

Pricked: Extreme Embroidery, or the Sampler's Extraordinary Journey across Cultures

Adriana Gradea

American visual artist Andrea Dezső appropriated the genre of the Transylvanian sampler, modified it, and recontextualized it to allow for its visibility in the high-culture milieu of the North American art world. Dezső's samplers take age-old beliefs and superstitions from the domestic sphere of rural Eastern Europe into the public space and the digital techno-sphere. Through her transformation of the sampler genre, Dezső emphasizes the genre's hybridity; by complicating fonts, chromatic palettes, and messages of a woman's place in the private sphere, the artist is able to assert the woman's power to question the world's belief systems that govern her everyday actions. Dezső, a woman herself, offers the genre of the sampler a trajectory and a journey through geographical and social spaces.

A Traditional Genre

In the region of Transylvania, Romania, the embroidered sampler is a low-culture type of artifact used as a kitchen wall-art decoration by most ethnic groups (Romanian, Hungarian, German, Slovak, Serbian, etc.). But this art form can also be found elsewhere in Romania, and probably all over the world, for that matter, in various expressions. The traditional Transylvanian artifact uses red or blue color thread on a white background. Visually, the sampler combines image and text, and its message pertains mostly to family and domestic life. A contemporary example of the embroidery sampler is shown in Figure 1, below, featuring birds and flowers in red thread and the following text in Romanian cursive writing: "The Blessing of the Home: Where there's faith, there's love, where there's love, there's peace, where there's peace, there's blessing" (my translation).

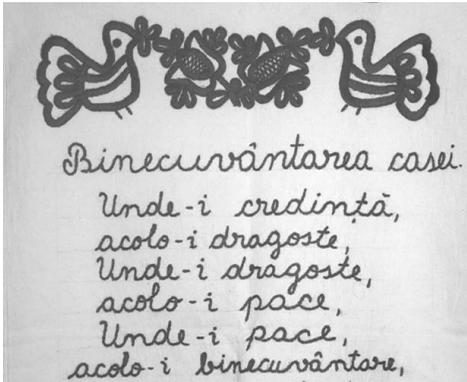


Figure 1. Contemporary Transylvanian sampler (in Romanian).¹

The traditional sampler genre addresses the small circle of family and friends that happen to visit the home, or what some call the “domestic sphere.” These samplers know their place as an age-old medium; their ambition is not to cross into high culture or to offer social critique, despite the texts’ attempts to appear as wise, philosophical catch-phrases. When the traditional Transylvanian sampler talks to these familiar visitors, the message it sends is one of agreement and positivity. Referring to the home and family, it reinforces established gender roles expected

by traditional society and contributes to the domestic harmony of the house in which the woman knows her expected role. The traditional genre’s audience is not one to be challenged with feminist words meant to disturb the male-female relationship. The sampler acts as a glue for these relationships while fulfilling its role of an unassuming aesthetic decoration for the home. In all these aspects, the sampler is designed to reinforce the societal bond between community members.

An Artist’s Remix

Andrea Dezső is a Transylvania-born American visual artist I knew from when we both attended the Visual Arts High School in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She went to study visual arts in Budapest, Hungary, after graduating from high school, and like me, followed her destiny to America in the late 1990s. After bumping into each other on the street in New York one fall evening in 1997, I learned that she had become an accomplished visual artist, working as an art professor in New York, lecturing in the U.S. and abroad, and holding art shows all over the world.

After our chance encounter, I checked out Dezső’s website² and found out about a collection of embroideries that she had created. The collection of 48 artifacts was exhibited in the “Pricked: Extreme Embroidery” art show at the New York Museum of Arts and Design in 2007-2008. Several of the pieces from the exhibit are featured on her website, including some animated embroidery work. Prestigious publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Village Voice*, and *The New York Times* included articles about the exhibition. For instance, *The New York Times* review article “Needling

More Than the Feminist Consciousness”³ written by Karen Rosenberg and published on December 28, 2007 in the Arts, says the following of Dezsó:

Some of the most interesting works reinvigorate the tradition of the sampler, a piece of embroidery that offers a religious or moral saying. . . . The Romanian artist Andrea Dezsó has embroidered 48 cotton squares with bits of Transylvanian folk wisdom passed down from her mother. One square suggests, “You can get hepatitis from a handshake,” while another claims, “Men will like me more if I pretend to be less smart.” Each warning or cautionary tale is accompanied by a small, equally humorous illustration.⁴

Dezsó is the only artist in the exhibition who referenced the traditional sampler genre I discussed above.

