

RSN Essential Stitch Guides

RSN Essential Stitch Guides: Crewelwork

by Jacqui McDonald



The Royal School of Needlework teaches hand embroidery to the highest standard, developing techniques in new and innovative ways. This book includes an extensive stitch guide, covering all the stitches necessary for crewel embroidery, a design section, and a history of the Royal School itself.

The history of crewelwork

Although it is commonly thought of as a woven tapestry, the Bayeux Tapestry is in fact the oldest surviving example of crewelwork. The illustrations on the piece tell the story of the events leading up to the Norman Conquest, and are embroidered on to the linen surface with a two-ply worsted wool. Laid stitches (see page 43) were used for the characters and scenery; couching (see page 60) for outlines and stem stitch (see page 55) to define detail and to render the lettering.

Worsted wools are thought to have originated in the farming village of Worstead in Norfolk. This native resource, most appropriate to the British climate, was manufactured into clothing and became one of Britain's most successful industries. To this day the inhabitants of Worstead continue the tradition of spinning, dyeing and weaving fleece from local sheep.

Although primarily spun to produce woollen cloth, at some point it became popular to use this yarn to embroider. At first, monochrome motifs stitched in wool, with a small number of different stitches, such as stem and seeding, (see page 50) were the most common, but embroidered curtains and bed hangings that resembled designs inspired by woodcut prints are known.

Foreign trade created by Elizabeth I, initially devised to bring back valuable spices, found a foothold in Northern India where English merchants picked up coffee in Mocha and cloth in Gujarat. Egyptian trade was found to be profitable as they too welcomed cotton cloth in exchange for silver, which reduced the drain on English silver, while the Persians provided a market for the English woollens. Inevitably some of these Indian and African fabrics made it back to Europe, where they were well received. Pampalores and pintadoes, painted calicos that came to be known in England as chintz, were produced on the Coromandel coast of India and became very popular in the now-furnished households of Britain.

By the late seventeenth century, cheap, washable cotton cloth and luxurious woven silks were in huge demand and contributed to the changing fashions in Britain. Fine, beautiful fabrics encouraged less padding to be worn and instead more to be added to the furniture, which during the Tudor period had been fairly stark.

Furnishings obviously called for something a little more durable than clothing and designers began to create textile furnishings with easily accessible and more resilient materials such as dyed wools and heavy-duty linens, their designs inspired by the fashionable tree of life patterns found on the pampalores.

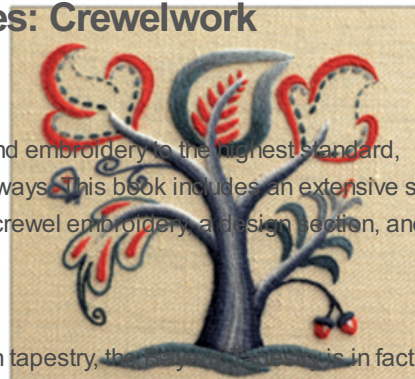
After the Protestant Reformation there was little demand for ecclesiastic work, so it was more common to see embroidery used for secular and domestic objects. Crewel embroidery thus became more popular, and professional craftsmen, laden with pattern books, travelled the country redesigning the interiors of the wealthy, adorning country houses with cosy furnishings, panels, fire screens and bed-hangings embroidered with exotic illustrations. The lady of the house would then embroider these patterns with colourful crewel wools.

Crewelwork reached its peak in popularity during the following Stuart period, after Elizabeth I died and James VI of Scotland acceded to the throne of the United Kingdom as King James I. Increasingly, amateur embroiderers took up needlework for pleasure and to furnish their own home, and it became the done thing for a young lady to accomplish.

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Crewelwork



INFORMATION

Publication:
29 September 2010

Price:
£10.99

Format:
BE Spiral bound

Size:
155x215 mm

ISBN:

9781844485505

EAN:

9781844485505

Extent:

96 pages

Publisher:

Search Press

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