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CREWEL WORK:
ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

by Ann Verser
in partial fulfillment
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The pleasure of turning the whole self to the creation of something beautiful, personal, and lasting is done through crewel work, one of the oldest and most delightful sources of tranquility. Crewel is an exceptionally creative type of embroidery which applies decoration to a fabric already existing using two-ply loosely twisted wool yarn. Its stitches are simple and so varied (75 in all) that they are never monotonous. The purpose of crewel was primarily conceived to decorate objects of use and the stitches were intended to become an integral part of the fabric, capable of standing up to years of wear and tear, as many historic examples have demonstrated.

Crewel work itself is an antique needle craft; nobody knows how old. In Exodus you read about the embroidered curtains of the tabernacle, the embroidered robes of the priests; crewel work, historians say. Many centuries later when young Augustus Caesar was founding the Roman Empire, the sails of Tyre's trading ships were embroidered in crewel work.

Another thousand years passed. The crusades called Kings and Knights away from their homelands leaving the ladies of the land to embroider pictures of their crusading lords in crewel work to hang on the stone walls.

In sixteenth century England when the steel needle was invented, fine needle work began to spread in flowery tendrils over bedspreads, chair seats and clothing. The East India Co. took these Tudor patterns to India to be printed there on cotton cloth for sale in England; and they returned exotic, subtly Orientalized, with lotus, pomegranate, pineapple, blooming

with the English designs on the Persian-Indian Tree of Life. To the European eye, used to formal symmetry, the designs on these palampores (a name for the printed or painted cotton hangings) were totally new and fascinating; a glorious profusion of exotic fruits and flowers growing with a naive disregard of realism from the same stem, their branches filled with wild birds and animals springing from the rounded hills of some far away imaginary land. The most popular patterns were the familiar Tree of Life with its stylized flowers and fruit. This tree grew from India's symbol of Mother Earth. British ladies added to these Indian designs the English oak, the English rose, and their royal emblems: the lion of England, the thistle of Scotland, the three feathers of the Prince of Wales.

The American version of crewel originated in England, but when people moved from the Old World to the New, crewel acquired a distinctly American accent. The first thing that the women did was to make the linen. They sowed, weeded, and reaped flax; soaked, beat, and broke the stems; washed, combed, and spun the fibers; threaded the loom, wound the shuttle and flung it back and forth through the web of warp until at last they held in their hands a length of creamy linen. After all this hard labor these women had no intentions of hiding the linen under stitches. They adorned it delicately with crewel in a new way.

With the precious needle that she owned and would use all her life, the American woman made swift and airy stitches: feather stitch, herringbone, couching, seed stitch, outline,

French knot and stem stitch. Wool was hard to come by, hence yarn saving stitches had to be devised. Early American crewel used primarily either stitches that wasted hardly a scrap of yarn on the wrong side of fabric or open stitches that covered the most ground with the least wool. Designs of this time have a vitality without slavish imitation: embroideries based on good craftsmanship. They also took on a new directness depicting the trees, flowers, birds, animals (deer and hounds) and people that made up their environment.

At first the only dye was indigo, so the first American crewel work was done in blue on bleached-white linen. Nothing is lovelier than its cool grace, and it is wholly American. Dyes were later made from the woods. Doubtless the Indian women taught them the walnut-husk browns, the pokeberry browns and purples, the yellow saffron that they mixed with indigo to get shades of green and later the cochineal reds.

By this time cotton cloth was being woven, so it was embroidered too, as well as linen and woolen, with wool, linen or cotton. The Americans used what they had; they broke all rules but one, making American crewel work quite different from European. The one rule that was rarely broken was that of crewel work design; seeing the fundamental shapes of things. A crewel thistle or rose will not look like one that has ever bloomed, yet when you see them you know what they are. The real flower distracts us by its own color, its scent, and its petals unfolding, but we always know what flower it is. Our eyes recognize its basic form and basic form is the age-old characteristic of crewel work. Every object has a simple,

fundamental shape and we always see it. Sometimes crewel appeared rather primitive since so much of it was self taught. Look at the fawn whose legs do not quite fit, the lady sitting uncomfortable on air, or the parrot whose tail is confused with its wing. Still you know it was stitched with love and it was beautiful.

Designs that were created by the individual flourished until the 1830's when roller printing and cheap woven fabrics stifled the demand for decorative embroidery. This commercial work offered wool yarns in a selection of brilliant colors to be used with ready-made patterns already stamped. Around 1878 crewel designed by the individual came back into popularity, and the better design and higher quality of earlier embroidery was revived.

Today anything that you see with a child's simplicity is a motif for American crewel work. Draw its basic form as you see it, use any stitch in any way that pleases you, on any cloth with any thread. True American crewel work is as much your own as your handwriting is; a needle in my hand will express myself as sure as any pen could hope to do.



In conclusion I feel it is only fair that I add at least a summary of the bulk of my project, since it was not research I spent the most time on but a practical application of crewel work itself (seen above). Crewel stitches range from very simple (a knot) to very difficult (bullion stitch-green center of yellow flowers) and each creates its own texture as well. Seeding, a stitch I improvised in the center of a couple of flowers, creates a thin texture whereas a satin stitch for a flower that has one point for center rather than a circular center causes a padded effect since all the stitches overlap in the center (yellow flowers on the right). I used approximately twenty stitches, many of which the instructions called for but since most of the flowers and fruit called for a satin stitch, to vary the appearance of the picture plus add to my knowledge of the various stitches I tried several that would fit the particular space

and give the right texture, too. Instead of using a satin stitch on the handle of the basket I used one that created an edge and two knots in the center and I used a coral stitch in the darker yellow on the very edge. Besides just using different stitches I tried combining them in as many different ways as possible. The buttonhole stitch was used as a flower center (yellow centers of the white flowers) and also as a flower edge (pink flowers on the left of the basket handle). No two similar stems, flowers, or even stitches are exactly alike because as I learned new facts from one I would put them to use on the next stitch, etc.

In closing I feel the most adequate thing to say would be to repeat Rose Lane's statement in the beginning of this paper: The pleasure of turning the whole self to the creation of something beautiful, personal, and lasting is done through crewel work. Speaking with a voice of experience I can truly say crewel work is all that and much more.