

A Gift of Liberty

This Fall the Museum of American Folk Art inaugurated a new program to help provide for important acquisitions for the collection. The Jean Lipman Fellows, named after the renowned scholar and collector, is a special group of friends dedicated to enhancing the Museum's permanent collection through the annual purchase of a work of art. The initiative was launched on October 16, when the Jean Lipman Fellows voted to purchase an exciting early nineteenth-century needlework from Connecticut dealer Marguerite Riordan. This engaging needlework from the Abby Wright School in South Hadley, Massachusetts, not only amplifies a much-needed area of the Museum's textile collection, but also introduces a significant early motif: the figure of liberty.

Symbolic elements played a meaningful role in the emergence of an American consciousness

after the War for Independence. Codified images specifically identified with the young democracy were potent symbols of the new political system and important as emblems that captured the ideals of the nation. The design for the Great Seal, the architecture of the United States Capitol building, and other national features represented serious decisions made by the leading political figures of the day, who put much thought into their public effect. Americans were actively encouraged to bring these symbols into their hearts and homes through the decorative arts, as a tangible means of participating in one of their first shared national experiences: freedom.

Among the most powerful of these symbols were expressions of liberty that evolved slowly over time. Liberty, as embodied in the form of a woman, descended from earlier images associated first with the North Ameri-

can continent and later with the English colonies. The figure was originally identified as the American Indian Queen, and by the time it was introduced as a needlework project at the Abby Wright School at the turn of the nineteenth century, the allegorical figure had undergone a series of transformations, becoming synonymous with the United States and the spirit of rebellion from oppressive rule.

The needlework acquired by the Museum was made by Lusina Hudson of Oxford, Massachusetts, in 1808, while she was a student at the Abby Wright School. At least three similar examples are known; all four represent the figure as a young woman romantically garbed in classical dress and carrying a liberty pole topped by a pileus, a close-fitting cap that was worn in ancient Rome and symbolized liberty. In Lusina Hudson's needlework, the pole also flies a

flag with colorful stripes and applied spangles. The figure bears an overflowing cornucopia, the entire composition contained within an oval with an embroidered border of flowers and wheat. The needlework bears many of the hallmarks associated with this Massachusetts school: minute seed stitches worked around shrubbery and trees, a small village in the background, a painted sky, and painted figures. Although Abby Wright's letters indicate that no limner was employed at the school, it is possible that the watercolor areas were painted by a professional artist. An inscription on the back of another embroidery made at the school suggests that professional help was sometimes sought for the painted areas: "Lucy Griswold, aged fifteen/ This name to be put on/ Sir I wish you to paint the sky if you can."

Abby Wright was born in 1774 in Wethersfield, Connecticut. Shortly after her widowed mother remarried in 1779, the family moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts. As a young woman, Wright taught at various district schools for several summers. At the age of twenty-six, she enrolled in the Westfield Academy.



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LIBERTY NEEDLEWORK
Lusina Hudson (1787-?)
 South Hadley, Massachusetts
 1808

Velvet, spangles, metallic and silk threads,
 and watercolor on silk; replaced egломis  mat and frame

18 x 16", sight (21 x 23" framed)

Museum of American Folk Art purchase with funds from the Jean Lipman Fellows, 1996.

In 1803 she opened her own school on the site of what is now the Mount Holyoke Observatory. Wright's venture proved so successful that for the first few years she had trouble boarding all the students who desired to attend the school.

Abby Wright was in her late twenties when she was formally educated (a mature age for a student). Her own students were between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. Wright's letters and memoirs, now in the collection of the Mount Holyoke College Library, illuminate the purpose and philosophy of women's education in the early nineteenth century. Abby Wright was dedicated to instilling proper values in her students: her goal, she wrote, was to "lead them in the paths of rectitude and virtue, that they may establish an unblemished reputation and become ornaments to society." Today, this exquisite liberty needlework, produced as evidence of these attainments, continues to beautifully illuminate nineteenth-century dreams and values, and to resonate with the love of liberty we share with an earlier age. ★

—Stacy C. Hollander,
 Curator, Museum of American
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Note: The information about the Abby Wright School is based on Betty Ring's research published in *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework 1650-1850*, Vol. I (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). Information on Lusina Hudson's birthplace and date was researched by Dianne T. Goodnow.