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16th to 17th Century English Embroidery: Providing the Tools to Work Towards the Liberation of Women

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Abstract

Women have always had a connection to embroidery, whether it was through nomadic bands of workers who worked for commission on pieces such as the Bayeux Tapestry or nuns within the Catholic Church who used it as a source of income. English embroidery in particular in the 16th century had a focus on ecclesiastical work, while the 17th century led to embroidery being centered in the secular sphere with an emphasis on preparing one for a life of domesticity. Ironically though while needlework was preparing one for suitor ship it was also providing tools such as literacy that would give women the ability to move out of the domestic space in the future. Through looking at artworks such as samplers, which included different stitches and patterns and which showed women gaining literacy, and comparing them to completed pieces such as gloves, which were seen as an engagement symbol, it is possible to highlight and represent the conflict women found themselves in. However, this new access to literacy was limited to women in the middle and upper classes, who had the time and money to practice embroidery, while those in the lower class simply focused on weaving the base fabrics. This thesis will analyze examples of religious embroidery such as priests' garb, as well as secular

examples such as samplers and gloves, to show how the artistic practice moves from the monastic to the secular sphere. The visual evidence provided will also serve to prove that once embroidery moved into the domestic sphere it opened up a window of education for women.

Introduction

Historically, very few artforms have been available to women, making the exploration of media that became accessible all the more crucial. One of these artforms that women have historically been linked to is embroidery. In England, embroidery was mainly used by the Catholic Church as a means to ornament vestibules and other religious garb up until the 16th century. With the end of the English Catholic Church in 1534 there was no longer a need for this craft within religion, so a new group stepped in and fully embraced this art form: the middle class. At earlier points this form of needlework was carried out to show one's devotion to God. However now it was being done to show one's devotion to a worldly figure. Women practiced this work to show their docility along with their purity for their future suitors, while at the same time using this skill to educate and provide themselves with some basic literacy skills. Scholar Roszika Parker best describes this complex relationship stating, "the manner in which embroidery signifies both self-containment and submission is the key to understanding women's relation to the art, Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness."[1] The switch that transformed 16th century ecclesiastical English embroidery to 17th century secular embroidery also provided middle class women with the skills of basic literacy comprehension and lead to one of the first steps in their education. It is important to note that while embroidery was guiding a transformative process in their education, carrying out the craft itself was preparing them for a life of domesticity that would keep them within the home and without power.

Technical Aspects

In order to discuss embroidery, we must first establish a basic understanding of what embroidery itself is and the techniques associated with it. The simplest definition would be that embroidery is the act of embellishing a piece of fabric or other material through use of needle and thread.[2] The materials and tools used are often quite humble. They

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[1] The New School Parsons, "From Obedience to Rebellion Embroidery and Feminine Identity in Late-Eighteenth to Early-Twentieth Century Britain," accessed November 12, 2024, https://adht.parsons.edu/historyofdesign/objectives/from-obedience-to-rebellion-embroidery-and-feminine-identity-in-late-eighteenth-to-early-twentieth-century-britain/

[2] Pauline Brown, *The Encyclopedia of Embroidery Techniques*: *A Comprehensive Visual Guide to Traditional and Contemporary Techniques* (Sterling Publishing Company, 2003), 7, https://books.google.com/books?id=hfegm_HnugYC&lpg=PA1&ots=OLGNzL71vU&dq=the%20encyclopedia%20of%20embroidery%20techniques&lr&pg=PA7#v=onepage&q=the%20encyclopedia%20of%20embroidery%20techniques&f=false

consist of scissors, pins and needles, tape measure and an embroidery frame, along with an iron and a sewing machine.[3] Since these materials are rather basic, it is that much more important to make sure they are of good quality. When it comes to the thread, you want to ensure that not only the color but also the texture suits your needs. Art Historian Matthew Martin states, "Whether for reasons of economy or for ease of application, embroiderers before the sixteenth century restricted the use of metal threads to visible surfaces of the work. By the second half of the sixteenth century expanding trade and development in technology had led to an increased availability of gold, silver, and silk."[4] With the switch to secular embroidery we will see the continued apprehension towards uses of metal threads within the work of middle-class women due to economic standing. However in the upper classes, women would use this thread without care due to their financial ability to do so.

There is an extremely long list of different types of stitchwork used within this craft. The popularity of these stitches fluctuates throughout the time periods depending on the focus of the stitchwork.[5] Scholar Neha Sharma notes that "much of the pleasure in embroidery lies in its textural appearance."[6] Due to this being a three-dimensional artform being able to create physical texture is one of its benefits. When planning out the piece one must alternate both thick and thin areas for a clean final product.[7] If one does not use enough thickness throughout the piece, it will appear more as a rough sketch rather than a completed piece.[8] While embroidery does differ greatly from painting much of the same concepts such as heaviness of brushstrokes and layering of color are carried over, just through use of needle and thread rather than paint and paintbrush.

While there are far too many stitches to give context to all of them there are a few that will be repeated throughout the pieces observed that are important to know. Backstitch (Fig. 1) is one of the simpler stitches, but still of great importance. This would likely be one of the first stitches that one would learn. It consists of stitching halfway along the previous stitch.[9] Backstitch would be used mainly for outlining a figure or adding in small details due to the strong defined lines it produces.

Satin stitch (Fig. 2) is one of the most popular stitches, especially in ecclesiastical work from the 16th century. Satin stitch is an overarching term with more specific patterns that fall under it, but the basic principle is that the stitches are worked parallel to one another.[10] This will result in a full coverage look and is used when one would like

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[3] Brown, *The Encyclopedia of Embroidery Techniques*, 7.

[4] Matthew Martin, *Exquisite threads: English embroidery 1600s- 1900s* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2015), 4.

[5] Brown, *The Encyclopedia of Embroidery Techniques*, 7.

[6] Neha Sharma and Navjot Kaur, "The Influence of Traditional Embroidery on Glamorous Fashion Industry," *RB Journal of Lib & Information Science* 12, no. 1 (2022): 289-292, https://www.journal-editor.org/alldocuments/691129.pdf

[7] Helen Brooks, "Embroidery: Sources of Design, Past and Present," *The Vocational Aspect of Education* 7, no. 14 (1955): 375–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057875580000041.

[8] Andrew Morral and Melinda Watt, *English Embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580- 1700:'Twixt Art and Nature* (Bard Center: 2009), 99.

