

VISUAL CHRONICLES FROM THE BALKANS AND CENTRAL EUROPE: SAMPLERS REMEMBERED

MARIA-ALINA ASAVEI

PhD, Lecturer, Post-doctoral Researcher
Department of Russian and East European Studies
Institute of International Studies
Charles University, Prague
U Krize 8, 158 00, Praha 5, Czech Republic
e-mail: 98022179@fsv.cuni.cz

ABSTRACT

This paper* examines the relationship between craft and popular culture by focusing on a peculiar type of textile sampler (needlework) that used to be omnipresent in the last century both in rural and urban houses across Central and South-Eastern Europe. Although these hand-crafted items are no longer part of today's 'compulsory' household, they are still regarded as nostalgic, familiar or emotional forms of materiality and tangibility which perform a cultural politics of identity. These vernacular textiles predate the digital age and the free market and yet co-evolve and interact with digital networks and technologies. This paper brings into focus 'amateur' and regional forms of home grown cultural expression and the ways in which these forms of folk creativity and materiality are recast in contemporary urban popular culture and arts. Thus, the main aim of this study is to explore the contemporary re-enactments of these vernacular samplers.

KEYWORDS: craft • popular culture • folk art • contemporary art • nostalgia
• textile history

INTRODUCTION

This paper has a regional perspective and is based on the fieldwork I conducted between 2012 and 2014 in various countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe (Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Macedonia and Serbia). The purpose of this research was to document and analyse a peculiar type of needlework, known as sampler (a wall-hanging carpet that combines written text and images) which was very popular in the last century across the region (especially in rural areas). Currently, these samplers are no longer part of the contemporary household. Yet, as this paper shows, some people still regard these vernacular textiles as visual memorabilia and collect them. The issue I attempt to disentangle in what follows is how a vernacular cultural practice associated with folk art (needlework) is recast in contemporary popular culture and art. Data

* Part of this research was conducted during my residential fellowship for South-Eastern European Scholars at the American Research Center in Sofia, Bulgaria, Spring 2014. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the American Research Center in Sofia.

was collected using visual sociology methods and ethnographic interviews, both with women who produced this type of samplers and with women who collect this form of vernacular handwork and recycle it. I have visually documented samplers made in the previous century across the region, as well as contemporary re-creations. Some repositories of information have been found in the older generation's attics, basements and flea markets (as well as on eBay, Facebook and other digital platforms). The focus of my analysis is on the content of these visual memorabilia. Following Howard Becker's visual sociology perspective, I define images as concepts. Thus, in Becker's (1974: 4) formulation, for any image I ask "what question or questions it might be answering?"

As Sandra Alföldy (2007; 2012) and other textile historians posit, although craft has always been understood and regarded as part of popular culture, there is no comprehensive, academic study on craft and popular culture. This paper aims to partly fill this gap and examines the relationship between craft and popular culture by focusing on the everyday 'politics' and aesthetics of a peculiar type of craft – a handcrafted sampler (needlework) from Central and South Eastern Europe – both from a historical perspective and in its contemporary developments.

Popular culture is currently experiencing a global resurgence in the form of artisanal decoration, food, souvenirs, garments and other hand-crafted objects which are disseminated and/or commercialised via DIY magazines, books, shops, craft fairs, flea markets, television programs, YouTube, Etsy, eBay, Facebook and so on. The practices and the actual hand-crafted objects are of course very rich, and their ordinariness (in terms of production, exhibition and dissemination) fosters a multi-sensory experience which opposes the hegemonic conceptual and physical spaces of art (usually displayed in the 'white cube'). The practice of needlework decorations has often been associated with folk culture (traditional practice held by geographically isolated homogeneous groups of people). Starting in the 1960s, cultural theorists and cultural geographers began to focus on the contrasts between folk culture and popular culture. While folk culture was usually defined as a culture traditionally practiced by a small group (clustered usually in rural areas), popular culture was understood as a culture of a large, heterogeneous society based on simultaneous connection via modern technologies (television, the Internet and digitisation). James M. Rubinstein (2005) analyses various material cultures, distinguishing between two types of material culture: folk and popular. In many cases the boundaries between folk and popular culture are rather vague as folk culture has always informed popular culture, and in some cases even 'high' culture (or what was regarded as art). If we take into consideration the global resurgence of the artisanal decorations that are disseminated and commercialised via e-commerce online platforms, DIY magazines and so on, it becomes obvious that traditional decorative needlework – which is said to have originated in folk culture – is an example of how traditional, homemade, folk culture has been turned into popular culture.

