

A Canadian flour bag and embroidery of proud Belgian women

The colorful exhibition: 'For a few sacks more.... How feedsacks clothed and warmed Americans during the Depression, and later' in the Textile Research Center (TRC) in Leiden, The Netherlands, from 15 January to 28 June 2018 inspired the Voorburg artist and researcher Annelien van Kempen to make quilt bags and to conduct an in-depth study on flour bags in the First World War.

The exhibition had an interesting peripheral program:

- *Linzee Cull Mc Cray from Iowa City, Iowa, USA, author of the book 'Feed Sacks, The Colorful History of a Frugal Fabric' presented the presentations 'The story of feedsacks' and 'Art Quilts of the Midwest' and the workshops 'String Piecing' and 'Stitch-and-Flip';*
- *Dr. Marian Ann Montgomery, Curator of Clothing and Textiles at the Museum of Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, USA, gave the lecture 'Embroidered flour sacks from WW1 Belgium';*
- *Dr. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, director of TRC, gave the workshop 'Quilting Techniques'.*



Inventory number 2017.0422 in the TRC collection is a unique Canadian flour bag from WWI, embroidered in Belgium and symbol of an unprecedented history.

In the First World War, for over four years - as long as the trench warfare lasted and the German army occupied parts of their countries - millions of Belgians and French people were fed daily and provided with clothing, fuel and work by private aid. These foreign aid goods came from the United States, Canada and other Commonwealth countries.



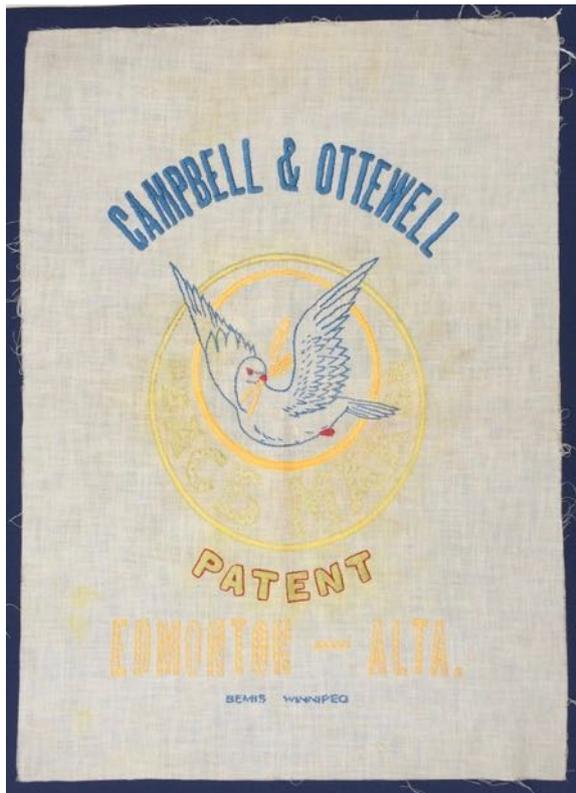
Millions of tons of food were shipped from New York for millions of

dollars via Rotterdam to occupied Belgium and northern France. The food aid arrived in bags, millions of bags of wheat, flour, rice and beans.

What better way to give thanks for that help than to turn bags into cushion covers, wall hangings and tea hats, decorating them with embroidery, paintings and handmade lace? In Belgium they went to work, in America they were pleasantly surprised with the gifts! The story goes that Belgian women and girls, in their unfortunate circumstances, happily embroidered the bags, the relief workers received the gifts with great gratitude and that nowadays in several museums decorated bags in various collections can be admired.

With the information I received from TRC based on American sources, a sense of frustration grew. Why didn't I know the history of food aid and the embroidered bags from my southern neighboring country, it only being presented to me from the other side of the Atlantic? The Belgian story remained unclear to me. Are there bags in Belgium? Are the Belgian ladies as satisfied with their embroidery as the Americans with their gifts? How many bags were used for the transformation into gifts, who worked on it and where, did they have materials for it and how was it organized and paid for?

This is why I invested intensively in the study of food aid in WWI from a Belgian perspective. The answers to my questions are beginning to form, but they also continue to raise new questions. Plenty of reason to carefully study the embroidered, Canadian flour sack in TRC. Here are my discoveries.



The bag is in front of me on the table, fixed on a dark blue surface with a few small stitches at the corners and in the middle.

To my surprise I notice the cloth is not a bag anymore, it is half of a bag.

