Women in the sea of time

Domestic dated objects in seventeenth-century England

Sophie Cope

Abstract
This essay looks at domestic objects inscribed with dates in early modern England. It investigates how time was perceived and experienced by women through the inscription of these objects. Two case studies of dated objects provide the focus for discussion. The first looks at wares used in the everyday running of the household, and considers their meaning in relation to the cyclical rhythms of daily life. The second considers samplers inscribed with personal information including dates and ages, arguing that such objects demonstrate the significance of dates in marking and extending social connections between women. Overall, the essay aims to show the opportunity dated wares present to analyze the connection between women, time, and material culture.

Keywords: materiality; dates; cycles; duration; kitchenware; embroidery

A tin-glazed earthenware mug in the collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum poses an interesting puzzle about the position of women in time in seventeenth-century England (Figure 2.1).1 In many ways, it is an unremarkable piece of ceramic. Made in one of the London potteries that lined the river in Southwark, likely Montague Close, Pickleherring, or Rotherhithe, it holds about half a pint of liquid, and was likely to have been intended for strong beer. The decoration on the mug is not unusual, with grotesques painted in shades of blue, green, and brown, and an inscription around the rim records the name of the owner in fairly typical blue with white background. Yet it is precisely this inscription, reading ‘ANN CHAPMAN ANNO 1642’, which makes this object so interesting. Through the inscription a clear connection

---

1 Victoria and Albert Museum, London, mus. no. 1107-1853.
Figure 2.1  Tin-glazed earthenware mug, dated 1642, London. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
is made between a woman, Ann Chapman, and a point in time, the year 1642. Yet the rest of the decoration bears no temporal messages, and no documentary evidence is known to provide further explanation. Thus, faced with the uncertainty of the meaning of this connection between Ann and the year 1642, the catalogue entry for the mug concludes that ‘its primary role was probably a commemorative piece for display’.2

Yet objects like Ann Chapman’s mug can tell us a great deal more about women and time than simply linking a woman and a date. This chapter, an exploratory study, provides ideas on how we might approach the question of dated objects, and examines the ways these objects can be used to think about women’s experience of time in the home.3 Dated objects are here defined as wares in some way inscribed with a date, often just the year, which could be carved, molded, painted, or embroidered onto an object. Encompassing fairly ‘everyday’ items, they survive in large numbers from the late sixteenth century. Most were inscribed at the time of making, though some were inscribed again at later dates as they were reappropriated by new owners. The dates themselves are almost always dismissed as being merely commemorative, however, often of a marriage or anniversary. Thus the fascinating insights these objects give us into the relationship between people and time have yet to be examined fully. This chapter uses dated objects to investigate the relationship between women and time, both quotidian and eternal, suggesting lines of enquiry and theories that can be usefully applied elsewhere.

Some groups of objects are more obviously associated with women than others, and the focus here is on two categories of domestic dated objects that circulated within women’s networks: cooking wares associated with daily routine and the everyday running of the household, and embroideries. Although these are very different categories of domestic object, they raise interesting possibilities about the significance of dates in marking and extending social connections between women. The discussion reflects various approaches to the question of dated wares, and aims to show how

3 This chapter explores some of my initial thoughts and approaches to the question of dated wares. It draws on my M3C/AHRC-funded doctoral research at the University of Birmingham, which aims to redress the gap in our understanding of how material culture can be used to analyze ideas of time, focusing on dated objects in the domestic environment, and how we can use them to investigate perceptions of time and temporality in seventeenth-century England. This research initially began as part of a cataloguing project with a private collection, Crab Tree Farm, Chicago, based on their own dated objects from across the wider early modern period.
certain categories of dated object might operate in different ways depending on the user, audience, and context. Moreover, by considering the theory of temporal systems put forward by George Kubler in *The Shape of Time*, the chapter also considers the more conceptual position objects hold in time. From the rhythms of daily rituals to the agency involved in a woman physically marking her material world with references to time, dated objects provide us with a unique opportunity to investigate the connections between women, time, the domestic, and material culture.

