

OF EMBROIDERY

THE technicalities of Embroidery are very simple and its tools few—practically consisting of a needle, and nothing else. The work can be wrought loose in the hand, or stretched in a frame, which latter mode is often advisable, always when smooth and minute work is aimed at. There are no mysteries of method beyond a few elementary rules that can be quickly learnt; no way to perfection except that of care and patience and love of the work itself. This being so, the more is demanded from design and execution: we look for complete

triumph over the limitations of process and material, and, what is equally important, a certain judgment and self-restraint ; and, in short, those mental qualities that distinguish mechanical from intelligent work. The latitude allowed to the worker ; the lavishness and ingenuity displayed in the stitches employed ; in short, the vivid expression of the worker's individuality, form a great part of the success of needlework.

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The varieties of stitch are too many to be closely described without diagrams, but the chief are as follows :—

Chain-stitch consists of loops simulating the links of a simple chain. Some of the most famous work of the Middle Ages was worked in this stitch, which is enduring, and of its nature necessitates careful execution. We are more familiar with it in the dainty work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the

Of airy brightness and simplicity of which
Embroidery. lies a peculiar charm, contrasted with the
more pompous and pretentious work of
the same period. This stitch is also
wrought with a hook on any loose
material stretched in a tambour frame.

Tapestry-stitch consists of a building-up of stitches laid one beside another, and gives a surface slightly resembling that of tapestry. I give the name as it is so often used, but it is vague, and leads to the confusion that exists in people's minds between loom-tapestry and embroidery. The stitch is worked in a frame, and is particularly suitable for the drapery of figures and anything that requires skilful blending of several colours, or a certain amount of shading. This facility of "painting" with the needle is in itself a danger, for it tempts some people to produce a highly shaded imitation of a picture, an attempt which must

be a failure both as a decorative and as a pictorial achievement. It cannot be said too often that the essential qualities of all good needlework are a broad surface, bold lines and pure, brilliant and, as a rule, simple colouring; all of which being qualities attainable through, and prescribed by, the limitations of this art.

Appliqué has been, and is still, a favourite method of work, which Vasari tells us Botticelli praised as being very suitable to processional banners and hangings used in the open air, as it is solid and enduring, also bold and effective in style. It is more accurately described as a *method* of work in which various stitches are made use of, for it consists of designs embroidered on a stout ground and then cut out and laid on silk or velvet, and edged round with lines of gold or silk, and sometimes with pearls. It requires

Of considerable deftness and judgment in
Embroidery. applying, as the work could well be spoilt
by clumsy and heavy finishing. It is now
looked upon as solely ecclesiastical, I
believe, and is associated in our minds
with garish red, gold and white, and with
dull geometric ornament, though there
is absolutely no reason why church
embroidery of to-day should be limited
to ungraceful forms and staring colours.
A certain period of work, thick and
solid, but not very interesting, either as
to method or design, has been stereotyped
into what is known as Ecclesiastical Em-
broidery, the mechanical characteristics
of the style being, of course, emphasised
and exaggerated in the process. Church
work will never be of the finest while
these characteristics are insisted on ; the
more pity, as it is seemly that the richest
and noblest work should be devoted to
churches, and to all buildings that belong

to and are an expression of the communal life of the people. Another and simpler form of applied work is to cut out the desired forms in one material and lay upon another, securing the appliqué with stitches round the outline, which are hidden by an edging cord. The work may be further enriched by light ornament of lines and flourishes laid directly on the ground material.

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Couching is an effective method of work, in which broad masses of silk or gold thread are laid down and secured by a network or diaper of crossing threads, through which the under surface shines very prettily. It is often used in conjunction with appliqué. There are as many varieties of couching stitches as the worker has invention for ; in some the threads are laid simply and flatly on the form to be covered, while in others a slight relief is obtained by layers of

Of soft linen thread which form a kind
Embroidery. of moulding or stuffing, and which are
covered by the silk threads or whatever
is to be the final decorative surface.

The ingenious patchwork coverlets of
our grandmothers, formed of scraps of
old gowns pieced together in certain
symmetrical forms, constitute the
romance of family history, but this
method has an older origin than would
be imagined. Queen Isis-em-Kheb's em-
balmed body went down the Nile to its
burial-place under a canopy that was lately
discovered, and is preserved in the Boulak
Museum. It consists of many squares
of gazelle-hide of different colours sewn
together and ornamented with various
devices. Under the name of patchwork,
or mosaic-like piecing together of
different coloured stuffs, comes also the
Persian work made at Resht. Bits of
fine cloth are cut out for leaves, flowers, and

so forth, and neatly stitched together with great accuracy. This done, the work is further carried out and enriched by chain and other stitches. The result is perfectly smooth flat work, no easy feat when done on a large scale, as it often is. Of
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Darning and running need little explanation. The former stitch is familiar to us in the well-known Cretan and Turkish cloths: the stitch here is used mechanically in parallel lines, and simulates weaving, so that these handsome borders in a deep rich red might as well have come from the loom as from the needle. Another method of darning is looser and coarser, and suitable only for cloths and hangings not subject to much wear and rubbing; the stitches follow the curves of the design, which the needle paints, as it were, shading and blending the colours. It is necessary to use this facility for shading temperately, however,

Of or the flatness essential to decorative
Embroidery. work is lost.

The foregoing is a rough list of stitches which could be copiously supplemented, but that I am obliged to pass on to another important point, that of design. If needlework is to be looked upon seriously, it is necessary to secure appropriate and practicable designs. Where the worker does not invent for herself, she should at least interpret her designer, just as the designer interprets and does not attempt to imitate nature. It follows from this, that it is better to avoid using designs of artists who know nothing of the capacities of needlework, and design beautiful and intricate forms without reference to the execution, the result being unsatisfactory and incomplete. Regarding the design itself, broad bold lines should be chosen, and broad harmonious colour (which should be roughly planned

before setting to work), with as much minute work, and stitches introducing play of colour, as befits the purpose of the work and humour of the worker ; there should be no scratching, no indefiniteness of form or colour, no vagueness that allows the eye to puzzle over the design—beyond that indefinable sense of mystery which arrests the attention and withholds the full charm of the work for a moment, to unfold it to those who stop to give it more than a glance. But there are so many different stitches and so many different modes of setting to work, that it will soon be seen that these few hints do not apply to all of them. One method, for instance, consists of trusting entirely to design, and leaves colour out of account : white work on white linen, white on dark ground, or black or dark blue upon white. Again, some work depends more on

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Of than on form, as, for example, the hand-
Embroidery. some Italian hangings of the seventeenth
century, worked in floss-silk, on linen
sometimes, and sometimes on a dusky
open canvas which makes the silks gleam
and glow like precious stones.

In thus slightly describing the methods
chiefly used in embroidery, I do so prin-
cipally from old examples, as modern
embroidery, being a dilettante pastime,
has little distinct character, and is, in its
best points, usually imitative. Eastern
work still retains the old professional
skill, but beauty of colour is rapidly dis-
appearing, and little attention is paid to
durability of the dyes used. In speaking
rather slightly of modern needlework,
I must add that its non-success is often
due more to the use of poor materials
than to want of skill in working. It is
surely folly to waste time over work that
looks shabby in a month. The worker

should use judgment and thought to procure materials, not necessarily rich, but each good and genuine of its kind. Lastly, she should not be sparing of her own handiwork, for, while a slightly executed piece of work depends wholly on design, in one where the actual stitchery is more elaborate, but the design less masterly, the patience and thought lavished on it render it in a different way equally pleasing, and bring it more within the scope of the amateur.

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MAY MORRIS.