

Embroidery

By Kellie Hultgren / THL Caoilfhionn inghen Cheallaigh ui Mhordha

Embroidery is an ancient art that predates the period studied in the SCA by centuries—indeed, some of the oldest examples are Chinese works estimated to be 4,500 years old! Embroidery was practiced by practically every culture in every time period. It would be impossible to cover every aspect of this rich art form in one article; therefore, this brief introduction covers historical highlights and a few tips to get you started on a project. It is also primarily focused on the European cultures that dominate SCA participation, although the terms and techniques are useful in researching the works of other cultures.

Broadly defined, embroidery is the art of embellishing fabric using a needle and thread or other fibers. This includes everything from finishing seams on a garment with running stitch in contrasting thread, to covering entire garments with rich silk and gold work, to delicate and carefully patterned designs executed with a single thread.

Few examples of early embroidery remain, because the work is often fragile and the materials unlikely to survive unless conditions are perfect. The earliest references to Western embroidery, as well as the earliest extant examples (dating from the late ninth century), are closely related to the spread of Christianity across the continent. Evidence suggests that women, especially high-ranking religious women, worked most of the early pieces. There are textual references in records and sagas of secular embroidery during this time; however, there are few items remaining to prove it. Pieces were worked in a few simple stitches, especially *stem*, *split*, and *couching stitches*, with embellishments like seed pearls and gemstones, to create amazing works of art. Those three basic stitches, illustrated below, form the foundation of much of Western embroidery.

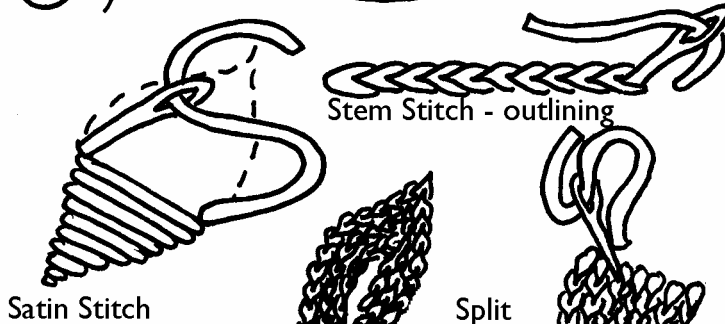
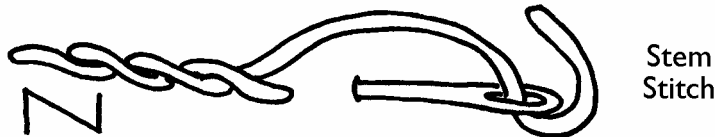
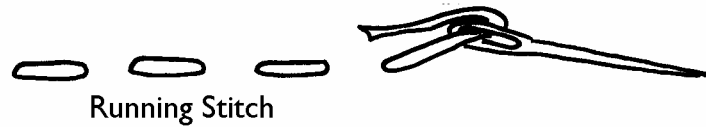
Embroidery reached new heights of technique and opulence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The market was still overwhelmingly religious and royal, but the pieces were increasingly commissioned from guild workshops and created by men and women. The style of the images depicted, mostly biblical stories and saints' lives, are closely related to the illumination styles of the time. Heraldry also began to appear in embroidered designs with more frequency.

Political and religious changes in the fifteenth century caused the center of production of embroidered works to shift from England to continental Europe, especially Belgium, France, and Italy. Embroidery also became more secular and widely distributed, although the best work remained in the hands of the nobility. The increased availability of elaborately woven imported fabrics encouraged the use of embroidery to enhance ground fabric rather than to cover an entire garment or hanging.

There are more examples of embroidery from the latter centuries of the SCA period remaining for close study, and the printing and distribution of pattern books, many of them German or Florentine, and the tradition of pattern samplers preserved many patterns and techniques after they fell out of favor. Extant items show the popularity of newer techniques and stitches: for instance, German and Scandinavian *counted-thread* embroidery uses *needle running*, *long-armed*

cross stitch, and *running stitch* to create colorful geometric designs. That tradition continues today in modern cross stitch and Hardanger (pulled thread) work. Although a few early examples of *applique* are known, that technique also blossomed in later centuries as the demand for household goods—especially hangings and bedding—increased. As the sixteenth century drew to a close, *blackwork* embroidery, also known as Spanish work, embellished lighter garments and accessories with intricate patterns worked in double running stitch.

