

A Brief History of the Human Figure in Embroidery

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So you want to embroider a human figure? Where to start, what style did they do them in? Where do I look for patterns? All these and other questions you want answered well lets take a brief tour through SCA period and look at some sources of Human figures in embroidery.

Human figures in embroidery have existed almost since the invention of needles, one of the earliest surviving examples being a 6th century roundel Egyptian piece of wool work on Linen. The depiction of human figures in embroidery ranges from highly stylized to humanistic. Some of the stylized figures are so abstract that sometimes you have to check the descriptions to be sure the figure really is human. Others are so life like that with the movement of fabric they could almost be breathing.

Most depictions of humans before the renaissance tend to be stylized, in other words they do not follow the rules of realistic proportion or perspective. Cases in point include the Bayeux Tapestry with some border figures rivaling Picasso in style. The renaissance was a revolution in the depiction of human figures that affected almost all forms of art including embroidery. Majority of works both during and after the renaissance have much more realistic human proportions although each follows a style that is unique to that time period.

Below is a brief snapshot of styles that depict human figures with links to resources especially web sites so that you can find out more. This is by no means an exhaustive list; but it is hopefully something to wet your appetite for more.

Viking Embroidery 9th - 10th Century – stylized depictions of human faces have survived on the famous Mammen embroidered textiles. Although full figure human depictions have not survived, outlines of heads in stem stitch on wool and silk have. Difficult to pick out the human faces on the example to the right but you can find line drawings of the motif on the site below.



- ❖ Viking Embroidery Stitches and Motifs by Þóra Shartooth - <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikembroid.html>

Laid work, 10th -12th Century – the most famous example of laid work is of course the Bayeux tapestry. Misnamed it is actually an embroidery worked exclusively in stem stitch and laid work. This piece has multiple depictions of human figures including some that are in no doubt anatomically correct (if somewhat exaggerated).

- ❖ Bayeux work article - http://www.sca.org.au/st_florians/Artisains-guilds/embroidery/bayeux.htm

Convent Stitch 14th Century – examples include the Mantel wall hanging, Tristran wall hanging and the Rossenberg hanging. This style is a variation of laid work done in wool on linen whereby each long stitch is couched down individually rather than in a cluster as in Bayeux work.

- ❖ "The Technique of Couching" by Bess Haddon of York on the WCOB page at <http://www.sca.org.au/broiderers/> under resources.



Opus Anglicanum (English Work) 13th -14th Century – worked in split stitch and underside couching was one of the high points of embroidery styles. Human figures, saints and fictional characters are common themes to this work. The figures are stylized but have a high degree of drama in their depiction. Want to know more?

- ❖ Opus Anglicanum article - http://www.sca.org.au/st_florians/Artisains-guilds/embroidery/opus.htm

Underside Couching 13th – 14th century – an early form of couching whereby the surface thread was pulled through the ground fabric on each stitch. The resultant work is a lot more flexible than conventional couching and suitable for clothing. Used extensively in opus anglicanum work it was also worked as a filler stitch to depict figures.

- ❖ See “fragment with kings in scrolls” – figure 4 in King, D. & Levey, S. (1993) “The Victoria & Albert Museum’s Textile Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200 to 1750” Canopy Books, New York
- ❖ Technique of underside couching is show in the Opus Anglicanum article shown above.



Beading of Figures 13th – 16th Century – an often forgotten style, beadwork existed throughout period and yes there are human figures depicted in this style. As can be shown in the figure to the left of a section of a 13th Century Altar Front.

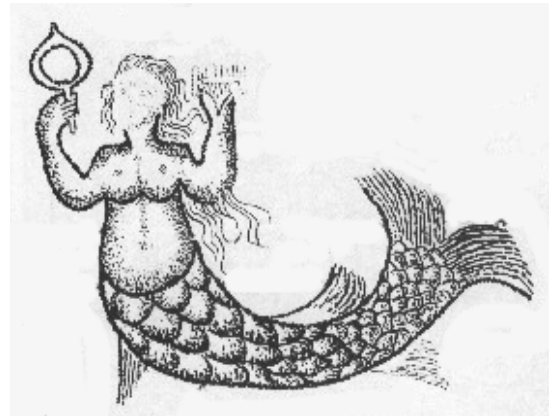
- ❖ The Medieval Beadwork page by Lady Elspeth of Grizel of Dunfort - <http://www.medievalbeads.com/docs/docs-13th.html#>
- ❖ Mouse's Guide to Beading" by Keridwen the Mouse York on the WCOB page at <http://www.sca.org.au/broiderers/> under resources.

German Brickwork, 14th – 15th Century – There is quite a range of human figures to be found in brickwork from repeating stylized border designs through to almost epic like wall hangings.

- ❖ *A STITCH OUT OF TIME: 14th and 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery* by Master Richard Wymac. This is a summary of his research to date on the subject of German Embroidery. Originally published as: *Compleat Anachronist* #86 (July 1996). Also at his webpage on <http://home.flash.net/~wymarc/asoot/stitch/westpat.htm> - see Pattern 5

Blackwork / Monochrome / Spanish Work 14th - 16th Century – one of the worst named styles of embroidery there is! This one word covers so many styles and periods that it causes more confusion than clarification, but covering all the issues on different types of blackwork would be a complete article in itself so to sum it up very simply. Blackwork is more than the counted Elizabethan style of work that many of us are familiar with. This style also covers many pieces done in a single color and to make things even more confusing they can also be in colors other than black; green and red being the most common alternatives hence the other term of monochrome work. The names that define the different types of blackwork also changes with the writer so although these are the terms I use they will not be consistent across texts.

