

The Art of Embroidery Series

From the Beginning
A Primer

Forward

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The Art of Embroidery Series

From the Beginning — A Primer Forward

The content of this five-part volume covers the basics in hand sewing and hand embroidery. The substance of this work is designed for the beginner — or the intermediate stitcher who has some experience with hand work, but is unsure how to proceed. In these pages you will find basic how-to's, myths dispelled, small samplers to practice your skill. The volume ends with two projects to test your newly learned mastery.

This compilation will become a valuable reference tool that you can use often as your experience level increases. It is dedicated to those who wish to learn but haven't found adequate text on the included subjects. It will take you step by step to a sound foundation. The text is richly illustrated and contains generous explanations to help you learn the history as well as the rewarding pastime of hand sewing and embroidery with a minimum of frustration.

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“Everything you do with a needle and thread improves what else you do with needle and thread.” —Anon.

From the Beginning

What makes a Skilled Needle Worker? Something to refer to when frustrated

A student once remarked that she was upset about an early sewing experience. While in home economics as a young teen, she got *only* a C on her project because the buttons were sewn on poorly. This woman related the event so devastated her that she didn't try sewing again until 30 years later. She added, "***Who looks at the backs of buttons, anyway!***"

The answer to that is no one, except perhaps a judge in a juried show, or maybe a busybody with great skills who can't wait to gloat.

But, that isn't the point. There's nothing wrong with the "C." It means *average*. Not all of us will be proficient enough to enter a juried show – and it is no one's business how neat (or not so neat) is your work. Indeed, it wasn't until the mid twentieth century that neat backs became a bone of contention in embroidery. Prior to that, much embroidery had rather messy backs, and museum pieces are rife with examples.

Some people have a built-in coordination that allows them to make identical stitches in precise measurements in every seam, hem and embroidery stitch. Others – and by far the vast majority – will be lucky to get nice, even stitches most of the time. A few at the other end will never be adept enough. Just like an opera diva or a skating champion, a few will develop into grand champions of their field, lots more fall into the middle ground somewhere, and a few can't sing or stand up on skates, no matter how hard they try. Some of this is your physical attributes (the muscle coordination and physical condition you are born with), some is practice (some have to practice more than others), and the remainder of the equation is individual, creative talent which you also have no control over (but can, in most circumstances, be nurtured). Emotions play a big role, and when tired or under great stress, concentration wanes.

Don't let your first awkward attempts deter you from continuing on. The virtuosi of any field didn't become so in a day. They spent many years and thousands of hours perfecting their skills. Their natural abilities and perseverance put them over the edge of that which is considered average abilities.

The first assumption is that you are reading this because needlework is something you want to do, as opposed to being forced to learn. It is highly unlikely, and indeed uncommon, to be totally incompetent at this craft. Your inborn skills, experience level, and emotional balance play large roles in how quickly you succeed. Some persons understand the concepts immediately and are able to use needle and thread easily. Perhaps they had some lessons earlier in life, or have prowess in other related fields, such as typing, playing a musical instrument, or any similar activity which requires fine motor skills. Others are slower to interpret the graphics and relate it to the real object at hand. It may be the first time holding a needle.

As to the quoted student above who received a grade of C because of the sloppily sewn buttons, it is important to remember that you must take your time. Beginning with your first stitch, your work is built stitch by stitch. The way in which each stitch is executed makes a tremendous difference in the quality of the finished piece.

Sewing on buttons neatly and precisely is good practice for doing other sewing and embroidery tasks neatly and precisely. You develop a rhythm. Pretty soon, buttons go on quickly almost each time you do them.

This skill translates itself in handling other details and stitches. Don't approach a task as if this particular one doesn't matter because you can't *see* the results, and therefore you do it any old way. It matters because you will know that you were sloppy. It also matters because you are cheating yourself of a learned skill that is to your benefit, whether or not you ever perfect it.

Okay. So your first two dozen buttons aren't very well sewn, and your basting stitch looks like something a five-year-old might do. Keep trying. Each time you do a task, make an effort to do it better than the last attempt. It is important to be patient with yourself. A poorly sewn button is not a failure on your part unless you gave way to the temptation of not trying to do it better. You will succeed in the long run.

What happens if almost everything else you do is sensational, but you still – after 150 attempts – can't sew on a button that would pass scrutiny by even a novice? Well, as said above, each of us has to learn what we can do. Not all of us will succeed to master status. Be pleased with yourself for what you have accomplished and trade your button sewing with someone who can't do something else at which you are superior.

Reaching for Perfection

Much of learning to perfect individual stitches is just doing them. Over and over again. I have also found that there is something else that goes along with this repetition. It is studying what you are doing as you do it.

Love each stitch as you lay them. —Margaret Boyles

Are you careful so that each thread laid has maintained the original twist, or are some of the threads untwisted? Be curious about each stitch and how you are using it in a given situation. Do you use the same hole at the bottom of a triangular shape, or do you do something “almost” the same, such as piercing threads slightly above the hole on some stitches in order to fill the shape neatly? What does it mean when an authority says, “Your stitching lacks control.”? These questions and puzzles can’t really be taught. They must be experienced. And the needleworker who pays attention, who experiments, who can “love each stitch as it is laid” will be more successful than the stitcher who merely follows a graphic and says, “Well, this just doesn’t work!”.