However, this paper will focus only on a particular type of decorative needlework consisting of stitched written message and visual patterns from a regional perspective. The focus will be regional because my research covered only the Balkans and Central Europe. However, as historians of textiles suggest, the production of this type of sampler has a long tradition all over Europe (and beyond) going back to the 16th century.¹ As Claire Browne and Jennifer Wearden (2014) posit, the popular needlework practice known as sampler (its English name derives from the Latin *exemplarium* and then from

the French *essamplaire*) avoids a precise definition. Etymologically, the term seems to mean any kind of work to be imitated or copied, although the term sampler has come to be used “for a type of object whose form and function has comprehensively changed over time, from the practical tool of the embroider, through decorative pictures to a formulaic or occasionally more individual schoolroom exercise” (ibid.). In their earliest forms samplers were anonymous needlework for church’s decoration, although they also served the role of a memorandum, recording the effects achieved by a combination of colours, types of thread and various stitches. By the 16th century, there are a number of references to samplers in German, Italian, French and English literature, although the survival of the textile pieces themselves is exceptionally rare.² Not only that, but the surviving pattern books are also extremely rare: “one rare surviving pattern book is a leather-bound volume consisting in 113 engraved sheets of animals, birds, fish, flowers, fruits, nuts and composites designs by various hands including John Dunstall, Robert Gaywood, John Chantery, and William Vaughan” (Smith-Ivey 1997: 25). In the literature of the time, a sampler was an exemplar for a woman to work by following a model: “it was a source for her to refer to patterns and stitches, before the introduction and growing availability of printed designs” (Browne and Wearden 2014). Textile historians have started to document this type of production all over the world (Harbeson 1938; Gotstelow 1977; Bridgeman and Drury 1978; Ring 1993). Some museums of ethnography have started to collect samplers from various periods, especially samplers of historical interest, such as the earlier map samplers or those samplers with particular regional characteristics. As Melinda Watt (2000) states:

[...] samplers were produced as teaching tools to acquire the needlework skills for decorating clothing and household furnishings as well as household maintenance tasks such as marking and mending linens. A typical sampler consisted of rows of practice stitches and repeating designs; in the 18th and 19th centuries, the alphabet and numbers were also common motifs. These were made throughout Europe, with variations in style from country to country.

Before samplers became “a schoolgirl endeavor, they were made by professional embroiderers to show clients the variety and quality of their work as well as to provide a visual reference for technique” (Sumberg 2010: 68). For a long time, samplers were produced mainly as teaching tools for young girls and wives. Their main function was to help the young girls to acquire practical skills. However, as Deborah A. Deacon and Paula E. Calvin (2014: 55) point out, in the early 20th century, samplers came into fashion as decorations: “they were no longer used to display a woman’s needlework skills and were now used decoratively in the home”. However, decoration was not the only purpose of this practice. Another purpose was to provide “a tangible record of the female experience” (Ambroso 2007: 184). As mentioned above, the focus of this research has been on a peculiar type of needlework that used to be present in many kitchens and living rooms from the region in the early to mid 20th century. The peculiarity of this handmade sampler rests in the combination of text and image. These wall hangings can be regarded as veritable stitched epics of the region and as cultural *aides-mémoire*. In other words, not only have the literary epics (inspired by vibrant oral traditions in the Balkans and Central Europe that began in the 14th century or before) forged a sense of identity and cultural memory, but they have also given rise to the production of textiles and other material cultures.



Photo 1. The sampler (found in Romania, Fântânele village) reads: "All birds sing my pain". Photo by and courtesy of Maria-Alina Asavei.

My main aim is to shed light on a category of less documented samplers, and on the ways in which these folk forms of materiality and artistry are re-enacted and reinvested with new meanings and functions in contemporary urban culture and art. At the same time, this paper attempts to highlight the subversive potential of these 'raw' forms of artistry by introducing into the discussion women's comments on their condition as materialised in their needlework. Unfortunately, "[n]either owners nor dealers take a casual approach to these samplers, they carry a history of female education, genealogical connections and intimate relation to the people who taught, created and inherited them" (Orlofsky et al. 2010: 166).

As this paper argues, if we take a closer look, we notice the statements that these hand-crafted objects make, reminding us that a complete sense of politics, history and artistry remain hidden from us. Although many samplers from the region reproduced the messages taken from the printed patterns, some samplers reveal new slogans or messages were adapted to each producer's personal narrative. These samplers, as well as other embroideries, hand-crafted dolls, wall hangings or knitted items are not merely a commercialised form of craft, but a way for artisans to show where they fit into society; how they live and struggle; what they care about and how to collaborate with others before profit. At the theoretical level my paper argues that the practices of needlework discussed in this study are output-oriented and claim-making practices that bind people together and foster a certain community of practice. In other words, this needlework practice is not meant to merely decorate kitchens and living rooms but also to bind people together and to allow the exchange of concerns about daily life. The resurgence of hand-crafted (artisanal) objects in contemporary popular culture and their co-evolution with digital networks and technologies indicates that handmade

decorations are not only meant to ornament or beautify a space but can also sometimes be regarded as forms of materiality and tangibility which perform a cultural politics of identity.

