

Beginning Creative Stitchery

Introduction

Creative Stitchery is simply another way of describing embroidery, the art of decorating fabric with a needle and thread.

There are many kinds of stitchery. Long ago, Peruvians attached brilliant feathers to their shirts. That was one kind of stitchery. Powhatan, the great Indian chief, father of Pocahontas, wore a leather robe “embroidered” with cowrie shells. That was another kind of stitchery. Now, too, we decorate our fabrics by stitching onto them such surprising objects as pebbles, driftwood, grasses, leather, beads, or the shiny wings of a dragonfly. Today, however, our embroidery work is more often done with traditional threads and yarns.

Stitchery is an ancient craft and has always been considered a very special one. If you had lived in Peru 2,000 years ago and had been one of those picked to spend all of her time spinning and dyeing thread, weaving it into cloth, then embroidering it, you would have been a “chosen woman.”

Your great-grandmother was taught to embroider when she was a little girl. In those days, this usually meant working with the tiniest of fine stitches. This could be very tedious, which may be why so many girls gave up learning how to embroider.

Others Who Have Stitched

Embroidery is as old as the needle, and the needle is as old as man’s earliest civilizations. Needles of bone and bronze

have been found in the ancient tombs of Egypt, dating from at least 5,000 B.C. Egyptians wore robes of beautifully embroidered linen, and when Cleopatra journeyed down the Nile, the great square sail of her ship was richly decorated with royal purple stitchery.

On the South American continent, the great Paracas weavers and embroiderers of Peru were making some of the world’s most magnificent fabrics just before the birth of Christ. Embroidery was considered to be a high form of art. Peruvians spun their yarns from the luxurious fleece of the llama, the alpaca, and the vicuna, which grazed on the high plateaus of the Andes. These fabrics have been preserved in tombs for more than a thousand years, and today we can see them in many of our museums. They show the things that were important in the lives of these early Americans – dancers, headhunters, birds, fish, and animals.

Historians have told us that embroidering with silk began in China. A Chinese empress is said to have discovered silk when she accidentally dropped the cocoon of a silk moth into her cup of tea and then saw the thread unreel in the hot water. From then on, the Empress of China was worshipped as the patroness of silk caterpillars. The secret of their silk thread was guarded zealously. In time, soldiers and travelers from Europe carried home news of the wonderful silkworm in China, but it was not until the sixth century A.D., after two monks had smuggled some cocoons back to Greece, that the manufacture of silk began on the European continent.

In the elegant court life of the Chinese emperors, embroidery was developed into a high degree of artistry. A man's status and profession were revealed through the elaborate stitches and many-colored symbols embroidered on his silk and satin robes.

Types of Embroidery

Candlewicking embroidery — A colonial form of embroidery worked using colonial knots on unbleached muslin with candlewick thread.

Charted embroidery — Creating stitches by following a chart, done on a fabric that has a natural grid woven in.

Crewel embroidery — Free embroidery worked with crewel or Persian yarn rather than floss.

Cross stitch embroidery — Embroidery using only the “cross” stitch, includes stamped and counted/charted designs.

Chicken scratch — A type of embroidery worked on gingham fabric. Using certain stitches, thread or floss creates a lacelike design on gingham fabric when finished.

Crazy quilt embroidery — Embroidering the seams of a item made with irregular shaped pieces.

Free embroidery — Creating stitches following a design stamped on the fabric.

Huck embroidery — A type of needlework done on huck toweling. Embroidery is worked around surface floats that are characteristic of this type of fabric.

Redwork — Uses one color (red) embroidery floss on white or unbleached fabric.

Ribbon embroidery — Embroidery using silk ribbon to form stitches.

Smocking — A type of embroidery that decorates as well as gathers the fabric on which it is worked. Regular smocking requires a grid either transferred to or woven into the fabric, such as gingham. English smocking is embroidery done on pre-gathered/pleated fabric

Snowflake embroidery — Also known as Chicken Scratch.

Swedish weaving — Similar to huck embroidery only down on monk's cloth. Designs are a larger scale than huck designs.

Supplies/Materials Needed for Embroidery

FABRIC

Almost any fabric can be used for embroidery as long as the needle and thread (or yarn) can pass through the structure of the cloth smoothly. Generally speaking, embroidery is done on woven fabric. There are even weave fabrics and plain weave fabrics. Plain weave fabrics are all constructed with an over-one yarn under-one yarn structure. There is not necessarily the same number of threads in the lengthwise and crosswise direction of the fabric, as with burlap, certain linens, and other fabrics. Even weave is a plain weave (over-one under-one yarn structure) that has the same number of threads running in both directions (warp and weft). An example is Aida cloth. Monk's cloth is

an even weave, but is considered a basket weave (over-four yarns, under-four yarns) structure.

