



# A Remedy for Rents

*Darning Samplers and Other Needlework  
from the Whitelands College Collection*

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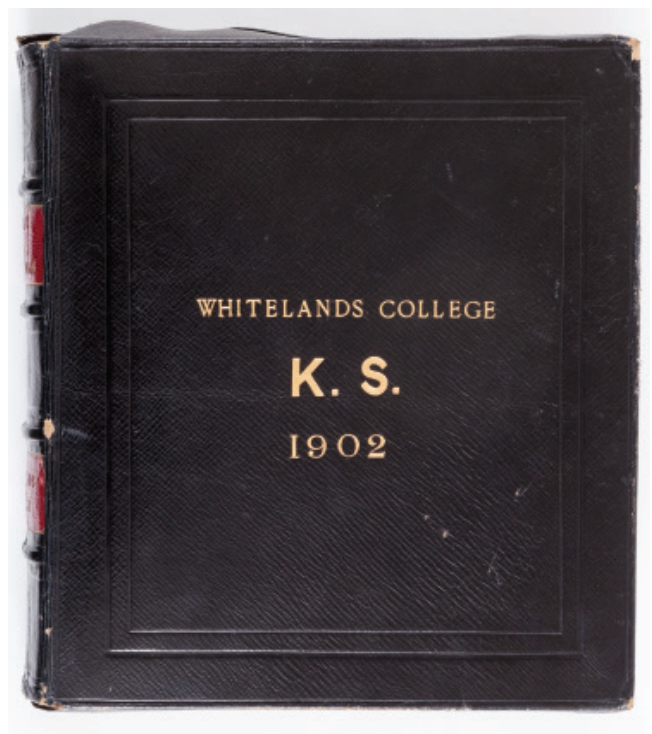
*It was but yesterday my own womankind were ... in the practice of some new device of remedy for Rents ... whereby it might be daintily effaced, and with a newness which would never make it worse. The process began – beautiful even to my uninformed eyes – in the likeness of herring-bone masonry, crimson on white, but it seemed to me marvellous that anything should yet be discoverable in needle process, and that of so utilitarian character.<sup>1</sup>*

**John Ruskin, 1884**

The revelatory ‘remedy for Rents’ at which John Ruskin marvelled was the mending of clothes, the ‘herring-bone masonry’ a stitch, ‘chiefly used to secure the raw edges of flannel’ (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> That a practical solution to damaged textiles could, as Ruskin noted, be beautiful as well as useful, is abundantly evident in the darning and plain needlework samplers produced, between 1877 and 1902, by student teachers at Whitelands College, Chelsea. The Head Governess at this time was Kate Stanley, and Ruskin, a leading figure in the Victorian art world, was an admirer of her needlework and a patron of the College.<sup>3</sup> The samplers’ exquisitely fine stitching demonstrates not only the makers’ technical skill but, together with the small-scale practice garments made by the students, they illuminate also the history of working-class dress, female education and gendered roles, experiences and expectations in nineteenth-century Britain and beyond.



1. Herringbone stitch (detail of E. Winton, 1877).



2. ‘Specimens of Needlework’. Album, 28 x 25 cm.

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<sup>1</sup> E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1907), vol. xxix, pp. 509–510.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Stanley, *Needlework and Cutting-Out* (London: Edward Stanford, 1883 [2014 ULAN Press reprint]), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Cole, *Whitelands College, The History* (London: Whitelands College, 1982), p. 20

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State funding of elementary education in England began in 1833 with the provision of grants to voluntary bodies to subsidize school building, the bulk of the money going to the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church.<sup>4</sup> In response to prevalent low standards, the National Society established two teacher-training colleges in Chelsea: St Mark's, for men, in 1840, and Whitelands, for women, in 1841.<sup>5</sup> Now part of the University of Roehampton, Whitelands was the 'first all-women teacher-training college', its stated purpose: 'to produce a superior class of parochial Schoolmistresses'.<sup>6</sup> The students were working-class women aged between 16 and 25. Most studied for one or two years, the £15 annual fees paid by scholarships or from the students' earnings in subsequent employment.<sup>7</sup> An 1848 timetable shows the students beginning their daily studies at 7am and continuing, with breaks for meals and 'recreation', until bedtime at 9pm.<sup>8</sup> The curriculum included religious knowledge, needlework, English, arithmetic, art, history and geography, and expanded to incorporate French, botany, algebra, geometry and first aid.

