

**Art Review | 'White on White'
A Folk Art Show of Needlework in White**

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Published in the New York Times on April 14, 2006

"White on White (and a little gray): Female Responses to the Classical Ideal in American Decorative Arts" is at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Midtown, through Sept. 17. (212) 265-1040.

NEO-CLASSICISM was the first European art trend to jump the Atlantic Ocean and land on the North American continent with both feet. The English colonies provided an increasingly receptive perch, especially after the Revolution, when they emerged as a new nation in need of a cohesive style statement. What could be more appropriate than the posts, lintels, pediments and laurel leaves of ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy?

George Washington's Mount Vernon, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, New York City's Federal Hall and the United States Capitol Building attest to this well-timed synergy. So do the fine silver and furniture produced by designers and craftspeople in Boston, New York and Philadelphia to meet the needs of the country's rising merchant class.

But neo-Classicism trickled down to many smaller, more personal corners of American visual culture, one of which is the subject of "White on White (and a little gray)" at the American Folk Art Museum. This dazzling exhibition has been organized by Stacy C. Hollander, senior curator at the museum. Its main focus is nine magnificent whitework coverlets that are enlivened by raised patterns and motifs, most of them leaf- or flower-based. They are flanked by two other signs of neo-Classicism's influence: five examples of the black-and-white needlework known as print work, and 20 drawings made with white chalk and lampblack on paper prepared with marble dust. Thanks to the luminous grisailles of these smaller works — especially the marble dust drawings — the gray of the exhibition's title comes in a rather astounding range of shades.

This show traces the influence of neo-Classicism through the nonprofessional ranks of homemakers, embroiderers and amateur artists. Everything in it was made by women, whose place in art history is steadily increasing. This exhibition contributes to that expansion and suggests a possible answer to the question asked by the title of Linda Nochlin's famous 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" To wit: there have been; they just didn't work with paintbrushes or hammers and chisels.

In their time, the whitework coverlets were, in addition to being great art, the latest in lifestyle chic, the bedding equivalent of white muslin Empire dresses that the ladies of the period wore. Often made for dowry chests and handed down through the generations, whitework also offered evidence of the reigning misconception of neo-Classicism: that all the marble on those Greek temples had been snowy white, rather than painted in bright and — by neo-Classical standards — gaudy colors. And it was symptomatic of the

central hypocrisy of the new American democracy: slavery. White cotton fabric became plentiful only after Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin, which also increased the use of slave labor. (The exhibition's primary sponsor is Cotton Incorporated, a trade organization.)

The bedcovers are mounted like big square radiant monochrome paintings. Their mostly symmetrical motifs range from Trees of Life and baskets of flowers bordered by coiling grapevines to abstract patterns, like a double wedding-ring design known from pieced quilts. It must have been a challenge to make these motifs stand out in the white-on-white color scheme. The solution was to marshal embroidery techniques so robust that the designs were built up different ways, almost to the point of resembling carved relief, thick pile or even fur.

Stuff work involved defining motifs with tiny stitches and then filling the unstitched areas with batting so that they protruded. This technique is in full cry in a Tree of Life quilt from 1796. Its flower and pineapples have a marvelous repoussé-like dimensionality, but the main energy comes from a snaky border of tightly spaced leaves that might well have been inspired by a silversmith's handiwork. The grapes seem to have been relegated to little pyramidal stacks at the quilt's outer edges, although these could also be cannonballs. In the adjacent quilt, the stuff-work leaves are broken up, and dispersed across a field that combines delicate, netlike stitching and stuff-work dots that suggest a shower of marshmallows.

Also popular was the embroidery technique known as wicking, roving or candlewick work, which was done with thread as thick as heavy string, or candlewick. When looped, clipped and washed, wicking expanded into a pompom-like fuzziness that must be a precursor of the basic chenille bedspread. Several coverlets have isolated fuzz — flower heads especially. But the technique was taken to extremes by Susan Tibbets in 1847, probably in Connecticut. Her composition of large-scale leaves, blossoms and heart shapes, all deeply fuzzed, has the thickness of a white bearskin rug. The Tibbets effort — said to be influenced by the sturdier coverings called bed rugs — has a brashness, even a crudeness that feels contemporary. You could almost see a 1980's neo-Expressionist like Julian Schnabel going at it with fat brushloads of paint.

But whitework, like any art form, accommodated a full range of sensibilities and levels of skill. The simplest example here, made by Maria Clark in the 1830's, uses cotton roving of a single weight, outlining a series of flower basket motifs with thin, sinuous, slightly unsteady lines that provide a kind of relief to the more high-powered needlework that abounds.

Taken as a group, the whitework coverlets convey an almost chilling sense of social propriety. They are wonderful objects from a time you wouldn't necessarily want to live in. At the same time they give the modernist ideal of pictorial flatness a run for its money. They might almost be paintings concocted by a young Frank Stella or Robert Ryman, as Minimalist responses to the messily painted quilt of Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed."

While the coverlets evoke recent art, the five small print-work pieces borrow actively from the art of their own time. All made in the early 1800's, they reflect a short-lived fad for imitating the fine lines and stippling of engravings with black silk thread on white fabric. Appropriately, the embroideries are mourning pictures commemorating a loved one's death. Standard motifs indicate a church, a suitably mournful weeping willow and a grave, usually marked by a monument or urn of neo-Classical origin and usually a lone, female mourner. Using ultra-thin thread, these works skillfully restate in three dimensions the digs and scratches of the engraver's burins while resembling ink drawings. They also master something not usual to embroidery: shadows.

The 20 marble-dust drawings, which are dated 1845-65, amount to a small show within an already small show. They were sometimes called "Grecian paintings," partly because of the marble component, partly because they were sometimes inspired by Greek wall painting.

Yet, like the churchyard scenes of the print work embroidery, they remind us that neo-Classicism was rarely far from its supposed opposites, Romanticism and the Gothic Revival, especially in that uncontrollable thing called the public imagination. Marble-dust drawing was primarily an amateur activity. Images were inspired by popular love stories, poetry, illustrated books like Robert Wood's 1753 "Ruins of Palmyra" and the graves of national heroes like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton.

People sometimes copied the same image, as in the two versions of "Morning in Greece" — each good in its own way — a scene that is part Venice, part rural New York, with water-side temples like those in Thomas Cole's "Course of Empire." One of the best, if most outsiderish, is "Byron's Dream," a scene of crumbling columns of alternately Greek and Egyptian design, distant camels and possibly a sleeping tourist cast in the soft gray light of an offstage full moon.

I also recommend the twofer that is "Castle in the Air," with its cloud-borne vision of a High Gothic cathedral floating above a typical Hudson River landscape, sheep and all. Equally good are a detailed daytime view of New York's City Hall, made by Abigail Gardner in 1853 after a lithograph by James Merritt Ives (of Currier & Ives), and "Greek Revival Homestead," whose gleaming, columned house is surrounded by graceful trees and a white fence. Emily Dickinson might be inside, writing.

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