A MONUMENT OF CLOTH: HANDMADE SAMPLERS FROM CENTRAL AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

At the beginning of the 20th century (and also later) many kitchens and living rooms from Central and South-Eastern Europe used to be decorated with a certain type of cross-stitched sampler (a written/embroidered wall hanging).³ The popularity of this vernacular sampler in the previous century is reflected both in some people's recollections and in the frequency of these items' appearance in scrapbooks and family photo albums. Family photographs of mid-20th century kitchens and living rooms reveal in the background the presence of these samplers on the walls. This peculiar type of handwork combined symbolic images borrowed from the oral epics of the region (and pattern books) and hand stitched messages. The final product is a mixture of oral and written popular culture that performs various functions within the household and even beyond it. Cross-stitched samplers have been made in many parts of Europe for hundreds of years. In many parts of Western Europe this activity was associated with a leisured, aristocratic lifestyle. In contrast to this leisured lifestyle "in all the Slavic countries and on up into Scandinavia, cross-stitch was the needlework of the masses" (Houck 1982: 1). During the fieldwork, I had the chance to notice, document and compare samplers from all over the Balkans (and to some extent from Central Europe). Although many people regard these pieces of handwork as things of the past or outmoded, kitschy feminine handwork, it seems that these objects' lasting impact on people's perceptions and memory cannot be neglected and deserves further investigation. These pieces of craft are still present in material forms in the flea markets (from Bucharest, Sofia, Budapest to Prague, Novi Sad and Belgrade), and in the memory of many (especially in the memory of the old generations). The generations that witnessed these objects directly, tend to remember at the same time the material culture that surrounded their childhood, while for the younger generations (including my own) these objects occasion a recollection of the 'imagined memories' of one's childhood. This hand-stitched sampler (made almost exclusively by women) usually tells a story, poses a riddle or recites an aphorism meant to protect or to aesthetically please the owners of the house and their visitors. Sometimes, it expresses a hidden desire or a piece of advice for the young wives. The messages inscribed onto fabric are cheerful and distressing; humorous and sad; silly and thoughtful. Some find them grotesque, kitschy or heartbreakingly touching because they are often associated with triviality, domesticity or popular culture. This is the reason why they are very seldom exhibited in contemporary art museums or art galleries. Yet, several recent exhibitions of ethnography and material culture from the region displayed these handmade artefacts as reminders of the history of matrimonial life and domestic work. For example, in 2012 the National Museum Satu Mare (Romania) hosted an exhibition titled *Traditional Stitch Work – Peretare* consisting of 39 pieces produced by the Hungarian artisan Bacsko Erzebet; Novi Sad Museum hosts a collection of written embroideries, and so on. An interesting exhibition dedicated to this

type of handy work took place in 2012 within the Ethnography and Folk Art Museum in Maramureş (Romania). An exhibition called *Embroidery as a Form of Craft and Communication in the Mining Zones from Maramureş* is the result of detailed anthropological research into the everyday life of miners' wives. It turned out that sewing and embroidery were an important part of their daily life with many of them producing these peculiar written embroideries to decorate their houses. The exhibition gathers not only *peretare* (stitch-worked wall hangings produced by miners' wives) but also various pieces of furniture that used to fill rural and urban kitchens back in the 1950s.



Photo 2. Detail from the exhibition Embroidery as a Form of Craft and Communication in the Mining Zones from Maramures, Romania. Photo by Lia Bradeanu, 2012.

It would be enough to look carefully at the innate passion for colour found in these decorative samplers to realise that John Ruskin was right when he claimed that “true art is of the people, not merely of the leisured classes, and so should form an essential feature of every peasant’s home” (see Jurkovic 1911: 12). The original geometrical patterns used in these wall hangings were worked without any frame, right on the linen. The material employed for embroideries consisted almost exclusively of coarse bleached linen thread. The dominant colours were white and red mingled with every imaginable colour. Most of the colours were obtained by immersing thread into a decoction made from saffron, raspberry, willow bark and wild pears. Old women spend their entire lives sitting up at night by candle light needle in hand to give life to these decorative

pieces and both the skill and the most popular patterns have been transmitted to their daughters and daughters-in-law. Due to their popularity, at a certain point back in the 1970s, these wall hangings started to be mass-produced and certain patterns (consisting of text and image) were commercialised through haberdashery stores. These patterns were later digitised and turned into professional, digital printed-patterns. Some women preferred to buy the printed linen, which already contained a message and an image, while others preferred to create their own samplers, avoiding the mass-produced printed designs. Textile historians do not agree if these demonstration pieces were conceived as instances of professional work intended as models for amateurs to follow in their housekeeping ritual, or if they had a purely commercial purpose. As an old artisan, Maria Onicescu from Romania, puts it: "I could choose to buy impersonal printed designs for my samplers but I always preferred a more personal declaration because every house has its own happy moments and its own celebrations to remember [...] as well as its hidden sadness." (Interviewed in May 2012)

