

A Blessing of Women

For Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester

Stanley Kunitz

“Remember me is all I ask,
And, if remembered be a task,
Forget me.”

Album verses by Minerva Butler Miller,
tinsmith's daughter, peddler's wife, c. 1850.

BLESS ZERUAH HIGLEY GUERNSEY of Castleton, Vermont, who sheared the wool from her father's sheep; washed, carded, and spun it into yarn; steeped it in dyes concocted from native berries, barks, and plants; and embroidered it, in Double Kensington chain stitch, on a ground of homespun squares until they bloomed with fruit, shells, snow crystals, flowers, and cats, most singularly a noble blue cat; each of the eighty-odd panels being different from the rest, and the whole a paragon of American needlework design, executed in the ardor of her long pre-nuptial flight, and accomplished in 1835 for her ill-starred wedding day.

BLESS DEBORAH GOLDSMITH, genteel itinerant, who supported her aged and impoverished parents by traveling from house to house in the environs of Hamilton, New York, painting portraits of the families who gave her bed and board, until she limned in watercolors the likeness of one George Throop, who married her, therewith terminating her travels and leading to her premature decease, at twenty-seven.

BLESS MRS. AUSTIN ERNEST of Paris, Illinois, whose husband, a local politician of no other fame, organized in 1853 a rally for the Presidential candidate of the new Republican party, following which she gathered the material used to decorate the stand wherefrom the immortal Lincoln spoke and, with scissors and needle and reverential heart, transformed it into a quilted patchwork treasure.

BLESS MARY ANN WILLSON, who in 1819 appeared in the frontier town of Greenville, New York, with her “romantic attachment,” a Miss Brundage, with whom she settled in a log cabin, sharing their lives and their gifts, Miss Brundage farming the land, Miss Willson painting dramatic scenes with a bold hand, in colors derived from berries, brickdust, and store paint, and offering her compositions for sale as “rare and unique works of art.”

BLESS HANNAH COHOON, who dwelt in the Shaker “City of Peace,” Hancock, Massachusetts, where a spirit visited her, as frequently happened there, and gave her “a draft of a beautiful Tree pencil'd on a large sheet of white paper,” which

she copied out, not knowing till later, with assistance from the Beyond, that it was the Tree of Life; and who saw in another vision, which she likewise reproduced, the Elders of the community feasting on cakes at a table beneath mulberry trees; and who believed, according to the faith of the followers of Mother Ann Lee, that Christ would return to earth in female form.

BLESS IN A CONGREGATION, because they are so numerous, those industrious schoolgirls stitching their alphabets; and the deft ones with needles at lacework, crewel, knitting; and mistresses of spinning, weaving, dyeing; and daughters of tinsmiths painting their ornamental mottoes; and hoarders of rags hooking and braiding their rugs; and adepts in cutouts, valentines, stencils, still lifes, and “fancy pieces”; and middle-aged housewives painting, for the joy of it, landscapes and portraits; and makers of bedcovers with names that sing in the night—Rose of Sharon, Princess Feather, Delectable Mountains, Turkey Tracks, Drunkard’s Path, Indiana Puzzle, Broken Dishes, Star of LeMoyne, Currants and Coxcomb, Rocky-Road-to-Kansas.

BLESS THEM AND GREET THEM as they pass from their long obscurity, through the gate that separates us from our history, a moving rainbow-cloud of witnesses in a rising hubbub, jubilantly turning to greet one another, this tumult of sisters.

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