

CUT-WORKS, NEW AND OLD.

BY ADA STERLING.



ONE may scarcely pick up a piece of ancient needlework without a quick recognition of the symbolism upon which its every stitch and form is built, and to the expression of which every line or dot or curve is devoted. Generally its message is religious, and similar in the form-vehicle to that shown in stone, wood, or metal ornament; for all ornamental designs, whether for dress or edifice or monument, are built upon allegory, emblem forms, or spring from an attempt to perpetuate great deeds or to express some given thought. In such needlework by early European workers as has been preserved for a half-dozen centuries, religious emblems were wrought almost exclusively. Not merely did these reflect the Christian thought; they repeated the mitre form of sacerdotal head-dresses, and reproduced the insignia of priesthood irrespective of the creed it represented.

Before the age of painting as we know it, in a time when, to quote the gifted author of "Ave Roma Immortalis," goldsmithing was the highest known art or craft (for artists then were prouder to win the title of craftsmen than any other), the making of cut-works as a fine art in Italy was an employment of great popularity. The works figured everywhere upon the robes of the rich and distinguished, and upon the altar cloths of the churches, and were then, as now, immensely valued possessions.

Historians of needlework, as an isolated branch of industry, all agree in complacently

ascribing the designs that appear upon the rich products of the European workers of the middle ages to the examples furnished by the wares of itinerant Byzantine and Moorish tradesmen, who landed from time to time in Italy in search of patrons. But Mr. Crawford, who is no mean oracle and who, seemingly, is panoplied with authority for his belief, declares the handiwork of the Byzantines and neighboring nations to have been cruder than that of native Italian work-



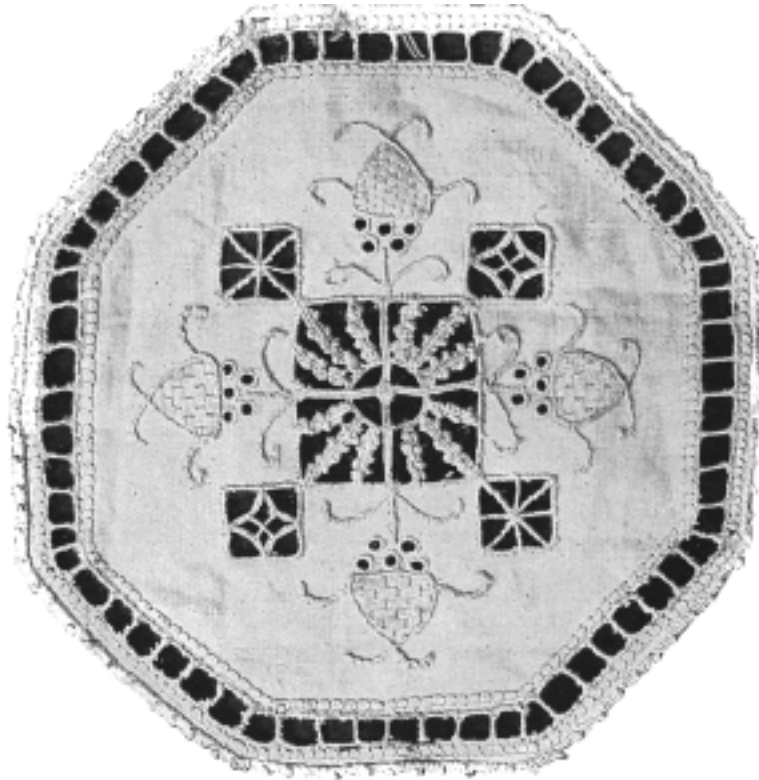
SPECIMEN OF CUT-WORK [1550]. FROM COLLECTION AT METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

ers, though infinitely more pretentious with its gold threads and garish, fantastical forms—to him, expressionless.

However this may be, the needlework specimens of 1200 to 1450 that have been preserved to the present day defy all attempt to limit their origin to the ingenuity of a single race or fusion of races. Every-

where in old ornamented fabrics, features appear that are familiar to eyes most trained to the recognition of Christian symbols, and learned folk have drawn therefrom conclusions that would make such ornament an expression of the faith that has changed the world in less than two thousand years.

