

Monochromatic Embroidered Embellishment in Elizabethan Undergarments

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Monochromatic Embroidery is an umbrella term used to describe a type of embroidery popular during the 16th Century. In this article we will explore this popular embroidery style in more detail as well as outline a simple project that you can use to start experimenting with this wonderful and enjoyable form of needlework.

What we commonly refer to today as blackwork and scarletwork was at the time simply a popular embroidery style where designs were worked in a single color, most often in silk and most often on a linen ground.

Black and red certainly appear to have been the most popular color choices for this embroidery but they were certainly not the only colors used. Blue was also quite popular and there are numerous examples of garments worked in purple, green, pink, and metallic threads.

This type of embroidery was used to decorate all types of garments and undergarments were especially popular choices for this type of embellishment. While they could be made plainly, all types of undergarments were also often embroidered. Shirts, smocks, hosen, breeches, coifs, forehead cloths, and night caps were all embroidered, sometimes elaborately and sometimes simply.

Linen was most often used as the ground for these embroideries. While other fabrics may also have been used, linen was by far the most popular fabric for undergarments. For example, most shirts and smocks were made of linen because it stood up very well to the rigors of everyday use and provided excellent protection for outer garments against oils and sweat.

Threads used and Popular Colors

Silk was the most popular thread used for the monochrome embroidery used to decorate undergarments of the time period. However, it was not the only type of thread used. Arnold's [Patterns of Fashion 4](#) describes a shirt of white linen embroidered in blue linen thread[1]. The same text also describes a woman's linen coif embroidered in white linen thread[2] and the tops of a pair of boot hose also embroidered with white linen.[3]

Red and black are often considered to be the most popular colors for this type of embroidery. Known commonly as scarletwork and blackwork, there are numerous extant examples of such embroidery on undergarments of the time period. In fact there are 6 examples of undergarments decorated with scarletwork[4] and 4 examples of blackwork[5] described in Arnold's [Patterns of Fashion 4](#). There is a great deal of variety though in the colors used for these embroideries. Green[6], blue[7], pink[8], and purple[9] were all also used. In addition metallic threads often appear to have been used with monochrome embroideries.[10]



Bess of Hardwick wearing a scarletworked smock under a fur lined loose gown. Bess of Hardwick. Unknown artist. c1550s.



Mary Cornwallis wearing a gown with blackworked sleeves. Mary Cornwallis, Countess of Bath. George Gower. c1580.



Elizabeth I wearing a gown with blackworked sleeves and stomacher as well as a coordinating blackworked ruff. Elizabeth I. Unknown artist. 1590.



Lady Kytson wearing a blackworked smock and blackworked sleeves. Lady Kytson. George Gower. 1573.



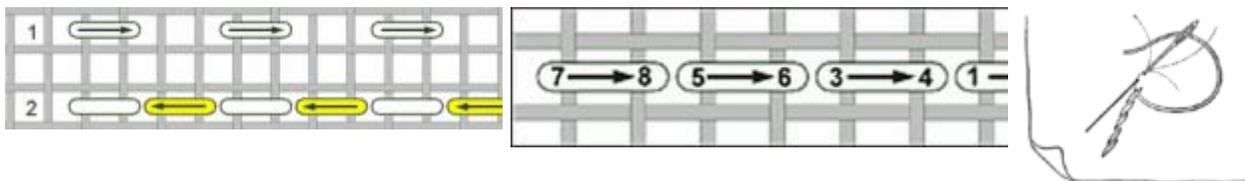
Sir Christopher Hatton wearing an embroidered falling band or shirt collar. Sir Christopher Hatton. Unknown artist. Last half of the 16th Century.



Esther Inglis wearing a blackwork stomacher. Esther Inglis. Unknown artist. 1595

Stitches Used

While the Holbein or double running stitch most often comes to mind when considering these embroideries there was just as much variety in the stitch techniques used as there was in color. In fact cross-stitch[11], double running stitch[12], satin stitch[13], stem stitch[14], buttonhole stitch[15], braid stitch[16], back stitch[17], and speckling stitch[18] all commonly appear in extant examples from the time period. In addition, insertion and openwork seams were also sometimes used to attach body pieces, sleeves, and gussets[19].



Holbein Stitch. Also known as Double Running Stitch ([Video tutorial](#))

Back Stitch ([Video tutorial](#))

Stem Stitch ([Video Tutorial](#))

Extant Examples

The Victoria and Albert Museum in England has several extant undergarments decorated in the style of embroidery that I would like for us to examine in depth.

[1. A man or boy's shirt decorated with blue embroidery](#) This shirt is believed to have been made sometime between 1540 and 1549. It is made of linen and decorated with blue silk embroidery. If we examine the pictures in the scrolling gallery bar we can see that the cuffs are decorated with two bands. The first and largest band appears to be on the ruffle of the cuff and is worked in a vine and flower design that matches the design used for the collar. The second, smaller band is located just under it. It appears to be on the actual cuff of the shirt and is worked in a simple knot work pattern. The collar of the shirt is also embroidered in the same vine and flower design used for the wide ruffle of the cuff. In addition, the ruffle of the collar is also embroidered with a single repeating leaf pattern taken from the pattern used for the cuff and collar. It is also interesting to note that the seams themselves are worked with a rather elaborate insertion stitch[20]. While it is difficult to make out the insertion stitch in the pictures on the museum's collections page, this shirt is depicted in Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion 4* and there is an excellent picture of the insertion stitch on page 17[21].