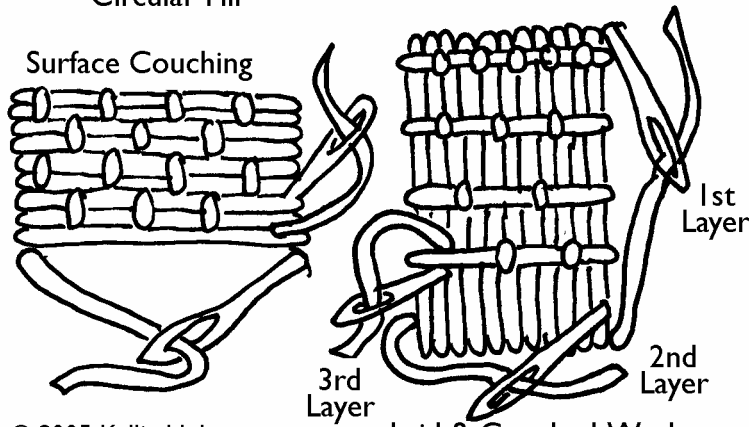
Some Common Stitches



Satin Stitch

Split Stitch -
Circular Fill

Split
Stitch -
Encroaching
Fill



Needle and thread, the basic materials needed for embroidery, have changed little since period. Early bone needles gave way to metal needles. The type of thread obviously changes across time periods and cultures, but silk, linen, and wool are most common; *ground fabrics* were also most commonly linen, wool, and silk. Many projects require an *embroidery frame* or *hoop*. All of these materials can be acquired for very little money, although, generally speaking, you will need to spend more money for period materials. The best ground fabrics are sturdy and evenly woven, without slubs or irregular threads. Cotton embroidery floss is cheap and easy to find and, while not common in period, it imitates the more expensive silk floss in color and usability. Embroidery wools are inexpensive and can be purchased at specialty craft and embroidery stores. Embroidery hoops are cheap and easy to find; embroidery frames and scrolls are more expensive but are often easier on the materials. Other tools, like stitch-laying tools, needle cases, thread organizers, and embroidery stands, are helpful but not necessary to enjoying the work.

When beginning a project, it is important to consider how it will be used. Are the materials washable? Will the embroidery be exposed to heavy use (as on garment cuffs and necklines), or can fragile stitches and materials be protected from snags and spills? Can the project be worked on at events, or should it be kept away from dusty outdoor activities? Do you want to exactly reproduce a period piece and, if so, what dye colors, materials, and stitches should you work with? If there is little documentation available, what can you extrapolate from extant pieces? If your budget is limited, what substitutions can you make and still achieve a beautiful piece? Once you have done a bit of planning, jump into the work. Remember, almost any mistake can be undone! Transfer pattern to fabric using a waterproof pen, an iron-on transfer, or chalk for dark fabrics. Thread your needle and get started; if you're worried about early mistakes, start at the back of a cuff or at the bottom of the design, where messy spots won't be as obvious. More specific project and stitch directions can be found in the diagrams and references below.

Embroidery is a fun and easy art to begin, even if you aspire only to decorate a tunic or create a banner. Mistakes are often easily fixed, and fabric and fiber are wonderfully forgiving media. With a little patience, you can use the simplest stitches to create beautiful items for personal use. And, if you enjoy the work, there are endless new techniques and projects awaiting your hands.

