a cheap fabric, very suitable for young children to work a first alphabet sampler. It was not often used for working the more elaborate samplers with patterns.

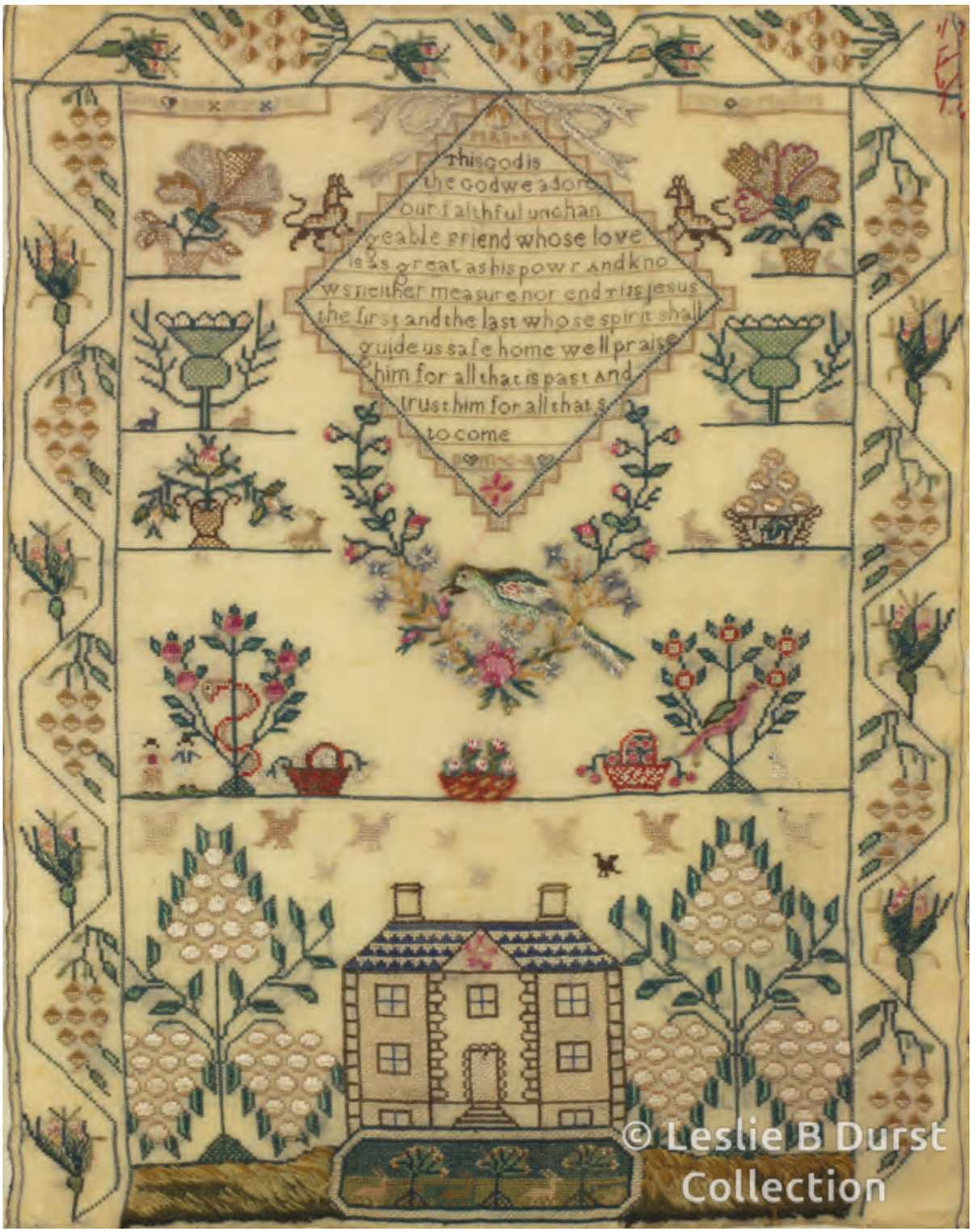
Mid to late nineteenth-century samplers are often worked on a cotton ground, with two threads in each direction creating an openwork mesh, known as double or Penelope canvas, ideal for the thickish, soft, untwisted Berlin wools.[125] This too came in various weights and widths, and the selvedges were usually used for either the top and bottom or side edges. This canvas is most often found in Berlin woolwork pictures, very popular in the middle of the century.

