

## Vintage Embroideries to Warm the Spirit Part 1

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*Embroidered basket of flowers on kitchen towel*

Embroidery, the timeless art of decorating fabric with thread, has been enjoyed by many different cultures over the centuries. Samples of embroidery were found in early Egypt, and countries such as Persia, England, and India have strong needlework traditions that include embroidery, as do China, Japan, and many European countries. The purpose of embroidery is to embellish fabric to make it more pleasing to the senses and, in some instances, to make it "fit for a king."

Embroidery is always a choice, not a necessity. It can instantly transform common household linens, bringing cheer to anyone who uses them. The many utilitarian objects adorned with embroidery would not lose their usefulness without the added motifs. Whether a woman embroidered a tea towel, placed a monogram on a nineteenth-century travel bag, or made a cutwork bureau scarf, embroidery stitches enhanced the visual enjoyment of these textile objects.

### Types of Embroidery

Simple stitches can often result in treasured heirlooms. The techniques vary and so do the motifs; yet we see

repeated themes, such as baskets of flowers and terriers in the embroideries shown here. These items are the work of women who lived in both the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Common embroidered goods of those time periods include bureau scarves (often featuring a colonial lady in a bonnet), pillowcases with flowers and/or butterflies, tea towels with a myriad of decorative designs, and linens with dainty floral motifs to line bread baskets.

The plethora of different styles of embroidery techniques include bead work, Brazilian embroidery (worked with rayon threads that are Z-twisted rather than S-twisted), cross stitch, counted cross stitch, crewel work (including Jacobean embroidery), cutwork, Deerfield embroidery (characterized by the New England laid stitch), needlepoint (often called canvas work today), outline stitch embroidery, petit point, Mountmellick work (from Ireland), silk embroidery and silk ribbon work, stumpwork, Tambour work, Ukrainian embroidery, whitework, and others.



*Beribboned basket of flowers on black bureau scarf*



Muster Field Farm Museum 1835 sampler

**Homespun: A Look Back**

During colonial times, very young girls began learning cross stitch so that they could mark household linens with embroidered initials to indicate ownership. In those days, bedsheets and other linens were very dear and were so important that they were often listed in household inventories. The training the girls received in making these simple monogram stitches served them well once they advanced to making a sampler, either at home or at "dame schools." Stitching samplers was a good way for girls to practice creating the alphabet and numbers. Many samplers feature religious



Embroidered liner for bread basket

sentiments that either reflect moral wisdom or acknowledge the brevity of life. (With childhood diseases so rampant at the time, it is true that lives were lost early.)

A "Girlhood Sampler" (left) made by Naomi Barnes, age 11, was finished on August 4, 1835. She must have worked very hard to have included all the words and designs featured, one of which is "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The framed piece holds her Family Record, a list of family members, and dates associated with them. She then writes at length about the nature of education and further proclaims that "Wisdom is the sister of virtue." The charming sampler, with its embroidered birds, flowers, and houses, is in the collection of the Muster Field Farm Museum in North Sutton, New Hampshire. (The museum's antique quilts were featured in the July 2008 issue of *The Quilter*.)



Inset of Jacobean crewel embroidery on fireplace screen

**Jacobean Crewel Embroidery**

We were very lucky to have acquired a freestanding fire screen (above) that showcases the beautiful crewel embroidery of some unknown creator. During the mid 1700s, crewel work was very much in favor. Two-ply worsted wool is used for crewel embroidery because wool can be dyed so readily to create different values of the same color, which is great for shading designs. The result, however, is that the wool must be dry cleaned. (I learned that lesson as a young adult when I attempted to wet-wash a piece of crewel embroidery!) Crewel work can resemble a fine painting and is often used to create pictorial scenes that will be framed and hung on a wall.

## Influence of the Royal School of Art Needlework

The Royal School of Art Needlework (now the Royal School of Needlework) was established in Kensington, England, in 1872. Students exhibited needlework at the Centennial International Exposition of 1876, held in Philadelphia, to the delight of all expo attendees. Students are credited with spreading the popularity of outline stitch embroidery as their answer to the more labor-intensive crewel work they had formerly been required to do.

As a result, redwork, bluework, and greenwork became extremely popular in the United States and Europe, a situation that has continued to the present day with additional thread colors and variegated threads. The Victorian Age—that is, the period when Queen Victoria reigned (1837-1901)—became a time of great ornamentation and excess in home decorating. Crazy quilts, with their endless stitches, totally epitomize the throwing off of the practical and the boycotting of pieced cotton quilts in favor of more fashionable silk statements.



*Pillowcase edge with flowers and butterfly*



*Whitework on tea towel*



*Terrier bureau scarf*

## Early Mourning Samplers

The willow trees seen in Victorian crazy quilts of the 1880s became a symbol reminiscent of death when they were included in many mourning samplers during the first several decades of the nineteenth century. The earliest known examples of this type of sampler commemorate the death of George Washington (1732-1799), the "Father of Our Country." These samplers typically feature silk threads on a linen, velvet, or hand-painted background and often include the images of gravestones.

*This concludes Part 1 of "Vintage Embroideries to Warm the Spirit." Look for Part 2 in the November 2010 issue of The Quilter.*

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