

Stitches In Time

Atwood House Exhibit Highlights Chatham Artist's Embroidery Work

story and photos by Debra Lawless

A special exhibit at the Atwood House Museum represents over a quarter of a century of one Chatham artist's stitching.

On display for the first time in "Works Most Artful & Ingenious" are over 30 stunning embroidered pieces by Ann Grey.

Grey began her needlework over 25 years ago, when her mother was also interested in the craft. For a time, they worked as a team.

"She was a real marathon stitcher," Grey recalled in a telephone interview last week. "I thought it would be helpful if I could paint some canvasses for her."

By canvas, Grey means the canvas mesh onto which the stitching is done. But Grey herself wanted to take things farther along. "I wanted to learn something more advanced," she says. For Grey, this never-ending learning process has kept her art fresh.

Grey sought the help of Barry Barnes, owner of Town-Ho Needleworks on Route 6A in Brewster. Barnes suggested that Grey create a traditional sampler. "That was the first time I realized there were all these stitches you could do," she recalls. "I had no idea about them before." Grey's 1986 sampler displays a variety of stitches around the edges with, in the center, a jug of flowers, the letters A through K and the numbers 1 through 0.

Grey's next inspiration was a 1973



things."

So after that first sampler, Grey turned to Flemish illuminated manuscripts for inspiration. This particular bent began during a trip to the J. Paul Getty Museum in California, where Grey examined a 15th century Book of Hours picturing Saint George and the Dragon. "I thought I'd try to

replicate it in needlework," she says. "That's what makes my work a lot different from what other people do." Sometimes she might consult a postcard of an artwork. "I'd put it on a footstool next to me," she says, and then start stitching. "I'm a real expert at taking threads out," she adds, laughing about her own false starts.

To prepare her canvas, Grey secures it to a wooden stretcher with staples or brass tacks to hold it rigid. The stretched canvas is then set in a frame that sits on the floor and can be adjusted to various positions. Grey works a couple of hours every afternoon in a very good light. Her three dogs keep her company.

"Some people play bridge, and I stitch," she says.

As well as mastering new stitches and techniques, Grey experiments with her materials. Does the word Tyvek mean anything to you? It's a plastic wrap that insulates houses against water and air. Grey has been known to drive up to a house under construction and ask the carpenters if she could have a sheet of Tyvek.

"They thought that I was a bit crazy,"

she says. Nevertheless, she has used Tyvek in many ways in her work: bonded velvet onto it, heated it over a gas flame on the stove or with a heat gun, and gilded it.

"I found it quite fascinating to work with it," she says.

While the visitor who knows next to nothing about needlework will be dazzled by Grey's framed work, the visitor who does know something about needlework will be fascinated by Grey's various techniques. She has experimented with gold work, which uses metal threads, and with needleweaving, a technique that adds a third dimension. And her latest passion is stumpwork, embroidery in relief that is built up with shapes and padding. Some of her pieces incorporate bits of metal, colored beads, and even a snail shell.

In time, "my real interest became in doing something totally original," Grey says. "There's a great pleasure in knowing it's your own unique work."



book called "Erica Wilson's Embroidery Book." When Wilson died in 2011, the New York Times dubbed her "the Julia Child of needlework" and credited her with reviving interest in the art of needlework through her books and show on public television.

Grey says Wilson's book helped her to understand that what she wanted to do was create her own canvasses.

"I was never interested in doing anyone else's work," Grey says. "I always wanted to come up with my own ideas. I like to try to experiment—do different sorts of

replicate it in needlework," she recalls.

The result is a stunning piece depicting a man and a woman on horseback crossing a bridge to enter a medieval town. Below the bridge is a boat with four passengers and an oarsman. The town's towers reach up into the clouds. This piece took Grey about six months to complete.

Although a couple of Grey's sketches on graph paper are on display, Grey does not paint anything on her canvas before she begins stitching.

"It goes kind of from my head onto the