### Daily domestic rituals and household objects

Women were intimately involved in the maintenance of the material life of the home. As Bernard Capp has argued, a woman of the middle and upper classes was expected ‘to manage the household, look after the children, and oversee her maids.’ He notes that although patriarchal codes structured early modern English society, women could negotiate the terms on which these codes operated within the home, giving them ‘some measure of autonomy and space, and a limited degree of authority.’ This is certainly evident in recent work by Catherine Richardson on domestic life in early modern England. Richardson uses household-advice literature alongside legal testimonies to problematize the tension between the subordinate role of women in the household as recommended in conduct books, and the reality of female agency in maintaining the order of material goods in the home. Through this examination Richardson shows that in this period men passed control of the material goods of the house, and its daily routines of production and consumption, to their wives. Yet Richardson makes clear this was not a straightforward transferral of power. The male head of household maintained overall control over domestic space, but through the routines of daily use and the required skills to use and maintain certain

---

4 Kubler, *Shape of Time*. See also Kubler, ‘Shape of Time, Reconsidered’.
5 Some categories of dated objects are more problematic on this count. For example, the owners of objects initially received as courtship gifts were arguably passive recipients rather than actively recording their own position in time, and it is possible Ann Chapman’s mug was given in this context. See Richardson, ‘A very fit hat’, and O’Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*, on courtship gifts.
7 Ibid., p. 25.
8 Richardson, *Domestic Life*, pp. 27–28. Also see the forthcoming volume by Hamling and Richardson, *Day at Home*.
9 Richardson, *Domestic Life*, p. 46.
household goods, ‘different kinds of agency, operating in different physical spaces at different times of the day’ could coexist and occasionally compete.\textsuperscript{10}

The defining role that women held in household maintenance, production, and consumption was a major factor in shaping their experience of time, through the repetitive temporal rhythms of the day. This is clearly the case in the mid-seventeenth-century broadside ballad, ‘A Woman’s Work is Never Done’, in which the cyclical daily rhythms of domestic chores provide the focus.\textsuperscript{11} The female protagonist of the ballad relates to the narrator the chores of her daily life. Her tasks begin by attending to the fire, ‘[...] when that I rise early in the morn, / Before that I my head with dressing adorn, / I sweep and clean the house as need doth require, / Or, if that it be cold, I make a fire.’ The timing of tasks related to heat and light, such as lighting the fire, is particularly interesting—delineating the start and end of day as they do, occurring at sunrise and sunset, these activities and the objects used to facilitate them provide the boundaries of the temporal cycle of a woman’s day. Meanwhile the ballad ends by reinforcing the circular nature of the temporal experience of daily life with the final lines, ‘And thus to end my Song as I begun, / You know a Woman’s work is never done.’

However, it is not just the natural cycles of the day that shape this temporality. Following these tasks at first rise, the ballad continues to narrate the woman’s daily life. Her day progresses as she attends to her husband’s and children’s needs, but she is notably sensitive to the markers of time passing around her: ‘But when th’leven a clock bell it doth chime, / Then I know tis near upon dinner time’, and likewise, ‘at night when the clock strikes nine / My Husband he will say, tis supper time.’ The woman in this ballad is clearly attentive to the passage of time—she listens out for the bells and the clock to remind her to move onto the next task, with this awareness of artificial time shaping her experience of the day just as the natural rising and setting of the sun had as well. The clock could well have been in the kitchen itself. Sara Pennell notes that the clocks found in the kitchens of houses in Westmorland inventories between 1650 and 1750 were often the only timepieces owned, and that it was particularly significant that they would be kept in the room that was ‘the heart of so much quotidian activity’.\textsuperscript{12} Pennell argues that this discovery complicates the association

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{11} Helen Smith discusses this ballad in her chapter on gendered labor in \textit{Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Culture}, pp. 177–92, in which she states that although the earliest surviving version of the ballad is dated 1660, the earliest reference to it dates to 1 June 1629 when it was part of the estate of ‘the widow Trundle’ who sold ballads (p. 190).
\textsuperscript{12} Pennell, ‘Pots and Pans’, p. 204.
of timepieces with the gendered control of timekeeping—by being placed in the kitchen, clocks were arguably more likely to be consulted ‘by female servants, their mistresses and housewives in general’ on a daily basis than by male members of the household.13 Yet it was not just clocks that could mark time. What of the other objects that would be encountered throughout the day in the completion of these household tasks? What can they tell us about a woman’s perception of, and relationship with, time? Much of the ballad is devoted to tasks involving the preparation of meals—indeed, these are the occasions in which the woman is guided by clocks and bells to remind her of the time—and significantly, many dated domestic goods relate to the preparation and cooking of food. Several dated cast metal cooking pots survive, for example. One of the earliest extant dated domestic objects is a cast bronze skillet which alongside a molded fleur-de-lis is inscribed with the date 1575 below the handle, while another bronze skillet has the date 1592.14 Several dated spit jacks also survive, intended to be fixed above the fireplace and used to turn the spit on which meat would be roasted. Two particularly interesting examples from the second half of the seventeenth century are dated 1670 and 1688. Both include a decorative brass plate inscribed with the dates, and the initials ‘TD’, and which are, rather suggestively, decorated with Atlas supporting the globe (Figure 2.2).15 Other dated objects involved in the preparation of food include spoons, skimmers, and pastry jiggers, among others.