At the beginning of the 20th century, mainly in the rural areas (but also to a lesser extent in the urban zones) of Central and South-Eastern Europe, women used to decorate their kitchens with these handmade wall hangings through which they attempted to express their feelings and daily concerns, and, sometimes, even their anger or distress. Many of these decorations repeated animalistic, vegetative or geometric patterns and cheerful messages from pattern books and patterns printed on fabric. However, while the designs for animalistic or vegetal patterns were usually replicated from pattern books or stitched over the printed pattern, the written message was often improved or adjusted to fit the personal narrative of the producer. The cross-stitched printed patterns included: the fruit/flower-basket sampler, the boy and girl or husband and wife sampler, the tea mat sampler, the bird pattern sampler, the red tulip and many more. However, some samplers reproduce the image of the printed pattern but add a personal narrative to it. For example, a sampler from Romania reproduces a bird pattern sampler but the hand-stitched message alludes to a sad state of affairs (the sampler reads: "All birds sing my pain"). Another sampler from Hungary reproduces a boy and girl pattern but reads, "My heart bleeds because nobody loves me".

The stitched messages combine patterned messages (for example "Good Morning", "The Kitchen is the heart of the House", "God bless this house") and personal narratives. The samplers I have documented read: "The person who is clean and tidy makes a palace out of a hut"; "Good morning my dear husband"; "It is easier to eat than to cook"; "I have not seen my husband drunk, I'm happy to have married him"; "My house is as clean as a sunny sky"; "Nothing compares to a good apple pie"; "I'm happy when my sour soup is tasty"; "Have a good day"; "Nobody knows how much I love you"; "A good day starts in the morning with a hot cup of milk"; "I'm a good wife and I take care of my kitchen"; "I wash my dishes as I wash my face"; "Be smiley and patient with your mother-in-law if you want to relive your family's stress". As well as these merry messages, there are also plenty of distressing ones: "My heart bleeds because nobody loves me"; "I married you to clean your house"; "My oh my, it wouldn't hurt if it got better". In some houses, the samplers expressed environmental concerns or subtle ironies directed at men's superior attitude. For example, a wall hanging from Romania says: "Husband dear, why are you meddling in the kitchen? Wait for supper in the living room!" and some Serbian decorative pieces assert, "She prefers the computer to the

stove, what is the housekeeper looking for there?"; "I gladly invest effort and knowledge when the acknowledgement of my effort is not lacking"; "I love my pipe when I have tobacco and the wife when she is baking a turkey".

There is a double function of the message in the samplers mentioned above: amusing and painful at the same time. They chronicle women's sad reality within the social confinement of their homes with official cheerfulness and happiness, while under this cheerful surface resides a certain poetics of resistance. A hand-made decoration can be both cheerful or sentimental, and critical and subversive. Its subversive power rests exactly in its cheerfulness and beauty. Anonymous (predominantly) women undertake these works of craft both for politics and pleasure. These decorative samplers are both cleverly beautiful and subversive/critical. They are cleverly beautiful because their beauty is not void of meaning or purpose. They are increasingly being used as a means of criticism "of suffocating female role models; of totalitarian political systems; of standardizing behavioral patterns, expectations and conventions" (Vogel 2011). In other words, their beauty is not restricted to a certain type of visual pleasure but is set to convey various truths such as: women's exclusion from 'proper' art, the de-valorisation of hand work, women's position in society and family, and so on. That is why this beauty is not simple, it is clever. Beauty from these wall hangings has many functions (critical, social, remedial, curative or dignifying). A decorative artefact can be beautiful and valuable not only because of its craftsmanship but also because of the idea it expresses. These decorative samplers are not necessarily good instances of quality in terms of craftsmanship: they are rather cheerful and raw than sublime and elaborate. But who says that only elaborated and sophisticated work can have a subversive dimension? In other words, the issue I want to address here is not to decide whether an activity associated with the 'work of craft' can be rendered as art or not. What I would like to underline is that despite institutional silence, there is a long-standing, home-made tradition of making critical art out of these works of craft. As art these politically aware pieces are exhibited at the biggest biennales and museums of contemporary art, as well as in peasant's kitchens in remote corners of the world.

We can look for political involvement in unexpected places, as in hand-made decoration from peasant's houses. Apart from the aesthetic pleasure it give viewers, every decoration has an inherent meaning "which stands for the representation of place/or the representation of the society occupying that place" (Moughtin et al. 1999: 14). Sometimes, certain patterns circulated beyond national borders with the people involved in this form of crafting exchange materials and pattern books occasioning a form of "cultural citizenship" (Hof 2006).

