

# A SURVEY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE OF EMBROIDERY 1840 - 1940

By

Joan Edwards

Books on embroidery fall into four main categories:

1. historical surveys
2. reference books
3. books on design and colour
4. ephemera.

With a few notable exceptions the authors are women and the majority are teachers. Their object in writing is didactic. They seek to inform their readers about the history of embroidery, to instruct them in the use of its tools, materials and methods, to teach them about colour and design, and to supply them with patterns.

From the books themselves emerges an interesting picture of the changing face of embroidery over a hundred years. Here is the end of the sampler as a means of recording patterns, alphabets and numerals, and the emergence of new and more liberal attitudes towards the teaching of needlework generally; the demise of Berlin work and the influence on the patterns of embroidery of the Arts and Crafts Movement, *art nouveau* and *art deco*; the growing use and appreciation of the Textile Study Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum, on whose collections so many authors have relied for their illustrations; and the opening rounds of the controversy over the relative importance of design and technique which effectively divided and sometimes still divides the progressive from the traditional embroiderer.

The minor publications, the ephemera, consist chiefly of patterns and instructions for working small accessories of costume, and a quite astonishing assortment of useful and useless objects. Not infrequently they are put together through the enterprising collaboration of a publisher, a journalist, and a number of anonymous but inventive needlewomen to meet the demands of an enormous but not necessarily very selective mass market. Like ground swell below the mainstream of embroidery, they serve to make the point that embroiderers come from all walks of life, represent an amazingly broad cross section of society, and are people to whom embroidery means many different things.

## I. HISTORICAL SURVEYS

The first book on the history of embroidery was published in 1841. It was called *The Art of Needlework* and was edited by Mary Margaret Egerton, Countess of Wilton. It is dedicated with the usual flurry of compliments to the Dowager Queen Adelaide. The publisher was Henry Colburn and the printers William Clowes & Sons, a firm that is still in business today. The book contains 405 gilt-edged pages and 25 chapters covering amongst other subjects the needlework of the Tabernacle and of the Greeks and Romans, the Bayeux Tapestry, needlework on costume, the needlework of royal ladies ("It is well known that Queen Adelaide, and, in consequence of her Majesty's example, those around her, habitually occupied their leisure moments in ornamental needlework"), and *modern* needlework by which the writer means chiefly Berlin Work and the needle paintings of Mary Linwood.

For some unaccountable reason the name of the author of this very comprehensive survey was firmly suppressed. She was, however, Mrs. Elizabeth Stone, and this was the first of eighteen books she subsequently wrote; they include seven written under the pseudonym Sutherland Menzies, four of which were history text books for junior classes published simultaneously in 1873 in Collins School Series. Obviously a widely read young woman, Elizabeth Stone described herself as "a humble and industrious pioneer" in the field of embroidery history. At the end of the book she wrote:

This is, I believe, the first history of needlework ever published. I have met with no other; I have heard of no other; and I have experienced no trifling difficulties in obtaining material for this. I have spared no labour, no exertions, no research. I have toiled through many hundreds of volumes for the chance of finding even a line adaptable to my purpose: sometimes I have met with this trifling success, oftener not.

She claims the leniency in criticism usually accorded to the adventurer on an unexplored track, and hopes that others will build upon the foundation she has laid. Her chance remark that in writing she has tried to avoid "the dry technicalities of the art", coupled with the fact that she was later to write text books on history, seems to indicate that she may not have been keenly interested in the practice of embroidery.

Within a year *The Art of Needlework* had gone into its third edition, and in 1844 a New Edition was issued. Then in 1847, without changing the format, and still bearing the imprint of Henry Colburn and William Clowes, it was bound up with a book of knitting, netting, crochet and

embroidery patterns compiled by Mrs. Henry Owen of Upper Baker Street, entitled *The Illuminated Book of Needlework*, though on another page it appears as *The Illuminated Ladies' Book of Useful and Ornamental Needlework*. The publisher was Henry G. Bohn of York Street, Covent Garden. It contains thirteen pages of hand-coloured patterns on point paper.