Rather than just having a date, or a date and initials, some objects used for cooking were also inscribed with moral or pious messages alongside the year. Several identical brass skillets survive with the year 1684 and the moral instruction ‘PITTY THE PORE’.16 These skillets were made in the Fathers foundry of Montacute, Somerset, and were part of a graduated set of five motto skillets. Each design had a moral or loyal inscription, but the ‘PITTY THE PORE’ skillets are the only ones to also include a date. The fact that the others were undated suggests that the inclusion of 1684 on just one design was a conscious decision with particular meaning attached to it. It was not part of the overall decorative design of the group, nor was it there simply to mark when the skillet was made. Moreover, the production of several copies of this skillet design for different customers with the same date suggests that

13 Ibid.
15 Victoria and Albert Museum, London, mus. nos. M.957-1926 and 715-1892. These jacks were likely made in London, although one came to the museum from a house in Norfolk.
16 These are catalogued in detail in Butler and Green, English Bronze Cooking Vessels, p. 59.
Figure 2.2  Brass and iron spit jack, dated 1670, England. Victoria and Albert Museum, London
we need to think more analytically about the meanings of, and responses to, the dates on these objects, rather than seeing them as merely commemorative.

There are several reasons why these skillets may have been dated. In their catalogue of English bronze cooking vessels, Roderick Butler and Christopher Green suggest that the year may have referred to the Great Frost of 1683/84, encouraging the user to think of the poor in that testing time.¹⁷ This is certainly possible, but it seems unlikely—the owner would have most likely wanted to show off this new piece of kitchenware, and in years to come this morbid reflection on the Great Frost would have somewhat dampened the prestige of the object.¹⁸ Moreover, putting the skillets into context with other dated domestic wares with moral inscriptions suggests that the inscription of the year was not necessarily a direct reference to specific events or circumstances. A red earthenware pipkin, for example, a cooking pot used for cooking directly over the fire, survives with the somewhat paradoxical inscription ‘FAST AND PRAY 1650’.¹⁹ Such temporal markers perhaps served more abstract purposes, acting as reminders of the passing of time, and when combined with such spiritual or moral prompts served as poignant reminders of the user’s own mortality.²⁰

Indeed, we could interpret the ballad in this light, with its frequent reminders of natural and clock time that a woman might encounter seemingly having pious connotations. While the references to time in the ballad are there to reinforce the constant succession of domestic tasks that the woman admits burdened her, they also give a heightened awareness of her own temporality and serve to emphasize that she is spending her time productively.

The moral or spiritual connotations of the passage of time, seen in inscriptions like ‘fast and pray’ and ‘pity the poor’, can also be found in contemporary literature. Protestant writers warned of the dangers of misusing time, a sentiment echoed in autobiographical writings by pious women in this period. In her ‘mother’s legacy’ of 1616, Dorothy Leigh warns how, alongside covetousness, idleness was to be avoided as one of the greatest sins, since ‘many are so carried away with idlenesse and pastimes that they can find no time to pray’. Significantly, she advises that ‘we need to be very circumspect, and watchfull over our selves, les wee bee snared with this

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ I am grateful to Tara Hamling for this suggestion.
²⁰ While she does not consider the role of the date, Sara Pennell has noted that moral inscriptions on cooking utensils acted as ‘reminders of and prompts to the necessity of domestic virtue’. ‘Mundane Materiality’, p. 182. See also Hamling, ‘Old Robert’s Girdle’, on the use of visual and material props in domestic devotion.
part of the devils policy'. Time therefore ought to be observed, and one’s own use of time vigorously monitored. 21

In a similar fashion, Lady Margaret Hoby used her diary, written between 1599 and 1605, to record every activity of her day in sequence. These entries were usually with a direct reference to time, either an exact clock time or one relating to other daily rhythms such as dinner time or bed time, in a bid to show that no time was ever wasted and that every moment of her day was spent either in productive or pious activity. For example, Hoby’s entry for Tuesday 28 August 1599 begins, ‘In the morning, after priuat praier, I Reed of the bible, and then wrought tell 8: a clock, and then I eate my breakfast: after which done, I walked to the feeldes tell: 10 a clock, then I praid, and not long after, I went to dinner’. 22 The language Hoby uses demonstrates how comprehensive and almost list-like her entries are. The constant use of ‘then’, and phrases such as ‘after which’ and ‘not long after’ show how she is attempting to account for every moment of her day without a gap. Taken in this context, the constant reminders of time in a woman’s environment, whether references to a year now passed on an object, or the tolling of bells, would have acted as a reminder of the passing of her own time, and prompted self-reflection over whether this had been spent productively.