All the fabrics apart from the cotton mesh were originally hand-woven, so suffer from some irregularities in the weave and this can affect the way the patterns and alphabets look. It is a difficult thing to copy exactly in modern reproduction samplers, which usually have a more uniform look.

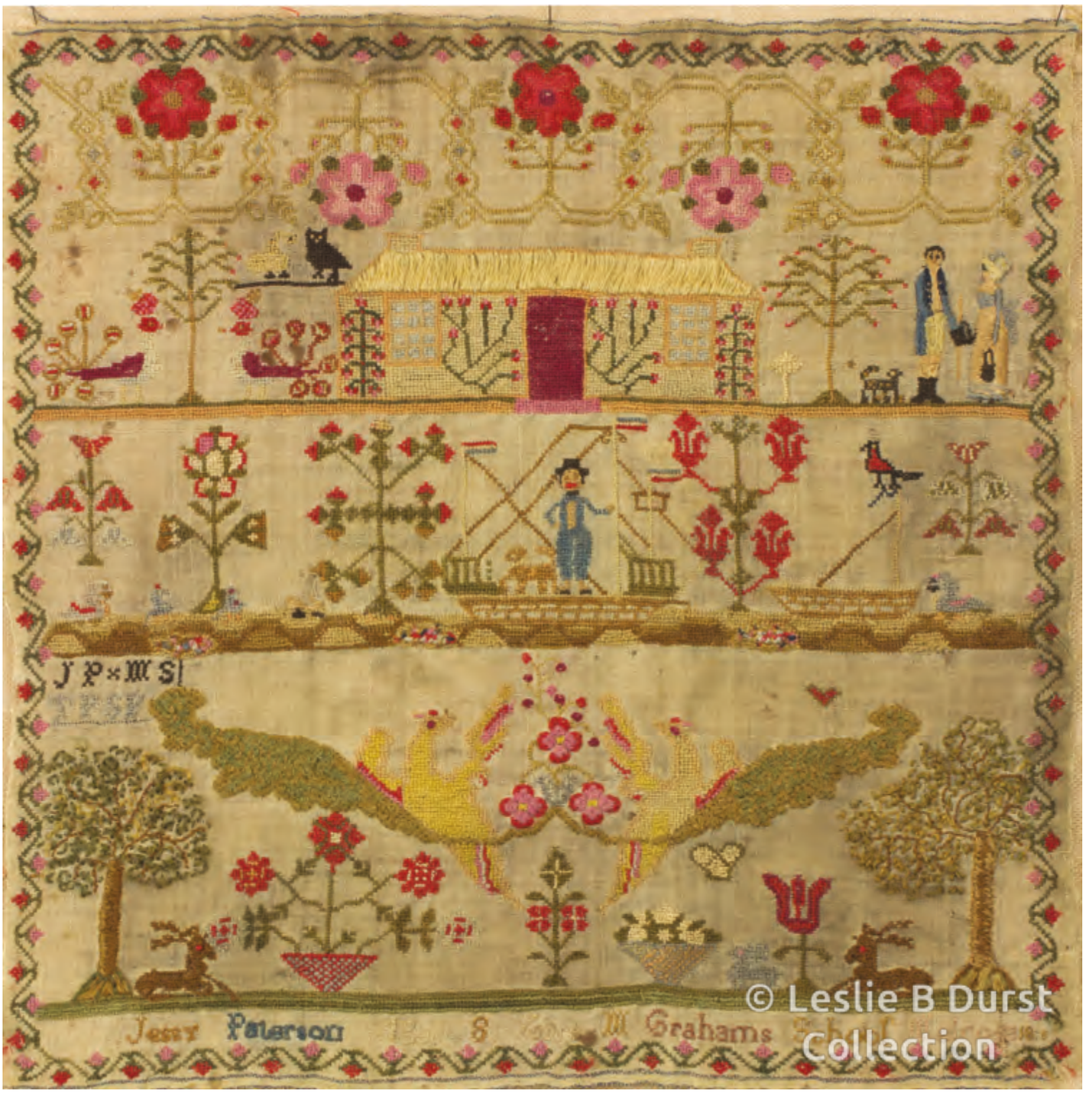
THREADS

Early samplers appear to be mostly, but not exclusively, worked in silk, a relatively expensive material. Later alphabet samplers are worked mainly in wool, although the picture samplers are usually worked in silk.[126] Quite why there was the division is unclear, as fine wool threads were used for the crewel work so popular for bed and wall hangings in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The 1719 hangings in the collections of National Museums Scotland use fine wool threads of various colours worked on a fine linen ground, so there was no technical reason why wool should not be used for a sampler.[127] Very rarely a metal thread might be included. In the late eighteenth century chenille thread became popular for working the lawns found on the samplers that showed a typical small Palladian villa.

