



FIG. II. EMBROIDERED BED-HANGINGS, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



FIG. VII.
THIS WAS ROUGHT BY ME
RUTH TWICHEL, 1793

AMERICAN COLONIAL NEEDLEWORK

PART ONE

IN WRITING of the needlework of the American colonies, there is little exact information except such meagre mention as is made of details in the probate records. This is especially true of the period antedating 1700. When the colonists left England and Holland fine needlework was practised in many households. The embroidery stitches quoted in the wardrobe act of Queen Elizabeth give definite knowledge of the technique in practice in England during the 17th century. The stitches mentioned are, Spanish stitch, true stitch, laid work and chain stitch. Petit point, called in English records tent stitch, is mentioned just before 1600. It is doubtful, I think, if anything except necessary needlework was accomplished in the colonies before 1650. After this date all records and correspondence of the times show that the period of hardships had given place to some comfort and even luxury. English records throughout the 16th and 17th centuries are filled with references to turkey work, and here also the earliest mention of needlework is to turkey work, used for chair seats and cushions. Turkey work is supposed to have been inspired both in technique and pattern by the Turkey (Asia Minor) rugs finding their way into Europe. These rugs may be seen on tables of the period in the charming Dutch interiors of Vermeer and other artists of his time. Examination of many specimens of these early turkey carpets have failed to show any that exactly suggest the turkey work of our early days. The best example of this work known



FIG. 1. EMBROIDERED BEDSPREAD, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

to the writer is at Essex Institute in Salem, where a fine settee of the period is covered with turkey work in excellent condition. The colors are blue, red, buff, brown, green, magenta and black. The pattern is quite conventional and oriental in suggestion. The work was evidently done much as an oriental rug was made except that the heavy wool was carried with coarse needles through the loosely woven linen background, tied and clipped. Hundreds of chair seats and cushions of turkey work are mentioned in colonial records from 1640 to 1700, and occasionally later. How much of this fashionable work was done here it is impossible to say, but that some of it was seems fairly certain.

To turn to the 17th century records again, we find mention of the following articles which called for decoration with needlework—table carpets, chimney carpets, bed spreads, window cushions, coverlets, chair seats and chair cushions, bed curtains and valances. The earliest definite mention which I have found is dated Watertown, Mass., 1656, the inventory of Anne Hibbins, a “wrought cupboard cloth,” again in 1660 appears the item “six needlework cushions wrought and four drawn to work,” and valued at ten pounds, a very high valuation. Whether it is possible that “wrought” as distinct from “needlework” indicated a difference of technique it seems impossible to say, for the records for inventories were made up by men who were certainly not versed in exact naming of anything, but it may be that “wrought” referred to petit point or tent stitch, and embroidered referred to needlework of other kinds. In 1672 a Salem will bequeaths “my tapestry coverlet” and one in 1673 bequeaths a “tapestry covering.” I feel quite sure that these coverlets, highly valued for this time, were “wrought” work or petit point. Just what this “wrought” cupboard cloth was there is no sure way of knowing, but we can be fairly sure that it was either petit point, or embroidery in wool upon some heavy linen material, either Darnack or Fustian. The designs probably followed those available in England, small patterns composed of birds, flowers, fishes and beasts in vogue throughout the 17th century. An account of a design book of the late 16th century states that “there are 124 birds and 16 sorts of 4 footed beasts with 52 fishes of divers sorts.” Figure I shows a needlework bedspread of this period and design. These small designs lent themselves well to smaller objects, such as cushions and cupboard cloths, and though I do not know of a single ex-