Yet references to time need not have been negative or oppressive. In those cases when dates on an object marked moments in a woman’s own life—whether that be the commemoration of an anniversary, or simply the moment the object was acquired—such objects acted as a kind of material memory which would outlive the temporal occasion of the event itself. In this way they acted as physical evidence of a woman’s existence at that moment in time, and one that would remain as witness to her, even after her death, when such items could be passed on to future generations of family and friends. The fact that cooking pots were some of the few types of objects which could remain the property of a woman supports the idea that dated examples would have been particularly meaningful to her. As Pennell states, cooking vessels, utensils, and hearth goods were frequently incorporated into the ‘paraphernalia’ legally allowed as limited property to married women. 23 These objects could have high emotional as well as monetary value to women, as highlighted by their appearance in wills as bequests to other women. Pennell,

21 Leigh, ‘Mother’s Blessing’, pp. 55–56. For more on the genre of mother’s legacies see Heller, Mother’s Legacy. Heller defines mother’s legacies as a distinct branch of the advice tradition in early modern England that took the form of a dying mother’s pious counsel to her children.

22 Hoby, Diary, p. 11.

for example, quotes the will of Sarah Boult who left her married daughter, Sarah Clements, ‘my largest and smallest brass kettles [...] my largest brass skellett [...] my iron jack [...] my bell metal pott’ amongst other domestic wares. These dates then, inscribed onto objects that were not just used by women, but which could also have been owned, given away, and bequeathed by them, communicated a woman’s life to posterity, marking her position in time on an object which would be used, circulated, and above all, endure past that one moment. These dated objects therefore uniquely embodied multiple ideas of time: the cyclical time of daily rhythms and chores and the linear time of dates and years, from the everyday to the eternal.

Sometimes more overt links were made between a woman and her place in time through declarations of possession inscribed onto an object. This can be seen on two early seventeenth-century chests which clearly state who their owners were, and locate them in time. The first is an oak chest inscribed ‘THIS IS ESTHER HOBSONNE CHIST 1637’, alongside vigorous floral decoration. The second is a boarded elm chest inscribed, ‘ELESABETH LOVELL 1640’, which is also carved with various designs of strapwork and foliage (Figure 2.3). The lettering on both chests runs across the top of the

---

24 Ibid.
26 mus. no. 527-1892.
front panel, although the inscription on Elizabeth Lovell’s chest is much larger, taking up the entire length of the panel, while Esther Hobson’s is confined to a small section on either side of the key hole. Yet both were large, bulky, and costly items, and as such these chests would have likely stood on permanent display, providing a much bolder reminder of the women who owned them than the kitchenware that could be moved in or out of sight.

However, as with many dated objects, even when their owners’ names are known, we know frustratingly little about who these women were, and little documentary evidence survives in relation to the objects themselves. The style of Lovell’s chest suggests it was made in Shrewsbury, and so Elizabeth possibly came from that area or nearby. Slightly more can be said for Esther Hobson. Before the Victoria and Albert Museum acquired the chest, it had been housed in an inn at Brigg, Lincolnshire, having been donated there by a member of the Hobson family, who had been tenant farmers on Lord Yarborough’s estate there for many generations. While no Esther Hobson is recorded in the parish registers at Brigg during the seventeenth century, she may of course not have had the surname Hobson at birth, but acquired it in marriage. Many other Hobsons however are recorded in Brigg, while there are several others, including an Esther Hobson, recorded to be living in Kirkburton, West Yorkshire at this time. Perhaps, then, Esther came from another branch of the Hobson family and the chest was at some point passed on to the Lincolnshire Hobsons, but more research remains to be done on the connection between these two families.