In fact, the most familiar of these emblems antedate the foundation of the faith itself and are found mingling with the symbols of the myriad races that peopled the rounding southern shore of the Mediterranean, as well as those of the Persians and the East Indians. Every religion has mothered innumerable forms of expressive ornament, both in color and in form. Mohammedanism is the one great cult that seems to have failed to im-



A CUT-WORK DOILY. SYMBOLIC DESIGN.

press an individual symbolism upon the crafts practised by its followers. These wrought upon their banners, upon their robes, and upon the hangings of their temple rich embroideries, it is true, but their forms were individual fantasies rather than expressions of denominational tenets; crescents, such as the worshipers of Tanit loved, or the golden sun which, indeed, the Hebrews also used, and later the Christians adopted, having within its center the triangle and the name of God, the Triune, within it inscribed in Hebrew. But the sun-form is derived from the ancient sun-worship — the first influence to which life responds, as every flowering season tells. So to trace commonly familiar symbols through their various changes to their source were a task beyond the limitations of this paper.

Suffice to say that ancient needlework is massed with a symbolism as interesting to the student as the most over-written palimpsest. Prominent among the designs is the pomegranate burst open, a form that to Eastern

nations was early a symbol of immortality, the promise lying in the full gathering of seed revealed within the parted petals. The ring, significant of unending time, of eternity, and cross-forms to the number of twenty or more were commonly employed by oriental workers. Even today they form the basic design of certain oriental rugs. In the purest Arabesque designs of early needlework, the cross *fleurie* (blossoming) appears prominently, a fact which, if traced, would lead into a very labyrinth of poetry and romance. Wagner makes use of a legend of this cross in his story of Tannhäuser, whose redemption might not be accomplished until, nourished by the tears of penitence, the brown staff, a pilgrim's cross, begins to blossom.

Again, the lotus, five-petaled, and sometimes having but three, symbolized coming plenitude, a reward, a future life. It has been appropriated with its original significance by Christian worshipers and mingled undisputed with their symbols.



COMBINATION OF MODERN CUT-WORK AND SAXONY LACE

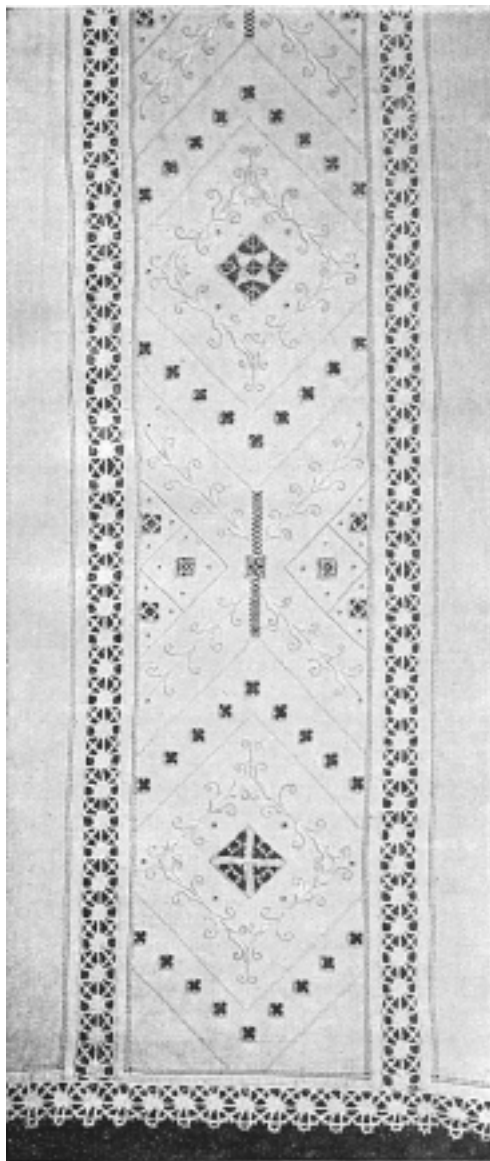
In needlework forms none save appliqué has been found so reflective of symbolic forms as the cut-work. It may be generally accepted that the primitive cut-works, rich in gold thread and often done upon the costliest of silken foundations, were derived from African or Persian sources, coming by way of the sea to Spain. Traversing that Catholic country, developing there for several centuries, the designs were practically already Christianized by the time they reached Italy. Here, in the kingdoms ruled by the Catholic Church, which to the time of the Reformation was practically the single guardian and transmitter of the gospel of Christ, the varied cross-forms seen in Eastern ornament were diminished to two. These were the Calvary cross and the Latin, the latter made with a pedestal composed of three steps, charity, hope, and faith, named in the order in which they ascend. These are the forms that have remained, almost exclusively, in use upon the needleworks of

Italy, though the Maltese and Greek crosses, and the cross *pâtée* (literally, split—it resembles a square, with cleft corners and is not unlike the Maltese form) still continue favorites for metal-workers, jewellers, wood-carvers, and others, all three forms being available for setting within a square or circle.