[2. A girl or woman's smock elaborately decorated with black embroidery](#): The smock is believed to have been made between 1575 and 1585 in the household of its owner and quite possible by the owner herself. The embroidered panels are elaborately worked in black silk in a

floral design and the linen that they are worked on is a much finer linen than the linen that was used for the undecorated skirt of the smock. The V&A indicates that the stitches used on this piece include back stitch, stem stitch, and the darning stitch. A buttonhole stitch is also indicated as being used as a fill stitch[22].

3. A girl or woman's smock decorated with pink embroidery : This smock is believed to have been made between 1600 and 1620. It is embroidered in a knotted strapwork design with flowers embroidered within the strapwork grid. The embroidery is worked in a simple outline stitch and the V&A indicates that the linen used for the smock was woven with a “balanced weave with 40 threads per cm”[23].

4. A girl or woman's smock decorated with pink embroidery: This smock is believed to have been made around 1630. While an example of an early 17th Century smock, it is still made in the same style as many late 16th century examples. The smock itself is made of linen and embroidered with a dark carnation pink silk. It is embroidered with a series of sixteen motifs (four sets of four) which are laid out in a grid pattern. All the motifs appear to have been worked in stem stitch. Most of these motifs appear to have been taken from *A Schole-House for the Needle* which was a popular early 17th century design book by Richard Schorleyker. Similarly to the shirt we discussed earlier the seams of this smock are also worked although in a much simpler cross stitch pattern[24].

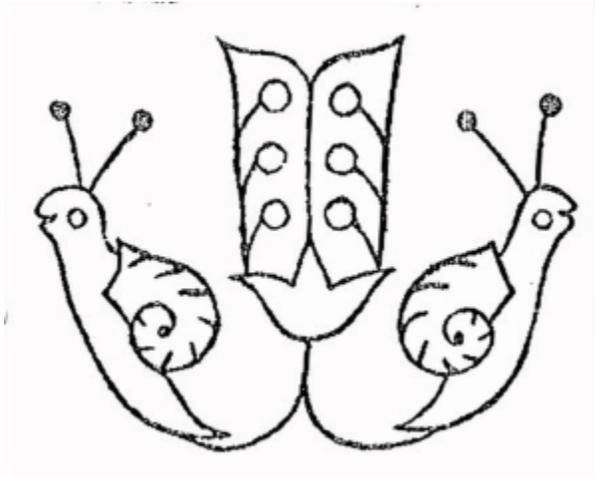
Practice Project: An Embroidered Pincushion

Now that we've discussed monochrome embroidered embellishment of the Elizabethan period, let's try our hands at a simple project. Below are two simple embroidery motifs plus the directions for turning one or both of them into a pin cushion. We will work through this project together so you will have a chance to try out this lovely style of embroidery for yourself. For those of you who are ready to try your hands at something a little more complicated, once you have finished your pincushion I have also take the liberty of including a bonus design: a pattern for the collar and cuffs for an embroidered shirt. Let's get started.

Materials Needed:

- 1 pair scissors
- Straight pins
- Embroidery Thread in the color of your choice (I like to use the [2/30 Gemstone Silk from Halcyon Yarns](#))
- 1/4 yard low slub evenweave linen (for embroidery)
- 1/4 yard silk or other material (for pincushion backing)
- Fiberfill
- Archival quality marker or pen in a similar color to your embroidery thread
- Embroidery hoop or frame

Step 1: Select your design from the two included in this article (below) and size it as you desire. You may choose either one you wish, but for the article I have selected the snails and peapod motif. They were just too cute to resist!



Two Snails and a Peapod



A Fruiting Vine

Step 2: Using your archival quality pen, trace your motif onto your linen, making sure to leave enough room around the motif to secure it to your embroidery hoop or frame.

If you have difficulty seeing your motif through your linen, tape your design to a window and use the light to help you trace your pattern onto your linen.



Step 3: Place your linen in your embroidery hoop or secure it to your frame. It's time to begin our embroidery!

A wide variety of stitches were used depending on the preference of the embroiderer so you may use any stitches you like. That's part of what makes your embroidery unique.

For my pincushion I chose to use [2/30 Gemstone Silk from Halcyon Yarns](#) in black for the embroidery and I chose to do the outlining in stem stitch.

Step 4: Complete the outline of your motif.

At this point if you wish to add spangles or fill stitches to your motif, similarly to the way the leaves and flowers are filled in the portraits above, now is the time to do it.

For some examples of fill patterns please check out "[Fill in Patterns from Sixteenth Century Blackwork Embroideries](#)" located on the Atlantian Embroiderers Guild website.

For the purposes of this article I decided to keep my motif simple, and elected just to do the outline.

