Stitched in Time: English Hand Embroidery as Art, Communication, and Cultural Memory

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Abstract

Throughout history, the textile arts have served as a visual language and creative method of preserving identity, culture, and independence. In sites of unbalanced power distribution, English hand embroidery was often used as a means of establishing an individual's independence, in an effort to preserve personal identity, and sometimes to additionally form or maintain a positive connection between authority levels. *Stitched in Time: English Hand Embroidery as Art, Communication, and Cultural Memory*, explores the narratives that English hand embroidery has carried and historically preserved, while also exploring the shift to its current role in today's world. This project critically analyzed artistic textile works, techniques, and symbols alongside applied studies in the English hand embroidery technique of Goldwork. Additionally, this project documents for the first time embroideries which have never been on display or photographed before. *Stitched in Time* has resulted in the creation of artistic output in the form of Goldwork embroidery, along with written documentation detailing photos of works involved and their respective notations, and includes video interview documentation with specialists in the field of English hand embroidery.

Background

Historical textiles are often important in telling the stories of historical figures who have passed on, not only those of significant figures such as Mary Queen of Scots, but more importantly those of everyday common citizens. By becoming a viewfinder into everyday experience, textiles shape the way we identify cultural practices and historical movements through individualized identities. Needlework served as a means of representation for many individuals in sites of unbalanced power distribution, where it became a form of representation which preserved ones presence and identity. Needlework also served an important role in women's education, which we can observe primarily through the presence of samplers: stitch guides often representing personal identifying characteristics, and created for future reference. In one's studies, samplers were commonly used alongside topics of geography and religion, displaying interdisciplinary practice. The altering or ornamentation of garments and household items is also telling to its owners history and societal role. Technique choice, material use, and design played a key role in establishing an article or its owners purpose, while allowing the garment or artistic piece to serve more than a simply utilitarian purpose. This project aimed to further examine these visuals and practices.

Methods

- Literary Review
- Interviews with specialists in the field
  - Marianna Klaiman - Textile Historian
  - Isabella Rosner - Curator of Textiles and Contextual Studies at the RSN
- Artifact & General Studies at
  - Liverpool Cathedral
  - V&A Kensington
  - V&A East Storehouse
  - The King's Gallery
  - Royal School of Needlework
- Applied Studies in Goldwork Embroidery
  - Michelle Agnew - Raised Goldwork Specialist
- Video, Photo and Written Documentation



V&A East Storehouse, 7/21/26

Above Image:
Studying Embroidery Samplers at the V&A East Storehouse



Liverpool Cathedral 7/27/26

Discussion

Embroidery tells a story, stitching prospective, identity, and culture into the historical records by hand and thread. In this project I advanced my understanding of English embroidery practices through object studies, interviews, and literary review, while completing applied studies in the embroidery technique of Goldwork. I hope that by sharing my studies, photographic documentation of these pieces, and my artistic piece, that I can expand interest in this art form across generations, and promote its study and practice. During my work I also noticed how intricate proper textile preservation can be, and that it is not always easy to access. I would love to continue this project in the future, building on my research to further my understanding of hidden messaging within English embroidery, and take a closer look at the preservation of textiles.

"Considering the lingering social stigma attached to women's involvement in work at this time, the [Liverpool Cathedral Embroidery] Association members were more than confident in their abilities and displayed quite an independent spirit…The Liverpool Cathedral Embroidery Association was made up of formidable women who resolutely rose above class distinctions, criticisms and the requirements of society in order to work together to produce fine embroideries"
(*The Embroideries at Liverpool Cathedral*, pg.16)

Above/Right Images: Embroideries from Liverpool Cathedral, which showcase stylistically varying examples of the Tudor Rose

References:



Liverpool Cathedral 7/27/26



Left Image:
Goldwork Butterfly Wing, completed during my time studying with Michelle Agnew

Technique

Goldwork is an intricate, timely embroidery technique which utilizes a variety of gold thread types, often alongside padding techniques, to create a raised embroidery piece. Further dimension is added by utilizing varying textures, whose gold materials reflect brightly in the natural light of day or candlelight of evening. Some materials are directly embellished with off the spool, while others are carefully measured and individually cut to size, like a bead, then stitched down. Most Goldwork material used today is not gold, but rather gilt. Due to the delicate nature and material of these threads, they tarnish quickly with touch, making minimal handling essential to maintaining their appearance. Historically Goldwork embellishment has been used as a symbol of status, power, and wealth, as the art form is labor intensive and materials are costly. Being able to explore the technique this summer was very rewarding and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to study under Raised Goldwork Specialist, Michelle Agnew.