While we might not be able to pinpoint exactly who these women were, we can learn a lot about these objects, and why they might have been inscribed with names and dates, through a consideration of the wider cultural context of chests. Chests were one of the oldest forms of furniture and were multifunctional, providing storage as well as extra seating and surfaces. While most middling households would have had at least one chest, richer households may have had as many as a dozen. Indeed, their popularity and near-fundamental role as household furnishing is demonstrated in the study of production and consumption in early modern English households by Overton et al., who have shown that in Kent over 90 percent of inventories mention chests throughout the period 1600–1750. The authors also note a lower figure of 50 percent for Cornwall, although this figure is still significant in light of the markedly lower percentage of other goods found in Cornish inventories.
larly identified with female members of the household in different ways. On the one hand, they were often used to store linens and other household goods, and thus were associated with the female-dominated maintenance of the household discussed above. In 1630, for example, the widow Martha Barton bequeathed her daughters, ‘my chest of linen to be equally divided between them.’ Chests also had a more symbolic function though. They were associated with a woman entering marriage, as it was customary for her to bring a chest to her new home, or for her father or husband to commission one to commemorate the occasion, and they might be used to hold her dowry. Marriage was arguably the most important rite of passage a woman would experience, transforming her social and sexual standing, leading to new domestic roles as wife, mother, and housekeeper, and such objects would come to represent this transformation.

If these chests were made to commemorate a marriage, it would go some way towards explaining the inscriptions. As no male name appears alongside them, we can see these objects as intensely personal and proud markers of the occasion when the women have reached this pivotal life cycle event. They also suggest a great sense of pride in being able to possess such costly and elaborately decorated objects. Catherine Richardson has described the accumulated goods a girl of middling wealth would acquire throughout her childhood at various extraordinary occasions. Gathered in anticipation of a time when they would form the basis of a new household, they would later become part of her marriage negotiations, and would be ‘representative of her family’s prosperity’. As the place where such collections would have been stored, the chest would have come to represent all that a woman herself owned, her connections with her own family and kin, and her transition into a new household and a new role. Yet by marking these chests with a name and a date, these women are also firmly declaring their own unique existence and their own position in time, and memorializing it for the future.

**Objects in time**

We can gain a deeper understanding of how dated objects could be used to communicate a person’s existence in time to posterity by thinking more

---

32 Hamling, ‘An Arelome To This Hous’, p. 68.
34 Richardson, *Domestic Life*, pp. 77–78.
conceptually about the existence of different temporal systems. In particular, the theory of the art historian George Kubler, put forward in his 1961 work *The Shape of Time*, encourages us to consider the temporality of objects.\(^{35}\) Kubler argues that objects occupy time differently than do people, with objects having much longer ‘durations’ than humans. For Kubler, duration is defined as the ‘span’ of a thing in time, with different kinds of things occupying different spans. He wrote, ‘When we define duration by span, the lives of men and the lives of other creatures obey different durations, and the durations of artefacts differ from those of coral reefs or chalk cliffs’.\(^{36}\) Kubler was particularly influenced by the thirteenth-century work of St. Thomas Aquinas, who had speculated on the nature of the time of angels, and the notion of the *aevum*, or the duration of the human soul. This duration was somewhere between time and eternity, having a beginning but no end.\(^{37}\) Kubler saw the concept of the *aevum* as a useful way of thinking about the duration of ‘many kinds’ of artifact, ‘so indestructible that their survival may, for all we know, ultimately approach infinity’.\(^{38}\)

Kubler wrote in the 1960s, and the advent of material culture studies in the 1980s, which drew upon earlier developments in archaeology and anthropology, saw further exploration of how we might critically engage with objects.\(^{39}\) Most notable is the volume edited by Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, in which Igor Kopytoff in particular emphasized the

\(^{35}\) Kubler, *Shape of Time*. Although an art historian by training, in this text Kubler dealt as much with material culture as with works of art. He suggested that ‘the idea of art’ be expanded ‘to embrace the whole range of man-made things’ and not just ‘the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world’, taking what he calls ‘the desirableness of things’ as his point of departure. Indeed, following Kubler’s death in 1996, Gordon R. Willey argued that *The Shape of Time* remains fundamental for the inclusion of material culture in art history (Willey, ‘George Alexander Kubler (26 July 1912–3 October 1996)’).

\(^{36}\) Kubler, *Shape of Time*, p. 84.


\(^{38}\) Kubler, *Shape of Time*, p. 84. Kubler’s thinking here is problematic when applied across material culture as a whole. Since he includes few examples, it is unclear which kinds of objects he sees as having infinite durations. Indeed, while Kubler’s work is useful in interpreting the objects considered in this chapter, notably inheritance items, it becomes problematic when applied to other, more ephemeral, categories of object.