[9] "Backstitch," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed February 15, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/backstitch#:~:text=back%C2%B7%E2%80%8Bstitch%20%CB%88bak%2D%CB%8Cstich,of%20stitching%20on%20both%20sides.

[10] Brown, *The Encyclopedia of Embroidery Techniques*, 24.

to block in a space.[11] While you might think it's simple, as it is just a continuous straight line, it is actually one of the most difficult to achieve a clean polished look with, because there is not much variety going on any mistake is made especially evident. [12]

Another prevalent stitch is known as long and short stitch (Fig. 3). This will be very common in ecclesiastical pieces as well as more finished pieces such as gloves and waist coasts made in the domestic sphere in the 1600's. Scholar Paulie Brown states "*Long and short stitch* is most often used for shading motifs such as petals and leaves and can create very realistic effects. Practice is required to perfect a smooth gradation both of stitching and color."[13] This stitch's ability to depict transition of color is one of the reasons that it was most often used in religious iconography as well as secular floral motifs. It allowed the needleworker to create depth within their piece, as opposed to the backstitch which provides a very flat look.

Art Versus Craft

Embroidery is often overlooked in the study of art from different time periods. There is a hierarchy that takes place within the art world, with medias such as fibers, stained glass, mosaics and ceramics being placed at the lower end of the scale due to their perceived relationship with functionality.[14] "Art" is typically used to refer to pieces that contain painting, sculpture and printmaking, whereas "craft" is used to relate to more domestic activities such as weaving, wood working and a large majority of textile related products.[15] Interestingly, the distinction between art and craft did not emerge until post Renaissance in the western hemisphere, when the word craft was usually put into context when referring to more "home making" arts which would include embroidery and primarily textile works. However, all works of art consider at least some level of skill, and by this point the debate of what can be grouped into the art versus craft category has been ongoing for centuries. While embroidery can be traced throughout many centuries and locations, it has not received the attention of researchers on par with paintings and drawings or other two-dimensional mediums until fairly recently. Outside of embroidery we are able to observe a clear bias against textile art. However there has been a change in recent years of scholars researching into the history of bias against craft and attempting to bridge that gap in the art world.

Brief History of Embroidery

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[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid

[14] Ulla Mannering and Irene Skals, *Textiles and Fabrics: Conservation and Preservation* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 10576-10582, https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-030-30018-0_488

[15] Sally J. Markowitz, "The Distinction between Art and Craft," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 28, no. 1 (1994): 55–70. https://www.google.com/url?q=https://doi.org/10.2307/3333159&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1745177419140281&usg=AOvVaw1QA3DlOudyIrE_rhQvMxaS

Embroidery as an art form did not originate in England. Techniques used today such as the buttonhole stitch can be tracked all the way back to examples from 8,000 B.C.E. Even further back in time in 38,000 B.C.E we already see evidence of clothing being decorated with stone beads and animal teeth with origins in China and Central Asia.[16] Scholar Catherine Leslie states "Beginning in the sixteenth century, the English, Spanish, and Portuguese disseminated European techniques around the world through exploration and conquest. Embroidery from China imported by the British East India Company furthered the cross-cultural needlework exchange that continues into contemporary times."[17] In Western Europe the earliest forms of embroidery dated around 700-1100 C.E.[18] Perhaps the most well-known piece from this time is the *Bayeux Tapestry* (Fig. 4). Created in 1077, this tapestry depicts the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Its name, however, is misleading because it is not a tapestry, but in fact a work of embroidery. Measuring over 200 feet long at a width of 2 feet throughout the whole piece. [19] The materials used in the work consist of 8 different colors of worsted wool thread including blue, green, red, yellow, brown, gold, black and tan on linen. When taking a closer look at the embroidery we see a lack of fine detail in comparison to other works that will be examined.[20]

Due to the large size of this piece, it was meant to be viewed from a distance making minute detail superfluous as it would have been lost to the viewer. Something particularly intriguing about this piece is the inclusion of depictions of textile work, such as images of "plush hangings covering the vaulted ceiling, seat cushion decorated in a lattice-work brocade, and the kings garment trimmed with distinctive gold-threaded embroidery."[21] Including these details lets the viewer realize these artists knew the importance of their skills in the world of textiles. Embroidery was most likely the chosen technique due to its ability to cover a larger surface area in comparison to other techniques that were available at the time.[22] What is most impressive about the *Bayeux Tapestry* is the fact that it still exists to this day. Sadly, many more ancient pieces have become victims of this artform's inherent vulnerability and fragility and sadly no longer exist.

It is known that some of the finest preserved embroidered pieces are from England from 900 to 1500's. Opulent examples known as *opus anglicanum (*Latin for "English work") were made for ecclesiastical and secular use.[23] Esteemed for their finely executed stitches and luxurious materials, they are considered the pinnacle of

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[16] Catherine A. Leslie, *Needlework Through History: an Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Press, 2007), 13, https://archive.org/details/needleworkthroug0000lesl/page/79/mode/1up?q=700-1100

[17] Leslie, *Needlework Through History,* 13

[18] Ibid, 79

[19] Gerald Noxon, "The Bayeux Tapestry," *Cinema Journal* 7 (1967): 29–35, https://doi.org/10.2307/1224876.

[20] Noxon, "The Bayeux Tapestry," 29-35.

[21] Elizabeth C. Pastan, *The Bayeux Tapestry and Its Contexts: A Reassessment* (Boydell Press, 2014), chap. 1, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt6wp9gx.8.

[22] Noxon, "The Bayeux Tapestry," 29-35.

[23] Ibid

European embroidery and were sought after by Europe's religious leaders and royalty.[24] There were two typical groups who worked on these embroidered pieces.

> At the time when this massive work was undertaken the art of embroidery, particular with silk and golden threads had reached a state of high perfection in Northwestern Europe. There were not only permanently established embroidery workshops maintained by royalty and church authorities, but also nomadic bands of workers, skilled in all kinds of fine needlework, who wandered in teams through Europe to secure commissions wherever they could find them.[25]

Regarding the *Bayeux Tapestry,* due to its sheer size, it was constructed by more than one person. Most likely, Bishop Odo, William the Conquerors half-brother commissioned this piece.[26] Bishop Odo then got in contact with an artist who drew up the design for the artwork and then the main artists would collaborate with one of the teams previously referenced who would embroider the piece based off the master drawing.[27] We see similar processes continue to be used into the age of ecclesiastical embroidery.