Step 5: Once you have completed your motif it will need to be ironed.

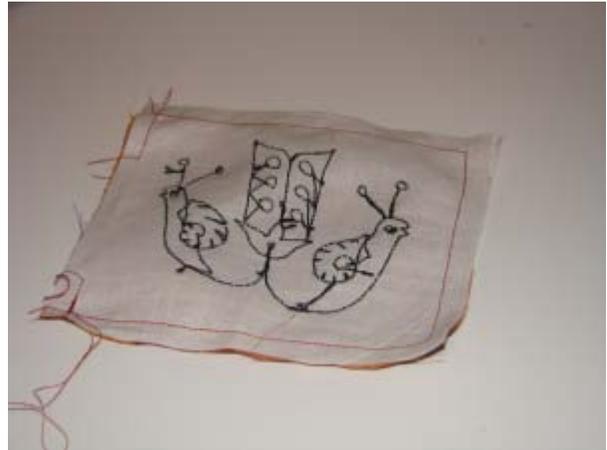
Turn your motif upside down and gently press it with an iron to remove any wrinkles. Be particularly careful around your embroidery.



Step 6: After you have ironed your embroidery it is time to cut it out. Choose the shape of your pincushion and cut out your embroidery.

I chose to make mine rectangular but you could just as easily do circular or square.

Once your embroidery is cut out, cut out your pincushion backing to match



Step 7: Sew the front and back of your pincushion together, making sure to leave an opening for stuffing.

Step 8: Clip your corners, turn your pincushion right side out, and stuff it with your preferred fiberfill.

Once you have filled it, pin the opening closed.

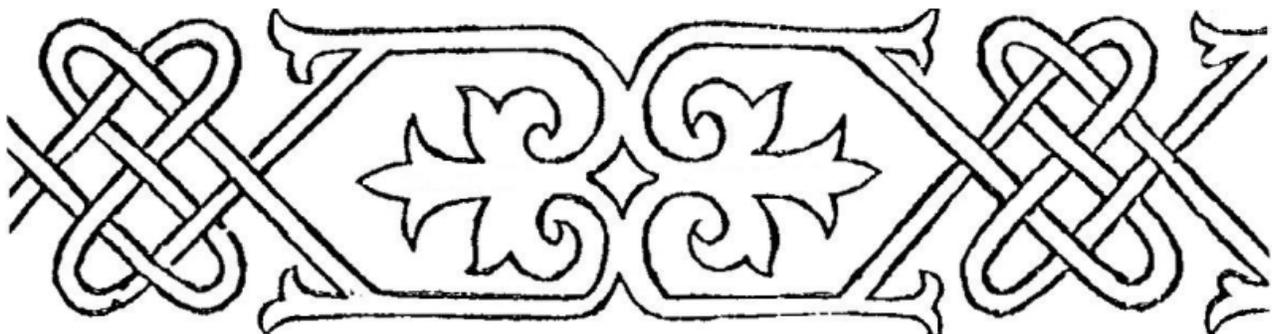
Sew it closed with a small whip stitch.

Step 9: Your pincushion is now ready to use! Use yours for dress pins, needles, straight pins, or whatever you like.



Bonus Design: Collar and Cuff bands

If you enjoyed embroidering your pincushion and want to try something a little more difficult, here is a band motif that would look lovely embroidered on the collar and cuffs of a shirt.



References

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Atlantian Embroiderers Guild. "Fill in Patterns form Sixteenth Century Blackwork Embroideries". Retrieved November 11 from the World Wide Web:
<http://aeg.atlantia.sca.org/projects/howto/blackwork/>

Footnotes

- [1] Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 71
- [2] Ibid. p. 104
- [3] Ibid. p. 107
- [4] Ibid. p. 66, 67, 69, 72, 104
- [5] Ibid. p. 71, 103, 115, 120
- [6] Ibid. p. 72
- [7] Ibid. p. 65, 71
- [8] Ibid. p. 65, 110-111, 116, 118, 120
- [9] Ibid. p. 65, 112
- [10] Ibid. p. 65, 67, 72, 104, 112
- [11] Ibid. p. 65
- [12] Ibid. p. 65, 66
- [13] Ibid. p. 66
- [14] Ibid. p. 66, 113
- [15] Ibid. p. 103
- [16] Geddes, Elizabeth and McNeill. *Blackwork Embroidery*. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1976) p. 40
- [17] Ibid. p. 40
- [18] Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 113
- [19] Ibid. p. 6
- [20] Victoria and Albert Museum. Search the Collections: Shirt. London England: Author. Retrieved November 11 from the World Wide Web:
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115767/shirt/>
- [21] Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 17

[22] Victoria and Albert Museum. Search the Collections: Smock. London England: Author. Retrieved November 11 from the World Wide Web:
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78732/smock/>

[23] Victoria and Albert Museum. Search the Collections: Smock. London England: Author. Retrieved November 11 from the World Wide Web:
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[24] Victoria and Albert Museum. Search the Collections: Smock. London England: Author. Retrieved November 11 from the World Wide Web:
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