

THE FOUR MODERNS IN AMERICA, EXPONENTS OF THE NEWER EMBROIDERY

by

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IT IS interesting to embroiderers, and to those familiar with the history of needlework throughout the ages, to note that the four moderns represented in this expression of art have chosen the medium of crewel embroidery for their contemporary designs. In contrast to canvas stitches there is a definite reason for this. It permits greater flow and rhythm in the variety of stitches. The ever desirable third dimension may be found in the shadow underlying the removed threads. This may be stressed in accenting the round edge of a tree trunk or lost flatly if the stitches are united as in flat canvas stitches. In the former case one depends upon the thread speaking for itself as a quality. In needlepoint, threads are massed and have to depend upon color shading to indicate movement. Herein lies a deep difference.

Individuality in design is also more clearly portrayed in crewel work. The idea played with is more closely related to the personality of the worker and accords to the use and play made of the selected stitches. Again comes the infinite variety obtainable, with which to tune in the harmony desired for the composition. In the exact requirements of canvas work this is not possible. Freedom to invent for oneself is almost nil.

The "needlepainting" of these four artists has been arrived at through the feeling that this medium is an excellent expression for the design, as it may interpret in purest decorative form as opposed to the realism of reproductive painting.

Crewel work may be lyric, allowing the artist freedom in technique and movement without conveying or creating weariness. In this age of

streamline endeavor it seems appropriate to choose the swift effects and spirit obtainable through this medium.

Simplicity added to movement, thought, and idea, selective and representative of our day, with a broad technique, is shown in the work of these artists, and in contrast to the work of their predecessors. These differences are cultivated, of course, with the age-old fundamental truths as a foundation, which concern good craftsmanship and respect for the laws of natural growth, mixed with good taste and the creativeness which makes good design.

Each of the four modern needlepainters referred to in this article have arrived at their individual expression by way of serious training in art as the necessary preparation for their work. Each has had a one-man show in a New York art gallery, in some cases more than one. One has achieved a group of thirty pictures which are shown in museums throughout the country. This calls attention to the seriousness and dignity to be realized in embroidery as a medium of pure art. It comes into its own when the trained artist takes into her own hands the actual technical working out of her idea. In the past, many painters of renown have drawn cartoons and relegated the carrying through of the design to those less gifted with vision. It is the feeling of the writer that herein lies error in that the indefinable touch of personality, dream, vision, or instant selectivity is lost. A work of art, in all instances, is truest when labored through by the artist who conceives the idea.

There is great contrast in the work of the embroiderers herein discussed, although all used identical stitches in their expression. Each is original and modern, and each one has condensed her technique into the idea and design which has been her experience in either fact or dream. Thus is created the individual quality which gives distinction to an artist's work.

Invention is employed to a certain extent, adaptation and arranged pattern noted, in "The Circus" panel of Marguerite Zorach. The pattern predominates and has interested the artist primarily—uniformity is stressed by the use of one stitch almost entirely—an open Cretan stitch, finely worked. Spaces left are filled in with groups of chain and lines of backstitch. This almost covers the linen entirely, which Mrs. Zorach likes to do. Occasionally an area is left open, like a breath of air, but dotted with fillings of cross or satin stitch patterns before it escapes or

