



c. 1800

Silk plain weave with silk floss and silk chenille embroidery in satin, encroaching satin, couching, stem, and cross stitches and bullion knots; gouache paint

Length x Width: 24 1/4 x 25 inches (61.6 x 63.5 cm) Framed (LxWxD): 31 x 32 1/2 x 2 inches (78.7 x 82.6 x 5.1 cm)

**SARAH MONTGOMERY THOMPSON**  
American

Gift of Mrs. Henry Nagle, 1894, 1894-274

### LET'S LOOK

What is happening in this picture?

What do you see in the foreground? Middle ground? Background?

Describe the colors the artist used. What mood or feeling do they create?

### LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Look for symbols that relate to the United States. Where have you seen them before? What do they represent?

What might the figures' poses convey? What could they be saying?

How do you think the maker, Sarah Montgomery Thompson, felt about the United States and George Washington? How do you know?

## EMBROIDERED PICTURE

George Washington (1732–1799) confidently strides up a grand staircase and stands in the center of this picture. With his left hand, he points toward an elegant white building on a distant hill. The house, known as Mount Vernon, is Washington's home in Virginia. His gesture conveys that he will no longer serve as the first president of the United States, and will instead return to his life as an ordinary citizen.

This impressively large embroidered picture—almost twenty-five inches on each side—celebrates Washington's successful eight-year presidency (1789–97) and honors his resignation, or decision not to seek a third term, in 1796. Important symbols surround him. The woman at the top of the stairs represents the United States. She sits on a temple of fame, indicated by the dome with a sculpture behind her. Incense burns on the altar of gratitude nearby, creating a large cloud of smoke that drifts into the sky above. The woman hands Washington a special scroll that congratulates him on his accomplishments and thanks him for his service. She also holds a liberty pole that is topped with a Phrygian cap, a symbol of freedom. All of these symbols are associated with ancient Greece and Rome, two societies that valued democracy, just like the United States.



The Great Seal of the United States of America was designed by William Barton and Charles Thomson and adopted by Congress in 1782. It was designed to symbolize the nation's ideals and is still used today. For example, you can find it on the back of a one-dollar bill. Find a similar design in the embroidered picture. What similarities and differences do you see?

In the foreground, a proud eagle grasps a patriotic shield decorated with a blue band and red and white stripes. A similar eagle and shield can be found on the Great Seal of the United States of America, adopted in 1782 and still in use today. An olive branch

(symbol of peace) and a bundle of arrows (symbol of war) appear to the right and left of the shield. Beside the eagle, a cornucopia, filled with fruits and vegetables, cascades down the steps. It represents the country's prosperity and plentiful resources. Finally, a scroll unfurls at the base of the shield, bearing the words "E Pluribus Unum," a Latin phrase that translates into "out of many, one." This saying refers to the many states that form our nation.

Sarah Montgomery Thompson, who lived in Philadelphia, made this embroidered picture by using brightly colored silk threads to stitch the images onto silk material. Although women were discouraged from pursuing oil painting during Thompson's lifetime, her remarkable embroidery demonstrates the significance of women's artistic contributions in other media. Little is known about Thompson or her family, but it is clear that she was a gifted needlewoman. It required exceptional skill to work with the delicate threads used to create intricate details such as the eagle's feathers. Thompson likely framed this ambitious work of art and proudly displayed it in her home.



Sampler  
1737

Linen plain weave with  
silk embroidery in cross, satin,  
queen's, tent, stem, and  
encroaching satin stitches  
15 1/2 x 11 3/8 inches (39.4 x 28.9 cm)

**ELIZABETH HUDSON**  
American

Gift (by exchange) of the  
Robert L. McNeil, Jr. Trusts,  
1966, 1966-149-1

Like many young women in Philadelphia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Thompson learned how to embroider as part of her formal education. Many parents encouraged their daughters to learn needlework because it was a useful skill and helped them to learn the "feminine virtue of neatness." To create this work, a needlework teacher probably drew or traced the picture onto the silk with ink and Thompson filled in the image with her embroidery stitches. Finely detailed areas, such as the faces, were then painted with gouache ("gwash"), either by Thompson, her teacher, or a professional artist.

Thompson completed this embroidery around 1800, the year after George Washington died. Many Americans regarded their first president as a national hero and were deeply saddened by his death. Across the country, people created images in his honor. These pictures celebrated his contributions to the country and important moments in his life. Thompson and her fellow Philadelphians felt a special connection to Washington because their city was the nation's capital during his presidency.

The sampler seen here, from 1737 by Elizabeth Hudson (American, 1721–1783), features another type of embroidery that young women in Philadelphia made in the late eighteenth century. Instead of one large picture, the design includes flowers, leaves, and writing, including the names of family members (bottom).

## ONE PICTURE, MANY ARTISTS

This image existed in two forms before Sarah Montgomery Thompson made her embroidered picture (above). John James Barralet, an Irish artist who immigrated to Philadelphia in 1795, drew the original picture. He may have been inspired by a public celebration that took place in 1797 in Philadelphia soon after Washington resigned as president. Another artist, Alexander Lawson, engraved Barralet's drawing so that it could be reproduced as an illustration in *The Philadelphia Magazine* in 1799.

Needlework teachers often drew or traced book and magazine illustrations onto silk for their students to embroider. They frequently changed or omitted details from the original image. In fact, several of the details in Lawson's magazine engraving are absent in Thompson's picture, including a helmet and sword on the steps, and an ox in the background near Mount Vernon. What would you change, add, or take away if you were to create your own version of this picture?

## MAKING WAY FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT

Why did George Washington decide not to pursue a third term as president in 1796? Most importantly, he wanted to establish the United States as a true democratic nation. In a democracy, power is not held by one person, but by the country's citizens who vote to elect leaders. Washington was a popular president and could have easily won another four-year term. However, he chose to give power back to the people, urged them to elect a new leader, and set



This print, *General Washington's Resignation*, appeared in a magazine in 1799 and provided the inspiration for Sarah Montgomery Thompson's embroidered picture. What is similar about the two pictures? What is different? Engraved by Alexander Lawson, after John James Barralet. Published by B. Davies, Philadelphia. Engraving and etching; second state, image 6 x 3 11/16 inches (15.2 x 9.35 cm). (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Bequest of Charles Allen Munn, 1924 [24.90.90]). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

an important precedent for the country. Over a century and a half later, in 1951, the two-term limit became law through the Twenty-Second Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Washington's resignation also demonstrated his strength of character. Americans admired their confident yet humble leader, and felt his decision showed that he cared more about the country's future than about his own power. Many images, including Sarah Montgomery Thompson's embroidered picture, celebrate his strength, honesty, and humility. George Washington's legacy endures today and continues to inspire people across the United States and the world.

### CONNECT AND COMPARE

Find other images of presidents in books, magazines, and online. What qualities are captured in their portraits? How are those characteristics conveyed?

There are many symbols in the *Embroidered Picture* that relate to the United States. What are other national symbols? Where have you seen them? What do they represent?

### RELATED ART ACTIVITY

Try your hand at stitching a picture. Draw a simple sketch onto a piece of burlap. Then thread a plastic needle with yarn, knot the end, and create small stitches to trace the lines of the designs drawn on the burlap.

*This embroidered picture is included in Pennsylvania Art: From Colony to Nation, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and generously supported by the Sherman Fairchild Foundation, Inc.*