HAND STITCHES AND REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST ERA

The tremendous popularity of this particular type of hand work, which used to be part of the common household, has started to decrease in our century because the younger generations prefer to decorate their houses with various landscape posters and other mass produced decoration. The reasons for this change in home décor vary: from a certain change in people's taste to the hand work's devaluation (both at symbolic and economic level) at a certain point in time. The old hand stitched sampler, so popular

in the previous century, has been replaced with other vernacular decoration, which only a few people remember. There are of course exceptions in this respect, and certain shops that specialise in kitchen appliances and accessories still commercialise (or at least insert into their display windows) the vernacular sampler as a piece of vintage décor. Yet, the memory of this type of artefact and the activity associated with it is not completely lost even if many people have never seen these samplers. Several websites, forums, Facebook pages and other social media sites are keen to preserve the memory of these pieces of hand work and other on line platforms commercialise both old pieces and newly produced artefacts from the same genre. As one anonymous contributor notices on a Facebook page written in Romanian in 2010, “many of us have never seen these *peretare*. Some of us perhaps remember them from their grandparents’ houses from the countryside because 25–30 years ago they were very fashionable.” (Peretare) Others think of them nostalgically:

[...] yes, of course I will always remember the beautiful colours and the witty messages inscribed into cloth. I was raised with them on the wall in my grandparents’ Balkan kitchen. I have even learnt how to sew them. (Interview with A. M., 57-year-old woman, Bucharest, Romania, October 2013)

Others describe this culture of hand stitching as a paradise lost, as a 52-year-old woman I interviewed in Serbia points out:

Yes I know these samplers. I remember them so well with great melancholy. When I was a child they were my goodnight story about my mother’s life. My mother was a very busy woman and had no time to tell us stories, but she put them on the wall. (Interview with I. V., 52-year-old woman, Belgrade, February 2014)

She even showed me some pictures from the 1960s in which her house was filled with samplers of different dimensions and different messages. Some of them depicted old episodes from the South Slavic oral epics while other displayed more global fairy tales about Snow White or Little Red Riding Hood. Those inspired by folk epics display the female helper, the eternally loyal mates and the heroic mother. Interestingly, this feminine hand work encapsulates what Margaret Beissinger (1999: 69–70) calls “the female role in South Slavic oral epic” as opposed to nationalist revival literature from the late 19th century. Some samplers display visual epics in which women have wings and can fly. As cultural historians of the region notice, the 19th century written epics – the so-called “revival literature” that emphasises national as opposed to foreign oppression (especially Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian) – relied heavily on oral epic sources. Through the 19th century and at the begging of the 20th century prominent cultural figures from the Balkans (exclusively men) started to collect oral epics from the region and then to fix them in written forms. Their publication of oral epics was instrumental in the 19th century development of the national literatures of Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Croatia. Beissinger (1999: 81) claims that unlike the written epics of the 19th century (in which nationalistic poems that relied heavily on older oral epics virtually ignored women in their narratives), the old oral epics (which can be traced back to the 14th century) reflected the larger diversity of roles that women played in traditional societies and thus offered a “multifaceted portrayal of womanhood”. Many samplers from the Balkans and Central Europe display this multifaceted womanhood by repre-

senting women in various postures: not only as devoted wives and mothers but also as healers, otherworldly figures, spirited women and so on. If in the literary epics from the region, at the beginning of the 20th century, women's role is still marginal if not entirely dispensable (since they were not useful in the construction of the 'national self' reserved to men who formed the elite of the 19th century), the oral epics are resurfaced and reinvested with power in popular culture, including here the homemade decorations. Women remembered the vibrant oral tradition of the region and re-enacted it in their handwork as visual epics. At the same time, their practice encapsulates its own politics (in the sense of identity politics), which does not rely on the messages that served the political agenda of the male public in literary epics. In other words, these women gave birth to a culture of resistance by refusing to forget the rich tradition of the oral epics from the region in which womanhood was multifarious and omnipresent without being reduced to motherhood (women-mothers as receptacles for the birth of national heroes), lamenters (for dead national heroes) or victims (especially rape victims). However, this does not mean that some samplers from the region don't display the image of various national heroes or historical events, although this repertoire is not part of this paper. When the production of these samplers started to weaken and other types of mass-produced decoration replaced them, some people (including me) started to collect them.



Photo 3. Sampler commercialised in Budapest's flea market. Photo by and courtesy of Maria-Alina Asavei.

A female informant I interviewed in Budapest's flea market emphasised that her interest in collecting this type of needlework is triggered by a certain longing for the idea of

home or lost home. She confessed that she has not mastered the skill of sewing these “carpets” but she nevertheless wanted to buy some items to decorate her house because these pieces look like home to her. By the same token, another female informant (C. A., 64 years old) from Vaslui, Romania, points out that these samplers encapsulate her childhood happiness. She also tries to find traditional samplers in large flea markets because she wants to recycle these nostalgic items by turning them into contemporary decoration. In both cases the informants testify to their longing for something they consider lost (either longing for a lost home and era or longing for quality as opposed to today’s globalised mass production). This brings us closer to Svetlana Boym’s theorisation of nostalgia from *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Boym claims that the etymological origins of the word nostalgia are constituted by *nostos* (which means home in ancient Greek) and *algia* (longing for). This nostalgia for one’s past (for one’s home, childhood, community and so on) is, according to Boym, a form of reflective nostalgia. Unlike restorative nostalgia, (which is a longing for an absolute truth or ‘nation-home’, and usually characterises national memory), reflective nostalgia as a form of cultural and social memory is more flexible and more diverse and is composed of individual memory and personal narratives. These handmade samplers are “memorative signs” of a lost real or imaginary past. (Boym 2001) The longing for an artefact that was in front of us in the past can be understood as a contemplation of our identity “in the act of a reflective nostalgia” (Oicherman 2015: 113). At the same time, reflective nostalgia is not only a highly personalised feeling of longing for the past, because it often reflects collective memories shared by a certain generation. The same nostalgic feeling for a lost home or the life we have lived is also the impetus for contemporary art’s re-enactments of the vernacular, hand stitched samplers. In what follows, I will explore several instances of how these samplers are reinvested with new meanings and functions in the urban culture and contemporary art of the region.