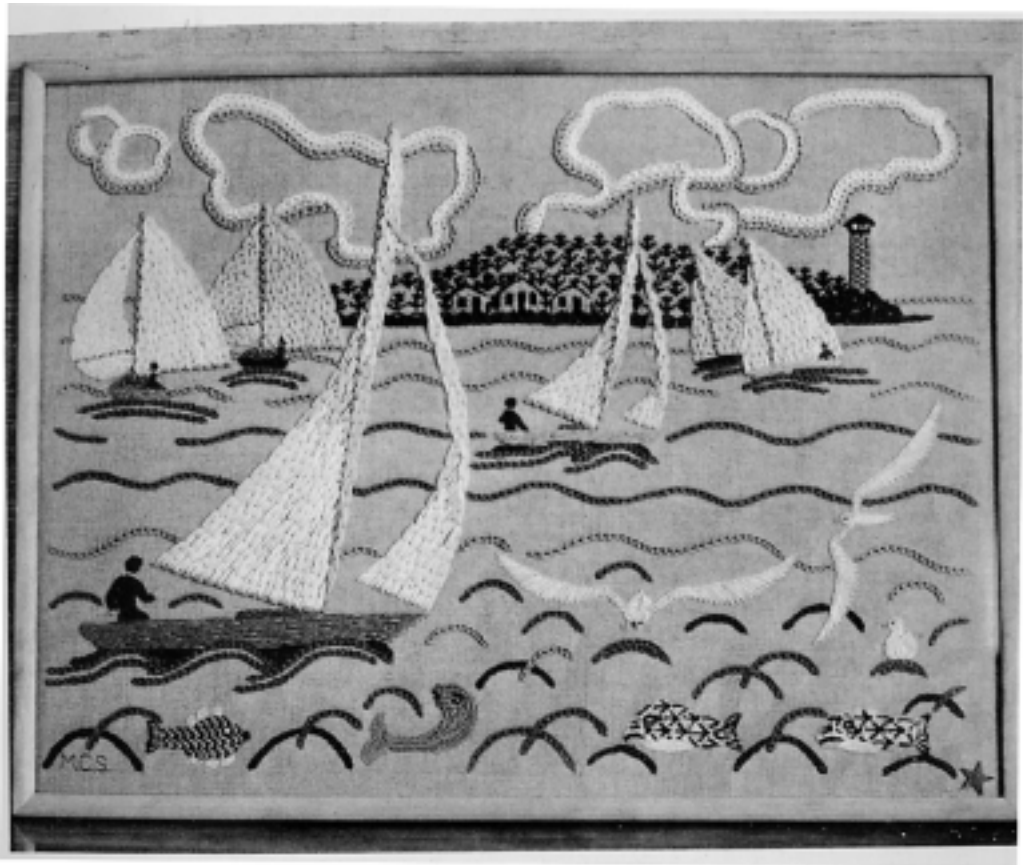


PLATE XI.

EMBROIDERED WALL PICTURE BY MISS MARCIA STEBBINS. NEUTRAL COLORINGS ON ECRU LINEN;
WHITES, GRAYS, AND DARK GREENS PREDOMINATING.



PLATE XII—DIANA.

PANEL BY MARY ELLEN CRISP. WOOL EMBROIDERY ON LINEN. THE HORSE AND RIDER ARE WORKED IN WARM LIGHT TONES; THE DOGS AND TREES IN TONES OF GOLD AND BROWN WITH BLUE GREEN TREES IN THE BACKGROUND. THE TREES IN THE FOREGROUND ARE WORKED IN TONES OF RED AND TERRA-COTTA.

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leaves a bare feeling in the composition. Mrs. Zorach works entirely in this all over modern technique, and always on linen.

Using linen also, but leaving her backgrounds free as part of the design scheme, Marcia Stebbins, a newcomer in the field, allows her stitchery to suggest movement, lyrically maintaining simple technique with chain, backstitch, and coarse stitchery. Her work gives delightful airiness and poetic feeling. In the boating panel shown, one senses the joy of the occasion interpreted. Again the shadow from the heavier wool threads gives the third dimension depth while the lines of chain stitch clouds wreath about in definite evolution in a manner that painted lines simply could not suggest. All of Miss Stebbins' panels possess this same spirited charm, conveying her love of the subject and a real appreciation of her technical problem, especially in the joy released in the pattern upon the fishes. These are imaginative sprees and amusing.

Mrs. Arthur Crisp brings to her work more classicalism in design. Being the wife of an architectural mural painter no doubt influences her feeling and appreciation of the formalized rendering. She loves the country and hunting dogs so it is natural to see her dream expression turning toward Diana. Like Mrs. Zorach, she "sees" her linen background covered completely in tapestry manner. Her stitch selection is different, however, having a preference for a little looser technique, and an over and over satin stitch worked in rows on the horse, dogs, and figure. There is greater variety in the introduction of buttonhole, Cretan, back chain, and outline stitches used. The all over design is composed far differently from that of either of the preceding artists, but the effort to obtain movement is related, and again is shown the individual personal touch from the artist's own storehouse of cultivated information.

Approaching movement from another angle is the decorative panel, "The Enchanted Isle," of the writer.¹ The differences are in the use of heavy blue green taffetas as a background, the balancing of the design flowing around and into a center unit. Here is an attempt to express the mood of repose in the midst of action. The clouds move out placidly behind the tree in contrast to those in Miss Stebbins' panel. The water is similar in expression of line, but the stitch in the writer's panel is a flowing backstitch suggesting smoothness of flow. Miss Stebbins' is chain stitchery suggesting the choppiness of Maine water. Again Miss Stebbins'

¹ Plate III, Page 6.

panel is more the expression of the place observed, and actually seen, whereas the writer's panel was a place ideally imagined and created from fantasy plus certain observation.

