



LIBERTY NEEDLEWORK

Lucina Hudson (1787–?)

South Hadley, Massachusetts; 1808

Watercolor and silk thread on silk with metallic thread and spangles; 18 × 16"

Museum purchase with funds from the Jean Lipman Fellows, 1996, 1996.9.1

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After the War of Independence, symbolic elements played a meaningful role in creating a unified American identity. Americans were actively encouraged to bring these symbols into their homes through the decorative arts, thereby reinforcing a sense of participation in the formation of the new American nation. By the time the allegorical figure of Liberty was introduced as a needlework project under the tutelage of Abby Wright (1774–1842) in South Hadley, Massachusetts, she had undergone a series of transformations. Once represented as an American Indian queen, Liberty now appeared in the guise of a charming young woman with ringlets, fashionably garbed *à la grecque* (in the Greek style), and carrying a liberty pole topped by a *pileus*, a close-fitting cap symbolizing liberty that was worn in ancient Rome. This needlework was made by Lucina Hudson of Oxford, Massachusetts, whose father had fought in the Revolutionary War.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Bank, Mirra. *Anonymous Was a Woman*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979.

Bradstreet Richter, Paula. *Painted with Thread: The Art of American Embroidery*. The Peabody Essex Museum Collection 136. Salem, Mass.: Peabody Essex Museum, 2004.

Harding, Deborah. *Stars and Stripes: Patriotic Motifs in American Folk Art*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2002.

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Ring, Betty. *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework, 1650–1850*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

FREEDOM'S HANDMAIDEN

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is going on in this picture?
- What can we say about how it was made?
- What can we say about the setting in which this scene takes place?
- What can we say about the figure?
- What symbols can you find?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Lady Liberty was a common motif in early American domestic decorative arts. Do you feel this image reflects patriotism? Why or why not?
- Though *Liberty Needlework* was created as a school exercise, like other works of folk art it reflects social and cultural norms of the larger society in which it was created. Referring to details in the image, describe what views on race, class, and gender you see in this American object from 1808.
- One can draw many parallels between American and ancient Greek political ideologies. How are these connections represented in this image?
- In early nineteenth-century America, Lady Liberty was a popular allegorical image of freedom and rebellion from colonial rule. Do you think this figure is an effective symbol? How does this depiction compare with others you have encountered, such as the Statue of Liberty?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- This work is laden with American symbols of prosperity: a cornucopia, a flourishing landscape, and a growing town in the background. In 1808 America, what recent events would have made these symbols particularly appropriate?
- What did “liberty” mean in America in 1808, when this work was created, and for whom was liberty intended? How have notions of liberty changed or been challenged since the creation of this needlework?
- Needlework pieces such as this one were often created by girls as part of their school curriculum. What educational opportunities were available to young women in 1808? How did these opportunities compare to those of young men?
- What symbols of liberty or freedom are common today? Where do we usually find these symbols? (Examples: bumper stickers, yellow ribbons to support troops in combat.)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students draw, paint, or collage successive images that they feel represent what the United States has stood for throughout its history. How do these images compare with

Liberty Needlework? How does each of the images reflect the time period in which it was produced?

- Have students explore connections between ancient Greek and American ideologies. How are ancient Greek values and symbols reflected in *Liberty Needlework*? How has the meaning of the symbols changed from an ancient Greek context to a present-day American one? Where can we find Greek symbolism or values throughout art history, popular culture, or language today?
- Ask students to design their own “liberty flag,” making it appropriate for a contemporary context and incorporating three distinct symbols of their choosing. After students have developed their designs, ask them to discuss how the images they have chosen reflect nationality, politics, current events, and gender.