It will work eventually. You must have patience with yourself. At first you will be struggling to master the basics of a given stitch, such as the needle goes in here and comes out there. It will be awhile before you learn exactly where “here” and “there” actually are located. And it will take even longer before your fingers learn to manipulate just those simple steps with any degree of comfort. But once your needle starts flying in and out of, say, a stem stitch, it is then that you can slow down and study how it maintains a distinct curve or point, and if not, how you can go about getting those perfect curves and points.

Embroidery isn’t quick, although there are small patterns which work up in no time at all. The truly outstanding show stoppers are worked by experienced needleworkers who patiently laid each stitch with an eye for detail and an attention to the design elements. Every piece you work will add to your experience level. With that in mind, it is important that you keep on stitching, even if your end results are less than ideal. Especially as you are just beginning to learn. In time, you will discover embroidery’s rewards: the fascination with a project as one color after another adds to the magic of the whole piece; how each different stitch creates that exquisite texture that only hand embroidery can embody. For although machines can mimic, they cannot duplicate the priceless beauty of hand work.

You may be quite satisfied with average ability and considerably less than perfect work. There is nothing wrong with that philosophy, as long as you accept where you are in the scheme of things. For it is far better to be stitching something than it is to give up and not stitch at all. Your work will be treasured by your friends and relatives, as anything you do will be stitched with love whether or not it is a museum quality piece.

How Do I Get Started?

Learn to practice everything a bit at a time. Stretch frequently, especially after a session. Hand sewing and embroidery should be done in 20-minute blocks so that you can rest your eyes, shoulders, wrists, necks and back in between times. Research has shown this is better for learning, anyway. The more often you do something,

and the shorter the time element of a session, the better your brain and muscles remember what to do. Just as a gymnast starts out with tumbling, stretching and balancing on one foot before attempting the balance beam, you will start “training” your fingers, eyes and body with basic stitches that will get tinier and tinier as your skills improve. How much time is based on individual talent, desire and a stubborn refusal to quit. You will reach plateaus where you will be stuck. This will pass. These are periods where your body and mind are sorting out and solidifying what you know to that point. Sometimes it even helps to take a break of one or more weeks (even months) during this period. It is a normal learning curve. When you again pick up fabric, needle, and thread, you will be amazed at your newfound progress.

Several beginning subjects are laid out to help you make useful and intelligent decisions about tools you will need to get started. Once you have read them, make notes on a shopping list.

Included in this volume is a square of aida cloth and a skein of pearl cotton¹ to help you master the first hand stitches for sewing. Once you have made your little sampler, and have read **Section Two**, you can make a trip to your nearest fabric or needlework shop to purchase the remainder of your supplies.

Also, included is a piece of muslin and a skein of cotton floss. Use these to make a sampler of your embroidery stitches after you have practiced on the aida. Continue to use this “doodle cloth” as you learn new stitches in this series or in other patterns. You will find this little cloth a treasure to view in years to come.

Some 19th-century and early 20th-century authors cautioned that the worker should sit at a table and not hold the material in your lap. That it was better for your posture and muscles. You may find working at a table awkward at first. For some tasks, it is easier e.g., when using a sewing bird – see Part Two page 30, whipping², or seaming large areas of fabric. With other tasks such as pin stitching a hem, you might find it just as relaxing to sit in a comfortable chair and sew. Do what is comfortable for you, trying out different areas and furniture to see which best suits your personal needs and the task at hand.

- You will need a half-yard of good-quality fine muslin (sometimes referred to as fine quilter’s muslin) for sampling new stitches as you learn them. For expediency, the word muslin will be referred to often. However, you can substitute with cotton broadcloth, lawn, percale or domestic batiste (see Part Three, page 20) for practicing your new techniques – or relearning those already accomplished should you be at a higher level of expertise. Just remember to make certain to purchase a one-hundred percent natural fabric. Fabric which contains polyester, nylon, or other manmade fibers, do not work well for hand sewing. The exceptions are some rayon fabrics. You will only get frustrated if you try to hand sew or embroider on something other than cotton, linen, silk, fine wool or blends of these fibers (such as a cotton/linen blend).
- In addition to the supplies mentioned in the following pages, you will need a good steam iron and ironing board. If you don’t have an ironing board, you can use a thick, wooden cutting board on which you place a doubled Turkish (terry) towel, and top it with a linen or cotton dish towel. This is frequently handy for ironing small pieces if your ironing board is out of easy reach.

¹Pearl cotton is often sold under the French term *coton perle*. It is a soft, lightly twisted, shiny cotton thread used in knitting, crocheting and embroidery. It is available in size 1 (largest diameter) to 12 (finest).

²Used here, the term whipping describes stitching over a rolled or pressed tiny hem. Whipping is also a stitch. See overhanding, page 8, Part Four.

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- A clean, plastic spray bottle filled with tap water is good for dampening cloth. Recycle one from your cleaning supplies. If you live in an area with a high iron content in the water, you might consider purchasing bottled water to avoid accidental rust stains.
- Some authorities recommend starching (either commercial spray cans or make your own to use in a spray bottle). This is not always a good idea when hand sewing. While ironing, it is much easier to distort the grain line when starch is applied. It is also a good way to scorch the fabric if you're not very careful. Save the starch for the finished product – at least in the beginning. That being said, some individuals prefer to work (and have an easier time of it) when using starched fabric. So, experiment with your muslin to see which works best for you. Just remember to be careful ironing so that the edges are completely square. The distortion can be removed, but it is easier if you don't have the frustration of pulling it straight while sewing.

The important thing to remember is to always work toward your individual best abilities.



Full view and detail of a Zeeland Bonnet – a private collection