Whitelands quickly established a reputation for excellence, not least for the quality of its needlework. According to one observer, the 'system of training', aimed to make the students 'really humble unpretending Village Teachers'. It included cleaning, cooking and ironing, but not scouring and washing because they would 'unfit the hands for fine needlework in which it is absolutely essential the mistresses should excel'.<sup>9</sup>

Whitelands students went on to teach at, and head, schools nationwide. Furthermore, by the end of the nineteenth century, they were teaching in more than half the teacher-training colleges in England and in training colleges throughout the

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***Whitelands was the 'first all-women teacher-training college', its stated purpose: 'to produce a superior class of parochial Schoolmistresses'***

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British Empire.<sup>10</sup> Over the years, therefore, the needlework taught at Whitelands, the ideologies, techniques and style of garments, entered the minds and homes of millions of poor and working-class girls, not only in Britain but across the world.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Evans, *The Development and Structure of the English School System* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30; Cole, *Whitelands*, p. 2; 'History', *University of St Mark and St John*, [marjon.ac.uk/about-marjon/history](http://marjon.ac.uk/about-marjon/history).

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Watson, *The Story of Roehampton University* (London: Third Millennium, 2010), p. 16; Cole, *Whitelands*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Cole, *Whitelands*, pp. 5, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Timetable, 11th August 1848, Whitelands College archive, display cabinet.

<sup>9</sup> Cole, *Whitelands*, pp. 8-11, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> For a similar point, see Joy and Stephen Jarrett and Rebecca Scott, *Stitched in Adversity: Samplers of the Poor* (Witney: Witney Antiques, 2006), 'Introduction'.

## NEEDLEWORK EDUCATION

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Needlework was perceived to be an intrinsic element of femininity for nineteenth-century women and girls. In practical terms it was expected that working-class females would make and mend most of the clothing and household linen for their families or, as domestic servants, their employers. Morally, needlework was believed to instil the desirable female qualities of discipline, patience, modesty and thrift. Many

in authority feared that increasing female employment outside the home was eroding domestic skills. Therefore, as the provision of elementary education expanded, needlework gained ever-greater prominence in the girls' curricula for state-funded schools. However, the Education Department's regulations prohibited the teaching of 'fancy work', stipulating that the working-class pupils should be taught only utilitarian plain needlework.<sup>12</sup> Embroidery, as Rozsika Parker noted, was 'dangerously suggestive of class aspirations'.<sup>13</sup>

## KATE STANLEY AND JOHN RUSKIN

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Kate Stanley was the daughter of a slater and plasterer and trained at Whitelands. She began teaching at the College in 1859 and was Head Governess from 1876 until her retirement in 1902.<sup>14</sup> An excellent needlewoman, her manual for trainee teachers, *Needlework and Cutting-Out* was published in 1883. She dedicated it to:

*Professor Ruskin, LL.D., who writes,  
'While the plough of the husbandman goes well  
in the field, and the plough (needle) of the woman  
goes well at home, the nation will be happy.'*<sup>15</sup>

Ruskin clearly subscribed to the Victorian notion of prescribed gender roles with women responsible for the domestic sphere. But he believed girls should be educated and while their education should enable them 'to make the home a place of beauty and comfort for the warrior', he thought they should as far as possible study the same subjects as boys.<sup>16</sup>