Embroidery can be worked freehand; however, most often the stitcher follows a line drawing, which is transferred onto the fabric. Fabrics with a prestamped design can be purchased. A design on a transfer sheet can also be purchased and applied to the fabric of your choice. Another alternative is to create your own design that can be transferred onto the fabric.

Surface fabrics, such as gingham, can be used to create a design by following the pattern of the fabric. Gingham is great for beginning stitchers because it is a firm fabric with woven (rather than printed) checks to help keep stitches even, straight, and uniform.

Waste canvas is a stiff even weave fabric used to add cross stitch designs to all sorts of fabrics. The waste canvas is basted on top of the background fabric, aligning grain lines. Stitching is done through the centers of each canvas square. After stitched design is completed, basting and canvas threads are removed from under the design.

THREADS

There are many different kinds of thread that can be used for embroidery.

Stranded floss — The most commonly used. Comes packaged in a skein. Floss has six strands which can be divided and used to give a certain effect.

Persian yarn — A stranded thread that can be divided. Used for crewel embroidery

Pearl cotton — has a high sheen. Usually used as a single strand. Available in balls or skeins and comes in different thicknesses, which can be used for special effects.

NEEDLES

Needles come in different sizes and with different points for a variety of fabrics. It is important to take good care of your needles to prevent rusting, scratching, or dulling the point. Storing them in a separate container is a good idea.

- Embroidery/crewel needles — come with sharp points that enable the needle to pass through the fabric smoothly and large eyes so the needle can be easily threaded with floss/yarn.
- Tapestry needles — have blunt points and large eyes and are mostly used for counted work.
- Chenille needles — have sharp points and longer, larger eyes for threading heavier threads and yarns.
- Sharps, darners and betweens — are general-purpose needles for hand finishing and basting. Darners are extra long needles while betweens are short and easy to use.

HOOPS

Embroidery hoops are two rings that fit together with the fabric in between held taut for embroidery work. One ring fits inside the other with a tension screw on the outer ring. Tighten or loosen the ring by adjusting the screw. Hoops can be made of plastic or wood. They come in different sizes and sometimes different shapes such as oval, round, and square.

Always loosen the tension on the hoop when you stop work on your project.

Leaving it tight can create creases that are hard to remove later.

To use the embroidery hoop, lay the smaller ring on a flat surface. Place your embroidery fabric over the ring, then loosen the outer ring with the tension screw and place the outer ring over the smaller ring. Tighten the screw, keeping the fabric taut by pulling gently from side to side not corner to corner. It may be necessary to tighten the fabric occasionally as you work.

SCISSORS

The best kinds of scissors to use for embroidery work are small sharp-pointed ones. Store your scissors in a separate container (eyeglass case, plastic holder, pencil box).

THIMBLE

This is a helpful tool to protect your finger during stitching. It also assists with moving the needle through the fabric. Thimbles are most commonly made of plastic or metal. The thimble should comfortably fit the middle finger of the hand with which you stitch.

Preparing to Stitch

PREPARING FABRIC

Clothing items used for embroidery need to be prewashed. All other fabrics for embroidery do not need to be washed before using. Keep in mind that even weave fabrics tend to ravel; therefore, finishing the raw edges becomes necessary. Overcast or zigzag the edges. It is also acceptable to use masking tape over the raw edges of your fabric.

TRANSFERRING THE DESIGN

If using an iron-on transfer sheet or iron-on design, carefully follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Transfer crayons, water-soluble pens, or air-soluble pens are easy ways to transfer designs. Follow the directions provided with these items. Techniques may vary depending on the type of item used.

Without access to transfer pens or crayons, an easy way to transfer a design is to tape the pattern to a window with strong light, then tape the fabric in place over the design and trace with a lead pencil. The lead pencil will wash out after the project is complete.

Patterns and designs are extremely plentiful and can be found in many places. Coloring books, china, wallpaper, magazines, photographs, quilt patterns, or comic books are just a few suggestions for finding design ideas. Be creative and draw your own!

THREADING THE NEEDLE

Cut a length of floss approximately 18 inches or according to the directions in the project or kit. Flatten the strands at one end of the floss. Gently pull one strand out while lightly holding the top of the other strands. Repeat until you have the number of strands needed for the work. Put the strands together to thread the needle.

A purchased needle threader can be used to put the floss through the eye of the needle. An alternative method is to make your own needle threader with paper. Cut a strip of paper about 3 inches long and just wide enough to go through the eye. Lay the floss in the center of the strip of paper and fold in half. Holding both ends of the

paper together, pass the strip through the eye.