\(^{39}\) Following the rise of material culture studies, other disciplines also began to develop their own approaches to the question of objects, including literary studies and art history (for example, the work of Jones and Stallybrass, Michael Baxandall, and Nigel Llewellyn). Yet in recent years the division of material culture studies by disciplinary background has become less marked as the field moves towards a multidisciplinary engagement with objects (see for example the recent volume by Richardson *et al.*, *Routledge Handbook of Material Culture*). This has not only meant that the breadth of things considered within the study of material culture has widened significantly, but also that there has been a recognition that, as a result of this range, no single,
biography of an object as a model through which to analyze the meanings of things. Such an approach sought to understand all the stages in the 'life' of what Appadurai calls 'things-in-motion', from production, through to trade, use, and perhaps even destruction. This model rejects the idea that objects are static or passive artifacts, and has proved influential to future scholars, notably Jonathan Gil Harris, who has advocated a 'diachronic' approach to material culture which involves tracing the trajectory of a thing through time and space. According to Harris, the culmination of various moments in an object's 'life' invests it with significance. Harris's approach thus acknowledges the diverse temporality of an object, since its present value is seen to derive diachronically from its relations to past and future contexts. 40

Yet while scholars like Appadurai and others have been interested in tracking the lives and trajectories of things through time, Kubler's theory is particularly distinctive in suggesting that artifacts could even transcend time. If early modern people viewed objects in this way, then the things they made and adapted, through the addition of dates and other inscriptions, could be seen to reach into eternity, and can be interpreted as personal markers on the much wider sea of time. The language used by testators in wills certainly suggests that objects may have been seen in this way, with property and domestic fixtures, especially furniture, frequently being bequeathed to a house 'forever'. 41 The dates therefore attest to a specific, brief interaction by a person with an object whose duration will ideally endure past the human who made it or owned it. The date, accompanied by personal details like the owner’s names and other short inscriptions like ‘pity the poor’ or ‘fast and pray’, becomes a message to posterity, and a way for a woman to stamp her own presence on something which would be circulated, inherited, and which would last beyond her. 42 Indeed, in his critique of Kubler, Jan Bialostocki suggested that we should take into account not only the visual form of things, but also ‘their utility, function

40 Harris, ‘Shakespeare's Hair’, pp. 484–85
41 Hamling, ‘An Arelome To This Hous’.
42 Ceramics is an interesting category of dated object as ‘semi-durables’, so-called by Carol Shammas, since ‘if routinely used, they would require early replacement’ and thus would be unlikely to outlive their owner. Yet the fact of survival of dated examples many hundreds of years later suggests that they were not routinely used but were intended for display. See Shammas, Pre-industrial Consumer, p. 76, and Pennell, ‘For a Crack or Flaw’, p. 31.
and importance as vehicles of communication’. Might we see domestic dated objects in particular as such vehicles of communication across time?

Needlework

We can use ideas about object temporality and duration to examine a different category of dated object associated with a more elite group of women—needlework. Samplers in particular are frequently inscribed with names and dates from the seventeenth century onward, and thus provide an important medium through which to investigate how wealthier women, not necessarily directly engaged in the domestic activities discussed above, were able to individually identify and record themselves. Embroidery was a skill women learnt at an early age and samplers were a key part of this education, used in the learning and recording of stitches. While many of the girls who worked samplers were unlikely to be expected to earn a living, the acquisition of needlework skills was nevertheless an important stage in a young woman’s development, anticipating the future management of a household and the possibility of adorning items within the home with personal additions. Samplers were thus a kind of aide-memoire for the young women who worked them—after completion they were not obsolete but would be brought out, referred to, and passed down to other female relations. Indeed, it was perhaps to these women, as well as their future selves, that the inscriptions on samplers were addressed. The narrow shape of the early band sampler facilitated this function as they could be rolled up and stored away, ready for future use and reference, rather than display.