The new joint venture has a magnificently coloured title page by M. & N. Hanhart, lithographic printers, of Charlotte Street, on which it is surprising to find Mrs. Owen taking precedence over the Countess of Wilton, the title of whose book has now become *A History of Needlework*. The overall publisher is Henry Bohn. My own copy belonged to a Miss E. A. Bohn though whether this is purely coincidental I shall probably never know.

Mrs. Owen had already one small publication to her credit, *A Hand-book of Knitting* published in 1845, but no other books are attributed to her in the British Museum catalogue, nor does it seem that *The Illuminated Book of Needlework* was ever issued as a separate volume. It is tempting to think that the cost of printing it and colouring the patterns may have been greater than anticipated, and the sales of *The Art of Needlework* having declined (the embroiderer's appetite for history being notoriously limited), the two books were put together as a matter of commercial expediency. In doing this the publishers had before them the example of a book in which historical and practical information were combined in about equal proportion and which seems to have found a ready market. This was Miss Lambert's *Hand-Book of Needlework* which, since it was first issued in 1842, had gone into three editions and had been hailed by one reviewer as "the most complete and erudite treatise on the art of needlework that has ever been compiled." Her idea was that if a brief historical sketch was attached to the various techniques of embroidery - gold work, canvas work, applied work, bead work, braiding, etc. -, the book would be of more interest than "a mere Manual of directions and examples." She also tempted the would-be purchaser with passages on the history of textiles and threads.

But the path of the embroiderer with an original idea for a book is not necessarily a smooth one. In 1851 a publisher named Willis P. Hazard of Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, issued a pirated edition of her book to which he added two small pattern books by English ladies: Mrs. Gaugain's *Miniature Knitting, Netting and Crochet Book* and *The Royal Shetland Shawl, Lace Collar, Brighton Purse, and China Slipper* by Mrs. J. B. Gore. The Duchess of Gloucester to whom Miss Lambert dedicated her book has gone, and in her place this notice, calculated to enrage any author, appeared: "To the Ladies of the United States, this Volume is most

respectfully dedicated, by The Publisher." It was not the first time Miss Lambert had been exposed to this type of abuse. Quickly she dipped her pen in vitriol and wrote an Advertisement which was printed in front of subsequent English editions. It reads:

Without alluding to many petty piracies, the writer cannot refrain from noticing the reprint of this Treatise in America as an original work "dedicated to the Ladies of the United States:" a circumstance which she is fain to accept as a compliment, as there is no redress for the substantial wrong. To imitators at home it may be as well to hint that all designs in this book are copyright.

So it was, we see, the patterns - not the history - that Miss Lambert grudged to the less than honest. It was the patterns that sold the book and which, more than a hundred years later, still sell embroidery books.

As if this was not enough to bear, however, another pirated edition was published in America in 1859. This time the firm was T. B. Peterson who also operated from Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, and who may well have had some connection with Willis P. Hazard. They made it into an entirely new book and changed the title to *The Ladies' Complete Guide to Needlework and Embroidery*.

The next major historical survey was angled from the artistic rather than the practical point of view. It was intended to complement another *Handbook of Needlework* published in 1880 by Miss L. Higgin, secretary of the Royal School of Needlework, or as it then was, the School of Art Needlework. In editing this purely practical text book Lady Marian Alford, one of the School's first patronesses, had promised that she herself would provide a sequel on history and design, and in 1886 her *Needlework as Art* appeared. It is a very large book which the *Edinburgh Review* described as "a contribution of no light value to the literature of Decorative art." Lady Alford herself ingenuously admitted it was likely to be considered "too shallow for the learned, too deep for the frivolous, too technical for the general public, and too diffuse for the specialist." Lest we should wonder why, in Heaven's name, she wrote it, she disarms us by saying that her pleasure in doing so was sufficient to excuse these defects. Unfortunately some of her opinions have not stood the test of time. Greatly admiring, for example, the Durham stole and maniple and the Worcester fragments, she nevertheless despised later medieval vestments describing the designs as weak and childish.

