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34 *Donna Druchunas* READING INTO HISTORY: SUSAN BOARDMAN'S NANTUCKET EMBROIDERED NARRATIVES

Inspired by the journals of Susan Veeder, the wife of a Nantucket whaling captain, Susan Boardman embroidered her story.

Julia Fein Azoulay



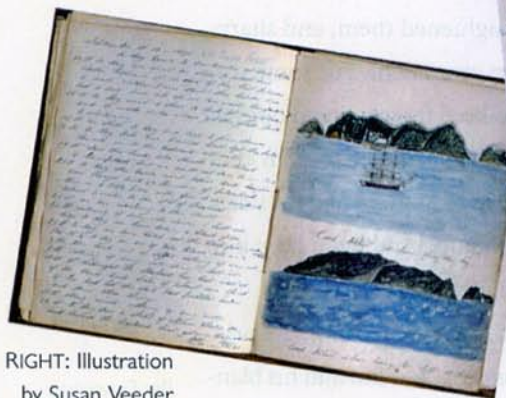
READING INTO HISTORY: Susan Boardman's Nantucket Embroidered Narratives

JULIA FEIN AZOULAY

Portrait of Susan Veeder. Artist unknown. 1857. (P21235). A page and illustration by Susan Veeder from the logbook of the *Nauticon*. Ink and watercolor. 1850. 10¼ x 8 inches (26.0 x 20.3 cm). (1995.4.1).

Photographs courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts.

IN 1848, Susan Veeder (1816–1897) set sail from Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, on a whaling voyage with her husband, rounding Cape Horn, visiting Chile and Tahiti, and then heading north to the forbidding, treacherous Arctic Circle. Aboard the *Nauticon*, Veeder kept a journal of her five-year journey, chronicling the hazardous whale chases known as “Nantucket sleigh rides,” accidents at sea, intoxicated crews, mutinies, alligator-infested rivers, villages of bamboo huts inhabited by half-naked natives, and the shipboard birth of her child.



RIGHT: Illustration by Susan Veeder labeled “O.tahute as Seen from the Harbor” from the logbook of the *Nauticon*. Ink and watercolor. 1850. 7 x 7½ inches (17.8 x 19.1 cm). (T412).

Photograph courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts.



In 1998, the fiber artist Susan Boardman found Veeder’s illustrated journal in the Nantucket Historical Association’s manuscript collection and was inspired to create her first embroidered narrative. Other journals and letters in the collection have served as inspiration for further embroideries. In 2002, Boardman exhibited nine of these narratives of Nantucket women in the Whitney Gallery of the Nantucket Historical Association Research Library. Besides Veeder, they include the astronomer and early feminist Maria Mitchell

(1818–1889), the poet, author, and historian Mary Starbuck (1856–1938), and the African-American activist Eunice Ross (1824–1895), who successfully petitioned the Massachusetts State House for admission after having been barred from attending Nantucket High School because of her race. Each narrative takes Boardman between 300 and 450 hours to complete.

“Through her writings,” explains Boardman,

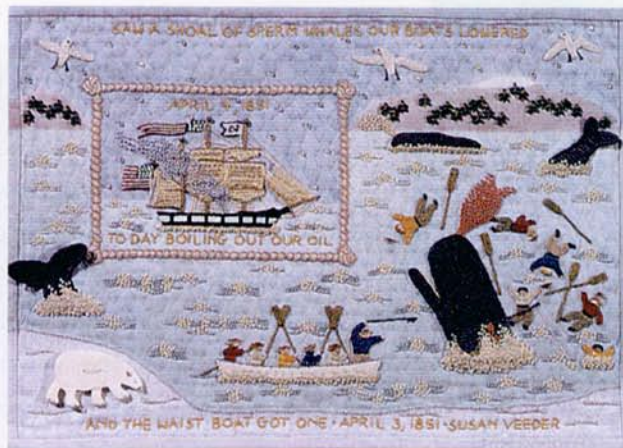
I can examine a woman’s life as a real person on her own terms. Quotations from the journals will often be the catalyst for a design. In the first moments of working, while my mind is uncluttered, I solve the design or technical problems and receive inspiration. . . . Then, I record and/or illustrate these ideas in my journal. I begin my designs by drawing single images, which I then arrange and rearrange until I am pleased with the overall composition. . . . Through the intricacies

of detail, I aim to encourage each observer to stop, focus, and become involved with the piece. I have always loved and been inspired by the techniques of illuminated manuscripts. In the intertwining of texts and images and the playful use of borders, my own pieces pay tribute to this rich tradition.

With a background in design and drawing, Boardman incorporates certain rules of composition but consciously eschews others. “I don’t care about perspective,” she says, “so you’ll see elements like a person that is too big for the house, but I do include a focal point and balance and symmetry.”