Ecclesiastical Embroidery

While the *Bayeux Tapestry* is an example of a secular work of embroidery, it was a common art form to be used for a more ecclesiastical purpose. This term refers to stitchwork that is used for worship and featured in the ornamentation on priests' garbs as well as bible covers. Embroidery is a very slow process that takes a while to yield any results. One can imagine that the artist would form a great sense of connection with what they create and that they would only do so for something or someone that they felt deeply connected to. The term contemplative practice sums up this feeling. "Contemplative practice refers to various approaches, disciplines and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, and compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom and the like."[28] Most often connected to religious devotion, contemplative practice can be defined as the act of carrying out an action to help one either develop inner peace or connect with their practicing religion. In the case of ecclesiastic embroidery, it is the latter, as embroiderers would spend so much time and put so much care into their art that the art itself became an act of religious devotion.

Contemplative practice explains why we see such a strong connection between craft and religion throughout history. By devoting all of your time and attention to this craft which is related to the church you are therefore devoting your time and attention to God himself. During the Middle Ages however, it was not common folk who carried out

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[24] Ibid

[25] Ibid

[26] Ibid

[27] "What Is the Bayeux Tapestry about - the Story of the Tapestry," Bayeux Museum, last modified June 3, 2024, https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/what-is-the-bayeux-tapestryabout/#:~:text=The%20Bayeux%20Tapestry%20is%20a,cathedral%20in%20Bayeux%20in%201077.

[28] Louis Komjathy, *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (State University of New York Press, 2015), chap. 1, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18255559.7.

this work but rather greatly revered artisans. [29] While it was common for bands of greatly revered artisans to carry out more worldly embroidery, when it came to ecclesiastical embroidery, this job fell upon the nuns within the Catholic church. Following the idea of contemplative practice scholar, Claire Walker states “Within the monastic context, manual labor was imbued with a distinctive spiritual significance which aimed to lift toil beyond mere financial necessity and into the realm of religious devotion.”[30]

The relationship between labor and the Catholic church is an interesting one. St. Benedict in his religious rulings was against idleness or sloth, which were enemies of the soul.[31] This teaching walked a fine line though because certain forms of physical labor were seen beneath those involved in the church, the work done in the fields was only carried out by the lowest of the social groups. Most of the men and women within the church during this time were the sons and daughters of the aristocracy.[32] It was seen as beneath them, so those involved in the church had to find a compromise, and from this nuns’ relations with embroidery appeared. Walker states “While monks were offered the opportunity to pursue a scholastic career which set them apart from the pursuits of their brothers in the world, nuns were accorded the same work as their secular sisters.”[33]

There were two main uses for textiles within the church: “the paraments, that is, the altar frontals, pulpit and lectern all and banners; and the vestments, the garments worn by the clergy and lay officiants during a church service.”[34] Aspects of these textiles such as the ornaments, iconography and coloring were integral to the meaning of these pieces. The elaborateness of these pieces was meant to help draw attention to the leader of the congregation as well as add to the experience of the church service. The grandeur seen within a lot of these pieces would help to enhance the mood. Whether the vestments were full of color or more solemn added to the mood that the clergy was aiming for. Clergy members might also choose a more elaborately decorated vestment to reflect one’s status and wealth.[35]

Formal Analysis of *Chasuble*

A surviving example of ecclesiastic vestment from the Middle Ages within the Catholic Church is currently being held at the Victoria and Albert Museum located in London. The object titled *Chasuble* (Fig. 5) was made anywhere from 1510-1533 and the artist is unknown. A chasuble is the principal church vestment worn by a priest at

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[29] “The Materials and Techniques of English Embroidery of the Late Tudor and Stuart Eras,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-materials-and-techniques-of-english-embroidery-of-the-late-tudor-and-stuart-eras.

[30] Claire Walker, “Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 2 (1999): 397–418, https://doi.org/10.2307/2544710.

[31] Walker, “Combining Martha and Mary,” 397–418.

[32] Ibid

[33] Ibid

[34] Sarah Bailey, *Clerical Vestments: Ceremonial Dress of the Church* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), chap. 1, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5RPDCwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=clerical+vestments&ots=1wsWy_pSZ4&sig=s4rxyksCnAjlIDp8VuB1IdJzCZU#v=onepage&q=clerical%20vestments&f=false

[35] “Chasuble: Unknown: V&A Explore the Collections,” Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 3, 2024, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O118444/chasuble-unknown/.

the celebration of the Christian Mass.[36] Chasubles were usually made from richer materials such as silk and then adorned with embroidered images of symbolic significance for Christianity. Historian Sarah Bailey states,

> In Western Europe some early ecclesiastical textiles still exist, mainly in public museums and cathedral treasuries but also in small parish churches, cared for and preserved for education and study as well as use. Much of the information on early priestly clothing is gleaned from brasses, sculptures, stained glass and paintings of the Middle Ages giving clues to how clerical vestments developed.[37]

When looking at this particular chasuble the base fabric is a black velvet silk. Different base fabric colors were chosen based on the different seasons within the liturgical year of the Catholic church. Black was seen as appropriate for use of funerals or requiem masses. What is especially interesting about this piece is the fact that it is so well preserved. The dyestuffs used within black fabric actually have a rather corrosive effect that has prevented many of these vestments from surviving, which means fabric that incorporates black tends to break down much faster than fabric with other dye bases.[38] Not only is the color of this chasuble interesting but so is the history of this piece. Due to the meaning behind the color black one might assume that this chasuble was used within funerary services. It was, but it was also a recycled pall, in other words a cloth that was used to cover a coffin.[39] On the back of this vestment are the embroidered letters RJ referring to Robert Thornton, who was the cloth's original owner. We often see the recycling of fabrics most likely due to their inherent value. This particular velvet was most likely made in Spain and then imported to England where the embroidery was applied. Now the transition from pall to chasuble was not the only transformation to take place for this piece. The embroidery on this cloth dates to the early 16th century while the particular style of the vestment dates to after 1600. This means that once it was crafted into a chasuble it was manipulated once again to fit with the style of the times.[40]

While the base fabric is black velvet, the embroidery itself was done in a combination of colored silk, silver-gilt and silver thread with spangles. Also, the embroidery was not carried out directly on the velvet fabric that is visible, but was most likely worked on a cream-colored satin along with green silk and linen and then later stitched onto the velvet.[41] This was done on account of the challenge of embroidery on velvet, as its structure is quite stretchy and therefore would make it difficult to maintain the design's integrity. In addition, velvet also contains a nap or the soft texture that is sought after but that actually makes it quite easy to lose sight of stitches. And finally, velvet especially darker ones, can easily be damaged on accident due to excess pressure which leaves marks that would make the piece look less clean. Therefore, one would not want to have to take extra care when maneuvering around the piece while adding all these intricate designs that take countless hours to apply. It made much more sense to add the embroidered figures as appliques later on.