The use of red and green in Scottish samplers

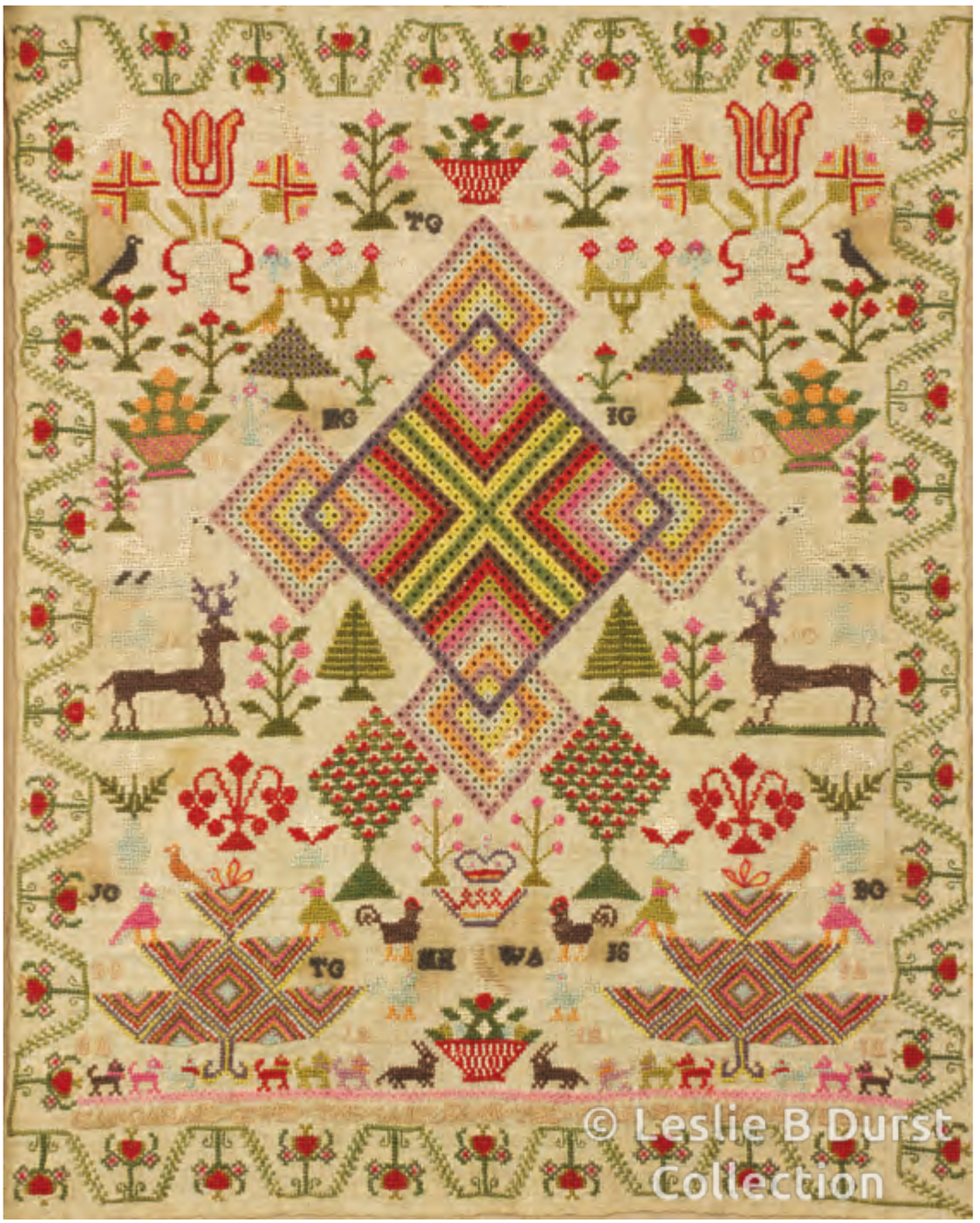


4.2 A very fine silk gauze ground embroidered in silk with a neat pedimented house, thistles and a diamond shape with verse 'This god is the god we adore'. She also includes on the left Adam and Eve, fully dressed standing under a rose bush, with a menacing serpent looming over them. Unfortunately the maker has neglected to put her name to this wonderful piece, although there are several sets of initials. 17¼ in (43.8 cm) x 13 in (33 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.