When I found these references on Dezsó’s website and the links to various articles commenting on her work, I was intrigued. I have to admit that, at the time, I knew little about the traditional sampler genre for several reasons: first, because the genre belongs to the countryside subculture, and I’d been born and raised in the city, and secondly, because European education still shows more interest in “high culture” than “low” or pop culture, even more so than in places such as the United States. In many parts of the world, including Romania, the city and the village differ radically in their cultures, the village being more traditional than the modernist city. The sampler genre was nowhere near my interests while I lived in Romania, but when I found Dezsó’s exquisite interpretations of them on her website, I realized that these artifacts were way more than needlework.

Having studied art myself, I’d always been aware of how artists often take existing genres and adapt them to new forms, looking for new ways to address issues of the day or cultural and philosophical questions. In a similar way, Dezsó takes the age-old sampler genre and transforms it according to her artistic vision. The final result, carrying her artistic fingerprint, is the perfect example of how a genre can be repurposed and resituated to speak to a different audience in new contexts.

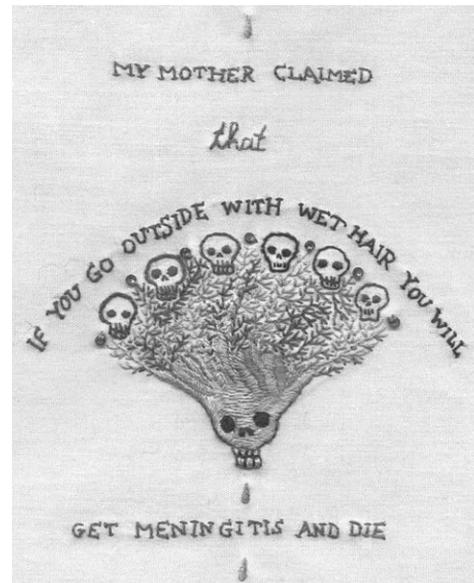


Figure 2. An embroidery about obsolete medical knowledge.⁵

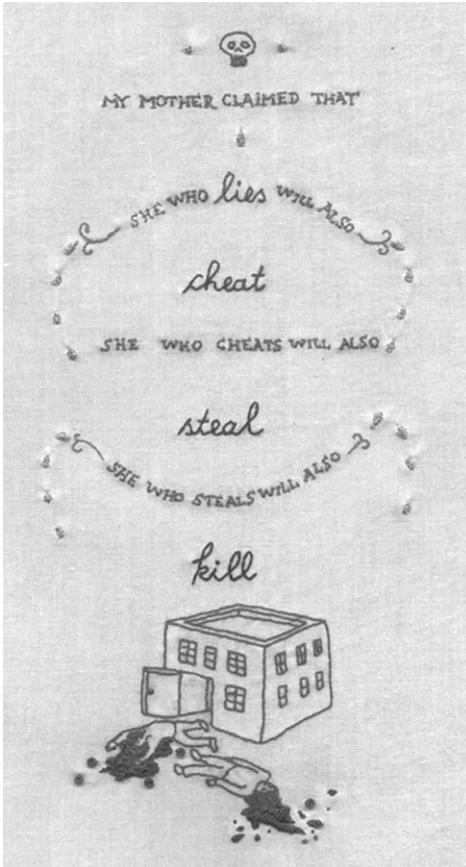


Figure 3. An embroidery about an obsolete vision on the justice system.⁶

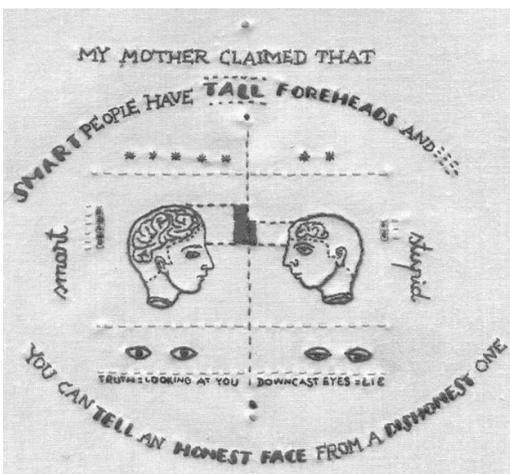


Figure 4. An embroidery about phrenology⁷, which is “the study of the conformation of the skull based on the belief that it is indicative of mental faculties and character [. . .] Though popular well into the 20th century, phrenology has been wholly discredited.”⁸

