

A Brief History of Embroidery
by
Lady Aranea (Bonnie Bain)

"Embroidery is the art of applying decoration by needle and thread to the surface of a piece of woven cloth." (Staniland, 1991, p. 4).

Embroidery as a means of embellishing clothing and other articles is a very ancient craft. For example, the buttonhole stitch, still in use today, dates back to at least 8,000 B.C.E. Needles with eyes have been found as far back as 30,000 B.C.E. while clothing decorated with stone beads and animal teeth dates back even farther, to 38,000 B.C.E. Metal needles were invented during the Bronze Age (2000-800 B.C.E.) and the oldest extant examples of chain stitch come from China around 475-221 B.C.E. (Leslie, 2007). Another ancient embroidery stitch is the cross stitch, which consists of two slanted straight stitches which cross over each other, forming an X. Cross stitch probably originated in Central Asia and the Middle East and the oldest extant piece dates from around 850 C.E. (Leslie, 2007).

Many of the stitches mentioned above are probably much more ancient than their oldest surviving examples since textiles often do not preserve well. The oldest surviving pieces of embroidery come from Egyptian tombs and include pieces such as embroidered hem panels on the tunic of King Tutankhamun (Leslie, 2007). Other very ancient embroideries which have managed to survive to the present day come from India (circa 2000 B.C.E), Greece, and China (Leslie, 2007).

The earliest examples of embroidery from Western Europe and the Middle East (at least based on surviving extant examples) date from around 700-1100 C.E. The most famous of these is the "Bayeux Tapestry" from around 1077, which, in spite of its name, is not a tapestry, but rather an embroidery. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and is an example of crewelwork, which is embroidery done with worsted wool thread on linen (Leslie, 2007).

From the eleventh-thirteenth centuries, cross stitch was very popular with western European noblewomen waiting for their husbands to return from the Crusades. During this time period, many noblewomen copied the patterns from Middle Eastern rugs into their own cross-stitched pieces (Leslie, 2007).

Blackwork or Spanish Work was another type of embroidery which was very popular in many parts of Europe during the Middle Ages. Blackwork, which consists of simple running stitches and back stitches, often worked in very intricate patterns which resemble lace, originated in northern Africa and was brought over to Spain by the Moors. It is believed to have then been carried from Spain to England by Catherine of Aragon, Queen of England from 1509-1533. During this period in England, it became a popular substitute for lace (Hogg, 2010; Leslie, 2007). The technique continued to flourish and became very fashionable under Henry VIII when blackwork on linen was found on womens' jackets and smocks and on mens' collars, sleeves, and cuffs. The technique remained popular and Queen Elizabeth I is depicted in a painting from 1590

wearing a dress in which the sleeves, bodice, and ruff are completely covered in blackwork (Hogg, 2010, p. 11).

Some members of the British Royalty were very skilled embroiders: for example, Mary Queen of Scots and her ladies in waiting were known for making very fine drawnwork and needlepoint pieces. For those royals and other nobles who did not embroider, there were many skilled craftsmen and women available to supply elaborately embroidered pieces for them and also many of these same craftspeople supplied ecclesiastical embroideries to the Church. As an example of the time and expense involved in these works, an altar-frontal was embroidered for Westminster Abbey around 1268. It took four women nearly four years (approximately 1268-1271) to complete the embroidery for this piece. Materials used for this project included gold and silk thread, pearls, enamels, garnets set in gold, and silver plaques. Payment was made on behalf of Henry III in 1271 and consisted of the following: total amount spent for materials was over 220 British pounds; the four embroiderers shared a payment of 36 pounds total for their four years of labor (Staniland, 1991).

The history of embroidery is a vast and complex subject and I have only had time in this article to share a few snippets of information about it. Anyone interested in pursuing the subject further should start with the references below. Happy reading!

References

Hogg, B. 2010. *Blackwork: Royal School of Needlework Essential Stitch Guides*. Search Press, Ltd., Tunbridge Wells, Kent, England.

Leslie, C. A., 2007. *Needlework Through History, An Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, USA.

Saint-Aubin, C. Germain de. 1770. *Art of the Embroiderer*. Translated facsimile edition edited by A. Rainoff, E. Maeder, and L. Dean, 1983. Co-published by Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California and David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., Boston Massachusetts, USA.

Staniland, K. 1991. *Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers*. 7th impression, 2006. The British Museum Press, London, England.