Appliqués, or applied figures, cut out in one material and laid over another of contrasting color, to which they were secured by gold, silver, or silk threads, were the immediate predecessors of cut-works as a form of dress ornamentation, in so far as may be traced. Doubtless, too, slashing, a method of dress ornamentation that may be observed advantageously in old pictures, had its part in exciting the ingenuity of needlewomen and the makers of cut-works in particular. Slashed trimmings, on sleeves, and “trunks” of velvet were in vogue for many centuries. They generally revealed undergarments or linings of delicacy. At times the slashed

sides were eyeletted and laces of lute-string were introduced.

As open needlework advanced, the slashes slowly gave place to lace, embroidered, or cut-work bands. Appliqué forms, especially



ONE OF THREE BANDS IN CUT-WORK BED-SPREAD,
MADE BY THE DECORATIVE ART WORKERS.

upon linens and wool-stuffs, were already commonly made and worn in Rome in early Christian times. One writer, W. G. P. Townsend, tells of a toga worn by a Christian senator, upon which there were six hundred or more applied figures representing

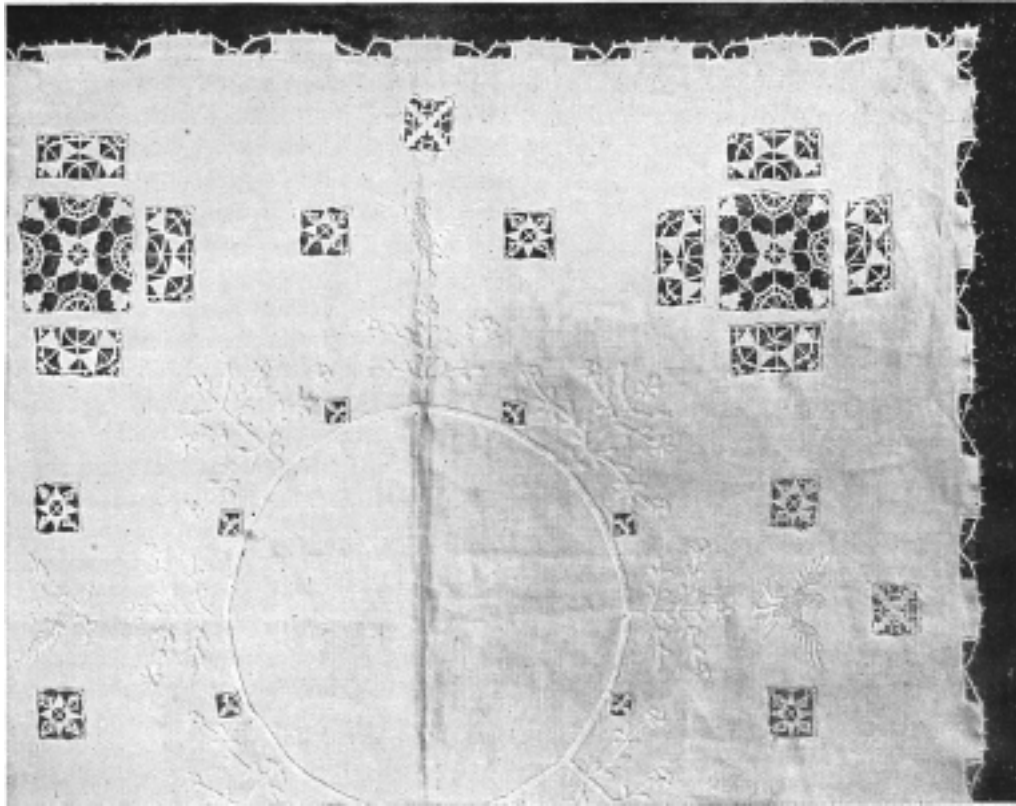
Biblical narrative. A walking panorama was this godly man, remarks the writer.