ample of this work done before 1700 surviving here, there can be no doubt that it was done by colonial women in great quantities. A Salem, Mass., inventory dated 1647 enumerates "a parcel of cruell thread and silk," and another dated 1654 "cruell and fringe." In Salem, Mass., also, in 1672, "a small box with severall samplers, laces and Broidered works." These are all references to material for needlework. The fact that it was done in wool has something to do with its disappearance, and the few surviving examples of turkey work have escaped the moths by a miracle, for they are the most tempting morsels. Beds, as everyone knows, were of great importance as they occupied a conspicuous position in the principal living room of all households, consequently they were beautifully draped and ornamented. Many such bed hangings are mentioned in our colonies, both those made of silks, satins, brocades, velvets, calico and chintz, and those described as "wrought" or "needle worked." The patterns were those already described and the stitches were the usual ones of the period, chain stitch or tambour, which was adapted from the Persian and Chinese objects, known in Europe—True stitch, which seems to have been an outline stitch, laid work, which may have been the heavy repeating long and short stitch which formed heavy masses of leaves and stems, basket stitch, French knots or seed stitch, together with various others. Figure II shows a bed hung in crewel work. In the large patterns, which were the height of fashion during the last quarter of the 17th century, these spreading designs of trees and leaves were undoubtedly inspired by the Indian and Persian printed cottons just then becoming well known in England. That curtains, valances, cushions and table carpets, hand wrought, were highly valued is evidenced by the explicit mention of them in the records as special bequests and by their unusually high money value.

A careful study of the 17th century probate records has failed to show any mention of samplers other than the reference above quoted. There are a few surviving which are believed to have been made here, and these follow in design and technique the well known English ones. See Figure III. Mention is made in Charles the First's "Closett of Rarities" of a needlework picture. Many of these pictures of English origin worked during the 17th century are well known to all of us. Those done in petit point, with additions of purling in metal thread and spangles, those done in beads,



FIG. III. SAMPLER, EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

and the most characteristic of all of this time, those done in “stump” work, where the principal motives often the King, Queen, a lion, camel or butterfly, with many other popular “figures” in the design embroidered in high relief over a foundation of papier-maché. The stitches in these “stump” work pictures are most exquisite, including the finest satin stitch and Point de Venise. I have failed to find any needleworked pictures mentioned here before 1700, but a considerable number of pictures so made are mentioned here largely after 1750, and some of these survive, that date after that time, done in petit point, and those known to the writer made as late as 1790 follow much earlier designs, notably the little *mille fleurs* details.