Occasionally an important exhibition of historical embroideries has inspired a textile historian or a collector to write a book. This is particularly true when the author has also been responsible for compiling the catalogue, the book thus becoming an extension of it. In March 1900 an exhibition of Old English Tapestry Pictures, Embroideries and Samplers was held in the rooms of the Fine Art Society. The catalogue was prepared by a collector named Marcus Bourne Huish. It included samplers by the Brontë sisters and Ruskin's mother and grandmother. Encouraged by the interest created in the exhibition, Huish proceeded to publish a lavishly illustrated book called *Samplers and Tapestry Embroideries*. He has some hard words for Lady Alford whom he accuses of "dismissing samplers in a single line." Mrs. Head, author of *The Lace and Embroidery Collector*, contributed a few useful practical notes. Only six hundred copies were printed at two guineas each, a price which Huish considered extortionate. Greatly to his surprise it sold well, and in 1913 a revised and enlarged edition was issued.

One of the most prolific writers on the decorative arts during the first half of this century was Margaret A. Jourdain. In 1902 she revised Mrs. Bury Palliser's *History of Lace*, originally published in 1865, and in 1910 her own book on *The History of English Secular Embroidery* appeared. It is arranged in historical periods with additional chapters on quilting, stumpwork, samplers, etc. Generally reliable she does, however, occasionally stumble. Black work, for example, she equates with "Spanish work" and believes it to have been introduced into England by Catherine of Aragon.

In 1905 an important exhibition of English medieval vestments was held at the Burlington Fine Art Society. The catalogue was compiled by a member of the staff of the Textile Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum named A. F. Kendrick, and in 1906 he published *English Embroidery* devoting sixty pages to the *opus anglicanum* and cramming the whole history of secular embroidery into the remaining forty. He is obviously aware of the controversy over the origin of black work, but as a young man at the outset of his career, is not yet ready to express a firm opinion on it. This had to wait until, in 1933, he published *English Needlework* and set the record straight by quoting from English documents prior to the reign of Henry VIII in which it is mentioned, and drawing attention to the even earlier portraits of English, French, German and Italian nobles on whose clothes it appears. In 1967 *English Needlework* was revised by Patricia Wardle and is likely to remain the standard survey of

English embroidery for many years to come. It is all the more to be regretted that the publishers, A. & C. Black, should have seen fit to issue it in an old fashioned format unrelieved by a single colour plate.

The long gap between Kendrick's two books was bridged by Mary Symonds (Mrs. Guy Antrobus) and Louisa Preece who, in 1928, published *Needlework through the Ages*. Already, in 1915 Mary Symonds had published *Elementary Embroidery* and in 1924 had collaborated with Louisa Preece in writing an admirable book on *Needlework in Religion*. Artists and sculptors had long since discovered African art, and scholars had begun to study systematically the non-European cultures. The artifacts they brought back from their field trips aroused the interest of English craftsmen. Going along with this the authors of *Needlework through the Ages* declared that "embroidery is not only aesthetic and historic but also ethnographic." They included illustrations of the work of North American Indians, Lapps and Maoris, and invited the noted archaeologist and expert on Greek Island embroidery, Professor A. J. B. Wace, to write the preface. In their introductory remarks they describe Greek Island embroidery as "unconscious" art, explaining that it results from the woman's spontaneous and natural desire to make her clothes and household linen interesting and attractive. With fine scorn they dismiss Lady Alford's art needlework as "a class of work that is as futile as it is dangerous in art."

In 1933 A. F. Kendrick had apologized for passing over the *opus anglicanum* in a somewhat cursory manner in *English Needlework* but this, he explains, is because "the subject has engaged the attention of a diligent student and experienced needlewoman for many years" who will, he hopes, be ready to publish the results of her research in the not-far-distant future. In 1938 Mrs. A. H. Christie's famous and comprehensive book on *English Medieval Embroidery* appeared. It represents the consummation of years of patient study inspired originally by the exhibition of 1905. As Kendrick realized, Mrs. Christie was unique - a successful and original embroiderer whose technique was also impeccable; an excellent teacher; a clear and coherent writer; and a fine editor. There is no department of contemporary embroidery in which her influence is not still apparent. No textile historian has attempted to improve upon her *magnum opus* on English medieval vestments.