Glossary

appliqué: technique in which pieces are cut from one type of fabric and stitched onto the ground fabric to create patterns

blackwork: late-period technique, also known as “Spanish work,” in which running stitches are worked back and forth across couching; technique in which long pieces of one type of thread are laid across the ground and attached by smaller, perpendicular stitches; in *underside couching*, the perpendicular stitches pull a small loop of the couched thread through to the back of the fabric, hiding the couching thread

counted thread embroidery: any technique in which stitches are worked across a specific number of threads in the ground fabric counted threads to create repeating patterns,

usually in black thread on white backgrounds

embroidery frame: a set of four interlocking bars across which the ground fabric is stretched and tacked

embroidery hoop: two interlocking circles of wood, metal, or plastic between which ground fabric is stretched tight

embroidery scroll: a frame where two stretcher bars separate two dowels onto which ground fabric is rolled, so that tension and work area can be adjusted by scrolling fabric from one side to the other

even-weave fabric: a plain fabric in which the number of threads per square inch is the same horizontally and vertically

ground fabric: fabric on which stitches are worked

long-armed cross stitch: technique in which threads are stitched across counted threads in an X, with one leg of the X longer than the other and extending over or under the X preceding it

metal threads: often used in couching and underside couching, they are usually produced by beating gold and silver into thin foil, then cutting the foil into strips and winding it around a silk thread core

needle running: technique in which thread is woven through the ground fabric to make designs

Resources

Suggested Reading

The journal *Textile History*, available at libraries, compiles excellent articles on embroidery throughout the SCA period.

Classic Stitches Magazine Online. "Stitch Glossary."

http://www.classicstitches.com/know_how/index.cfm?cat=Stitch%20Glossary&let=A.

A collection of modern and historical stitches with very clear diagrams.

Reader's Digest Complete Guide to Needlework. Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1981. A modern introduction to embroidery (and other techniques) with clear instructions and diagrams, but no historical guides. ISBN 0895770598

Stanliand, Kay. Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. An affordable and widely available introduction to Medieval embroidery, packed with excellent photographs and up-to-date information ISBN 0802069150

Synge, Lanto. Art of Embroidery: History of Style and Technique. Woodbridge, England:

Antique Collector's Club, 2001. ISBN 185149359X

Warner, Pamela. Embroidery: A History. London: B.T. Batsford, 1991. A recent survey with excellent illustrations of layout and technique. ISBN 0713461063

Specific techniques:

Christie, Grace. English Medieval Embroidery. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938. An excellent and thorough study with a detailed catalog and many detailed figures, but recommended for use in conjunction with more recent research; the book itself is rare and beautiful

Clarke, Dorothy. Exploring Elizabethan Embroidery. Auckland, New Zealand: Georgeson Publishing Limited, 1997. First in the Elizabethan Needlework Series, this book gives detailed instructions for several beautiful projects.

French Textiles: From the Middle Ages through the Second Empire. Carlano, Marianne and Larry Salmon, eds. Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1985. Helpful commentary on secular embroidery in France during the height of English production, including notes on guilds and divergence of French techniques and design.

King, Donald and Santana Levey. Embroidery in Britain from 1200 to 1750. New York: Canopy Books, 1993.

Miller, Joyce. "Medieval Embroidery." <http://www.doctorbeer.com/joyce/emb/embroid.htm>. Last accessed 4/12/05. French, German, and Icelandic pattern recreations.

Mitchell, Timothy J. *A Stitch Out of Time: 14th and 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery*. <http://home.earthlink.net/~wymarc/asoot/stitch/cover.htm>. Last accessed 4/12/05.

Priest-Dorman, Carolyn. (Thora Sharptooth). *Textile Sources for the Re-enactor*. <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/textileres.html>. Last accessed 4/12/05.

Some of them were so important that they would pave the way, ultimately, to the modern world we live in. The following list is far from exhaustive and in no particular order. 1. The Printing press was revolutionary. Source: Daniel Chodowiecki/Wikimedia Commons. The printing press is probably the most important invention of the Middle Ages. They would prove to be very successful and were used right up to the end of the Middle Ages. They first began to appear in images around the 12th Century. Despite this, they came into their own when fully rigged ships became commonplace in the 14th Century and were a pre-requisite for the forthcoming Age of Discovery. Suddenly Europeans had a useful tool for navigating the oceans of the world. 15. Eyeglasses made everything clear.