FIG. IV. CURTAIN AND VALANCES WORKED BY MRS. MARY BULMAN IN 1745

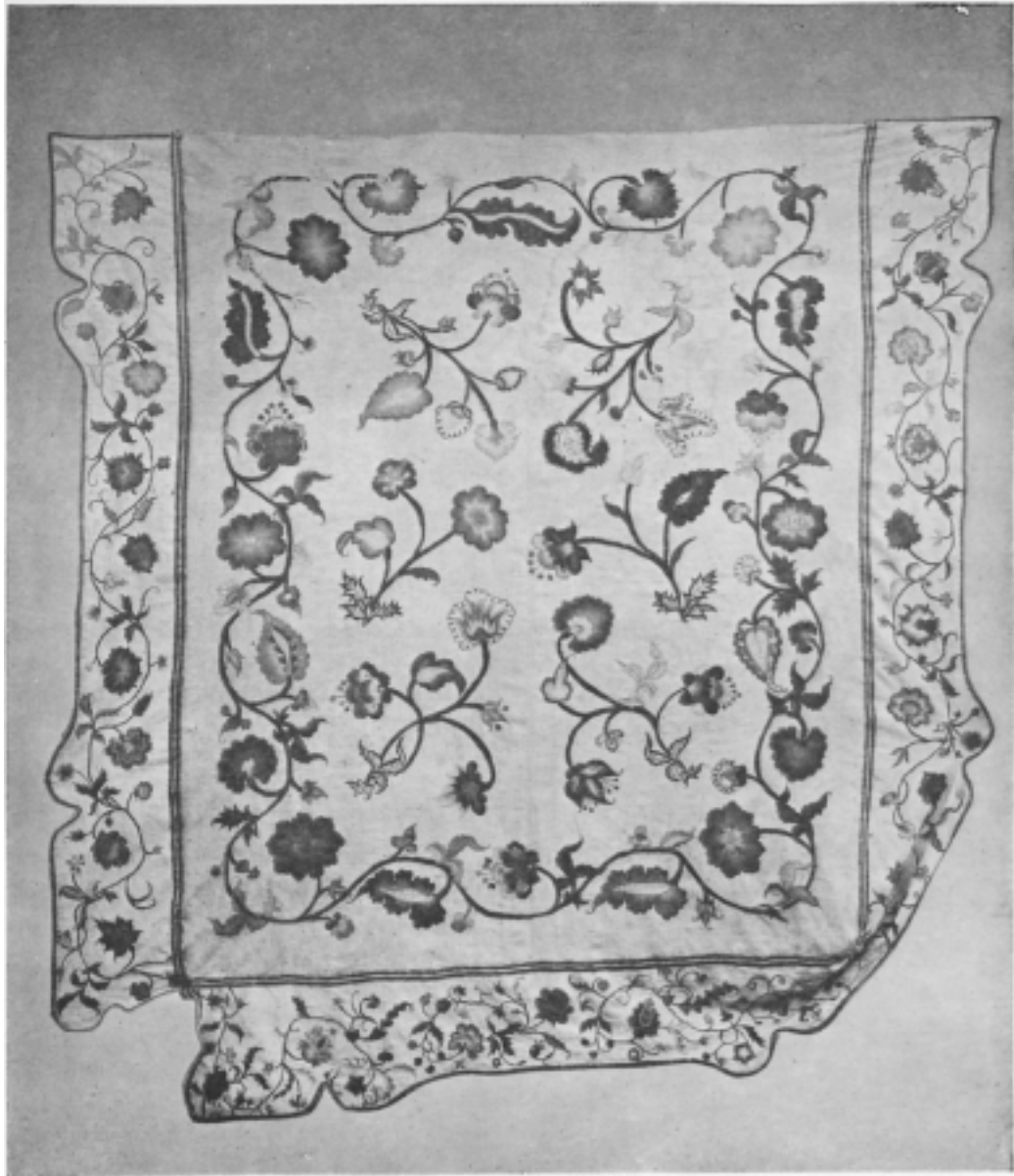


FIG. V. BEDSPREAD WORKED BY MRS. MARY BULMAN IN 1745



FIG. VI. CHAIR SEAT WORKED IN WETHERSFIELD, CONN., BETWEEN 1750 AND 1760

There seems to have been no marked change in fashion for needlework during the first quarter of the 18th century. A record dated 1703 mentions that Eleanor Plater embroidered six chair seats. I think these must have been crewel work. In 1736 the inventory of Gov. Patrick Gordon, of Pennsylvania, records "Fustian wrought curtains for doors and windows," very probably similar to Figure II. It may also be of interest to know that this same list describes chairs as covered with leather, mohair, plush and calico. Calico was, of course, chintz, and Pepys enters in his diary under date of Sept. 10th, 1663, "bought my wife a chintz, that is a painted callico, for to line our new study."

The beautiful bed hangings preserved in Old York Jail, in York, Maine, and made by Mrs. Mary Bulman, whose husband, Dr. Alexander Bulman, died during the siege of Louisburg in 1745, are referred to in a letter to a friend dated October of that year, in which Mrs. Bulman says she has started the work to occupy her mind. Figure IV shows the curtain that hangs between the upper bed posts and the upper and lower valance, and Figure V the bedspread with border. The hangings show that the earlier fashion of crewel embroidery on linen is still in vogue but the design is somewhat less heavy than that of the late 17th century and suggests in its use of less conventional basket and flowers the first half of the 18th century, while the bedspread follows quite closely the accepted patterns. The curtains and valances show originality, and the charm of quaint verses is I think peculiar to these hangings. In 1745 a Massachusetts inventory records an easy chair and cushion with crewel wrought fustian. We have now reached the middle of the 18th century and after this date examples of needlework are more plentiful. Between 1750 and 60 a bride in Wethersfield, Connecticut, embroidered a set of chair seats for Queen Anne chairs in the stitch which we know as Hungarian point. They are very faded now but still on the chairs, which are preserved in the Brooklyn Museum. See Figure VI. That this stitch was used for a considerable period is proved by the fact that the purse shown in Figure VII is dated 1793. The colors and technique are the same as the chair seats made thirty years earlier.