He reciprocated Stanley's dedication, citing her exemplary needlework in his *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Labourers and Workmen of Great Britain*. He rhapsodized over lost needle arts believing them 'imitable, perhaps, once more, with good help from Whitelands College and Girton'. He advised a sewing mistress, whose pupils thought the work might be better done by machine than by hand, to 'get Miss Stanley's book, which gives you the elements of this work at Whitelands', believing 'the text of it all that can be desired'.<sup>17</sup> In *Fors Clavigera* Ruskin challenged industrialisation and the Victorian capitalist economy, proposing instead the formation of 'a neo-medieval agrarian community' for which the fine needlework produced at Whitelands seemed eminently suited.<sup>18</sup> For the more pragmatic Stanley, in contrast, needlework was a cornerstone of female working-class morality and domestic economy. 'Ability to repair skilfully', she wrote, 'is an accomplishment which every girl and woman should earnestly covet, if they wish to be thrifty, useful, respectable, and respected members of society'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vivienne Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Ch. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> 'The gout sticks to me: two previously unknown letters by William Morris; Part 2', *Lucienne Boyce's Blog*, francesca-scriblerus.blogspot.co.uk/2014/08/the-gout-sticks-to-me-two-previously.html; Cole, *Whitelands*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley, *Needlework*, dedication.

<sup>16</sup> John Batchelor, *John Ruskin: No Wealth but Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), pp. 206-07.

<sup>17</sup> Cook and Wedderburn, *Works*, pp. 509, 491.

<sup>18</sup> Batchelor, *John Ruskin*, p. 251; John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley, *Needlework*, p. 64.

## SAMPLERS

The centrepiece of the Whitelands collection is a leather-bound album, 'Specimens of Needlework', the cover stamped 'K. S. [Kate Stanley] 1902' (Figure 2 - see Page 2). It contains 43 samplers, each mounted on a page bearing its year of production and the name of the student who worked it. With the first stitched in 1877 by E. Winton, and the last by Margaret Burton in 1902, the samplers span the final-year cohorts during Stanley's 26 years as Head Governess.<sup>20</sup>

Samplers have been worked in different parts of the world from around the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE. Originally produced by experienced, sometimes professional, needleworkers to record stitches and patterns for personal reference, they developed into a demonstration of the maker's skill and a device for needlework teaching and practice. The 18th century saw the emergence of darning samplers, possibly originating in the Netherlands, which reflected the original utilitarian purpose.<sup>21</sup>

The first 24 samplers in 'Specimens of Needlework' are approximately 18-21cm wide and 19-22cm high and date from 1877 to 1881. They are principally darning samplers, showing also examples of patching, buttonholes, herringbone, a few decorative stitches and, in the later specimens, a scattering of embroidery (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). In *Practical Plain Needlework*, Annie R. Chamberlain identified three types of darning. 'Plain darning', in which 'the simplest process of weaving is imitated', is the most familiar and was used to strengthen and repair a multiplicity of fabrics and garments.<sup>22</sup>

'Swiss darning including stocking-web stitch' recreates knitted fabric to 'exactly cover or replace the original threads'.<sup>23</sup> The Whitelands examples are very fine containing upwards of 182 stitches per square centimetre (Figure 10).



3. Sampler, E. Winton, 1877. c. 21 x 20 cm.



4. Sampler, Margaret Witteridge, 1878. c. 21 x 20 cm.

<sup>20</sup> Whitelands College archive, 5.4.15, Needlework Box 1. The samplers of another four or five students are missing from the volume.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Toller, *British Samplers: A Concise History* (Sussex: Phillimore & Co., 1980), p. 13; Pamela Claburn, *Samplers* (Princes Risborough: Shire, 1998), p. 8; 'A History of Samplers', *Victoria and Albert Museum* [vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/a-history-of-samplers](http://vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/a-history-of-samplers).

<sup>22</sup> Annie R. Chamberlain, *Practical Plain Needlework* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, n.d. [1911]), p. 166.