ABOVE. 4.3 Jessy Paterson, aged eight, worked her piece at M. Graham's school, Melrose, in 18[15?]. She has a rather charming scene of a house with roses climbing up the walls, a man and woman, perhaps her parents, a ship with sailor on board and the curious motif of the eagles or phoenix. There are blue lines in the selvedge at the top and bottom of the wool ground. 12¾ in (32.4 cm) x 12¾ in (32.4 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

OPPOSITE WITH DETAIL. 4.4 In the centre of Jean Garland's sampler she has worked wonderfully colourful diamond shapes in eyelet hole stitch. She continues the diamond shape in her trees and fountains worked in cross stitch. Jean was born on 6 February 1811, the daughter of Thomas Garland and Jean Allen of Kilwinning, Ayrshire, and was fifteen when she worked this piece. 16¾ in (42.5 cm) x 13¼ in (33.7 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.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is also a puzzle, as they were not cheap dyes. One explanation might be that the colours were already associated with women. Surviving plaids used by women as outer garments have a white ground with red and green lines, sometimes forming borders and sometimes all-over checks. Women stopped using plaids as outdoor garments in the eighteenth century, preferring cloaks instead, and many plaids then ended up as blankets on beds. Silk was imported from Italy, either as skeins or in an unprocessed state and it could then be dyed in Britain. Dye takes differently in silk and wool, while the use of mordants can affect the colour and hue of the finished product. By the mid-eighteenth century the green silk that was most popular for use in samplers was a darkish blue-green, which runs badly if it gets wet.[128] The red tended to be a blueish red, which is less likely to run when wet.

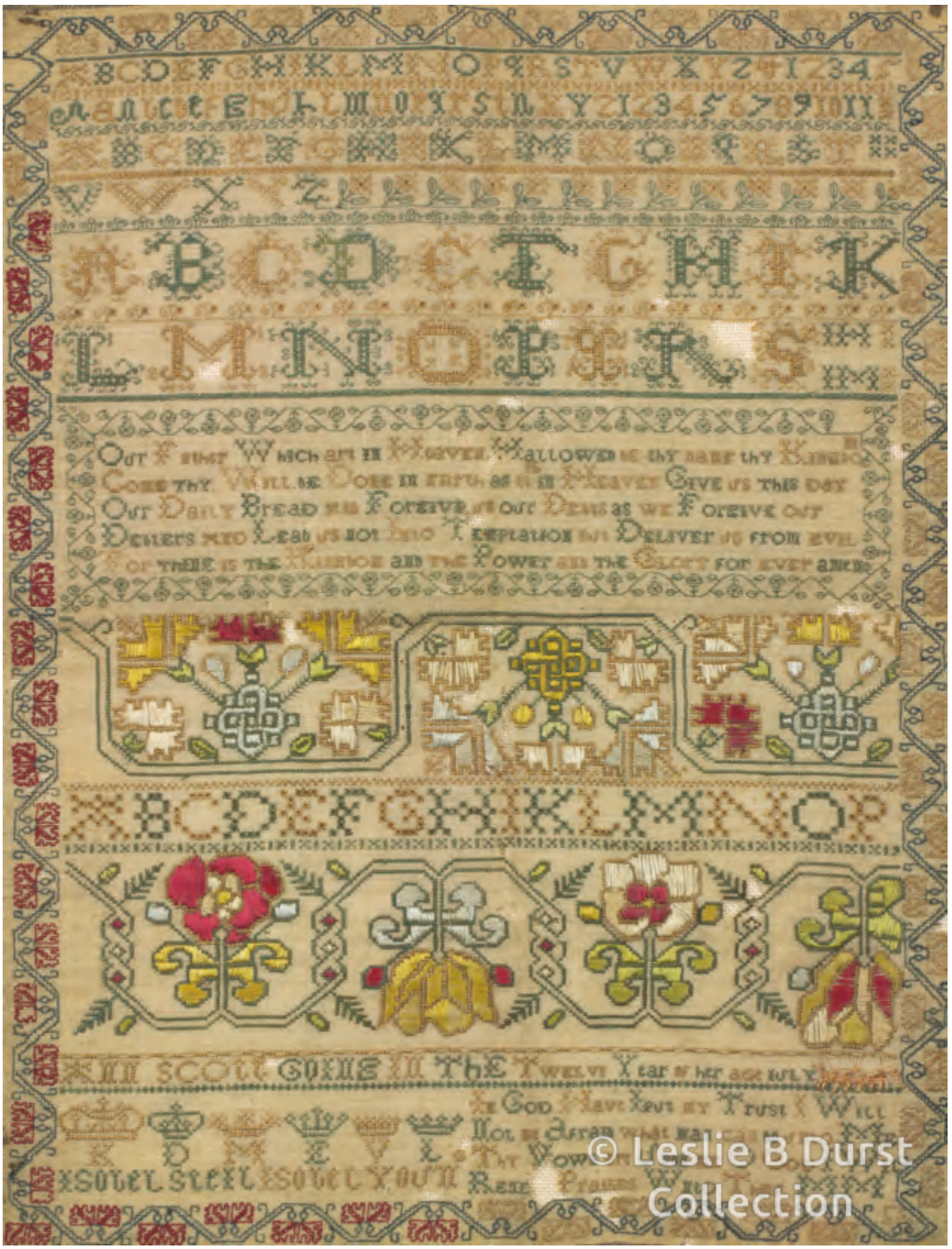
Wool threads varied in colour from a sage to a more emerald green and the reds from a pinkish red to a deep scarlet, but neither has the blueish tone of the silks. Once Berlin wools became popular the range of colours was greatly enhanced and some girls obviously revelled in the bright colours available.[129] Berlin wools were originally dyed using vegetable and mineral dyes only, and they show the sophistication and skill of the dyers immediately before the introduction of synthetic dyes from the 1860s onwards.[130]

