

Elizabethan Embroidery



The image above is the Jane Bostocke sampler, from the Victoria and Albert Museum website, item number T.190-1960.

The Elizabethan age was one of the periods of great English embroidery. Elizabethan embroidery differs from its predecessors in being primarily secular and domestic, though one would hardly call the works amateur. Although there were still professional embroiderers working for church and court, embroidery was now a craft done at home and for the home.

This was a time of relative peace and expanding prosperity. The increased stability in the middle and upper classes and their greater affluence fostered displays of wealth in home furnishings and in dress. Embroidery was done for a purpose – it decorated the body and the home.

This great popularity of embroidery occurred at the same time as the rise of printing. Flowers were a favorite subject of embroidery. There were 14 known herbal or gardening books published in the 16th century. Other design sources included emblem books and bestiaries, as well as charted design books.

The following flowers were found in Elizabethan embroidery:

- Roses – including the rosa alba (white rose) and damask rose
- Carnations (also known as gillyflowers)
- Iris
- Red peony
- Pansy (also known as love-in-idleness and cupid's flower)
- Daffodils (also known as narcissus)
- Violets
- Wild hyacinth (also known as bluebell)
- Honeysuckle (also known as woodbine)
- Cornflowers (also known as blewbotles)
- Daisy

Several distinctive styles of embroidery marked this age. Blackwork, canvas work, whitework, as well as a style characterized by silk and metal embroidery are all identified with this period.



Blackwork may be the style we of the SCA think of first, as it is still popular today. The counted thread blackwork with which we are familiar with is only part of the period blackwork phenomenon, which also included freeform designs and specialty stitches. Uncounted (for lack of a better term) blackwork was still balanced and symmetrical, but did not depend on the grid of the background for the consistency of the design. The

counted designs were often used as fill stitches in the elements of a large design. (This image is from the Cleveland Museum of Art. It is item number 1934.206)

Blackwork is often described as having been brought to England by Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. While it is certain that blackwork was used to decorate her clothes and linens, some form of black embroidery had been known in England for at least 100 years, since it was mentioned by Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales, specifically the *Miller's Tale*, in which the carpenter's wife's clothing is described as follows:

“Her smock was white, embroidery repeated
Its pattern on the collar front and black
Inside and out, it was of silk and black”

(modern translation by Nevill Coghill) Other translations refer to the thread as “coal black silk.”

Unfortunately we have no surviving garments with such black silk embroidery from the Medieval period, but fortunately for us, we have an abundance of items from the Tudor and Elizabethan times – found in artwork and in surviving garments.

The terms Spanish work and Spanish stitch were used during Catherine of Aragon's time. The Spanish stitch was possibly the double running stitch or some type of reversible cross stitch. Spanish work is believed to have referred to blackwork on costumes. (Zimmerman, pg.3)

Blackwork, as a term, was distinguished from Spanish work in the Elizabethan period. In inventories of New Year's gifts, Elizabeth received items of both Spanish work and blackwork. It is believed that blackwork referred to the filling patterns found in designs of flowers, leaves, animals, insects, etc that were found inside coiling stem patterns, (ibid, pg 4).

. In clothing it was found on underclothes, men's shirts, doublets, cuffs, sleeves, caps, partlets, stomachers, foreparts, jackets, coifs, forehead cloths, hoods, handkerchiefs, collars, sleeves (detachable), handkerchiefs, collars, and underskirts (ibid, pg 5). Interestingly enough, there have been so sweete bags found to date that were decorated with blackwork (I heard this from Eowin Amberdrake, when I attended a meeting of Caid's embroidery guild. She is currently writing a book on sweete bags, which she has been painstakingly researching for over a decade.)

Blackwork was also a major form of decoration on household linens, including curtains, pillow covers, and bed linens. Several pillow covers survive today. It was also used in chalice veils, one of the few forms of ecclesiastical embroidery one finds mentioned as having been made in the period.