5. Sampler, Ellen Crookall, 1879. c. 21.5 x 18 cm.



7. Sampler, Lucy May Powlson, 1880. c. 21 x 21 cm.



8. Buttonhole (detail of Annie Hewins, 1879).  
20 x 4mm at widest points.



9. Buttonhole (detail of Annie Hewins, 1879).  
20 x 6mm at widest points.



6. Sampler, Annie Hewins, 1879. c. 20 x 23 cm.



10. Stocking-web stitch (detail of Margaret Witteridge, 1878).  
Stitch area 23 x 20 mm.



11. Damask darning (detail of Ellen Crookall, 1879), 18 x 21 mm.

Lastly there is ‘pattern darning’ where ‘the groups of threads taken up on the needle and passed over vary according to the pattern of the material to be darned’.<sup>24</sup> Particularly suited to the replication of patterns on damask fabric it was also known as damask darning. The Whitelands samplers contain numerous extraordinarily fine specimens, the stitches worked in a variety of coloured threads on a white or cream ground (Figures 11, 12, 13, 14).

Despite the prevalence of damask darning in the samplers to 1881, Stanley’s 1883 *Needlework and Cutting Out* dismissed it in one sentence, noting that the requisite ‘skill, care, and patience’ meant ‘comparatively few children would be able to accomplish it’.<sup>25</sup> Sampler expert Jane Toller, having never seen an example of pattern darning used in the repair of antique textiles, suggested the samplers may have been made simply ‘as an exercise in superfine needlework’.<sup>26</sup> A local newspaper correspondent visiting Whitelands in December 1884 reported that:

*the specimens shown us were marvels of superlative fineness. Some of the stitches were so tiny, that without a magnifying-glass it seemed hopeless to count them ... Specimens of fancy*

*stitches, darning, marking, and of intricate crossing and re-crossing, which could only be accomplished at the rate of about a square inch in one or two hours, were carefully preserved in an album. What a tale of hours and hours of useless labour and waste of eye-sight the book seemed to tell! However, we learnt, with pleasure, that now these useless elaborations and intricacies are modified, and in part abandoned.*<sup>27</sup>

The final 16 samplers in ‘Specimens of Needlework’, dating from 1890-1902, are plain needlework samplers. Still of exceptional quality, they are entirely white – except when the maker’s initials are worked in red as marking practice – devoid of darning, and demonstrate the various techniques needed to make simple garments such as seams, hemming, gathers and tucks (Figures 15, 16, 17). Between these two groups are three ‘transitional’ samplers, dated 1882 and 1883, which, in different ways, show the move from damask darning to plain needlework (Figure 18).<sup>28</sup>



12. Damask darning (detail of Lucy May Powlson, 1880), 14 x 27 mm.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>25</sup> Stanley, pp. 80-81.

<sup>26</sup> Toller, *British Samplers*, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> ‘A Morning at Whitelands College’, *Westminster and Lambeth Gazette*, December 13 1884.



13. Damask darning (detail of Ellen Crookall, 1879), 18 x 14 mm.



14. Damask darning (detail of Margaret Witteridge, 1878). 18 x 35 mm.



15. Sampler, H. Bateman, 1892. c. 24 x 24 cm.



16. Sampler, Maria Eastwood, 1897. c. 21.5 x 22 cm.



17. Detail of sampler, Josephine Daskell, 1900. c. 21 x 24 cm.





18. Sampler, Sarah Pratt, 1882. c. 21.5 x 23.5 cm.  
Stitch area 23 x 20 mm.

### SCALE GARMENTS

While Ruskin enthused about Stanley's methods, he suggested replacing the 'trimmed water-butts' style of the garments she proposed with designs by his protégé, the illustrator Kate Greenaway, whose infant characters wore a whimsical version of Regency dress.<sup>29</sup> Stanley, with a more realistic understanding of the budgets and lifestyles of her students and their future pupils, was concerned with utility, not ornament. Her book gives instructions for cutting out a range of simple basic garments, including a baby's pinafore, child's frock and woman's petticoat, to be made from utilitarian fabrics such as calico and flannel.<sup>30</sup>

Another form of sampler was the small-scale garment, made to learn techniques more quickly and avoid costly mistakes. Full-size garments could be made when the miniature was perfected. The Whitelands collection contains a number of small-scale as well as a few full-size

garments, most undated (Figure 19). A full-size 'baby's first shirt' is almost identical to the first item in the cutting-out section of Stanley's book, a small-scale robe following a similar, slightly more complex, design (Figure 20). Like the darning and plain needlework samplers, many of the garments display a high degree of skill. Indeed, some are so small and intricate as to suggest that their production may have required more skill than a full-size version (Figures 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26). Full-size garments, however, such as the child's hand-stitched cutwork dress, display a very great deal of patience (Figures 27, 28).



