



FROM A DRAWING BY CARMONTELLE OF MADAME DU DEFFAND



### CREWEL EMBROIDERIES

**P**RECISELY considered, crewelwork may be said to typify embroidery with worsteds on linen, cotton or kindred fabrics, the foundation material remaining in parts unworked or at least visible through openwork fillings. Regarded, however in the wide sense of the word as wool embroidery on linen, it is an art that finds a place in the chronicles of antiquity and that reaches back through historical periods to the traditions of ancient peoples. While the curtains of the Tabernacle<sup>1</sup> and the embroidered robes of Aaron and his priests, considered by some historians to be this type of work, may be of an interest greater from a historical than a technical point of view, it is certain that in a very early day worsteds were combined with gold for fine needlework. Centuries before the Christian era, mention is made by Herodotus of a linen corslet embroidered with gold and tree-wool<sup>2</sup> that was presented by the Egyptian king, Amasis, to the Lacedæmonians<sup>3</sup>, and it is this same Egypt—the country whence came also the embroidered sails of the Tyrian ships—that has yielded up from its tombs and burying grounds linen fabrics embroidered in brightly colored wools, some of which resemble work of the eighteenth century (fig. a) but which were wrought in the early Christian period under the rule of Rome. In Europe in the abbeys established by the Carolingian kings the arts of embroidery

<sup>1</sup>Exodus XXXVI, 8.

<sup>2</sup>Cotton at this time and for several centuries afterward, was commonly believed to be the growth of a tree.

<sup>3</sup>Herodotus, b, iii, c 47. See Rock, Daniel; *Textile Fabrics in the South Kensington Museum* p. XIV.



FIGURE A. LINEN HANGING EMBROIDERED WITH COLORED TWISTED WOOLS IN CHAIN STITCH. EGYPTIAN, V CENTURY. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

and weaving were carefully fostered and in the famous monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland workrooms were set aside for such crafts. Hangings for church walls, funeral palls and other ornamental coverings for ecclesiastical use were worked on linen with either worsteds or silk, combined upon occasion with gold threads. Just prior to the thirteenth century such embroidery was utilized quite as much for comfort and warmth as for decoration; the austerity and chill of stone walls were mitigated by coverings of this material, and pillars and roofs as well were hung with embroidered strips of worsted bound by cross fastenings to coarse canvas. The Bayeux tapestry,<sup>4</sup> which tradition attributes to a Mathilda of Normandy—though not uncommonly regarded as foreign both to Bayeux and Mathilda, and certainly not a tapestry—is indubitably wool work on linen, and a piece in the National Museum at Stockholm, almost contemporaneous, representing figures in and about a church, is of like workmanship.

With the increased use of silk as a medium for embroidery, however, wool is more rarely recorded, but in regions where simple customs prevailed or where silk was not easily available, the more homely material was used. Such were the countries of northern Europe where wool embroidery on linen was general in the middle ages, not only among the peasant classes, but in court circles as well, and confined as was such work to convents and castles in small communities, it retained a distinctive character untouched by the foreign influences brought in by commerce with outer worlds. As subjects for these embroideries, Biblical tales, romantic legends and hunting scenes were often utilized, and pieces with such motives are preserved in various cloisters, cathedrals and museums throughout Germany.<sup>5</sup>

Elizabethan England saw the continuation of wool embroidery which was used not only for the decoration of household fabrics, but for the

<sup>4</sup>Belloc, Hilaire; *The Book of the Bayeux Tapestry*, London, 1914.

<sup>5</sup>In the Louvre is preserved an altar hanging of the late mediaeval period portraying the story of St. Martin. The Tristan legend, a mediaeval romance paralleling that of England's King Arthur and celebrated in song and story throughout Europe, appears in a set of the first half of the fourteenth century, owned by the former Nunnery of Wieshausen near Celle, and also in a piece, dated 1380, once the property of a cloister in Wurzburg, but now in the Erfurt Cathedral, in which twenty-six scenes of the romance are depicted. In the Welfen Museum, also of the same period are hunting scenes, lives of the saints and related subjects, while of the two following centuries are the New Testament scenes in the Ursuline Cloister at Erfurt. The Museum at Freiburg in Baden possesses a wallhanging from the Cloister of Adelhausen whose subject is the favor and cunning of women.



