



Needlework Pictures

By Olive Milne Rae

EMBROIDERY, or the splendid art of working with the needle, said to have been initiated by Minerva, is one of the most ancient of the arts. It takes precedence of painting, for the earliest method of portraying human and animal forms, fruits and flowers, was by needlework done upon canvas. Both on account of its great antiquity and its beauty it has always been held in the highest esteem by collectors; but there is a comparatively small, though very interesting, branch of it which it would be well worth while to take an interest in. It is the department of needlework-pictures. A collector in search of a new hobby could scarcely find a more charming one than the acquisition of these quaint and rare hand-sewn pictures, and especially those of them which are English, for they have a character quite their own. The field is not a very large one, for needlework pictures, as distinct from tapestry and tapestry pictures, do not appear to have been made till the time of the Stuarts, probably not till the reign of Charles I., and the vogue, which was extremely popular and keenly followed, only lasted for about a century and a half altogether. They are not always particularly beautiful, and there is not much originality about them, for their range of subjects does not seem to have been very wide, but they are interesting relics of

a fashionable craze of a bygone day, and form an epoch in the history of needlework.

In those days fine ladies knew the art of wielding the needle more thoroughly, perhaps, than they knew any other; and if their productions were not always of the highest artistic order as pictures, the stitching of them, at least, was unimpeachable. Its variety and elaborateness, and the way in which they gained their effects by it, was truly wonderful, and presents to embroiderers of the present day an object-lesson of no mean value.

Up to the period when needlework pictures came into vogue ladies had been accustomed to do much larger pieces of work, great pieces of tapestry, immense embroidered curtains, bedspreads, and the like, on which all the "females of the family" and their hand-maidens, too, would be engaged for months and even years at a time. But ornamental textile fabrics, machine made, were beginning to be put on the market, doing away with the necessity of so much hand-worked embroidery, and they turned with relief to these comparatively minute canvases upon which

they lavished the wealth of divers stitches at their command. Such an incredible number of different stitches are often crowded into the space of a square inch that it is almost necessary to use a magnifying glass to distinguish them.

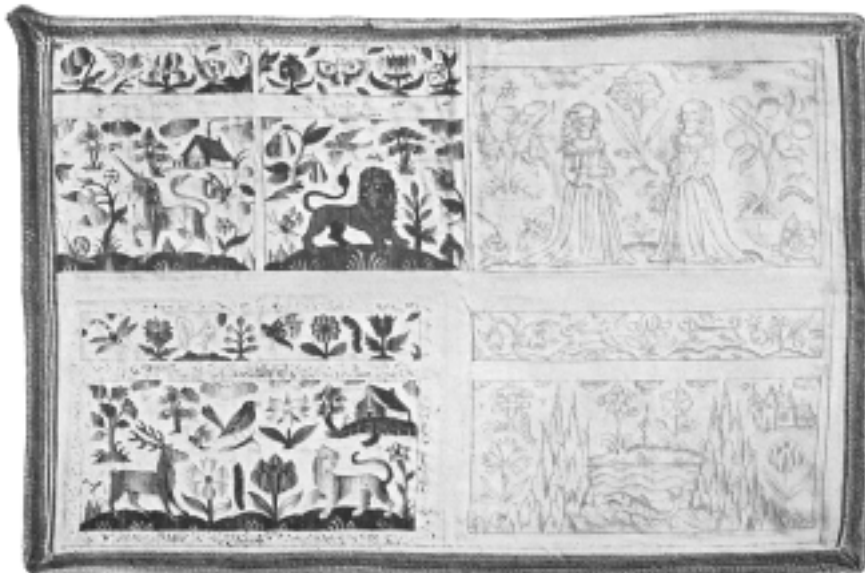


Fig. 1

NO. I.—CHARLES I.

Fig. 2

The Connoisseur

The earliest specimens of needlework pictures are worked with silks on coarsely-woven linen canvas, in the small slanting stitch taken over a single thread of the groundwork, which is technically known as "tent-stitch" or *petit point*. These were, of course, infinitely laborious, and closely resembled tapestry in effect. Fig. 2 of No. i. is worked in tent-stitch; while Fig. 1 shows the elaboration of stitches which followed. In Fig. 1 the bodies of the animals and the flowers are worked in what was called the "long-and-short stitch," or crewel stitch. In the upper half there is a still greater elaboration, the bodies of the lion and the unicorn being raised and padded.

About the middle of the seventeenth century this surface-padding of the long-and-short stitch picture became the fashion, and thus began that curious phase of the high-relief embroidery known as stump-work. Possibly it may have been suggested by the raised work on Italian ecclesiastical vestments,

and it was used to give the pictures a more realistic effect. These stump-work pictures generally depicted either Biblical subjects or the reigning King and Queen and their Court. Their elaborateness was often extraordinary, all the known stitches being employed to enhance them, as well as the new and life-like effect gained by the padding. As time went on they became still more extravagant and eccentric. Seed pearls, paste jewels, lace, sequins, and feathers, were all pressed into the service. The groundwork was generally of white satin, studded with tiny spangles. The ladies' dresses were worked in long-and-short stitch in soft untwisted silks, and ornamented with silver and silver-gilt twist, purl and lace. The chief figures were made to stand out in high relief by being padded up with hair or wool.

