

HISTORIC ORNAMENT  
Treatise on  
DECORATIVE ART  
AND  
ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENT

*POTTERY; ENAMELS; IVORIES; METAL - WORK;  
FURNITURE; TEXTILE FABRICS; MOSAICS;  
GLASS; AND BOOK DECORATION*

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## EMBROIDERY.

The earliest method of decorating textiles was that of embroidering. It has been called "painting with the needle," and is even an older art than pattern weaving. In some of the oldest monuments of art that are still in existence, as the bas-reliefs of Egypt and Assyria, there may be seen representations of the embroidery that formerly decorated the kings' garments (see Figs. 162A to 165, former volume), and we have seen that these were the models for some of the earliest woven patterns. At first embroidered patterns would be simple geometrical designs, and afterwards symbolic units mixed with simple floral forms, as many of the older Egyptian embroidered patterns usually were, until by degrees the higher forms of patterns with figures or personages and animal forms were developed by the Chaldeans and Assyrians.

The latter nations, with their inherent love of barbaric splendour and Asiatic predilections for gorgeous colouring, surpassed the Egyptians in the art of embroidery.

The Persians and surrounding nations inherited from the older races this love of colour and early traditions of design, which are still seen in their tapestry, carpets, and embroidered work of all kinds.

The ancient Phrygian and Lydian people, who inhabited a portion of Asia Minor, were cultured races whom the Greeks and Romans always regarded as the inventors of embroidery—"phrygio" being the Roman word for embroiderer. The Phrygian embroidered patterns were mostly geometric, but in the later periods plant and animal forms were also used. Most of the decoration of the Ionian Greek pottery, consisting of bands of animals, birds, rosettes, and lozenges, are copies from the embroidered work of Asia Minor. To-day, even, the women of these parts embroider their bodices, aprons, head-coverings, and towels in an almost similar style of ornament.

The rock-cut façades of the Phrygian tombs, unlike the

imitated timber constructions of the Lydian tombs, have sculptured decorations that have been copied from geometrical forms of embroidery, and in many cases these façades resemble an embroidered curtain or carpet that would be hung up to serve the purposes of a door to the entrance of the earlier square domestic wooden buildings, of which the Phrygian and Lydian tombs were imitations in stone.

The Assyrian thresholds (Fig. 166, former volume) and many other sculptures and wall decorations in painted tiles of Chaldean and Persian origin were usually copies of embroidery, all of which clearly shows that embroidery and pattern weaving preceded stone, wood, and metal sculpture.

The Greeks were highly skilled in making embroidery. Homer repeatedly alludes to this art as an employment for women. Helen of Troy and Penelope wrought beautiful robes and hangings in their looms, embroidering them with rich needlework. On a Greek vase from Chiusi, Penelope is represented at work on a loom of the "high warp" (*haute-lisse*) or vertical pattern which is used so much to-day by the embroiderers and carpet weavers of the East. We have many allusions in the Bible to those who made all kinds of cunning needlework. Josephus says that the veil of the Temple at Jerusalem "was a Babylonian curtain embroidered with blue and fine linen, with scarlet and purple, and of a texture that was wonderful."

In England, during the Anglo-Saxon times, embroidered work had a great reputation, so much so that it was greatly prized and in request in France and other parts of Europe, where it was known as "Anglicum Opus." From an inventory of Charles V. of France (1364-80) we learn that he had a room furnished with English "hullings" or hangings embroidered in blue, with figures of lions, eagles, and leopards. Embroidery was the chief occupation of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman ladies. Bede and other old historians frequently extolled the excellence of design and

workmanship of the English embroidered palls, copes, corporals, chasubles, and hangings. After the Conquest and during the Norman period all kinds of heraldic devices were introduced amongst the ornament and floriated patterns; sometimes stories and romances were illustrated with the needle, and belonging to this order the famous Bayeux Tapestry may be mentioned, which represented in the form of a long frieze the Conquest of England by the Normans. It is supposed to have been wrought by Queen Matilda and her maidens, but was probably made to the order of Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, and brother-in-law to the Queen. It is not only a celebrated piece of needlework, but is an invaluable record of the costume of the period (Fig. 271). A coloured photograph of it is now in the Kensington Museum.

About the date of the thirteenth century various technical names were given to the different kinds of embroidery, such as "*opus plumarium*," or, as it is now called, "feather-stitch," a kind of needlework where the stitches are laid lengthwise, and not across, overlapping each other like the feathers in a bird's plumage; "*opus pulvinarium*," or "cushion" style, where the work is done in cross and tent stitch; "*opus pectineum*," where the embroidery is made to represent or imitate weaving, and had the design carried through from front to back of the foundation material. The *Opus Anglicum*, so highly prized, seems to have been a kind of chain-stitch embroidery, giving a granulated surface. The workwoman would start, for instance, in the case of executing the face of a human figure, at a point in



Fig. 271.—Norman Archer from the Bayeux Tapestry.

the centre of the cheek or chin, and work around it in a circular method, and where the hollows and dimples would



Fig. 272.—Part of the Orphrey of the Syon Cope; in the South Kensington Museum.

occur, a heated metal rod with a small bulb at the end of it would be used to press down the cavities.

In the well-known Syon Cope, an English embroidery of this period (Fig. 272), both the old feather-stitch and the chain-stitch are used as above described.

The *Crewel* stitch is a combination of the long and short



Fig. 273.—Carpet from Persia, embroidered in Gold and Silver on Dark Blue Velvet; Early Eighteenth Century. (S. K. M.)

feather-stitches, and is adapted for shading effects. In the stitches known as chain, knotted, and button-hole stitch the thread is looped; but lies flat in satin-stitch, crewel, darning, tent, and cross stitches. Satin and darning

stitches can be worked so that the design appears the same on both sides of the cloth, but chain and crewel stitch only produces the design on one side of the material.

Gold thread has been used very much in all ages in embroidery, and silver thread also, but unless the latter is



Fig. 274.—State Gloves, formerly belonging to Louis XIII. (S. K. M.)

varnished or lacquered it goes black by tarnishing. Gold “passing” is a silver-gilt thread wound around silk.

In old embroideries and woven tissues a gold thread was made of thin parchment gilded and twisted around silk: the Japanese used gilded paper in the same way, and sometimes the pure gold was used in thin, flat, beaten-out strips for both embroideries and woven fabrics.

In Persia and in the East generally an extensive use is

made of cloths of gold and silver embroidery (Fig. 273) as well as closely-covered needlework in silk and wool, and another modern kind is white silk embroidery on white cambric or calico.

Cut work or "appliqué" is another form of embroidery, where flowers, foliage, ornament, and figures are separately wrought with the needle, and the spaces cut out of the ground material into which these pieces were inserted. Many examples of Spanish, Rhenish, and Florentine needlework may be seen in the Kensington Museum, in which the architectural portions of the design are woven, and the figures of saints and other subjects worked on fine canvas and inserted in the panel spaces. Another and commoner kind of appliqué work is where the ornamental shapes are cut out of silk, velvet, linen, or woollen material, and sewed on to the cloth foundation, an edging material being used consisting of silk cord, gilt leather, or gimp. Appliqué work is more adapted for hangings and furniture coverings than for dress material, though it was formerly used for dresses. The illustration (Fig. 274) gives a very good idea of the style of ornament in Spanish or French embroidery of the Renaissance period.