FIGURE B. BEDHANGING EMBROIDERED IN CREWELS. ENGLISH, LATTER PART OF XVII CENTURY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

clothing of the lower classes as well. The inventory of the "Household Stuffe, Goodes and Cattelles of S<sup>r</sup> Henrye Parkers K<sup>nt</sup> 1551-1560" contains the following quaintly worded item: "In the Chamber by the Bote House A Lytle stoole covered with the nedle worcke checkered w<sup>th</sup> white, blewe & tawnye cruell" and in the well furnished house of Mrs. Elizabeth Hutton who flourished at Hunwick at the same time are recorded "two long cushions of crool wrought with the needle,—a carpet cloth that is in working with crools for the same—two testers with curtains of crool." Also of this century are two curtains of coarse linen which show detached bird and floral motives embroidered in colored crewels.<sup>6</sup>

The term crewelwork, as it is generally known, however, applies to those exotic and colorful tree designs in warm though sombre tones of green, blue, brown and old red worked with soft twisted worsteds on a linen ground and used so universally as curtains, coverlets and bed hangings in England in the late seventeenth century (fig. b). These embroideries were patterned quite distinctly after the palampores or painted cottons brought to European shores by the various East India Companies of the time (fig. c) and portray, like their eastern prototypes, the graceful and fantastic Tree of Life rising from a grassy bank, its opulent flowers and foliage sheltering birds of strange hue and stranger size, while animals of various types disport themselves on the terrain beneath in a happy world where scale is held as naught and where antelope, parokeet and rabbit meet on equal terms. Such designs were common to the Orient and it was in 1631 that the East India Company, established under Elizabeth, was allowed by Royal Proclamation to import into England among other articles those "Painted callicoës" whose popularity in the fashionable world so endangered the existence of the silk and woollen industries and to check whose devastating vogue was passed in 1700 the edict forbidding—though fruitlessly—the importation of Indian chintzes. Widely known as were these oriental fabrics and well adapted as were their designs for work on a large scale, their translation to the field of needle-work as hangings and curtains follows quite naturally. The patterns carried out, in the loosely twisted yarn or crewel<sup>7</sup> that

<sup>6</sup>Old English Embroidery. Marshall, F. and H., p. 73.

<sup>7</sup>Said to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon *Cleow*, —a ball of thread.



FIGURE C. PAINTED INDIAN HANGING. XVIII CENTURY.  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

gives the work its name, were not confined to the great tree designs alone; to these were added isolated flower motives, and panels between which ran detached floral sprays. The decorative patterns, worked on grounds of homespun linen or cotton—probably Indian—or a twilled linen and cotton mixture,<sup>8</sup> were executed in stitches many and varied.

Though the so-called crewel stitch<sup>9</sup> was largely employed, this was in reality only one of the many used, feather, chain, herringbone, satin, rope, coral, cable stitches, French and bullion knots being also employed for the various outlines and fillings. The motives in the course of time, departing in a measure from the original Indian patterns, took on a character native to the soil of their adoption. The carnation, the rose, the potato flower—this latter common to both Portuguese and English work—the oak, which came in at the time of the Restoration, when the color became more brilliant, the jasmine, the cherry, the harebell, the honeysuckle all make their appearance and eventually change the character of the work so completely that it becomes finally entirely floral in motive, naturalistic in character and reduced in scale, departing in every way from the fantasies and grotesques of the early patterns.