Announcement of the forthcoming publication of Mrs. Christie's book was made to embroiderers in 1937 by Mrs. K. Harris in *The Embroideress*. She recommended it to them as filling an important gap in the history of embroidery, and also for its completeness, "no field of research

having been neglected that might yield material of interest or hitherto unknown examples." The publishers, the Clarendon Press, offered readers a special pre-publication price of nine guineas, subscribers' names to be printed at the back. The edition was limited to 350 copies, and on publication the price rose to twelve guineas.

In February *Embroidery*, the journal of the Embroiderers' Guild, paved the way with an article on the *opus anglicanum* by A. F. Kendrick, and in the following issue came the review. The writer compliments Mrs. Christie on providing so enthusiastic a catalogue and praises the stitch diagrams and line drawings; but the lack of colour and the indifferent quality of the reproduction of the photographs call forth reproof. Curiously enough, it is the fact that many of the quotations are in Latin and that the book is of considerable size and weight that cause her to wonder whether it will appeal to many embroiderers. She wrote:

It is a fatiguing book to review - it measures 15-3/4 ins. by 11-3/4 ins., is 2 ins. thick, and weighs 9 lbs. Seriously I wonder if it would not have been better to issue the matter in a series of volumes of more practical size and less awe-inspiring price. But whoever buys it will get twelve guineas worth, and Mrs. Christie deserves the thanks of all who take pride in our heritage of English embroidery, and welcome the opportunity of making an exhaustive study under expert guidance of its beautiful and treasured remains.

They had every reason to be grateful to her not only for the years she spent on *English Medieval Embroidery* but also for all the other well written books and articles she left behind. Posterity has had no difficulty in recognizing their worth.

## II. REFERENCE BOOKS

Two years after *A Hand-Book of Needlework* appeared Miss Lambert had another book ready for publication. The subject, which had proved more difficult than she anticipated, was *Church Needlework*. "I was hardly aware at the commencement of my task," she wrote, "of the difficulties I had to encounter, or of the contested ground on which I was treading." Once again there is a little history. She begins with an account of the introduction of Christianity to Britain, and continues through the Anglo-Saxon, Romanesque and Gothic periods to the dissolution of the monasteries and the Reformation. But it is the current revival of interest in ecclesiastical architecture and church furnishings that has moved her to write:

The interest lately evinced in all subjects connected with the Internal Decoration of Churches has led me to suppose that the present volume might not be unacceptable; the more so as authors of works on Church Architecture and Ecclesiastical Furniture, although they have pointed out where the decorations of the needle are required, are but little conversant with the practice of this branch of art.

So she sets to work to provide them with sensible, clearly drawn motifs and a great deal of practical information about how and where they should be applied to vestments. A charming touch that makes this a prettier book than the first, in which the text was enclosed with a double ruled border, are the symbolic roses, passion flowers, pomegranates and grapes that drift in long trailing sprays down the pages.

Another substantial book on ecclesiastical embroidery appeared in 1867. This was *Church Needlework Ancient and Modern* by Mrs. Anastasia Dolby; and the following year she brought out *Church Vestments, their Origin, Use and Ornament*. It was Mrs. Dolby who, a few years later, was to become one of the founders and first Director of the School of Art Needlework. Her sudden death within a short time of its opening caused her colleagues to feel that the key stone had dropped out of the arch.

The first general reference book on embroidery was *The Dictionary of Needlework* published in 1882 by Sophia Frances Ann Caulfeild and Blanche C. Seward. Both ladies had already contributed articles on embroidery to *The Queen*, *The Bazaar* and *The Girls' Own Paper*. Miss Seward had published a book on *Artistic Flower Decorations* and in 1884 wrote a practical handbook on *Decorative Painting*; while Miss Caulfeild, in 1886, produced what must be - for posterity - one of the most entertaining accounts of the activities of various small sewing and embroidery



societies entitled *A Directory of Girls' Societies, Clubs and Unions conducted on Unprofessional Principles*. Each and every one was dedicated inexorably to good works.