My favorite use for blackwork has to be samplers. Although few samplers have survived (the most famous and only dated sampler in the period is the Jane Bostocke sampler), they are described in several period works and were mentioned in wills. The Bostocke

sampler includes spot motifs, border designs, silk and metal threads, pearls, black beads and a great variety of stitches; it is not just a blackwork sampler. Barnabe Riche's tale of *Phylotus and Emilia* in 1582 describes the life of a rich man's wife and we find the following quote:

“Now, when she had dined, then she might go seek out her examplers, and to peruse which work would do beste in aruffe, whiche in a gorget, whiche in a sleeve, wkich in a quaife, whiche in a caule, and whiche in a handcarcheef...”

Quoted in Digby, pg 90. All of these seem to be designs that would be perfectly suited to blackwork, leading me to believe that blackwork samplers were worked in period.

Another style is canvas work, seen in table carpets and the panels made by Mary, Queen of Scots and Bess of Hardwick. Slips, which are small motifs (often flowers or plants) applied to larger panels, were also popular. Stitches used in canvas work include cross stitch, tent stitch and long arm cross stitch, all of which are still popular in needlepoint. Many of the designs in Mary's needlework can be found in period bestiaries, especially that of Conrad Gesner. (The image below, attributed to Mary, Queen of Scots, is from the Victoria and Albert Museum website, it is image T.33H-1955)



Table carpets were another popular item made using canvas work. These carpets can be seen in several paintings – always on tables instead of the floor. The Bradford table carpet is one of the most famous. Long pillows and bed hangings, such as valences, were also stitched in this style. Slips were another use of canvas work – items embroidered in tent stitch on linen and cut out and applied to another surface, such as velvet.

White work includes reticella, cutwork and lacemaking. Collars, cuffs and ruffs were made using these techniques, as well as other household goods and samplers. There is a surviving whitework sampler in the Fitzwilliam Museum. Some people believe that elements of modern hardanger can be found in period white work designs, but this isn't a universal belief, by any means.

The final style is perhaps the catchall one and includes some of the elements found in blackwork. Dorothy Clarke calls this style “Coloured Silk Embroidery.” (Exploring Elizabethan Embroidery, 1997, pgs 8-9) This style is epitomized by opulent scrolling stem patterns surrounding flowers and insects. Pearls, spangles, jewels and beads were often used to embellish the embroidery. Gold and silver threads were also a hallmark of this style. These designs were used on clothing – coifs, hoods, nightcaps, stomachers, partlets, jackets, sleeves, gloves, and sweet bags, among other items – and household furnishings such as cushions and bed hangings.

Sweete bags were very popular in this era because they were the period version of a gift bag. All nobles and even some bishops were obligated to give Queen Elizabeth gifts of gold coins in decorated bags at the New Year. (Digby, pg 70) They were also used for gifts among the nobility and used to hold small devotional books that often also had embroidered bindings



Image from the Victoria and Albert Museum website, item number T.258-1926.

Another favorite gift of this time was gloves, which were also a perfect item to embroider in this style. We have several surviving gloves. A popular design (or at least one that has survived) was a mitten style with a large, embroidered cuff.

The following stitches are used in Elizabethan era embroidered items in the Victoria and Albert Museum, as described in Guide to English Embroidery, Victoria and Albert Museum by Patricia Wardle (London:HMSO,1981):

French knots, back, stem, chain, braid, buttonhole, plaited braid, double coral, long and short, speckling, long-armed cross, tent, cross and satin.

The following are the stitches found in the Bostocke sampler:

back, Algerian Eye, satin, chain, ladder, buttonhole, detached buttonhole, coral, two-sided Italian cross, couching, speckling and French knots.

The following stitches are mentioned in Elizabethan Embroidery by George Wingfield Digby:

cross, back, buttonhole, detached buttonhole, two sided Italian cross stitch, back, tent, plaited braid, coral, ladder, couching, oriental, speckling, split, gobelin, French knots, eyelet holes, herringbone, long and short, double running, pattern darning, chain, stem