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[36] "Chasuble: Unknown: V&A Explore the Collections."
[37] Bailey, *Clerical Vestments.*
[38] "Chasuble: Unknown: V&A Explore the Collections."
[39] Ibid
[40] Ibid
[41] Ibid

The main focus of this embroidery are the figures are on both the front and back of this robe. The majority of this detail being kept to the back of *Chasuble* is intentional. As the V&A museum website explains, “Prior to the 1960s, the priest stood facing the altar with his back to the congregation, so the back of the chasuble was visible most of the time. This fact usually accounts for the dominant imagery being on the back and the construction being more perfect there.”[42] There are three groups of figures within *Chasuble.* The dominant imagery throughout this piece are the figures of angels blowing trumpets and the six-winged seraphs. Seraphs are archangels and typically appear with six wings and a more serpent like demeanor.[43] These two groups stand out due to both of them taking up a larger surface area and their crème color schemes creating contrast with the dark velvet. They also contain a greater amount of detail than the human forms. These figures are wearing clothing unlike the human figures which are delicately crafted from a variety of neutral toned threads. First, focusing on the angels, it is of note that they are accompanied by scrolls upon which the words “SVRGITE MORTVI VVENITE AD IVDICIVM” are inscribed.[44] This phrase translates to “Arise you dead and come into the judgement.”[45] This statement directly relates to the other group of bodies within the composition which are images of the rising dead that are depicted mostly without arms and only from the torso up. The six-winged seraphs have banners which display the words “IVSTORVM ANIME IN MANV DEI SVNT.”

In the very center part of the back, we see the RJ inscription which was previously mentioned. When looking at the front it becomes evident that *Chasuble* was in fact made from a reused piece of fabric due to the fact that some of the angel figures are cut off at odd parts. One would assume that if this was a completely new piece the artist would account for the space needed to include each figure. Another intriguing point on the front of this chasuble is the center seraph that is on the red velvet section of this piece. While this seraph contains legs and a torso it lacks a head. Due to the level of completeness of the rest of the piece I have to assume this was a stylistic choice rather than a lack of time or material. This needlework makes it appear as if there is a halo surrounding the lack of head. A theory I have for the lack of head is that there was an issue with transferring the embroidery onto the velvet. When looking at the humans and angels we see accurate and realistic proportions displayed which proves that the artist had an understanding of human anatomy. And the same can be said about the bodies of the seraphs up until will get to their necks and their heads. Their bodies do seem a little bit drawn out and extended but nothing too drastic, however, when looking at the necks we see that they are much wider than one might expect. In some such as the top right one on the front of the chasuble, we see a notable gap where it should in fact be connected to the shoulders.

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[42] Ibid

[43] Mony Almalech, "Linguistic, Cultural, and Theological Aspects of Seraphim," *Annual of Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski* 114, (2021): 86-122, https://eprints.nbu.bg/id/eprint/4460/1/Almalech_Seraphim%202021_ISSN%20-%20small.pdf

[44] “Chasuble: Unknown: V&A Explore the Collections.”

[45] “Rise, Dead and Come to Judgment from Nouveau Recueil d’ostéologie et de Myologie,” Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, accessed December 3, 2024, https://www.famsf.org/artworks/rise-dead-and-come-to-judgment-surgite-mortui-venite-ad-judicium-from-nouveau-recueil-dosteologie-et-de-myologie.

In my previously mentioned theory that the heads were stitched on a separate piece of cloth than the bodies, perhaps once they were both transferred onto the velvet the artist realized some proportions did not line up but did not care to change them. This piece is meant to be viewed from a distance so they probably thought it would not be a noticeable mistake. Perhaps also in the transferring process they lost a head that was intended for the front center seraph.

Formal Analysis of *Cope*

Another piece from the era of ecclesiastical embroidery is a Cope, also currently located in the Victoria and Albert Museum. This piece, much like *Chasuble,* is simply titled *Cope* (Fig. 6). A Cope is a full-length cloak and liturgical vestment, but that is where the similarities end. Unlike the chasuble which simply has a cut out for the head and is then pulled over the head, the cope consists of a semicircular shape that is open at the front and then fastened at the breast by hooks or a broach.[46] Copes can also be worn by any clergy level and are worn at almost any function that the chasuble is not worn at.[47] This specific cope was originally made in 1450-75 with a base layer of red velvet and hand embroidered silk, silver and silver-gilt threads.[48] On the hood or at the top of the piece we see a trim which includes a yellow or beige base with mainly blue and yellow thread depicting a mother and child enthroned.

Within both Cope and Chasuble, we see intentionality in what the embroidery depicts. Embroidery was not seen as simply a decorative technique but used to further the priests' sermons that they were preaching. While there are some decorative aspects to these cloaks, both contain figures that are the main focus of the embroidery as well as take up the most space. I believe this was done because needlework was such a time-consuming task you would only want to use it on the aspects that matter the most. And while simply decorative aspects would be nice to look at during the sermon, when you are gazing upon well-known figures such as mother and child enthroned it brings your mind back to thinking about your relationship with God. Ultimately both cloaks, chasuble and other religious textile were used to further the message from the priest and also the message from God.

Secular Works and Formal analysis of Jane Bostock's *Sampler*

With the switch in power at the head of the church in England we also see a change of those who were able to have access to the skill of embroidery both in the creation of work and the commissioning of it. As the scholar Matthew Martin states, "In the

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[46] "Chasuble | Liturgical Vestment, Clergy Robe, & Priestly Garb," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 20, 1998, https://www.britannica.com/topic/chasuble.

[47] "Chasuble | Liturgical Vestment, Clergy Robe, & Priestly Garb."