Heavily influenced by seventeenth-century English stumpwork, the narratives are noteworthy for their layering and depth. Boardman begins with plain muslin, the tightest weave she can get. She backs the muslin with a layer of organdy, stitching through both layers. "This gives your muslin strength," she explains, "and allows you to get as compulsive, as small and dense, as you want with the stitching." At a dye workshop, Boardman learned to dye more than 100 colors, which she can now "reproduce exactly each time." The Procion chemical dyes are permanent but, equally important, don't alter the hand of the fabric. The sky, ocean, and borders—so essential to her narratives—are all dye-painted directly onto the muslin.

With her fabric stretched on a roller frame, Boardman uses DMC six-strand cotton embroidery floss in "a dozen or so" colors: predominantly grays, blues, and greens that



evoke the place and period described in her narratives. "They're sort of muted, a bit foggy," Boardman says. "I always use two strands of the floss so I can make yet another color by combination."

Boardman's embroidery techniques are primarily those of traditional pictorial needlework, but they gain drama by her whimsical additions of scrimshaw, gold leaf, mica, and

needle lace. They give the narrative a third dimension, standing alone as independent images while in combination building a story.

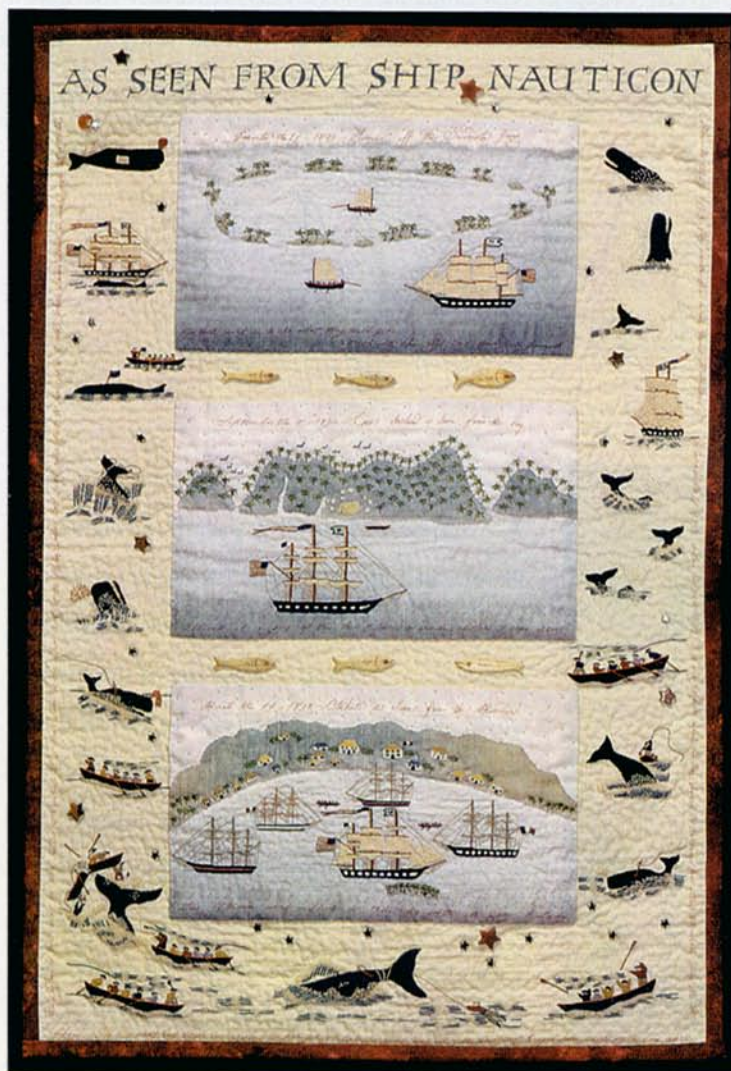
Boardman backs the embroidered, embellished muslin and organdy layers with thin cotton batting, which she in turn backs with another layer of cotton muslin. Tiny diagonal stitches over the entire surface add texture and linear interest.

For Boardman, "The overall design is the first and most important element, but because raised work is used so rarely, it draws people closer to look at it more carefully." A woman's world is multidimensional; her life, a complex of memories, perceptions, experiences, relationships with loved ones, and encounters with the self interwoven over time. Depicting the rich, complicated reality of women from America's history and bringing them to life, Boardman's embroidered narratives are a doorway to the past and to the viewer's inner world as well. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. *Julia Fein Azoulay, who currently divides her time between Florence, Italy, and New York City, writes about apparel and textiles for consumer and trade publications. She may be reached at fashionreporting@aol.com.*

Saw a Shoal Of Sperm Whales by Susan Boardman. Embroidery, needle lace, appliqué, quilting, dye painting, and scrimshaw. Cotton thread, leather, glass beads, wire, and ivory on hand-dyed cotton. 2003. 6½ x 9 inches (16.5 x 22.9 cm).

Photograph courtesy of the artist.



As Seen From Ship Nauticon by Susan Boardman. Embroidery, needle lace, appliqué, quilting, and dye painting. Cotton thread, leather, glass beads, and ivory on hand-dyed cotton. 1998. 27 x 18 inches (68.6 x 45.7 cm). From the collection of the artist.

Photograph courtesy of the artist.