Sometimes the figures were raised by means of a complete little "skeleton" of plaster or wood *appliqué*

on to the background. These were then tricked out in dresses of needlework, ornamented with seed pearls, tinsel, and paste gems, and trimmed with real lace. Real hair was often used for their wigs and beards, and the whole picture looked like a quaint little marionette show, delightfully disregarding of any of the fettering rules of proportion and perspective.

No. vi. is a good and not too elaborate example of stump-work of the Charles II. period. The background is of white satin, and all the principal figures are in high relief. The scene is evidently the garden of a palace—the palace is seen at the left-hand corner—all a-growing and a-blowing with curious and wonderful flowers and plants, a flora of the imagi-

nation, unknown in modern botany, where various wild and tame beasts and birds, and even fish, disport themselves under a beautiful noonday sun, worked in gold thread. Observe the king of beasts peacefully slumbering in one corner, and



NO. II.—CHARLES I.

the spirited-looking leopard in the other, looking at him over his shoulder. The figure under the canopy is no doubt the king, as he is wearing a robe lined with ermine, which is realistically worked in "plush-stitch" to imitate the fur. He is apparently awaiting the approach of the lady on his right, whose dress is beautifully embroidered in coloured silks, in what is known as "lace-stitch," enriched with real lace collar and cuffs, and ornamented with seed pearls. The other figures are their attendants, who are worked in different stitches, their hair being made in knot-stitch. A great many different stitches, such as the "cross-stitch," "split-stitch," "cushion-stitch," and purl are used in the execution of the animals, trees, flowers, and birds.

No. ii., which is reproduced by courtesy of the Royal Scottish Museum at Edinburgh, is a much more elaborate example. The subject is Queen

Needlework Pictures

Esther, in irreproachable English costume of the seventeenth century, going to the presence of King Ahasuerus. Mordecai is seen kneeling a little to the right of Esther, while (presumably) Haman, looking very jaunty in English hunting costume of the same period, stands behind the king. In the top left-hand corner, Jacob's dream is

portrayed, for no apparent reason, while with the same charming inconsequence English oak, apple, pear and rose trees grow side by side with the lotus and the pomegranate, and various tropical birds and beasts mingle quite naturally with the British "bunny," squirrel and snail. The stitchery of the picture, however, is wonderful. Esther's robe is worked in the finest needle-point, and every conceivable stitch appears to have been worked into the other component parts of the picture. The canopy under which the king is seated is hung with seed pearls, and there is a good deal of gold and silver thread worked into various portions of the design, which must have given the picture an exceedingly rich effect nearly three hundred years ago, when the now faded colours of its silks were fresh and lovely, and the fair fingers that had worked it had taken it off the embroidery frame, finished — a work of skilled and patient labour, if not of very perfect beauty.

No. v., another example of stump-work of the Charles I. period, in lower relief than the other two, is a spirited representation of the Judgement of Solomon. The figure on the right (who, by the way, is in the costume of a Roman soldier, with which he



NO. III.—CHARLES I.

wears a pair of top boots) holds in his right hand the body of the unfortunate infant, which is the funniest and crudest thing imaginable. The body and arms are abnormally long and the legs very short—a little wooden doll covered with pinkish satin. The king in the picture is really quite a good likeness of Charles I. himself, tricked out in

all the bravery of ermine and velvet, and wearing the regalia of England! But such petty details of correctness are quite beneath the notice of the fair embroidress.

No. iii. is probably one of the earlier examples of stump-pictures, and represents the King and Queen surrounded by the usual heterogeneous collection of animals and insects, flowers and birds, worked in satin-stitch, chain-stitch, knot-stitch, and others. The foliage of the trees and grass banks are generally worked in knot-stitch, which is very effective for the purpose. These stump-work pictures are things quite apart and unique in the domain of needlework, and no good collection is complete without one or two of them. It is not advisable to buy specimens which are very worn or greatly soiled, for they do not, as a rule, stand the process of cleaning. Benzine or ammonia should never be used to clean old or fragile pieces of needlework. The use of anything damp or wet, in fact, only tends to shorten their lives. Careful brushing with a soft brush or blowing the dust out of the crevices of raised stitches or figures will be found to be the best method of cleaning them.

During the later part of the reign of



NO. IV.—QUEEN ANNE

The Connoisseur

stump-work pictures, bead-work came into fashion, and whole pictures were often wrought in it. The subjects and design of these were exactly the same as the stump-pictures, but instead of being worked in silks, the figures, flowers, animals, etc., were worked in beads, on a background of satin or silk. These pictures are very quaint and almost pretty, and their colours, of course, have not faded, so that they look nearly as well as when they were first made.