The sketches used stress rhythm of the object to be expressed. The chain stitches used for the trees are of blended green, and drooped to convey the effect of overlapping leaves. The buttonhole stitchery in the garland border is worked loosely to give action of growth and flow of pattern, but also to allow some value of the blue taffeta background to blend through the open stitches of pale corals and blue pink wools to create scintillation.

It may be interesting to note that "The Enchanted Isle" panel was conceived and created in my New York studio, the writer never having had the pleasure of visiting that enchanting spot. This panel was purchased by The Academy of Fine Arts in Honolulu, Hawaiian Islands, for its related feeling to the island.

So in following through the mood idea, and the feeling of the moment, we may find in needlework exhibits of today a genuine release for the creation of works of art. Following the command of an able technique, love and enthusiasm may do wonders in evolving patterns, employing those which have been garnered from the past in combination with the new materials and ideas of the present period.

The movement has begun with the efforts of these four moderns in America. May the ranks grow and the quality develop so that future generations may receive inspiration from our results.

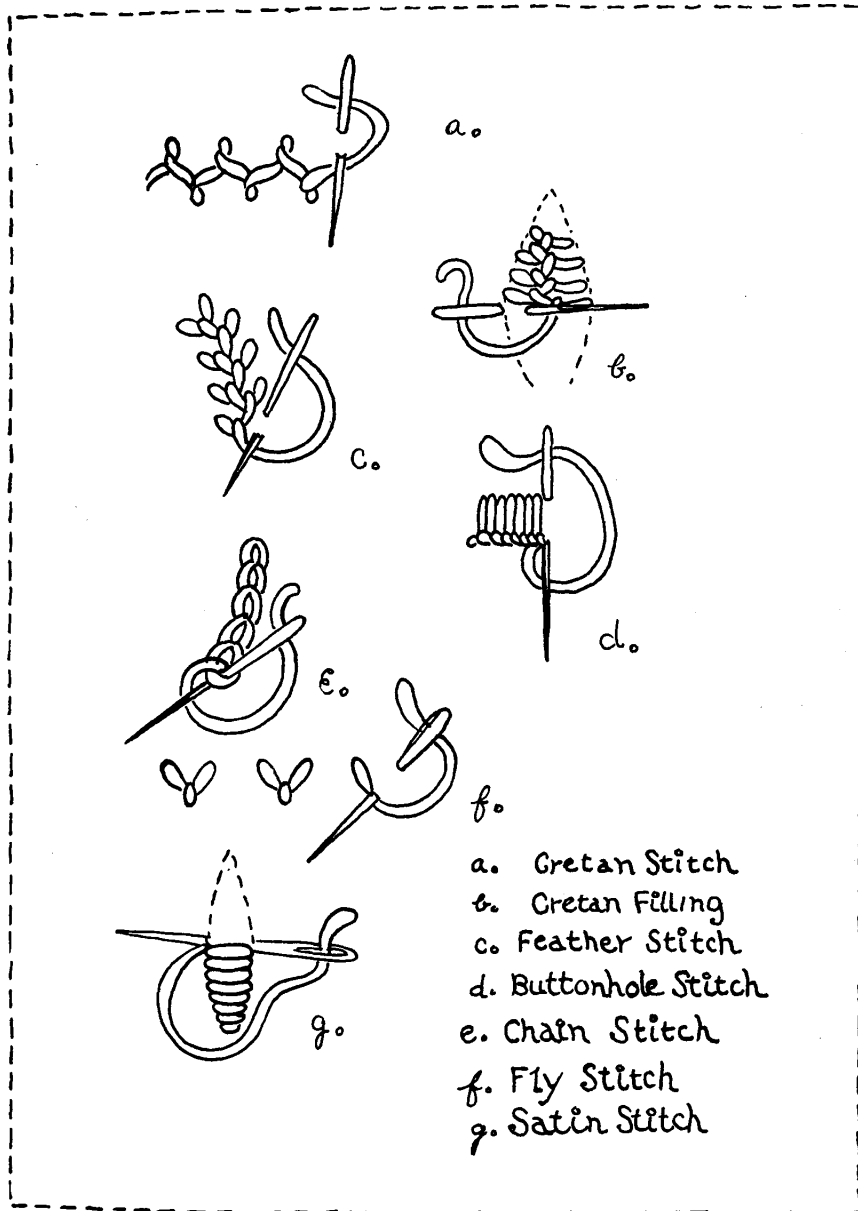


PLATE XIII.

STITCHES MOST UNIVERSALLY USED IN THE EXECUTION OF PANELS ILLUSTRATED
 IN THE WORK OF THE FOUR MODERN NEEDLEPAINTERS.