19. Full-size child's linen tippet, undated.  
Centre back length from collar seam 33cm.



20. Full-size baby shirt and small-scale robe.



21. Small-scale infant's stays.

<sup>29</sup> Cook and Wedderburn, *Works*, pp. 509, 491.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley, *Needlework*, Part II.



22. Small-scale stays/corset.



23. Small-scale shirt, 1877.



24. Small-scale shirt, 1872.



25. Small-scale sock.



26. Small-scale cap.



27. Full-size child's cutwork dress.



28. Child's cutwork dress, detail.

## DARNING TODAY

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Darning is enjoying something of a revival. The growing sustainable fashion movement highlights the negative ethical and environmental impact of cheap mass-production, which encourages disposability in the West. It advocates a more responsible attitude to clothing manufacture and consumption including the re-use and repair of existing clothes and textiles. Tom van Deijnen and Celia Pym both practise and teach visible mending in which repair becomes an obvious and aesthetically-pleasing addition to garments.<sup>31</sup> Pym and van Deijnen focus on the relationship between the garment and the wearer/human body, but Lizzie Cannon's darned foliage, 'Mended Leaves', invites reflection on human interventions in the natural world.<sup>32</sup>

Practitioners of modern darning may not share Ruskin's desire for a return to medieval agrarianism, but they demonstrably see the same potential for beauty and artistry in remedies for rents.