Towards the end of the reign of Charles II. stump work seems to have died out, giving place to a type of needlework picture somewhat like that of the Charles I. period—of the flat tent-stitch. There were certain differ-

ences, however. They were much better worked, and altogether prettier and more artistic. They were no longer grotesque, and the figures really resembled the human form. The faces of the little embroidered people were usually painted in water-colours, either on the background itself or on parchment, which was deftly inserted into its place. The dresses were worked in silks or chenille in rich colourings. The subjects were somewhat more varied than those of the preceding reign, and were generally of the sentimental order; knights and ladies, or Watteau shepherds and shepherdesses making love in Arcadian bowers, "Charlotte at the Tomb of Werther" and the "Finding of Moses," too, were favourite themes, and were "done to death" in the reign of Queen Anne. No. iv. is a good and a pretty example of this Queen Anne style of needlework picture. The subject is the "Finding of Moses." The dresses of Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants, which are in the height of the English fashion of the time, are worked in long and short stitch, while satin-stitch and knot-stitch are used for different parts of the picture, the shrubs and distant trees being worked in knot-stitch.

About this time, 1780-90, many needlewomen

began to copy engravings, possibly for lack of any good or new designs for embroidered pictures, and to emancipate themselves from the stilted and ugly old designs. Some of these copies are very charming and cleverly done, in fine black and white sewing silk, and sometimes, in the case of miniatures, in human hair of all shades. Since the beginning of

the nineteenth century the needlework picture seems to have degenerated and died out, though of late years an attempt has been made to revive it, and some of the distinguished needlewomen of our own day have executed beautiful copies in embroidery of the designs of such masters as the late Sir Edward



NO. V.—CHARLES I.

Burne-Jones and Mr. Walter Crane, who have both realised fully their decorative and artistic value.

Pictures embroidered after 1800 bear the unmistakable marks of degeneration, and after the atrocities wrought in Berlin wool on "Penelope" canvas up to about 1830, they ceased to be made altogether. But a collection, to be quite complete, should certainly contain at least one example of even the degenerate phases of the early nineteenth century pictures. Of these, the most important are the large, gaudy, vulgar representations of Scriptural subjects worked in silk, wool, and chenille on sarsenet; and the fine cross-stitch pictures in gloss-silks, which are so tantalising to the eye, and lastly, the groups of flowers in *appliqué* cloth and silk.

To those about to form a collection—for needlework pictures are the *dernier cri* in the collecting world at present—a few hints may be useful. The question of framing is an important one, and is likely to be treated according to the individual taste of the collector, but the frames should always be copies of the old designs. Stuart pictures generally look best framed in black, with a narrow gold inner beading, and ebony-stained mahogany is the best substitute we have for the pear-wood of which the old frames were

Needlework Pictures

invariably made. Anything is better than the cheap composition variety, "In Deutschland Gemacht," which have been known to be used for the purpose, and which entirely vulgarise and spoil the look of the pictures. The eighteenth century type of sentimental picture was generally framed in gold, with a deep border of black and gold painted on the glass, and perhaps this is the most successful method of showing them to advantage, but when the original frame is *non est*, a plain black one is the next best thing. It is absolutely essential that old needlework pictures should be framed, as their lives would be very short if they were kept in drawers or portfolios, where they would get rubbed. In the case of raised work or stump-work the glass should be pasted into the frame with strips of paper, and raised well above the needlework by means of little slips of wood, in order to keep it from touching the delicate surface. As has been said, it is never advisable to buy very old pieces which are not in a good state of preservation, as nothing can be done to renovate them. It is usually fatal to take an old picture off its backing-board and stretch it on a new one. It is almost sure to split in several places, or to fall to pieces altogether. But if it is quite necessary to do this because of worms in the original stretches, or any other cause, the accumulated dust should be carefully blown off the back of the picture

with a small bellows, and then it should be sewn upon the linen with which the new board must be covered, taking great care that it is not stretched or strained. The collection should be kept in as even a temperature as possible, as the fragile ground fabrics are extremely sensitive to atmospheric conditions, and are apt to split when subjected to sudden changes.

There is something intensely fascinating about these old-world embroideries, something which has nothing to do with their intrinsic beauty, or with their age. It is the sense of the human care and labour which have been spent upon them, the consciousness that they are the work of human fingers, and have been the objects of thoughts and intents and aspirations, of heartbreakings and disappointments, of recoveries and the joyousness of success, of the gloriousness of work well done and completed. All the fair devices and designs that ever were fancied cannot be expressed and rendered by the machine with anything like the beauty of those which are hand-sewn. As the supreme worth of the diamond lies in the fact that it took infinite pains and time to find it, then to cut it and set it, so the true delight and supreme worth of needlework lies in the magnetism of those dead hands that worked it, of the individuality that planned it and set its seal indelibly upon it for ever.



No. VI.—CHARLES II.