It was likely their formative part in early education that led the girls and young women who made them to proudly embroider their names and the date on which they completed the work, marking their accomplishment at learning a new skill. Elizabeth Billingzley, for example, precisely recorded that she completed ‘Her ZAMPLer’ on ‘the 19 IVLY 1653’. Moreover, unlike the wares discussed earlier in this chapter, samplers are of particular interest because they were inherently tactile objects—made with the very hands of the women whose lives are inscribed onto them. This intimate

44 Humphreys, Samplers, p. 1.
45 Browne and Wearden, Samplers, p. 9.
46 Brooks et al., Needlework Collection, p. 2.
47 Browne and Wearden, Samplers, p. 9.
personal connection is illustrated by some of the inscriptions samplers bear—one, for example, reads ‘ANN FENN IS MY NAME AND WITH MY HAND I MADE THE SAME 1655’. Here Ann clearly records her presence at a specific moment in time, with the reference to her hand working the object further conjuring up the image of her at that moment, preserving the memory for posterity.

In their work on how textiles were used to transmit memory during the Renaissance, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass argue that although women were largely left out of the dominant memory culture of inheritance, through samplers they could materialize ‘a counter-memory’ for themselves. They see the stitching of female makers’ names onto needlework objects as a way for women or girls to record themselves in this alternative memory system, ‘a subculture recorded in physical objects that were nearly always transmitted among women […] passed down through their families’. Jones and Stallybrass do not discuss the role the recording of dates played in this memory system, but these temporal reflections were clearly a way for their makers to fix themselves to a specific moment in time, adding weight and authority to the sampler as a record of their existence. Indeed, these makers would sometimes include multiple references to time by including their age at the time of making as well as the date. Rachel Loader, for example, recorded that she wrought her sampler ‘BelNG/ TWeLVe YeARS OVLD THe TeNTH/ DAY DeSeMBeR 1666’. Meanwhile although Ann Skinner does not record her age at the time she made her sampler, she does refer to both her position within the life cycle—‘I AM A MAIDE BVT YOUNG’—as well as alluding to her future life, ‘MY SKILL IS YET BVT SM/ALL I HOPE THAT GOD W/ILL BLESS ME SO THAT IS/HALL LIVE TO MEND THIS ALL’, alongside the date ‘NOVEMBER 22 1672’. A range of temporalities are therefore used to subjectively identify the individual maker in time—dates, life cycles, ages, and even allusions to time not yet passed. Combining not just a proud assertion of skill and accomplishment, but also a record of the maker at that very moment in time, these objects became material manifestations of the women and girls who made them.

50 Jones and Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing, p. 134.
51 Ibid., pp. 156–58.
54 For more on how needlework objects became material expressions of the women who made them, see the discussion on the use of embroidery to express the views and morality of the maker through the selection of subjects and stories in Geuter, ‘Embroidered Biblical Narratives’. Mary
Jones and Stallybrass see this memory subculture that samplers were a part of as connecting female makers to other women. We can further analyze how the dates on these objects connected and extended such networks by considering how the dated inscriptions represented the different temporal intersections between people’s lifetimes. In her study of women’s textualities and the use of needlework in particular as a medium for text, Susan Frye outlines how we should envision the domestic context of the making of early modern English needlework. Using the personal accounts of women like Margaret Hoby and Elizabeth Isham, Frye emphasizes how the production of needlework was frequently performed in the company of other women. Clifford, for example, records sewing with her favorite cousin, while Hoby also records how she ‘wrought with my maids’. Frye concludes that the objects these women made, in particular samplers, ‘manifested lifetimes of connections among women’.55 Many of the inscriptions on needlework objects reflect these female networks in which they were produced,

Brooks, however, advises caution when seeing these selections as indicative of personal views, since the significance of the images may have changed as they were passed around (English Embroideries, pp. 14–15).

circulated, and given meaning. A small embroidered beadwork bag dated 1625, for example, demonstrates that it was produced as a testimony to friendship, as it bears the inscription ‘THE GIFT OF A FREND’ (Figure 2.4).56 While the maker and recipient remain anonymous, the date on this bag fixes their friendship to a specific moment in time and acts as a future reminder of the occasion on which the gift was given.

Other needlework objects more clearly reflect the temporal intersections of different women’s lives. One example which has been the source of much academic interest is a sampler inscribed ‘JANE BOSTOCKE 1598/ALICE LEE WAS BORNE THE 23 OF NOVEMBER BE/ING TWESDAY IN THE AFTER NOONE 1596’.57 Research has shown that Jane and Alice were distant relatives, with this sampler perhaps allowing Jane to pass on her own skills and designs to the next generation.58 Again there are several temporalities recorded through the inscription. There is the past event of Alice Lee’s birth, recorded to a very precise degree with the date, year, day of the week, and time of day all present. This precision is made even more poignant as it contrasts with the long labor involved in working the object. There is also the suggestion of Alice Lee’s future life, with the expectation that she would learn the skills needed to produce such a sampler at a later date. Meanwhile the temporality of the object itself is recorded, overlapping with Jane’s, as it records both the year of its own creation and the date of Jane finishing what was presumably a gift for Alice. In this inscription then, three kinds of temporal timelines, past, present, and future, intersect.