Another method is to fold the floss around the eye of the needle to make a loop. Press loop tight against the needle eye. Slip loop off the eye of the end of the needle eye. Flatten floss, holding close to the folded edge and thread floss through the eye of the needle.

CLEANING AND PRESSING

Cleaning an embroidery piece depends on the fiber content of the fabric as well as the fiber content of the thread used.

Embroidery floss is cotton, and if handled careful, can be laundered. If the base fabric is also cotton or cotton blend, the item can be washed.

To wash, use warm water and a mild detergent suitable for delicate fabrics. Wash by gently dipping and squeezing the fabric; do not wring or twist. Do Not Soak. Rinse well in warm water. Again do not wring or twist your work. Lay flat until almost dry.

To iron the embroidery, place it on a towel wrong side up. Cover the stitched area with a lightweight cotton cloth. Lightly press the project with a moderately hot, dry iron.

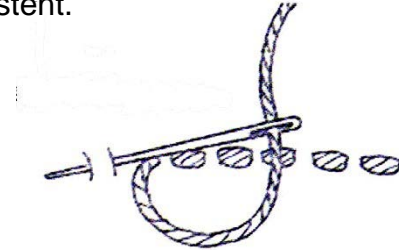
STITCHES

Running stitch

The running stitch makes a good outline and is a fine way to fill in color.

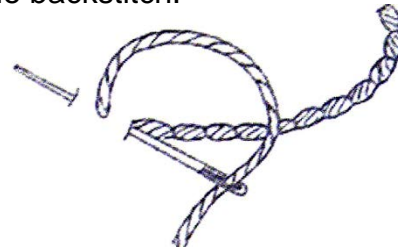
Position piece in embroidery hoop so that stitching be worked from right to left. Begin with the needle on the underside of the fabric. Bring needle up to the top side. Move needle forward, along line to be

stitched, no more than ¼ inch. Insert needle taking no more than a ¼-inch stitch. Stitches should be the same size on the top and wrong side as well as consistent throughout. It is possible to take several stitches at the same time on the needle. However, be careful that stitches are consistent.



Backstitch

If the running stitch leaves too many open spaces for the outline effect you may want, try the backstitch.



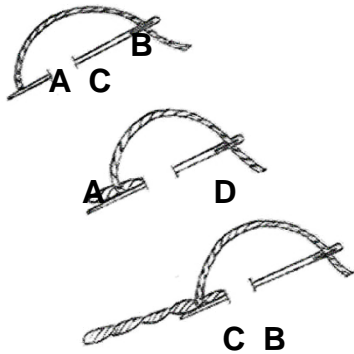
Start the same way, but take only one stitch at a time. Instead of going forward for the second stitch, go backward to meet the previous stitch. The backstitch makes a nice, clean outline. It is a very good stitch for signing your name on stitchery.

Try sewing your initials on the practice cloth, first with the running stitch, then with the backstitch. For different effects, experiment with the different threads.

Stem stitch

This is a very old stitch sometimes called the outline stitch. Position fabric to stitch from left to right. Bring your knotted thread up at the point marked **A**. Go down at **B** and back halfway, coming up at **C**.

The stem stitch will look best if you try to keep stitches equal in size. Next, go down at **D** and up in the same hole as **B**. Continue in this way, always keeping the thread on the same side. Thread can be on either side, but don't switch back and forth.

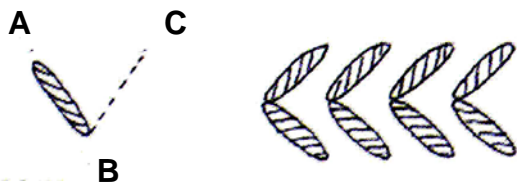


Stitches for a Lighter Design

Sometimes a pattern or design will require a filled-in, solid effect. At times a filled space with a light, airy design is what is needed. The stitches that follow do this in various ways.

Arrowhead stitch

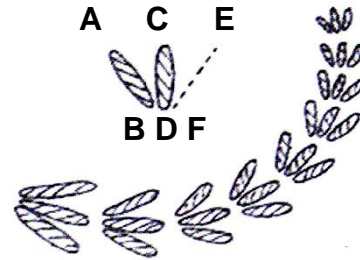
To begin, come up at **A**, then go down at **B** and up at **C**, then back down in the same hole as **B**. You can line up these little "Vs" like birds in flight, or you can scatter them around to fill a particular space.