The cotton cloth is not fringed, the edges are frayed, it has a size of 67 cm high and 47 cm wide. I count 20 threads in a centimeter. Is this the thread density for packing flour or maybe there has been grain in the original bag?

The logo provides information about the sender: Campbell & Ottewell was a flour mill and grain company established in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada at the beginning of 1900, but today the mill no longer exists. Bemis was an American bag supplier with offices in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada and is a global packaging group nowadays.



The size of the embroidery 'Campbell & Ottewell' up to and including 'Bemis Winnipeg' is 50 cm high and 30.5 cm wide. The original printing of the bag would have been an industrial design, as the embroidery has measured sizes, but the printing has since disappeared. The embroiderer would have to have followed the pattern of the vanished print exactly.

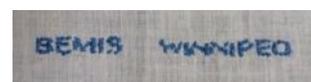


The height of the letters 'Campbell & Ottewell' and 'Edmonton - Alta' is exactly 5 cm.

The letters 'Patent' are 2.5 cm high, 'Peace Maker' goes from 1.5 cm to 5 cm and back to 1.5 cm.



The letters 'Bemis Winnipeg' are small, 0.6 to 0.7 cm (three to four cross stitches) high.



The wingspan of the dove's wings, symbol of peace, is exactly 18 cm, the distance from the top of the left wing to the end of the tail measures 24 cm. The two wheat stalks in the bill of the dove are 9.5 cm resp. 6.5 cm long.

The dimensions of the two ovals are 26 cm high and 24 cm wide for the large ones and 18 cm high and 16.5 cm wide for the small ones.

The embroidery thread is mercerized cotton, 3 threads twisted.



The embroidery stitches used are cross stitch, lock stitch and satin stitch.

The satin stitch has an embroidered surface so that a larger three-dimensional effect is achieved.



The embroidery is in five colors: blue, light green, yellow, ocher and red.

The light green yarn has bled into the fabric over the years because of the aniline used in the dyestuff. The cloth has apparently been washed or became wet, 'Patent' has obviously bled color and two letters 'P' and 'A' appear in light green color at the bottom left of the canvas.



The quality of the embroidery is solid at first glance. When I take a closer look at it, there are irregular stitches and a single piece has been missed. The embroiderer would have rushed, making quick stitches, as the work had to be finished.

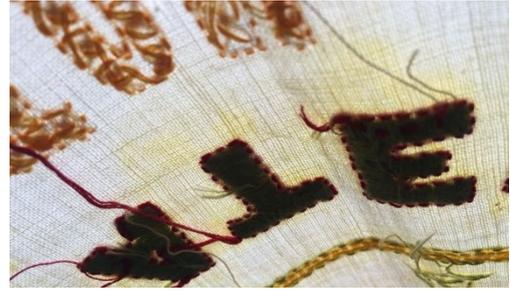


The ocher cross stitches in the large oval are irregular and one 'O' of Edmonton lacks the inner contour. The horizontal parts of the letter 'E' in Campbell & Ottewell are sometimes embroidered in one, sometimes in another direction.

The name of the producer of the bag, Bemis Winnipeg, is a bit tattered in its embroidery, probably because the letters were too small and faded by the transport. The cross stitches



are placed improvisedly on the canvas and where one would expect a 'G' from Winnipeg, there is an 'O', as proof that the embroiderer would have had no idea of the existence of that city on another continent, where the bag, her embroiderycloth, had originated from.



I have not been able to thoroughly study the back of the embroidery because of the fixation of the cloth to the surface, but I detect several loose, unfinished threads.

After these discoveries in the Belgian embroidery on the flour bag I leave the TRC to go home.

If I did not know any better, this garment could be anything. It is not a bag, no Flemish or Walloon characteristics, no Belgian patriotic signs or years or a signature, as I have come to recognize from other embroidered flour bags.

I am deeply impressed based on my current level of knowledge. The flying dove with bright red bill, piercing eye and peculiar talons, two golden yellow wheat stalks brings hope, this free bird is a 'peace maker'.

I think of the Belgian embroiderer who produced her embroidery in time of occupation and war. She worked, like hundreds of her colleagues, on such a bag, for at least eight hours a day and she received a maximum of 3 francs a week for this, not enough to make ends meet...

My conclusion is: proud Belgian women and girls have performed this work!

Annelien van Kempen (text and photos)

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For comments email: [info\(at\)annelienvankempen.nl](mailto:info@annelienvankempen.nl)

Blog website: meelzak.annelienvankempen.nl