Dezső appropriates this genre of the sampler by modifying it, and her artistic interpretation of the sampler is meant to resituate it in a new context. Some of her changes at the level of the form consist in aesthetic changes, such as dropping the border, the monochromatic use of red or blue, and the exclusive use of cursive writing. She also adds more colors, capital letters, and a more militant, daring design, as can be seen in Figures 2, 3, and 4. In addition to aesthetic modifications, Dezső also changes the textual component in a more salient way. All of her embroideries have at the top the phrase “My mother claimed that,” followed by a specific image and text combination. By taking the aesthetic form and the semantic content of the original artifact to new realms of interpretation, she manages to resituate the artifact into the new context of the “high art” of New York, where the art exhibition took place. Moreover, since she has pictures of the artifacts on her personal website, this artwork exists in the digital sphere, therefore addressing a digital audience in addition to the museum-going crowd.

Of course, these messages disturbed me at first; was Dezső saying that our little culture in Transylvania was too traditional, weird, backward, outdated, superstitious, or stupid? Was this a way to criticize that particular culture, cultural artifact, or society? Were these artifacts engaging in any serious discussion at all, or was this supposed to be seen as a mere whimsical exercise? Was my friend saying that a mother could actually say all those things? By the way, was she talking about her actual mother? At this first encounter, when visiting Dezső’s website, I was so shocked that I thought

I would close down the browser and just forget about it. But, of course, a few days later, I couldn't help but take another look.

Looking closer and sifting through her artwork to better understand what exactly it was saying, I discovered that, at a more profound level, while funny and slightly absurd, these messages essentially read as a critique of humanity's organization of knowledge and belief systems. Societies, indeed humanity in general, organize knowledge and belief systems in a certain relative way that changes with time and from generation to generation. For example, medieval medical practices were considered obsolete by the 19th century in the same way that Victorian Puritanism is seen differently in the 21st century. Science, medicine, religion, philosophy, and society organization change with time, and, thus, so does our understanding and organization of knowledge. Our knowledge of the world changes with time in a vertical way: the mother belongs to an older generation, as do historical periods, and so knowledge changes vertically, with time. Likewise, knowledge also changes spatially, with one's movement around the world: what holds true today for a culture in one part of the world may be considered entirely wrong in another. This replicates exactly Dezsó's movement from the culture of Transylvania to that of the United States—a horizontal move through geographical space. In a different interpretation, the mother is the representative of the older generation, entrusted with the education of the young and with the transmittal of values about life and society to the next generation. The mother-daughter dialog is a conversation between two women, in which the mother teaches lessons, hence the collection's title: "Lessons from My Mother."

Reading again the textual messages on Dezsó's embroidered artifacts through the lens of belief and knowledge modification through time or geographical space, we can see how "Mother's" interpretations of the world are obsolete. For instance, "My Mother claimed that our destinies are written in our palms"⁹ reminds us that various cultures might have believed this literally at some point in history, or that certain subcultures may still believe it today. Also consider this example: "My Mother claimed that the house is cold in winter because of a lack of oxygen inside. Open the windows—the fresh oxygen will warm up the house fast."¹⁰ This saying may be interpreted as a way to explain the world when chemistry and physics are not fully understood by a particular subculture, or a worldview at a time in history when scientific discoveries are not advanced enough for humanity to understand them. Similarly, "My Mother claimed that she who lies will also cheat, she who cheats will also steal, she who steals will also kill"¹¹ speaks to the way humanity may have once organized the justice system, or to the way certain cultures do it today. And lastly, "My Mother claimed that if you go outside with wet hair you will get meningitis and die"¹² reads as a superstition or misinterpretation

of the world, or even as an obsolete view of medical issues. Most of these statements also function as a degree of separation from conventional wisdom.