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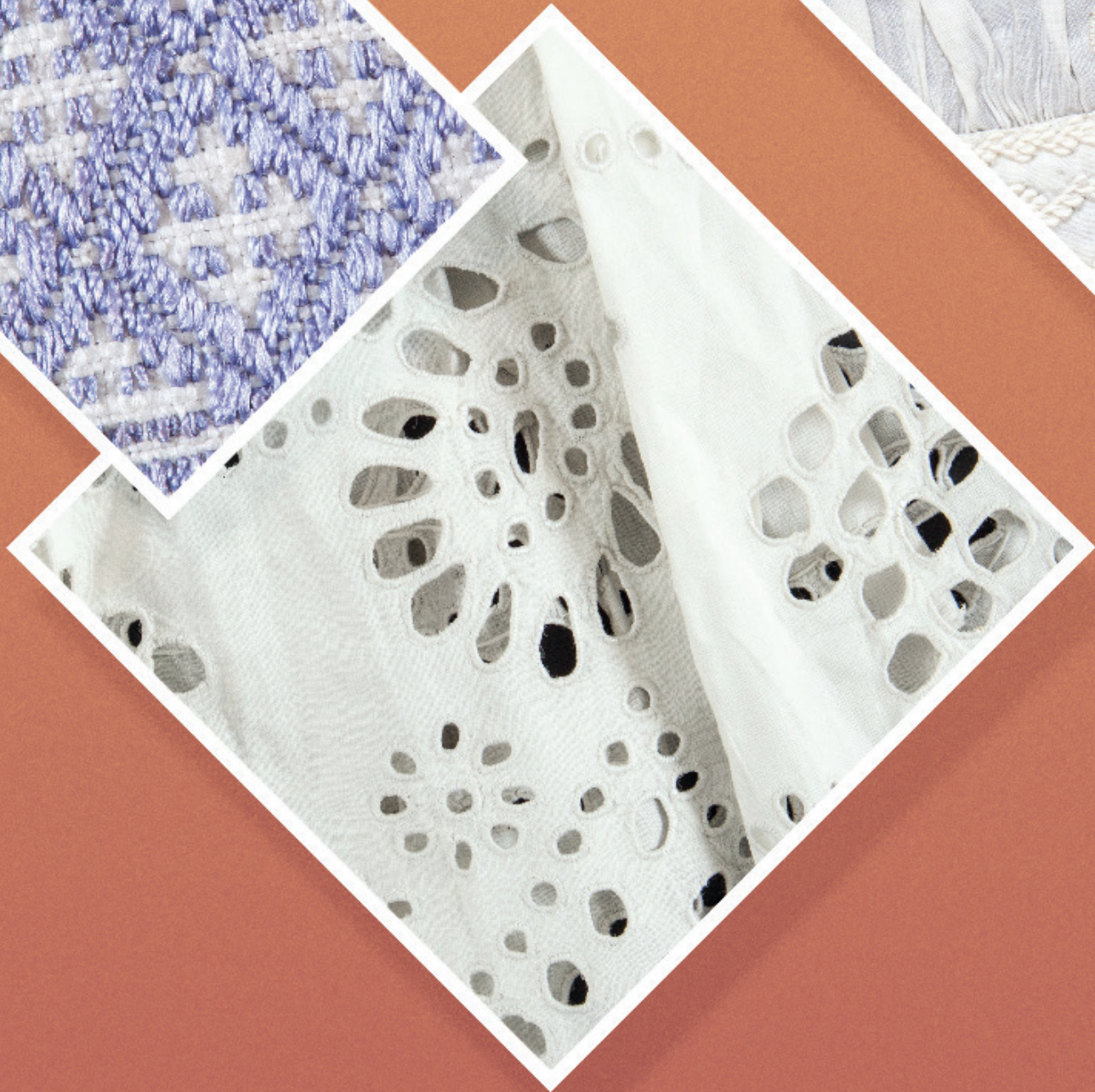
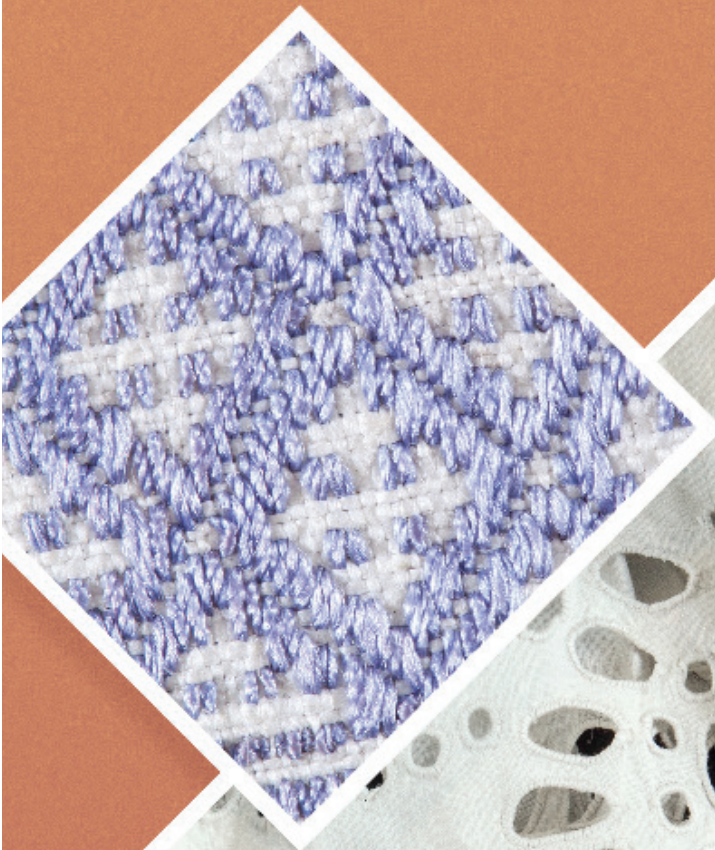
Carol Dyhouse for alerting me to the  
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<sup>31</sup> *Tom of Holland*, [tomofholland.com](http://tomofholland.com); *Celia Pym*, [celiapym.com](http://celiapym.com).

<sup>32</sup> *Lizzie Cannon*, [lizziecannon.com/art\\_3.html](http://lizziecannon.com/art_3.html).



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