

HANGING WITH NINE SAMPLERS  
Mexican, dated 1810 to 1861



Among the textile traditions brought to Mexico following the Spanish conquest in 1519 was that of samplers. As in Europe, the creation of samplers by young girls of genteel families was an important component of their education; in addition to learning a range of stitches that could be used for both decorative and practical sewing purposes, girls were also expected to acquire values associated with femininity including patience, obedience, and diligence. Although most surviving Mexican samplers date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the motifs were established in the sixteenth century. Pattern books—one of the primary means of circulating designs for samplers in Europe—were less available in Mexico, and, instead, needlework itself served to both record and disseminate motifs and stitches. As this hanging demonstrates, girls and young women using a standardized repertoire nonetheless produced samplers that reflected a sense of individual expression.

The nine complete samplers and smaller pieces of embroidery (all with linen grounds) that have been joined to form the hanging illustrate the motifs, colors, and stitches typical of many nineteenth-century pieces. The pictorial samplers are worked in two main techniques: white-on-white embroidery featuring padded satin stitches, stem, buttonhole and chain stitches, drawn and cut work (known as *deshilado*), and French knots worked in linen thread; and polychrome silk embroidery executed in shaded satin, split, stem, brick, eyelet, and running stitches, with French knots. The samplers with geometric patterns and stylized plant, animal and bird motifs are worked in silk tent and cross stitches and drawn work. Colored glass beads, purl, and sequins—the latter introduced by the Spaniards—add sparkling glints to both pictorial and geometric samplers. The sophisticated needlework and compositions in some of these suggest that they represent a “master sampler” or were embroidered by a young woman with accomplished sewing skills.

The emphasis on religious instruction for girls is evident in several samplers. Most noticeable is the figure of the Virgin as the Immaculate Conception, with a sequined halo, flowing white gown and blue mantle, on the right side. Considered the ideal role model for young girls and women in the context of their domestic responsibilities, she was a highly appropriate motif. During the Viceregal period (1521-1821), birds, animals, and flowers like those that accompany the Virgin here, symbolized women’s moral perfection. The Lamb of God appears in three samplers, one of which also displays the monograms of Mary (AMR) and Jesus Christ (JHS). In contrast to the exemplary Virgin and perhaps included as a cautionary warning to girls, the figure of Xantippe, the bad-tempered, quarrelsome wife of Socrates, sits atop her weary, long-suffering husband at the center of an oval floral wreath. This depiction of the ill-matched couple is based on a late-seventeenth-century print after Henri Gascar (1635-1701; British Museum, 2010,7081.71).

Most of the samplers include signatures and dates: “Rosaura Munoscano” subtly worked her name (which appears upside down) into the central tulle medallion of her white work piece; “Emiliana Alacazar” documented her name and the completion date—December 1824—of her boldly patterned geometric sampler across its bottom edge; “Soledad Santa Ella” recorded her name and “1856” at the center of her geometric sampler; and the young girl who produced the sampler with Xantippe and Socrates discreetly embroidered her initials, “L. L.,” within a pink-leafed wreath carried by a black and yellow bird, while a macaw holds a banner enclosing the date “1861.” Although the embroiderers of the top panel teeming with brilliantly hued archangels and carnations as well as the sampler featuring the Virgin remain anonymous, they dated their pieces, “1810” and “1821,” respectively.

Not only do these dates represent a significant accomplishment in the lives of the girls who produced these samplers, but they also cover a period of Mexican history that saw dramatic political changes. In 1810, Mexico began its struggle for independence from Spain, which it finally won in 1821 and, after a two-year monarchy, the Republic of Mexico was founded in 1824. Three decades later in 1854, liberals overthrew the country’s corrupt military dictatorship, ushering in a period known as *La Reforma*, and 1861 marked the election of the progressive politician Benito Juárez as president and the invasion by Napoleon III’s forces. Two samplers—the white work at the top right and the polychrome silk at the bottom center—display the crowned, double-headed eagle of the Hapsburg coat-of-arms, indicative of a conservative political ideology. The decision to include this motif may have come from the pupil, her instructor, or her family.

Provenance: Found in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the hanging was assembled in 1921 by a family of American missionaries who fled China in 1912 and settled in Oaxaca, where they collected the samplers.

71” H x 48” W