[48] "Cope | V&A Explore the Collections," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed March 4, 2025, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129321/cope/.

seventeenth century, learning embroidery formed an important part of a young English woman's education, equipping her with skills deemed necessary for her to become the mistress of her own household. In the previous century, fine needlework had been associated with queens and women of high rank, but as the seventeenth century dawned these refined skills spread to the wives and daughters of the middling classes."[49]

One of the first surviving pieces from this period of change was made in 1598 and is simply titled *Sampler* (Fig. 7). Generally speaking, samplers are pieces of fabric on which embroidery techniques were practiced. Scholar Lisa M. Klein states "A good example of an early sampler features bands of border designs worked in a single silk thread on a linen background, using a plain, linear running stitch."[50] During this time, we see a transition in the use of samplers being done as a form of sketch which was then given to a more skilled embroiderer to make a more finished piece, to them being used as a means of measuring and recording the makers skill.[51]

When looking at *Sampler* we notice a great amount of overlap of patterns and stitches, with many different stitches, colors, threads and patterns in use. There seems to be no rhyme nor reason for the layout of this piece. One might assume *Sampler* was simply a form of practice for the artist to make a cleaner version at a later time or as a reference object. Samplers remain one of the largest groups of surviving work from this time period. Often times these practice pieces were not done by one person but added to by those in her inner circle as a way to keep note of different stitches and skill levels.[52] Pieces from this time period give us insight into what women were thinking as well as what education they were receiving.

The creator of *Sampler* was Jane Bostocke, and the purpose of this composition was to commemorate the birth of her cousin Alice Lee. This embroidery is a mere 16.7 inches by 14.3 inches and made on a piece of undyed linen in plain weave simply referred to as canvas. The stitching is done in silk and metal thread with pearls and beads.[53] When looking at *Sampler* there appear to be three distinct sections, the top - which contains floral and animal motifs meant to be representative of family crests, the middle section - which includes the practicing of text, and the bottom half which contains the repetition of varying patterns. Bostocke seems to have stuck to a relatively small color palette mainly consisting of reds, pinks, blues, greens and brown. A majority of these features are worked in simple back stitch. This is done by inserting the needle and sewing one stitch backwards on the front side then two stitch lengths forward on the back side.[54] The resulting image will be fully connected stitches with no spaces in

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[49] Martin, *Exquisite Threads,* 4.

[50] Lisa M. Klein, "Early Modern English Embroideries: Contexts and Techniques," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts 75,* no. 2 (2001): 38-41, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23182820?searchText=%28embroidery+techniques%29&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoAdvancedSearch%3Fq0%3Dembroidery%2Btechniques%26f0%3Dall%26c1%3DAND%26f1%3Dall%26acc%3Don%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A360df93eff3470ade46a6453284234a8&seq=1

[51] "Sampler: Jane Bostocke: V&A Explore the Collections," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed November 18, 2024, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O46183/sampler-jane-bostocke/.

[52] Martin, *Exquisite Threads,* 4.

[53] Morral and Watt, *Metropolitan Museum of Art,* 99.

[54] "Backstitch."

between. Using this technique makes these aspects appear as if they are sketches. However, a few areas such as the bear along with varying parts of the geometrical patterns do have more complicated stitches such as satin, chain, ladder, buttonhole and more. These are more complicated than the back stitch creating a more intricate and refined look. We even see that slightly left of the center Bostocke included some dark beadwork. This could mean either Bostocke was simply practicing her skill of beadwork or was intending to cover the piece at one point but for some reason it was left incomplete.

Another piece of evidence that supports this as a practice piece is the stitching located just below the text in a brown thread. On the furthest left side, we see complete stitch work then to the right we see some aspects of stitchwork and then holes that look as if they outline where the stitches go. This is because embroidery was carried out but then removed leaving the puncture marks of the needles, which is known as “frogging” and refers to the process of ripping out your project by pulling on the thread. In embroidery frogging can actually be quite difficult to accomplish due to stitches often overlapping a great deal. As seen in *Sampler,* when removing the stitches in an attempt to erase the work one has done, it still leaves behind puncture marks tainting the fabric beneath it. Therefore, it is extremely important that the artist is confident in where they are placing their stitches.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this sampler is the inscription of words. The first line is simply the alphabet carried out in a light brown silk thread. Silk was chosen for its sheen as well as its durability. To the right of the alphabet are the words “JANE BASTOCKE” put there as if for the purpose of an artist’s signature. Included in this stitchwork we see the use of pearlescent beads. Even further to the right are the numbers 1598 which commemorate the year in which this was stitched.[55] Below this line we see the stitching “ALICE: LEE: WAS: BORNE: THE: 23: OF: NOVEMBER: BEING: TWESDAY: IN: THE: AFTER: NOONE: 1596. Something I find quite curious about this inscription is the fact that this was created in the year 1598 but was meant to commemorate the child being born two years earlier and further cements that this is not the finished piece. Based on the difficulty and detail level that Bostocke landed on it might have been a year or more past this point that the actual complete piece would be finished. The questions surrounding this are a direct reflection of my struggles in researching the textile works. Due to the fragility and lack of preservation of these objects it is difficult to find surviving works and even more challenging to find information about the artists behind them. Due to these works being considered more in the domestic realm than the art realm biographies of the ladies behind these pieces were not well kept.

Because the sampler does involve literacy it belongs to a small group of embroidered works known as “Integrated Text” group of band samplers.[56] The use of text within samplers was not a common practice. When looking into literacy rates amongst women in the 16th century in England there are many conflicting reports. For example, David Cressy used the “signature method” which consisted of surveying who

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[55] “Sampler: Jane Bostocke: V&A Explore the Collections.”

[56] “Mary Millner’s “Integrated Text” Band Sampler,” Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2019/09/26/mary-milners-integrated-text-band-sampler/

could sign ones name as evidence of who was literate or not.[57] The findings resulted in more than four fifths of women in the 17th century lacking the ability to write their name.[58] Other historians when collecting on women's literacy rates chose to focus on one's ability to read as oppose to write.[59] It was common for people to be able to comprehend the words that they were looking at but not be able to replicate it in their own penmanship. Suzanne Hull revealed that there was a rise in the number of books that were dedicated to women, therefore a decent number of women must have the ability to read.[60] So perhaps a decent number of women during this time did have the ability to read but lacked the ability to write. The small number of samplers and embroidered pieces in general by women that I was able to find during my research would support this theory.

