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Sophomore

Needlepoint Tapestry, ca. 1940

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Artworks of the Household: The Story of Virginia Maxwell

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Imagine a beautiful southern dining room. At its center is a long wooden dinner table with a finish that shines. The ceiling is tastefully adorned with a crystal chandelier and just behind the chair at the head of the table is an exquisite needlepoint portrait in a gold frame. The scene is simple, but the needlework is of the highest quality and could have only been done by the hands of a master. Virginia Maxwell was just that, a master with an embroidery needle. Her portrait of Victorian women lounging in a garden decorates the wall of the dining room display in Houston Christian University's Museum of Southern History.

The tapestry makes its presence known with its magnificent dresses of blue and pink. At the heart of the work is a collection of Victorian women lounging. They are surrounded by tall looming trees and overgrown bushes. It is a secret garden the women have all to themselves with walls made of shrubbery and a tiger striped sky above their heads. It hangs in its golden frame with a presence that is not overbearing, but it demands a second look as it sits on the wall.

Virginia Maxwell crafted this household masterpiece around 1940 and donated the piece to the university in 2008 accompanied by her daughter Madeline. Maxwell's daughter is now a communications professor at the University of Texas in Austin. Dr. Maxwell, like her mother before her, has taken on the task of storytelling, her mother just did it with a needle and thread. The story of Virginia Maxwell's tapestry is on its face a delicate scene of Victorian women. But looking past its surface, the tapestry reveals the story of Maxwell's life and legacy.

Maxwell's artistry came early, having first learned to needlepoint with yarn and a canvas from her grandmother. As Maxwell grew so did her passion for needlepoint and she perfected her skills at the Royal School of Needlework in England. Maxwell, originally from Ohio, moved to Houston with her husband in 1950 and remained there until her death on October 2, 2010.

Maxwell continued creating needlepoints until her death at the age of 91. Her life in Houston began with teaching first-graders at Immanuel Lutheran School in the Heights and leading arts and crafts classes at a local YMCA. One day the president of the original Foley's department store noticed the skill of Virginia's needlepoint and offered her a job. She became a buyer for Foley's knitting and needlework, but quickly became frustrated with the limited stock available.

In the 1960s, Maxwell opened her own gallery in the River Oaks Shopping Center. Initially called the Virginia Maxwell Custom Needlework Studio and later renamed the Virginia Maxwell Gallery, her solo success continued to grow, and she relocated to a larger gallery located at Kirby and Richmond in Upper Kirby. Her obituary writer commented on her gallery writing, "What made Maxwell's shop unique was that she had thousands of canvas designs, many of them original works, and she could create new ones from any photograph or sketch that the customer brought her" (Horswell).

Maxwell's obituary also revealed many honors that her work received during her life. In 1977 Maxwell was featured in a spread of *House Beautiful* where she explained how to enhance the home with needlepoint. Maxwell also created commissioned designs for local Houstonians and national celebrities. Her most notable commissioned work was for the folk singer Joni Mitchell who used one of Maxwell's designs to cover her piano bench. The height of Maxwell's accomplishments came in 1975 when she was chosen by the American International Needlepoint Guild to design a rug commemorating the 1976 Bicentennial. This rug called *The Peace Rug* is 14-foot-by-20 and incorporates 132 flags to represent the 132 countries that were then members of the United Nations. Maxwell had the opportunity to lecture on the rug's creation to people across America. The rug was then added to the Smithsonian collection in Washington D.C. and remains there to this day.

When considering this piece, Maxwell's own biography should be examined alongside the biography of needlepoint. Needlepoint is an interesting medium because it is accessible for all skill levels. Patterns can be found in magazines or simply drawn by hand. Needlepoints can adorn clothing and household furniture. Needlepoint as it is known today originated in the 17th century as fashion and upholstery began using canvas material as the foundation for embroidery (Britannica). But the beauty of needlepoint is its ability to communicate to the observer at different levels. Whether displayed in a museum or in the home, needlepoint is a distinct form of communication. This is because of the innate connection of the weaving to the weaver. Needlepoint is an art that requires patience, attention to detail, and skilled labor. Needlepoint style and pattern reflects cultural movements and regional affiliations. The craft is one that has stood the test of time and gives the viewer a perspective on the past. Virginia Maxwell's tapestry tells her story to all who pass through the Museum of Southern History even though she has passed.

A simple piece of artwork in a dining room, like this tapestry, tells the story of a life. Grant Colfax Tullar in a poem affectionately called *The Tapestry Poem* writes "life is but a weaving/ Between my God and me." The comparison of a tapestry to life is fitting. Experiences, lessons, and relationships are all woven together by God's skillful hand. The pattern that life will follow has already been sketched by the great artist. It is up to us to pull the knot tight and make the picture complete. This poem was often quoted by the Christian author and Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom who uses the poem to help people understand the sufferings of the world. And that is what a piece of art does, what a tapestry does, it asks the viewer to understand and to see beauty.

The tapestry that hangs in the Museum of Southern History is one of many weavings done in the long life of Virginia Maxwell. Even though this is one work of many, this artifact is a piece of the life of Virginia Maxwell, and it tells her story. This tapestry delights the viewer and makes them wonder about the art of those who came before them.

Works Cited

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