The great tree designs are definitely regarded as common to the Restoration period, but examples of an earlier day embodying characteristics familiar to the Indian “pintados” are occasionally found. The scrolling foliage appears in embroideries wrought by that indefatigable and efficient needlewoman, Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury, the famous “Bess of Hardwicke” who, born in 1518, married for her fourth husband the Earl of Shrewsbury and thus became custodian of Mary, Queen of Scots, who was at one time confided to the Earl’s care. It seems not unreasonable to consider that some of the brilliant hued cottons of the East, long years before they became part of the regular trade with England, might have been included in consignments brought to European countries. The Portuguese, indeed, prior to the seventeenth century were carrying on a great oriental trade. As early as 1510 they were established

<sup>8</sup>Though the use of linen and cotton combined was not unknown in the seventeenth century, it was in the early eighteenth century that pure cotton as a ground for needlework was interdicted as a measure of protection for English industries.

<sup>9</sup>An old embroidery stitch formerly known as *stem*, but which from its association with crewel-work has taken the same name. Technically this is a long stitch forward on the surface and a short one backward on the underside of the fabric, each following the other almost in line from left to right.





FIGURE D. HANGING EMBROIDERED IN CREWELS, FRENCH XVIII CENTURY.  
OWNED BY MISS FRANCES MORRIS

at Calicut. Five years later Goa was added to their conquests. They were trading with China in 1517 and by the middle of the century had maritime possessions on the coasts of Persia, Ceylon, Indo-China and the Malay Archipelago. They were the sole purveyors in Europe at that time of tropical products and it would not seem improbable that through their agency English work might have felt those influences that were so strongly marked later on. In any event these pieces dated as late sixteenth century have the same characteristics as their successors under William and Mary.

The same influence, in the form of the small hillock found in the Indian designs, is manifested in a piece of Dutch embroidery dated 1659, as was quite logical in a country that was one of the great carriers of East Indian products. A set of hangings now in America with the tree design similar to English work, and dated 1688 is attributed to Dutch workmanship. The use of crewels on linen was not unknown at this time to the French, who characteristically adapted them, quite as they did lace technique in the day of the great Louis, to designs quite their own (fig. d). One very decorative piece of the late seventeenth century now in the Victoria and Albert Museum shows a design half oriental, half classical, entirely French and utterly unlike anything English.

Crewelwork in general however, is associated almost entirely with England and had little in common with contemporary work on the continent. In an age when Italy was creating her beautiful Renaissance patterns, when Spain and Portugal, profiting by the technique and design of the Orient,<sup>10</sup> were producing their rich and splendid secular embroideries, the scope of English work was limited under the protectionist policy that forbade the importation of foreign embroideries and which fulfilled its mission so ably as thoroughly to isolate the country and limit the development of the English school. These crewel embroideries accordingly experienced an extensive term of popularity. They shared with cross and tent stitch the industry of domestic households and it may be this ornamental work that is referred to by Evelyn when he writes, January 24, 1687, "I saw the Queenes new apartment at Whitehall, with her new bed the embroidery of which cost £3000." Crewel-work continued into

<sup>10</sup>Although Portugal sent silks and satins to Goa to be embroidered, Indo-Portuguese work from this locality generally refers to designs done in chain stitch in honey-colored silk on a linen ground.



FIGURE E. ENGLISH CREWELWORK OF THE QUEEN ANNE PERIOD. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

the eighteenth century with the reign of Queen Anne (fig. e) and the graceful naturalistic designs endured until the advent of the Hanoverian dynasty when they were replaced with the German patterns and when English embroidery, in the words of one writer, "committed suicide in favour of Berlin cross-stitch and bead shepherdesses and lap-dogs." There is a very appealing picture of Lady Betty Germaine, once lady-in-waiting to Queen Anne, bending over her embroidery frame in Knole House where she lived during the reigns of the first two Georges and stitching at crewelwork with brightly colored wools.

America, in the days of the colonies, was familiar with these same patterns which—as runs the tradition—were brought over by the settlers who included among their household belongings some of the work of their mother country and who wrought in their adopted homes the familiar flowers, birds and beasts that they had known in the Old World. From native sources they gathered their materials. Sheep that accompanied these pioneers on their journeyings supplied the wool that was carded and spun, the indigo tub furnished blues of varying tints, bark of native trees and plants as well were ingeniously utilized for various shades of green, brown, yellow and black, while the introduction of cochineal, combined with logwood gave pinks and the homespun fabrics and linens common to the colonial picture provided the ground (figs. f and g).