Embroidery is not just an artform that we can reflect upon to admire women's homemaking qualities but is also a record of the developing literacy of women from this time. In this particular sampler done by Bostocke as well as other pieces such as another *Sampler (*Fig. 8), done by Anne Fisher, even if whole phrases are not embroidered, we at least see the beginning of women signing their name showing that they are learning writing skills. These samplers were seen as a means of exploring one's creativity and perhaps just like many artists who feel the urge to sign their finished piece and claim it as theirs so did these women. Needlework probably gave them a push to learn how to write for the simple means of being able to claim the sampler as their own as well as date it in order to track their progress essentially giving them an excuse to gain access to writing skills that they would not have previously known.

Formal Analysis of Unfinished Cabinet Panel

While *Sampler* by Jane Bastocke, seems to be an unfinished piece, there is no evidence to show the planning that went to figuring out the placement of the stitches. *Unfinished cabinet panels* (Fig. 9), currently being housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art gives the viewer great insight into what lies beneath the embroidery. Its title reveals that this piece was left incomplete and its purpose was to cut along the designated squares and eventually secure them to a wooden box frame to make a small cabinet.[61] This piece is dated 1660 and consists of satin worked with silk, and metal thread, silk purl, linen ink and pigment.[62] *Unfinished cabinet panels* is only 17 ½ inches by 22 inches. If this was intended to be one singular embroidered piece that would be quite the feat, instead it is split up into 10 different blocks that were meant to be divided, leaving the individual pieces quite small. Due to this, I conclude that when referring to cabinet they more likely meant jewelry boxes. *Cabinet with scenes from the Story of*

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[57] Margaret W. Ferguson and Mihoko Suzuki, "Women's Literacies and Social Hierarchy in Early Modern England," *Literature Compass* 12, no. 11 (2015): 575-590. https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.12281

[58] Ferguson, "Women's Literacies and Social Hierarchy in Modern England," 575-590.

[59] Ibid

[60] Ibid

[61] "Unfinished Cabinet Panels: British," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/230014

[62] "Unfinished Cabinet Panels: British."

Esther (Fig. 10) is an example of what the finished product was intended to look like.[63] The story we see portrayed is quite intriguing. The Met states, "… the painted pale pink cheeks of the woman in the blue dress and her reflection in the mirror she holds. She is a personification of one of the Five Senses (in this case, sight), and she looks at her companion, the personification of smell, who holds a flower. On the left side of the panel appears a scene from the Old Testament tale of Elijah and the Widow of Sarabeth."[64] Stories such as these were included in young women's embroidery as a form of instruction.[65]

While the story that piece displays is intriguing what's even more interesting is the fact that the piece is unfinished. Therefore, we are able to see the sketch lines that would exist beneath the embroidery. In this piece there are ink sketch lines that shows where the stitches were intended to be put. This was a common practice for embroidered pieces. Scholar Liza M. Klein gives a great summary of this technique stating:

> The design was traced from its source—often with difficulty given the thickness of paper at the time. Then it was transferred to cloth by a method known as "pricking and pouncing." With a needle, holes were pierced along the design, the paper was secured to the cloth, and a powder made of chalk of charcoal was rubbed over the holes to mark the cloth beneath. The dots were then connected using ink. Alternatively, the design was drawn in ink by a skilled draughtsman employed either in a shop or by the family. Evidence of half-worked pictures suggests that some domestic needleworkers extrapolated freely from the design, other followed the outlines care-fully, and some lacked the skill to render the fine details of the inked drawing.[66]

Through the exploration of secular pieces such as samplers and incomplete pieces it is revealed that women were gaining access to power that they had not known before, but we must not forget the true intention of this needlework was to prepare one for suitor ship and ensure them a life of domesticity. Michaela Murphy states "Women in the 17th century were second class citizens, subject to their fathers from birth and later handed over like chattel to their husbands."[67] Traits that were sought after were stated by Gervase Markaham and contain "stout courage, patient, untired, watchful, diligent, witty, pleasant, constant in friendship, full of good neighborhood, wise in discourses, but not frequent there in, sharp and quick of speech but not bitter or talkative, secret in her affairs, comfortable in her counsels, and generally skillful in the worthy knowledge's which do belong to her vocation."[68] Essentially a large list of traits that contradict one another. You must be stout in courage and quick of speech but not speak back to your husband because he is the leader of the household not you. Embroidered gloves were actually a great signifier of this relationship that existed.

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[63] "English Embroidery of the Late Tudor and Stuart Eras," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 2, 2025, https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/english-embroidery-of-the-late-tudor-and-stuart-eras

[64] "Unfinished Cabinet Panels: British."

[65] "The Materials and Techniques of English Embroidery of the Late Tudor and Stuart Eras."

[66] Klein, "Early Modern English Embroideries," 38-41.

[67] "Was There a Gender Revolution in the Seventeenth-Century."

[68] Ibid

Formal Analysis of *Gloves*

A piece simply titled *Gloves* (Fig.11) is currently located at the Metropolitan Museum. The maker is unknown, but the date range is somewhere from the 1620's to the 40's. Materials consisted of leather, silk and metal thread, and bobbin lace. As mentioned earlier in this paper satin stitch was commonly chosen due to its ability to create transition of color which was sought after in floral motifs such as the ones we see on these gloves. When looking at these gloves you'll notice that the fingers along with the palms contain only white leather and lack embroidery. This was most likely due to not wanting to put stitchwork in high contact areas, so most detailing is simply kept to the wrist. I am unsure if the visible wear on the leather of these gloves is simply due to their age or if they were worn often leading to the discoloration and staining on the right pinky.

When focusing on the stitches we see the metal threads, which are the shiny dark grey threads, being used in a way that creates an outline. They create a detailed repeated pattern around the whole area of embroidery as well as the side of the glove creating an elegant and refined look. These gloves were meant to have a feeling of dignity as they were not simple everyday gloves but rather used as a symbol. The Met states "Gloves are replete with associations to love, honor, and loyalty, and these accessories played an important symbolic role in the portraiture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a surrogate for their owner, gloves could be indicative of both romantic love or political allegiance, as when a woman's glove was bestowed upon her chosen contestant to be worn in a tournament."[69] This specific pair is believed to be a symbol of the former due to the use of birds as well as flaming hearts which stood as symbol of one's romantic devotion.[70]

Something subtle about this piece but still intriguing is the fact that the orientation of the bird would appear upside down to the viewer but right-side of to an onlooker. This solidifies that these gloves were meant to be a statement to others. With this choice of orientation, it allows viewers to understand what the glove is depicting and therefore connect the dots that the wearer is betrothed to another. Gloves were used almost as a form of an engagement ring. Due to the lack of information on who the artist was, I was unable to conclude if these gloves were made by the wearer or created by someone else and then gifted to the wearer. If thinking about these gloves in the modern sense of an engagement ring one would assume the soon to be husband had these gloves created, then gifted to his fiancé as a proposal of marriage. However, if we look at it from the lenses that we did when discussing previous ecclesiastical work, it could also make sense that the wearer herself made them. Much like nuns carrying out needlework to express their devotion to God, these women could be doing this to express their love and devotion to their future husbands. Either explanation would still lend itself to this overarching idea that embroidery being done to prepare one for marriage and domesticity.

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[69] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Gloves: British or Dutch," accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/222227

[70] "Gloves: British or Dutch"

Social Classes Impact on Access to Embroidery

Throughout this paper I have brought up the discussion of pieces that support both arguments: that women gaining access to tools of liberation and that support women continue to be in a position of submissiveness. Something important to keep in mind is the impact that one's social class had on her access to either of these themes. The type of textile work that these women had access to relied heavily on her socioeconomic status. It was very uncommon for women during this time to marry outside of their social class. [71] The Met states

> The type of work taught to a young girl was in large part dependent on her socioeconomic status, young women who would have to produce their own garments and household textiles as well make a living learned plain and practical sewing techniques. Daughters of the gentry and nobility advanced to more elaborate decorative stitches, as part of their preparation for future roles as mistresses of large households. At a time when all textiles were made and decorated by hand, needlework skills were necessary at all levels of society.[72]

Essentially, those belonging to the lower class only had the time and money to focus on weaving base fabrics. They simply had to make fabric out of necessity unlike upper class women who didn't need to provide for their family in some way and therefore had the free time to embellish there clothing as well as home goods creating their access to embroidery. With this access to embroidery, came access to literacy. meaning that women of upper class were able to educate themselves while lower class women were kept out of the loop simply due to social class.

Conclusion

While it would be an overstatement to say that embroidery led to the liberation of women due to the fact that one can argue women are still fighting for it, it can be linked to at least a steppingstone in this process. Through looking at earlier ecclesiastical works such as religious copes and chasubles and revealing the nuns who were behind it and then tracking the change into later secular examples like Bostock's *Sampler,* it is revealed that women have always had a tie to this form of needlework. And while it is true that it has been used to keep them in a submissive position, which *Gloves* were an example of, it can also be said that it gave women a chance at independence, a chance to learn the skills of reading and writing allowing them to educate themselves on matters that were kept from them, allowing them to form thoughts for themselves, and giving them the ability to claim a piece of work as their own.

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[71] "Was There a Gender Revolution in the Seventeenth Century."

[72] "The Materials and Techniques of English Embroidery of the Late Tudor and Stuart Eras."

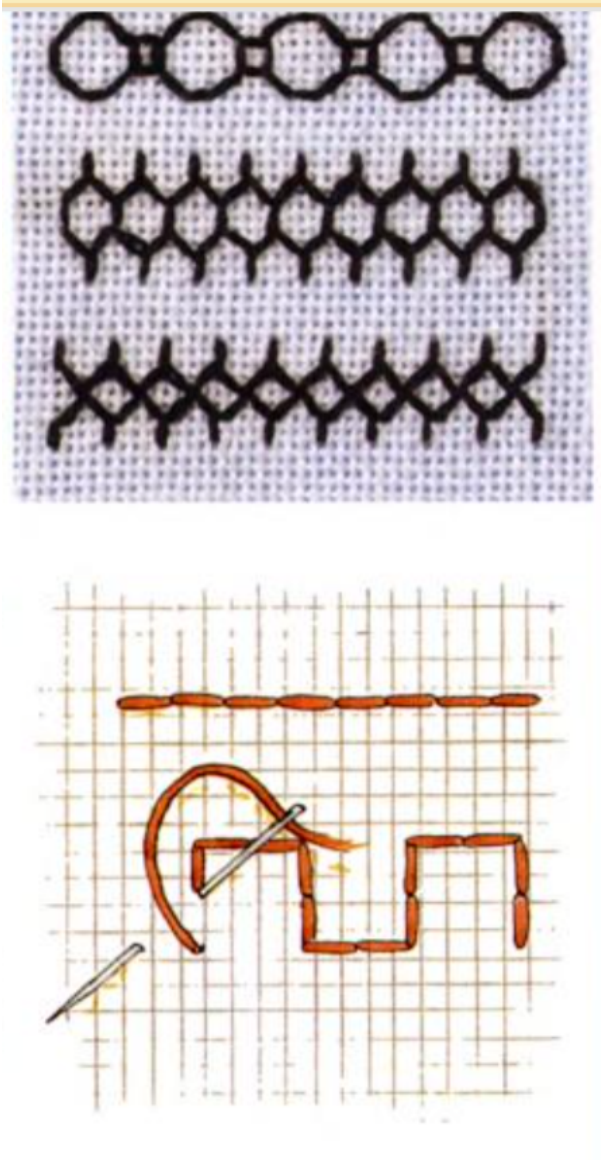

Figure 1 Illustrates backstitch https://books.google.com/books?id=hfegm_HnugYC&lpg=PA1&ots=OLGNzL71vU&dq=the%20encyclopedia%20of%20embroidery%20techniques&lr&pg=PA7#v=onepage&q=backstitch&f=false