Fern stitch

This differs only slightly from the arrowhead stitch. First, make the stitch from **A** to **B**. The second stitch moves from **C** to **D** and is

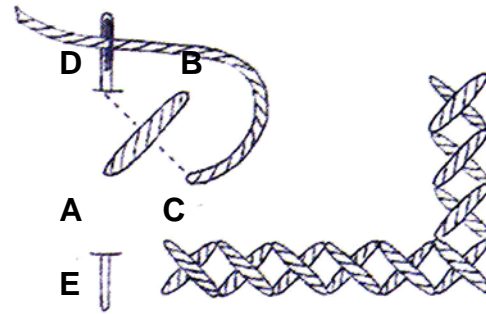
in the center. Then add the third stitch, **E** to **F**. You can see why it is called a fern stitch.



Cross stitch

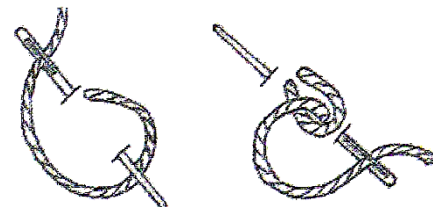
This is a very traditional stitch. Years ago, when every little girl made her own sampler, it was often done with nothing but cross stitches.

Come up at **A**, go down at **B**. Come up at **C**, go down at **D**, and so on, to the next spot.



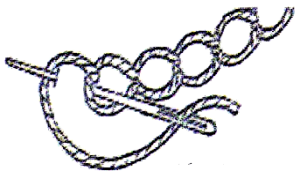
Lazy-daisy stitch

A popular stitch for making flower petals is the lazy-daisy stitch. Bring the thread up at the base of the petal, hold the loop with your thumb, and anchor it with a small stitch. Work the lazy-daisy petals in a ring with the base of each closed for a round flower. This may also be used as a stitch for filling in by scattering lazy daisies at random.



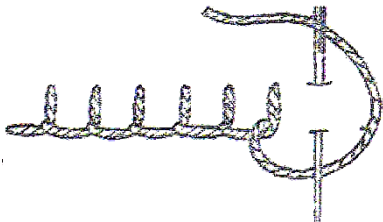
Chain stitch

This stitch is worked from the top down. Bring your needle up through the fabric, hold the loop with your thumb and insert the needle down again at the same place. Bring your needle up a short distance away with the thread looped under the needle and repeat. Use this for heavy outlines or as a filling, making rows of chains following the outline of the shape being filled.



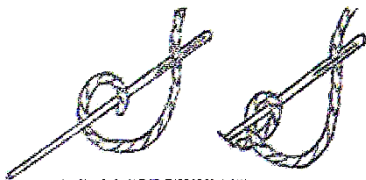
Buttonhole stitch

This stitch is worked from left to right. Bring the needle up through your fabric. Holding the thread under your left thumb, form a loop, then pass the needle through the fabric and over the looped thread; repeat.



French knot

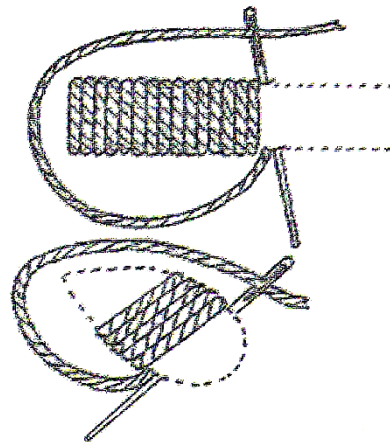
Bring the thread up through the fabric. Wrap it over and under the needle, crossing the beginning thread. Insert the needle in the fabric close to where it came up. Use the thread double to produce larger knots, if desired.



Satin stitch

You have probably used this stitch instinctively. Since the beginning of embroidery, the satin stitch has been used to fill in areas. It looks easy, but actually it's quite tricky to give it a clean, neat edge that looks good.

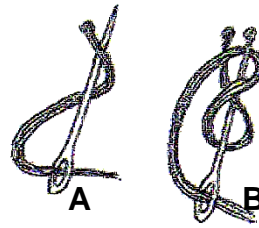
To get a firm, neat line around the edge, outline the area first with the split stitch, insert the needle over the outside edge of the outline. Another possibility is to start in the center and work toward each end. This gives a different effect.



Colonial knot

This is a stitch used for candlewicking. Bring needle and thread/floss up through the fabric at dot. Place the needle under the thread/floss. Run the thread/floss over the needle and then under the needle in a figure eight fashion. Holding thread tight with your left hand, insert the needle in the fabric at **B** and pull through to underside of fabric.

Proceed to the next dot on the design and repeat the process. To end, run needle under several stitches on the back.



Beginners in creative stitchery would be wise to choose simple designs and patterns. The stitches described here can be used on home furnishing articles such as wall hangings, pillows, placemats, and as trimming for curtains and draperies. They can also be used on clothing.

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