STITCHES

The variety of stitches used on samplers is wide (illus 4.4).[131] Seventeenth-century samplers in particular covered the range of stitches and techniques that a woman might need to complete some of the furnishing textiles that were becoming popular, such as crewelwork hangings, cushions and tablecloths as well as pictures and boxes. By the eighteenth century the alphabet played a major role in Scottish samplers and so the use of cross stitch came to predominate (illus 4.5).

For alphabets, cross stitch and back stitch were mainly used. These remained the most popular throughout the next two centuries, and cross stitch in particular came to be seen as 'the sampler stitch'. Scottish girls usually worked more than one alphabet, so one of these was usually sewn in eyelet hole stitch and, less often, a square stitch was used. Sampler makers used other stitches as required. By the nineteenth century the average woman probably used very few stitches for any embroidery she might do after she left school. Berlin wool work is seen as the Victorian embroidery par excellence but it was worked mainly in petit point or half cross stitch and sometimes included beads. There were other types of embroidery, as women's magazines of the period testify. Satin stitch and long and short stitches were both used to work the flower and fruit pictures popular in the mid to late eighteenth century. Much of what we see as Victorian embroidery was done professionally, such as the white work known as Ayrshire needlework.

To work elaborate pieces of embroidery, such as the earlier wall hangings, demanded a degree of leisure that very few women enjoyed. As more middle-class families emerged in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, fewer wives and daughters were required to work for money. This left women with leisure time to be filled, and many late Victorian commentators saw the wool work produced by these women as a useless, time-filling occupation.[132] But the work was often done for sale at bazaars to raise money for charities, including hospitals. The items produced, such as slippers, purses and cushions, were useful pieces, even if they may not always have been used by the buyers. In James Collinson's painting of 1857, *The Empty Purse*, a fashionably dressed young woman stands in front of a stall at a bazaar where there are embroidered slippers and braces among the things to be sold.[133] True, houses were seen as being over-stuffed with textile items by the 1860s, but they did help to brighten up homes, particularly those in towns and cities where smoke from the chimneys could produce a grey day even in summer.



4.5 Ann Scott was in her twelfth year when she worked this sampler, which is undated but probably about 1772–3, in silk on very fine linen. It shows similarities with earlier samplers with two of the popular reversed flower bands, and an elaborate alphabet of solid cross-stitch centres surrounded by back-stitched curlicues. She includes the Ten Commandments, crowns and various initials but also two names, Isobel Steil and Isobel Young, who may be her classmates at school. While Ann Scott is a relatively common name, the two Isobels have been traced to girls born in 1755 and 1756 in the Edinburgh area, making it possible that Ann was born in 1761 in North Leith. 16 in (40.6 cm) x 12 in (30.5 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.