As you can see from the examples above, Andrea Dezső does not discard the original genre's naive text in her recreation of the artifact. She starts with a seemingly powerless genre, which had small circulation, being restricted to one's circle of family and friends, but when she reorients it, the modified genre is even more powerful by virtue of its transformation. When she starts from original messages like, "I'm a good cook and a great homemaker" in order to arrive at "She who lies will also cheat, she who cheats will also steal, she who steals will also kill,"¹³ or, "My Mother claimed that men will like me more if I pretend to be less smart,"¹⁴ the subject matter has gained sophistication and strength. The new text talks about humanity and its values or about the way we understand justice or gender roles in society. In particular, the text critiques a patriarchal culture in which gender roles are prescribed. Generally, the textual message becomes deeper and more intricate, therefore speaking to a different audience.

Changes in Trajectory and Audience

To explore these changes in audience, let us consider the embroidery in Figure 5, which reads, "My Mother claimed that you don't know what kind of man you married until after you married him and by then it's too late."¹⁵ Not only is this text powerful because it talks about the condition of women living in a society in which it may be "too late" if she is in a bad marriage, but it is also strong because it contrasts cynicism and disillusionment with the idyllic graphic representation. The three-tier cake is set in predominantly

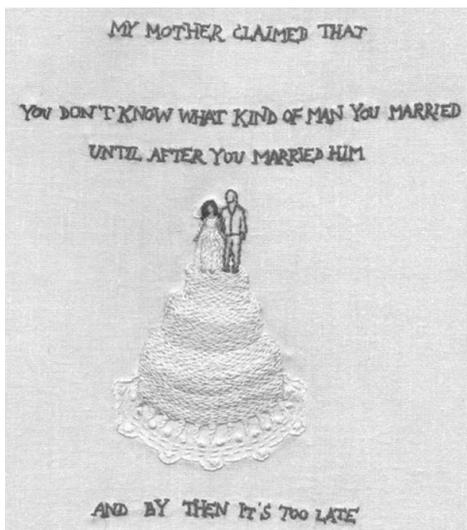


Figure 5. An embroidery about marriage.¹⁷

white and some pastel colors, denoting serenity, and if one were to ignore the text, the image by itself would contain no controversy or negative connotation. Its denotation (i.e., face-value meaning), therefore, is in opposition to its connotation (i.e., social, historical, and cultural meaning) of the hybridized text/image.¹⁶ Thus, the two extreme representations emphasize each other by means of a text divorced from the image it accompanies. When Dezső takes the wall-art decorative artifact and applies her own artistic fingerprint, she extracts it from its original context, brings it into New York's artistic milieu, and finds new audiences for it. The artifacts created in this style and

exhibited in the “Pricked: Extreme Embroidery” art show are reinvented folklore samplers whose messages have by now abandoned their domestic connotations and are ready to take on the world by challenging already established notions.

So, what happens to this new genre when it gets such exposure? The artist knows that the message has to be resituated from being simple, humble, and speaking to the womanly skills of the matriarch; addressing the American audience, particularly the high-art society of New York, the artistic message has to leave behind the simple, immediate parochial circle in order to expand and incorporate more abstract and cultural concepts. So first, it ceases to speak to just a small group of people made up of family and friends; the audience enlarges to incorporate the viewers of the exhibition in New York: young, aspiring, or established artists, students in various disciplines, and potentially people of all ages and professions who may take an interest in art and culture in general. Furthermore, when the audience changes, the trajectory of the genre changes. Once uprooted from its original context of a harmonious community where it found a well-defined place, the artifact changes in voice and attitude. Its message does not align along lines of harmony and agreement, but instead challenges and provokes its viewers, addressing deeper cultural values and speaking in a “new language.”

In March 2008, Dezső said in a National Public Radio interview¹⁸ that she sees her artistic sampler creations as “simply good stories.” I think the artwork she creates poses serious philosophical questions and challenges our understanding of the world. I also think that the transformation of the sampler genre interestingly replicates the artist’s journey from her original culture to that of the United States. In this repurposing of the original genre, the artist prepares it for different audiences, and most remarkably, sends it on a trajectory that leaves behind the domestic sphere. The newly remixed genre is ready to occupy a place in the public sphere. And it all started with the genre of a humble, unassuming cultural artifact that has undertaken an extraordinary journey in being transformed to address the world.

I would like to thank Andrea Dezső for providing me with high resolution files for all of the images of her embroideries in this article.

Endnotes

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Adriana Gradea was born in the region of Transylvania in Romania. Having lived, however, in Romania, Italy, and in American cities like New York, Seattle, and Philadelphia, she considers herself a citizen of the world, the Milky Way Galaxy, and well, the Universe.