In the middle ages appliqué was found to be a form of dress ornament that lent itself well to royal fabrics, velvet, silk, and costly jewels. In Holbein's portrait of Lady Jane Grey the petticoat is said to be of white, elaborately wrought with gold figured appliqué.

Appliqué is illusive in its suggestion of openwork, and cut-works, that reveal a dark or different background when laid upon silk or other foundation, very naturally succeeded it as fine needlework became more generally developed and practised. The drawing of threads and the open effects, resulting from a stitching back of these, may well have suggested the later cutting away of the material itself and the filling in of the holes thus made with fancy stitching. The fascination of this pattern-evolving led soon to the making of lace with threads and needles, and with bobbins, an ornamental fabric made wholly independent of the weaver.

For centuries all openwork done by the needleworkers was designated *lacis*. Even the darned nets of the north of England in the ninth century were so termed; and, at that time, the noble wives and maidens of Britain and of Ireland already, if their legends of war and of peace and of romantic wooing may be trusted, were accomplished embroideresses, who plied their needles upon the garments of husband or lover, to while away the lonely hours of waiting for their absent heroes, while the vagrant bard lingered to sing to them.

Within a score or more of years cut-works have been revived in Italy, in England and in France, and last in America, until today the making of this needlework is become a thriving industry, both artistically and commercially, among a class of educated native workers whose needlework ranks well when brought into comparison with foreign product. The introduction of this industry in America is due to the indefatigable efforts of some of the leading spirits of the New York Decorative Art Society. These have opened classes for instruction in the work under competent



A REPRESENTATIVE OLD MODEL OF SYMBOLISM IN NEEDLEWORK, REPRODUCED EXACTLY BY AMERICAN WORKERS. CHARACTERISTIC BORDER.

teachers, and, what is of as great value, have established a market for the sale of the finished work. The school, in the beginning, gave its instruction gratis, exacting only patient study on the part of its pupils and a faithfulness to the traditional excellence with which the early cut-works were made that would preclude the applying of the old cut-work stitches to flippant or insignificant and so-called modernized designs. In its adherence to the antique examples the school of the society has been inexorable and in this way it has kept clear for the product of its best workers a market supported by exacting connoisseurs of wealth.

The models used are wholly antique, faithfully followed as to stitch and symbol forms. They are collected for the society's use by Miss Johnson, a wealthy amateur who resides abroad, and who is probably the best informed American woman of her time on the subject of fine cut-works. The product

of the school of the New York society is costly, a fit adornment for the palaces which multiply in this country. It is made upon a basis of soft Italian linen. A single doily represents the work of days. A bed-spread of linen, not over elaborate, cannot be produced with cut-work ornamentation under from three hundred to five hundred dollars. Upon it are spent the time and fancy of gentlewomen, for it is from this class that the finest needleworkers have always been recruited.

Perhaps the most valuable of the illustrations here given, in point of historic accuracy and perfect representation of the symbolic in the needlecraft that is being fostered under this association of art patrons, is the communion or tea-cloth (for it may serve either purpose) of which a corner is herewith reproduced.

Every feature in the design is a symbol. Beginning with the ring in the center, em-

blem of eternity, the little squares will be seen to be filled in with a triumphal cross, and through it a sceptre. These tiny figures are wrought in buttonhole stitch, with sparse picots exactly as are the brides in the coarser Italian laces.* The edges of the little squares are stayed with the same stitch.

Beyond and springing from the circle is the palm-tree, symbol of martyrdom. At the four sides, above this tree, a dove is seen with outstretched wings, emblem of lowliness and of holiness. At each side of this symbol is an open square, repeating the

*See "The Making of Venice Laces," in THE CHAUTAUQUAN MAGAZINE for December, 1901.—EDITOR.

crown and sceptre symbol. Above the dove is another square in which the Greek cross is incorporated with a crown of thorns. In the oblong ornaments to the large open-work corners, the half-crown of triumph reappears, the sceptre thrust through it, and mingling with the design is the thinner crown of thorns. Buttonhole, satin, seed, and sometimes couching stitches are used in ornamental cut-works. Drawn-work and occasionally thread laces are associated with linen in some of the lighter articles made, but designs composed solely of cut-work stitches upon fine linen are of greatest artistic value.