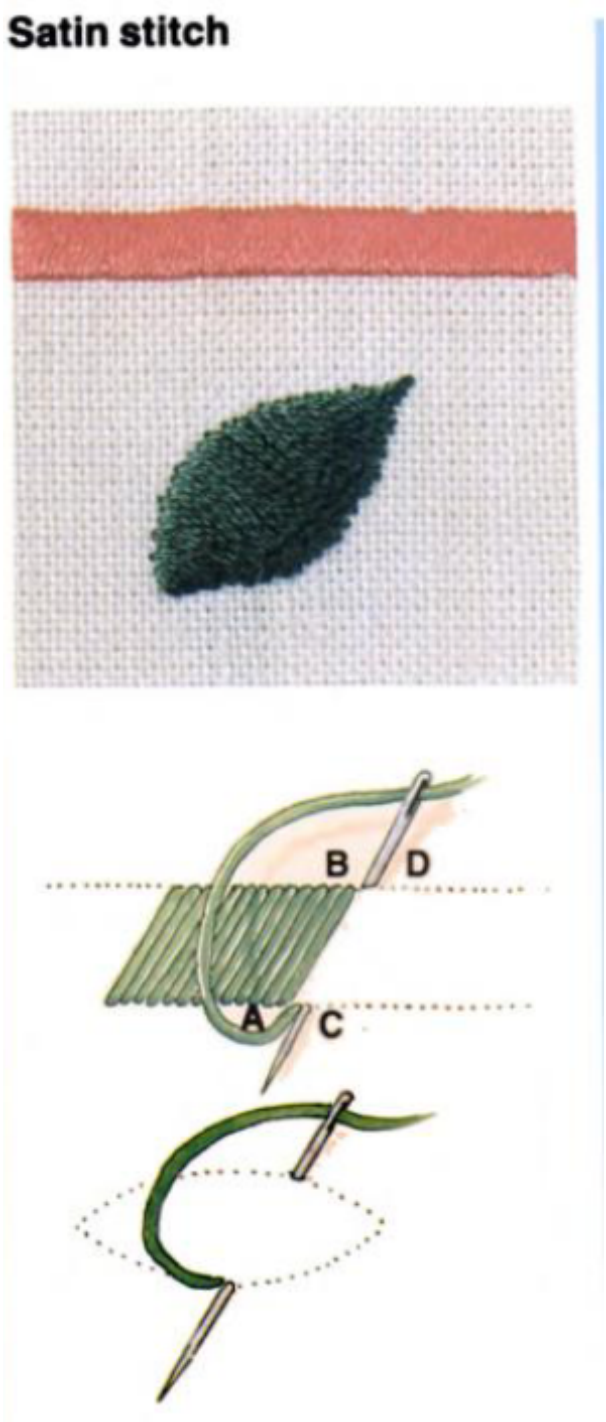

Figure 2 Illustration of Satin stitch https://books.google.com/books?id=hfegm_HnugYC&lpg=PA1&ots=OLGNzL71vU&dq=the%20encyclopedia%20of%20embroidery%20techniques&lr&pg=PA7#v=onepage&q=backstitch&f=false

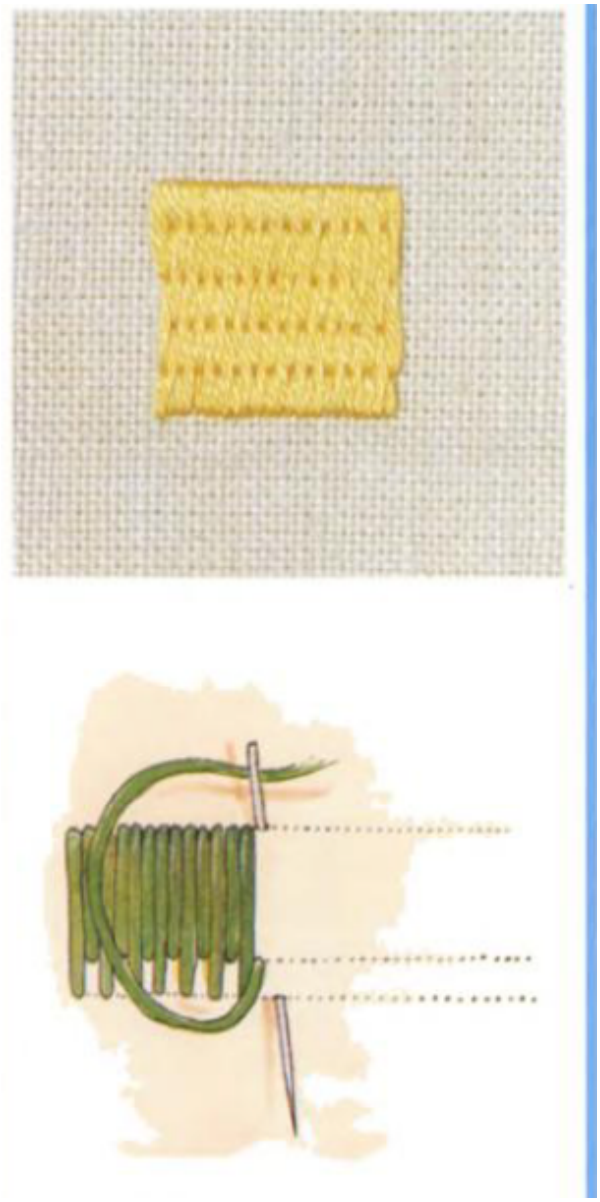

Figure 3 Illustration of long and short stitch
https://books.google.com/books?id=hfegm_HnugYC&lpg=PA1&ots=OLGNzL71vU&dq=the%20encyclopedia%20of%20embroidery%20techniques&lr&pg=PA7#v=onepage&q=backstitch&f=false

Figure 4 Bayeux Tapestry, Unknown, 11th century, linen with embroidered wool thread https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/tapestry-or-embroidery/#:~:text=The%20scenes%20in%20the%20Bayeux,dyer's%20rocket%20(or%20weld).

Figure 5, Chasuble, Unknown, 1510-1533, silver-gilt and silver thread and spangles embroidered on silk velvet, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O118444/chasuble-unknown/

Figure 6, Cope, Unknown, 1450-1500s, red velvet and hand embroidered silk, silver and silver-gilt threads, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129321/cope/

Figure 7, Sampler, Jane Bastocke, 1598, 42.6cm by 36.2cm, linen with wilk and metal thread, pearls and beads https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O46183/sampler-jane-bostocke/

Figure 8, Sampler, Anne Fisher, 1693, unbleached linen with colored silk thread, https://www.witneyantiques.com/cgi-bin/stock-full-details.pl?item_web_ref=10175

Figure 9, Unfinished cabinet panels, unknown, 1660, satin worked with silk, and metal thread, silk purl, linen, ink and pigment, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/230014

Figure 10, Cabinet with scenes from the Story of Esther, unknown, 1665, wood; silk satin worked with silk, metal threads, linen thread, seed pearls, mica, feathers, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/229034

Figure 11, Gloves, unknown, 1620-40, Leather; silk worked with silk and metal threads, spangles, long and short, satin and couching stitches, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/222227

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