Thus were these early needlewomen independent of supplies from the outside world, though it is quite possible that the native materials of their craft were insufficient since "Best Brown Thread—blew and Collered Tape and Pinns"<sup>11</sup> arrived in shipments from England in an age when needlework was a general accomplishment. In the century that followed at least, such commodities were advertised in journals of the day. Mrs. —— "near the Old North Meeting House" sells "cruells of all Sorts" in 1738; "Shaded Crewells, blew, red and other colours" appears in the *Boston News-Letter* in 1743; "cruels assorted in shades" are noted in 1752, and "yellow canvas for samplers—with worsted crewels for working do" are among articles in the stock of a Virginia merchant in 1794. Instruction in embroidery is also publicly announced, and one New England preceptress of 1775, whose establishment was in Orange Street, Boston,

<sup>11</sup>Dow, George Francis. *Domestic Life in New England in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 45.



FIGURE F. DETAIL OF BEDSPREAD EMBROIDERED IN CREWELS BY MARY BREED, OF BREED'S HILL, BOSTON. SIGNED MARY BREED, 1770. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



FIGURE G. DETAIL OF THE BREED BEDSPREAD, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



FIGURE 1. BORDER LINEN EMBROIDERED IN CREWELS, AMERICAN LATE XVIII CENTURY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

against the Sign of the Swan" includes in her curriculum "flowering with Crewel-working Pocket-Books."

Whatever the source utilized, however, bedhangings, table covers and articles of wearing apparel were decorated with graceful designs copied painstakingly after the old models. While in many cases the original drawings were faithfully followed with an almost identical result, a deviation in type was the work done in outline and the blue and white designs (fig. h) sometimes held to owe their origin to the blue Canton ware brought to New England through the China trade. With the lapse of years and the fancy of the individual worker, the design occasionally altered, but generally present and familiar to all are the same basic patterns, the same naïve disregard for relative scale, the mammoth bird and the tiny tree that go to make up a quaint and delightful whole and that trace directly back to the beautiful old English work. (fig. i).

While crewelwork as an art is one that is sometimes regarded as failing of the highest attainment, it is an art nevertheless that is exceedingly pleasant, and these needle-wrought translations of the fantasies of the East, in their brilliancy of hue, their quaintness of imagery and their variety of design possess a quality that is peculiarly delightful and a charm that is associated with the old manor houses that they once adorned.

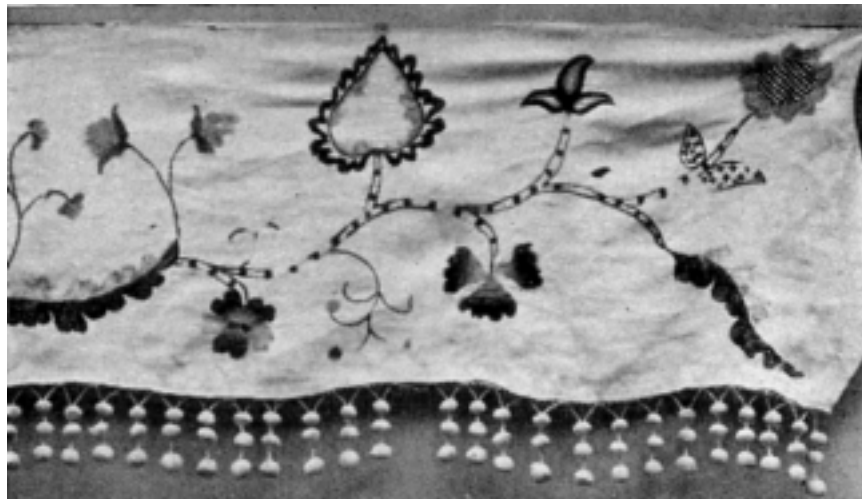


FIGURE H. VALANCE. HANDWOVEN LINEN EMBROIDERED IN CREWELS IN SHADE OF BLUE. AMERICAN—1800. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART