

A History of Embroidery Materials

by

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"To Embroider is the art of adding the representation of such motifs as one chooses--flat or in relief, in gold, silver, or color--to the surface of a finished piece of cloth. There is hardly a Nation that does not embroider with the different materials produced by its climate." (Saint-Aubin, 1770, p. 16).

Embroidery materials consist of a fabric or "ground" and threads with which to make stitches on the fabric. A needle, with an eye big enough to accommodate the threads used for the project, and a pair of scissors are the only other items required. Depending on the type of embroidery being worked, often the fabric is placed into a frame or hoop to hold it taut so that the stitches will be more even and the fabric will not stretch out of shape. Some embroidery stitches, such as the continental or tent stitch (needlepoint) or half cross stitch (cross-stitch) will always distort the fabric and should always be stitched in a frame or hoop.

Many different types of fabrics and threads have been used for embroidery throughout history, including cotton, linen (flax), silk, and wool. Some of the earliest known extant embroidery on cotton pieces date from around 2000 B.C.E from India. Sericulture (silk production) began in China around 3000 B.C.E. and by the 4th century B.C.E., many beautiful silk embroideries were being produced in China (Leslie, 2007).

The oldest surviving examples of wool embroidery were produced during the first century B.C.E. in northern Mongolia. Only fragments of these remain and they depict the face of a nomad warrior. Wool embroidery was also done by the early Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, although few of these have survived to the present day. There are many biblical references to curtains, altar cloths, and other wall hangings decorated with wool embroidery (Leslie, 2007).

Crewelwork (from crewel or cruell--a thin worsted wool yarn) is always worked on linen using wool (crewel) yarn and employs a variety of embroidery stitches. This type of embroidery flourished in England beginning around 400 C.E. and is still popular today. Its heyday came during the time of James I and the name was changed to Jacobean Embroidery. The most famous example of crewelwork is the "Bayeux Tapestry" from around 1077 (Leslie, 2007).

The usage of cotton and linen as ground fabrics for embroidery is so common today that it has been very difficult to find much historical information on this topic. Worldwide, embroidery on cotton has been around for a very long time, but in medieval Europe, cotton had to be imported and was, therefore rarely used for clothing (Thursfield, 2001) or embroidery.

Since cotton does not grow well in northern Europe, embroidery on cotton, usually

with silk thread, has historically been found in warmer areas of the world such as the Indian Subcontinent. Here, over many centuries, each region has developed its own unique style using these materials. For example, in the Punjab region, phulkari or "flowerwork" is used to decorate wedding shawls and is often made by the bride's maternal grandmother. Phulkari work consists of satin stitch flowers, worked in yellow and orange silk embroidery threads (Leslie, 2007).

Linen comes from the stems of the flax plant and flax can be grown in much colder climates than cotton. Hence, flax (linen) was a much more common fabric in Medieval Europe and was extensively used for clothing and also for embroidery. Both wool and silk threads were used to embroider on linen and several different embroidery techniques were developed using these combinations of materials.

Crewelwork or Jacobean Embroidery (see above) used wool threads to embroider on a linen ground and came to be characterized by tree-of-life motifs. Blackwork, an embroidery technique which was very popular during the reign of Henry VIII in England (Hogg, 2010), was usually done with black silk thread on a white linen ground. This technique, worked in a single color, employed running and back stitches, in intricate lacelike designs. Other colors, including red, blue, and green, were also used and the finished embroidery was often further embellished with metallic threads and spangles.

Cotton floss (stranded cotton), the most commonly used embroidery thread today, did not come into general use until around 1800, with the discovery of the technique of mercerising cotton thread by passing it through a caustic soda "bath" which modified the cotton fibers, making them stronger and silkier in appearance (DMC History website).

Silk threads, when used in embroidery, give the finished piece a beautiful shiny appearance and silk embroidery, still very popular today, originated in China many centuries ago. Very early examples, from around 2000 years ago, depicted a Longevity motif and another had a Dragon and Phoenix on it. These early examples were very skillfully done, indicating that silk embroidery had already reached a very high level of development many centuries ago (Chinese Embroidery History website). During the Han Dynasty (221 B.C.-220 A.D.), embroidery came to symbolize social status and Chinese nobles began to wear very high-quality embroidered clothing to court functions. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), silk embroidery reached its greatest heights (Chinese Embroidery History website).

From China, the use of silk fabrics and threads spread throughout the known world, transported along the ancient Chinese Silk Road (Chinese Embroidery History website), and they quickly became popular as highly desirable luxury items once they reached Europe.

Over the centuries, many other items have been used for embroidery including fabrics made from materials such as tree bark and pineapple cloth and embellishments have included items such as metallic threads and spangles,

beads, shells, gems, seeds, and insect wings.

I will close with a quote from Saint-Aubin (1770, p. 17):

"Almost all materials may be used in Embroidery: gold, furs, pearls, *le burgos* (mother-of-pearl), cut marcasite, precious stones, even diamonds. Man's industry and vanity turn all of Nature into a contributor; but, these materials, however precious they be, only add to the whole if they are well placed. Distributed with taste, they add to the overall effect: cadence in the shapes; the correct juxtaposition of large to small; of strong to weak; of soft to brightly colored; especially of blank space and repose--in a word, a selected imitation of Nature and the principles common to all the Arts."

References

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