FOLK ART FROM THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND URBAN POP CULTURE

After a search on Etsy, Breslo and other e-commerce companies that deal with “all things handmade, vintage, and supplies” (Etsy 2015), one will notice the presence of these ‘vintage’ samplers. They are also present in various bazaars from Budapest (Hungary) to Sofia (Bulgaria). Some vendors even sell freshly made samplers that replicate mid-20th century ones. It seems that there is still a demand for these items, especially because they are the material trace of one’s personal history. For instance C. M., a 63-year-old woman from Sofia, confessed that she buys these samplers because they remind her of her parents and aunts. Another 62-year-old woman said that she occasionally buys these items because they remind her of something she misses:

They remind me of how I felt before [...] when I was a child and my grandmother and other women from the village used to produce these things, especially during the long winter evenings [...] I remember my grandma’s hands working on these samplers and the smell of homemade yogurt. (Interview with V. S., Sofia, Bulgaria, March, 2014)

The vernacular sampler is not only present on e-commerce platforms but also in urban popular culture and contemporary art. Its memory is so present in the lives of some people that many contemporary artists re-enact it in contemporary artistic production designated for global appreciation, reception and consumption. As the following examples will illustrate, some contemporary artists use to recycle certain patterns from vernacular samplers in digital craft, feminist art and craftivism.⁴ In this way, this folk culture is no longer clustered but widely distributed, making sense for heterogeneous societies. However, it has to be noted that this cultural practice of stitching samplers never had the characteristics of a folk culture. Although its origins are unknown it cannot be claimed that this cultural practice has been traditionally practiced by small, homogeneous groups living in isolated rural areas because the presence of these samplers was not limited to rural, folk housing but widely dispersed in both rural and urban areas. Moreover, at a certain point these wall hangings started to be mass produced and certain patterns were commercialised in various craft shops. The popularity of these decorative items and their affordability turned them into a form of mass culture.

This culture of the masses is rehashed many times by contemporary art and culture and exhibited in mainstream cultural institutions (art galleries, museums and cultural centres). Contemporary artists recycle many patterns from vernacular handcrafted objects in an attempt to give new meanings to terms like hand embroidery, home labour, naïve painting. While these artistic appropriations, re-enactments and re-interpretations of vernacular craft are theorised and documented in contemporary art catalogues, booklets and in contemporary art's global media, very little has been written and very little research carried on vernacular craft and its subversive dimensions. The investigation of the subversive potential of vernacular handcrafted objects also has to be tackled because in the intellectual environment of contemporary art more or less anything can be art, although not everything can be craft.

This contemporary recasting of vernacular samplers occasions heated theoretical debates regarding politicised views of the distinctions between folk, popular, elite, and mass culture. An example of the contemporary appropriation of these artefacts can be seen in Ana Banić's work. The Romanian artist attempts to recapture in a hipster manner the old samplers by reinvigorating old patterns with contemporary slogans. Her stitched messages reflect the urban pop culture of our times with irony and wit. In one of her samplers (called *peretare* in Romanian), the artist stitches a young girl who performs some handmade embroidery while she meditates on various marriage possibilities. The sampler reads, "Which one should I choose?" and displays three Western boys and an aeroplane. Another sampler, entitled "Worth the Wait", displays a car park, a trendy man riding a motorcycle, and a mobile phone. The message is meant to be read by the contemporary younger generation: "I'm waiting for you in the parking lot to give you sweet kisses". A similar message is stitched on another sampler that reads, "Waiting for my lover with the mobile phone on my chest". The culture of TV-watching, which attracts millions of people in every country, is also tackled in Banić's samplers. For example, one of her samplers reads, "I'm waiting for you because I miss you holding me in your arms while watching the TV together", while the imagistic part consists of a naked young couple watching an erotic TV show or love story.⁵ The artist mocks the culture of TV watching by the means of a vernacular form of artistry (the hand-stitched sampler).