Meanwhile several other samplers from the end of the seventeenth century bear inscriptions which show they were all made by students taught by the ‘dame’ school teacher Juda, or Judith, Hayle.59 One example is inscribed, ‘ELIZABETH MEADOW IS MY NAME AND WITH MY NEEDLE I WROUGHT THE SAME AND IUDA HAYLE WAS MY DAME’, alongside the date 1691.60 Jones and Stallybrass have argued that samplers were a means for women to undo any distinctions between public and private, registering links with

56 Collection of John H. Bryan. See a comparable bag with the same motto and the date 1631 in Brooks et al., Needlework Collection, p. 114. Brooks notes that it has been suggested that kits for making such bags may have been available for purchase.
58 Frye, Pens and Needles, p. 123.
59 For a discussion of how young women may have been educated in needlework at schools see Brooks et al., Needlework Collection, pp. 14–18.
60 Museum of London, London, mus. no. 89.296.
other women both inside and outside the domestic setting.61 Taking up this idea, Frye has also argued that samplers such as these embody both the network and the individual, ‘the process of sewing within a network of household and community connections and a representation of each woman’s self-perceived location inside that community’.62 We can take these arguments further by considering exactly how the inscription of dates linked women to this wider community. Indeed, this group of samplers is significant because through their dated inscriptions the young women represent meetings in the lifetimes, or as Kubler would see it, durations, of different individuals. Thus the timeline of Judith Hayle’s life intersects briefly with Elizabeth Meadow’s in 1691, and with other girls on other samplers in 1693 and 1694. Meanwhile through Hayle and these surviving objects all these women are linked—in this way these samplers act as material memories of specific moments and connections between women, before transcending them, as the durations of objects extend well past those of human lifelines.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that dated objects provide us with a unique opportunity to analyze how connections between women and time were created and expressed through their material environment. It has emphasized that there are multiple ways of interpreting the meaning of dated inscriptions, and these vary as a result of different users, audiences, and contexts. In particular, it has argued that by moving past seeing dated inscriptions as merely commemorative, we can learn a great deal more about how women experienced and perceived time. While many dated objects would have been initially intended to celebrate a major life-cycle event such as a birth, courtship, or marriage, we need to think more critically about the role of such objects after the fact. They endured past that single moment as they were displayed, used, circulated, inherited, and eventually collected, and had a meaning such objects would have had both in quotidian life and for future audiences. It has been suggested here that if these dates did hold personal meaning to women, in some cases formed by their very own hands, then their presence in the material environment of the household could be empowering, with these objects acting as material memories of a woman’s

own position in time, and in some cases, of the networks of which she was a part. Yet time might also be oppressive – fervent Protestants emphasized that not a second ought to be squandered in idleness, and so reminders of past dates would also be reminders of the quick passage of time, and one’s own mortality. To return to Ann Chapman’s mug, the inscribed date 1642 may well have indicated a special occasion on which the mug was given, as the V&A catalogue suggests, but this temporal message also hints at the complexity and materiality of women’s experience of time in this period.63

Works cited


63 I would like to thank the editor, along with Tara Hamling and Erin Sullivan, for their thoughtful comments on drafts of this chapter. Many thanks as well to the anonymous readers for their suggestions. I would also like to offer my sincerest thanks to John H. Bryan for kindly allowing me to include an example here from his own wonderful collection, and for providing initial inspiration for this research.


Pennell, Sara, “‘For a Crack or Flaw Despis’d’: Thinking about Ceramic Durability and the “Everyday” in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England’, in *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture*
and Its Meanings, ed. by Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 27–40.


About the author

Sophie Cope is an Arts and Humanities Research Council- and Midlands3Cities-funded doctoral candidate in History at the University of Birmingham. Her thesis examines ideas and experiences of time in seventeenth-century England and their expression in material culture. It focuses in particular on a range of domestic wares inscribed with dates which have largely been neglected in scholarly work until now. Prior to this she received her MA with Distinction in History of Design from the Victoria and Albert Museum/Royal College of Art. Her first article, ‘Marking the New Year: Dated Objects and the Materiality of Time in Early Modern England’, was published in the Journal of Early Modern Studies 6, in 2017.