- Free-form Blackwork – This is just the outline of a figure, with no filling or shading stitches. This style includes one of the first pieces considered to be blackwork, a 13th century depiction of the ascension. Human figures outlined in stem stitch with no filling stitches.
- Speckling Blackwork – a combination of mostly stem stitch for outline and speckling stitch (also called seeding stitch) used as a filling stitch to shade the figure and give it a more 3 dimensional effect. See the figure to the right which is off the Shepherd Buss (1600)
- Elizabethan Blackwork – This includes works that are often outlined in Stem Stitch and filled with a variety of geometric stitch patterns.



References for Blackwork

- ❖ Complete Anachronist - Blackwork Embroidery No. #31 May 1987
- ❖ Complete Anachronist – Wrought with Flowers of Black Silk No. 115 April 2002
- ❖ A good blackwork bibliography is on the Elizabethan Costume Site - <http://www.dnaco.net/~aleed/corsets/black-bib.html>

Or Nue 15th – 16th Century – think of it as couching, taken to the ultimate extreme, figures here are very realistic and there are some beautiful Flemish pieces still in existence. The stitch detail is so finely wrought on these pieces that you may have to look close to determine that they are not painted.

- ❖ Staniland, Kay (1991) “Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers”, British Museum Press, UK – there is a beautiful piccy on the back cover.

Tapestry or Tent stitch 16th century - tent stitch combined with double-running stitch done on canvas was a popular stitch choice during the Elizabethan era. Elizabethans used them to produce a number of very detailed embroidery pieces often common domestic items such as cushions, valances, table carpets, wall hangings etc. Popular subjects included scenes from everyday life such hunting scenes as shown in the Bradford Table Carpet or bestiaries as shown in the Oxburgh Wall Hanging.

- ❖ Some times figures done in tent stitch were appliquéd onto other fabrics such as velvet or silk. These were called slips, examples can be found in King, D. & Levey, S. (1993) "The Victoria & Albert Museum's Textile Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200 to 1750" Canopy Books, New York – see especially fig 40.
- ❖ Slips - Maestra Clare de Estepa – Slips Handout - <http://www.planetc.com/users/derwyddon/sliphandout.html>
- ❖ Meg Andrews – Late 16th / Early 17th century Elizabethan Slips - <http://www.victoriana.com/shops/andrews/slips.htm>

Needlelace or Punto in Aria 16th Century – one of the most poetically named styles as the literal translation means stitches in air. Popular themes include allegorical as well as mythical figures such as cupids.

- ❖ Federico Vinciolo's "Renaissance Patterns for Lace, Embroidery and Needlepoint" available from Dover Publications is a reproduction of a book originally published in 1587 and includes a number of human figures in lace.

16th Century Assisi / Voided work – this is a style typified by voided patterns outlined in backstitch with the background covered (commonly) in single coloured long arm cross-stitch. The term Assisi was not used in period but is a modern term for this style. It is hard to find examples of human depictions in Assisi work but they do exist to the determined searcher.

- ❖ "Stalking the Wild Assisi" by Baroness Kathryn Goodwyn, O.L – which is her article on Assisi research - <http://mywebpages.comcast.net/medievalneedle/assisi.htm>
- ❖ Clare's Medieval Embroidery Page – Maestra Clare de Estepa, OL - includes her class notes and bibliography - <http://www.planetc.com/users/derwyddon/embroider.html#assisi>

Satin Stitch 16th Century – this common embroidery stitch makes it mark in the late 16th century and there are some beautiful surviving examples of brightly coloured human figures on gloves. As can be seen in the picture to the right.



Other sources of Inspiration

It is worth remembering that throughout SCA “period” designers worked across mediums and would work not only on embroidery designs but also calligraphy, frescos etc. If you are trying to design an original piece first determine the time period that you wish to work. Look for surviving embroidery pieces, what materials did they use, stitches, etc. Then explore contemporary pieces such as calligraphies, wood and stonework, jewelry and other art forms.

Things to look for include color choices and schemes, common themes or patterns or even popular stories or myths. Keep also in mind the country of origin of the artwork and the embroidery style as just because laid work was done in England in the 10th century does not guarantee that it was done in Germany in the same era. In fact in this instance the stitch would more likely have been convent work.

Lastly as so many embroidery pieces have been lost over time, it is worth reading up on some of the surviving books and paperwork for the time period that you have chosen. A rich source of reference information survives in ship manifests, household accounts, wills, guild charters and church inventories. These references can point to ways in which the embroidery was used and the type of materials used. For example commissions for cushions, wall hangings, horse trappings or clothing, descriptions of works in manifests and accounts of jewels, silk etc can give you pointers about an embroidery which no longer exists.

Whatever style or time period you choose there is a wealth of art and references which can assist you in your endeavors.

Have fun!