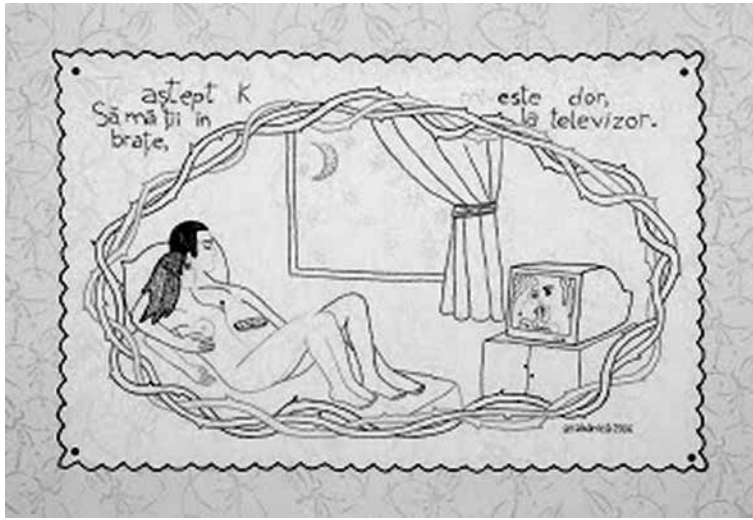


Photo 4. Ana Banică, *I'm waiting for you because I miss you holding me while watching the TV together*, 2006 (Ana Banica 2008).

In some cases, the message acquires ironic and critical tones when the sampler is replaced in new (urban) contexts, outside the familiarity of the kitchen. For example the contemporary Hungarian artist Krnács Ágota exhibited an enlarged photograph of this type of sampler in a public space (within the temporary exhibition titled *God Bless the Hungarians with Good Cheer and Prosperity*).⁶ The vernacular sampler is recast in the context of a temporary art exhibition displayed in the public space. The black irony is ubiquitous, including in the traditional sampler, which turns out to be more than a decorative piece. At the same time, this public display in a new context (the public space) of an item meant to decorate a private space is not without political consequences. The artistic re-enactment of visual memorabilia can be regarded as a search for lost time.

Its function is no longer merely decorative but has become an ironico-critical one. The embroidered inscription reads, "We have everything we need for baking and cooking, we don't need to go to the neighbours for anything". This is a subversive sentence for all those who are familiar with the art of good cheer and prosperity in recent Hungarian official politics. But why the artist preferred to reinvest an old, cheerful sampler with these ironic and even dark overtones is still a matter of critical deliberation. Yet, if we focus on the historical instances of decoration and use a theoretical background derived from critical theory, we can disentangle why and to what ends contemporary artists recast the vernacular decorative samplers in their artistic production. As David Brett (2005: 27) posits, hand-making textiles can be regarded as a civic-scale activity, something he explains as "the actual uses of decoration in social life."



Photo 5. Krnács Ágota, *Not Indeed*, 12th Exhibition of ARC, Budapest, Hungary, September 2012. Photo by and courtesy of Maria-Alina Asavei.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this paper was to shed light on a category of less documented samplers, and on the ways in which these vernacular forms of artistry are re-enacted and reinvested with new meanings and functions in contemporary urban culture. At the same time, as this paper attempted to demonstrate, certain samplers are not only recast in contemporary popular culture but also in contemporary art production. As the examples discussed above reveal, the handmade samplers and their personalised messages are not only based on mass-produced printed patterns and slogans, they also display their producers' personal narratives, concerns and expectations. Thus, these samplers were not only used to beautify and decorate a place but also to contest, heal or disclose certain aspects of women's daily life in Central and South-Eastern Europe. As well as small financial rewards, these works of craft fostered a sense of community, belonging, and a culture of mass resistance to a certain 'good taste' imposed from above by cultural hegemony. At the same time, this peculiar type of needlework occasions collective and individual forms of cultural memory and reflective nostalgia. As some of the women interviewed say, these pieces look like home, or lost home, to them. The feeling of nostalgia for a lost home or era is also the impetus for contemporary art's re-enactments of the traditional, folk samplers. The fact that these forms of vernacular handwork are re-

enacted and recast in contemporary art and popular culture (on digital platforms such as blogs, Facebook, websites, and art galleries and museum) proves that they are not merely things of the past. Although they are no longer produced in the region in their initial form and setting, their memory and the reflective nostalgia associated with their presence in Central-South-Eastern European kitchens and living rooms is materialised in new and hybrid cultural forms. They are recycled as nostalgic items in contemporary art and urban popular culture because those who still remember them associate their presence with the lives they have lived.

NOTES

1 Samplers were produced and disseminated all over Europe and in the Middle East and America.

2 One of the first pattern books was printed in Germany in 1523 by a textile printer Johann Schönsperger. Another popular pattern book of those times was printed by Johann Sibmacher. According to Carter Houck, since 1700, the cross-stitched sampler has been produced in many regions of northern Europe. The designs had their origins in the pattern book of Johan Sibmacher (for more details see Houck 1982).

3 I could not identify samplers from earlier periods. According to some of my informants, samplers from earlier periods are exceptionally rare.

4 In the last ten years, an art movement called craftivism emerged as a reaction to neo-liberal hegemony, women's rights repression and other social troubles. The term craftivism was coined in order to unite two separated spheres: crafts and activism. For the adepts of this movement, knitting or sewing in public space is an activist gesture meant to suggest that we have to produce our own goods and to try to avoid blindly buying consumer goods. There is a long list of contemporary craftivist artists and craftivist projects, for example: the Viral Knitting Project (an anti-war project based on the knitting pattern of knit/purl); the artist Cat Mazza (who created a huge blanket depicting Nike's trademark as a way of protesting against Nike's inhumane labour practices); the Anarchist Knitting Mob (knitters who decorate benches and trees with colourful patterns); and Marianne Jorgensen, who produced a pink 'tank blanket' and covered an M24 Chaffee combat tank with knitted and croqueted squares to protest against the Iraqi war. Political gestures like these are well known within the art world and have good coverage in art media.

5 Ana Banică's samplers can be seen on her blog (Ana Banica 2008).

6 This line is the introductory plea of the Hungarian National Anthem.

SOURCES

Author's field notes and audio recordings

Interview with C. A.

Interview with C. M.

Interview with I. V. in February 2014

Interview with Maria Onicescu in May 2012

Interview with V. S. in March 2014

Author's visual documentation (samplers, scrapbooks, photographs)

REFERENCES

- Alföldy, Sandra, ed. 2007. *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.
- Alföldy, Sandra. 2012. *Architecture and Craft in Postwar Canada*. McGill: Queen's Press University.
- Ambroso, Catherine. 2007. *Needlework through History. An Encyclopedia*. Connecticut, CT; London: Greenwood Press.
- Ana Banica. 2008. http://anabanica.blogspot.cz/2008/01/intr-o-vara-cu-mult-soare-am-cusut-la_28.html (accessed November 20, 2015).
- Becker, Howard. 1974. Photography and Sociology. – *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 11 (1): 1–19.
- Beissinger, Margaret. 1999. Epic, Gender and Nationalism. The Development of Nineteenth-Century Balkan Literature. – *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary Word. The Poetics of Community*, edited by Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus and Susanne Wofford. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 69–87.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brett, David. 2005. *Rethinking Decoration. Pleasure and Ideology in the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bridgeman, Harriet and Elizabeth Drury. 1978. *Needlework. An Illustrated History*. New York, NY: Paddington Press.
- Browne, Claire and Jennifer Wearden. 2014. *A History of Samplers*. Victoria & Albert Museum. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/a-history-of-samplers/> (accessed November 20, 2015).
- Deacon, Deborah A. and Paula E. Calvin. 2014. *War Imageries in Women's Textiles. An International Study of Weaving, Knitting, Sewing, Quilting, Rug Making and Other Fabric Arts*.
- Etsy. Shop directly from people around the world. <https://www.etsy.com> (accessed November 20, 2015).
- Gostelow, Marry. 1977. *The Complete International Book of Embroidery*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Harbeson, Georgiana. 1938. *American Needlework*. New York, NY: Bonanza Books.
- Hof, Karina. 2006. Something You Can Actually Pick up: Scrapbooking as a Form and Forum of Cultural Citizenship. – *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (3): 63–83.
- Houck, Carter. 1982. *101 Folk Art Designs for Counted Cross-Stitch and Other Needlecrafts*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.
- Jurkovic, Dusan. 1911. *Slovak Peasant Art and Melodies*. London: Constable Company Ltd.
- Moughtin, Cliff; Taner Oc and Steven Tiesdell, eds. 1999. *Urban Design. Ornament and Decoration*. Oxford: Architectural Press.
- Oicherman, Katya. 2015. Biding Autobiographies. A Jewishing Cloth – *The Handbook of Textile Culture*, edited by Janis Jefferies, Diana Wood Conroy and Hazel Clark. London; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Orlofsky, Patsy; Katherine Barker, Karen Clark, Rebecca Johnson-Dibb, Mary Kaldany and Barbara Lehrecke. 2010. Recording Change: 1978–2008. The Cleaning of a Needlework Sampler. – *Textile Conservation: Advances in Practice*, edited by Frances Lennard and Patricia Ewer. Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann, 163–171.
- Peretare. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Peretare/171469816218216> (accessed November 20, 2015).
- Ring, Betty. 1993. *Girlhood Embroidery. American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework 1650–1850*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rubenstein, James M. 2005. *The Cultural Landscape. An Introduction to Human Geography*. (8th edn.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

- Smith-Ivey, Kimberly. 1997. *In the Neatest Manner. The Making of the Virginia Sampler Tradition*. Austin, TX: Curious Works Press.
- Sumberg, Bobbie. 2010. *Textile. Collection of the International Museum of Folk Art*. Utah, UT: Gibbs Smith.
- Vogel, Sabine. 2011. Political Patterns-Changing Ornament. – *Nafas Art Magazine*, July. http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/political_patterns (accessed December 12, 2015).
- Watt, Melinda. 2000. *Textile Production in Europe. Embroidery, 1600–1800, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/txt_e/hd_txt_e.htm (accessed December 20, 2015).