The Dictionary begins with Abaca "the native name for the Manilla hemp produced by one of the banana tribe" and proceeds slowly and conscientiously through the alphabet to Zephyr Shirting and Zulu Cloth. In between it deals systematically with "the History of the various Works, the Stitches employed, the Methods of working, the Meaning of Technical Terms, and other information bearing on the subject." It was a marvelous compilation, illustrated by upwards of eight hundred engravings. With sound business acumen the publishers, Upcott Gill & Son Limited, issued it first in monthly parts between 1881 and 1882. When the set was complete the purchaser could return it to them for binding. They were asked to enclose a remittance of 20s.0d. for plain edges, and 22s.6d. if they wished them to be gilt. In October, 1882, the Dictionary received the supreme accolade when the authors proudly reported that Her Majesty The Queen had been graciously pleased to receive a bound volume.

In 1903 the Dictionary was re-issued. There were now well over one thousand two hundred illustrations as well as a number of colour plates. The pictures of the various laces are of particular interest being reproduced in relief in white on a coloured ground. Well might the authors claim that they retained "all the delicacy and richness of real lace." Seldom if ever has an embroidery book enjoyed such lavish presentation.

How deep an impression had been made on Mrs. A. H. Christie by the 1905 exhibition comes out strongly in her first book, *Embroidery and Tapestry Weaving*. It was issued in 1906 by Isaac Pitman & Sons, Limited, in their Artistic Crafts Series of Technical Handbooks. Mrs. Christie deals patiently and thoroughly with every aspect of her subject. Already the style is clear and concise, and a number of line drawings that will be used again in *English Medieval Embroidery* appear here for the first time. Among them are the two diagrams illustrating the technique of underside couching. It is interesting to find that this now familiar term has not yet been coined, and Mrs. Christie calls it simply "an ancient method of couching."

The same pair of diagrams have a place, too, in Mrs. Christie's next book, *Samplers and Stitches*, first published in 1920 by B. T. Batsford. With remarkable perception the editor of *The Embroideress* put her finger

on the special quality which makes this book the yardstick against which all other embroidery reference books are measured. She wrote:

No serious student of embroidery should be without it, for it will not only teach you all you can possibly want to know about stitches, but it will also teach you style into the bargain, and that is what many embroidery books are unable to do.

Mrs. Christie herself described it as "a textbook of modern embroidery and design." To the third edition published in 1934 she added chapters on quilting and applied work; and in 1947 when the fourth edition came out there was a second colour plate and some new drawings. But in essence *Samplers and Stitches* has remained the same for over fifty years and its stitch diagrams have reappeared in countless other books. Imitation, being, as Miss Lambert knew, the sincerest form of flattery.

In 1912 an enterprising publisher Percy Lund Humphries & Company of London and Bradford, issued a loose leaf portfolio of *Stitches from Old English Embroideries*, the samplers for which had been worked at the request of A. F. Kendrick for the Textile Study Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum, by Louisa Frances Pesel. Subsequently she published *Stitches from Western Embroideries and Stitches from Eastern Embroideries* in the same format. Like Mrs. Christie, Miss Pesel was a pioneer in collecting and deciphering stitches long since lost or not previously recorded. Plagued by the perennial question: "How does one know which of two different methods of working a stitch is the right one?", she gave the reasonable answer that as it is impossible to know with absolute certainty which is the original method, the embroiderer should always use the one that suits her best. She wrote:

I never consider that a stitch is a good and useful stitch, or that I have discovered the right way of working it, if, after a little practice, I do not find it easy to do. . . . So long as the back and front both look exactly like the model, so long as the silk twists and interlaces in the same manner, it does not seem as if it could possibly matter in which way it is worked.

Louisa Pesel also published *Leaves from my Embroidery Notebooks, Cross Stitch and Practical Canvas Work*, but is best remembered today for her work in connection with Winchester cathedral, the chancel of which she and the Cathedral Broderers furnished with kneelers, almsbags and cushions.

Finally, note must be taken of *Mary Thomas's Dictionary of Stitches* of 1934 and *Mary Thomas's Embroidery Book* of 1936. Mary Thomas has enthusiasm and personality and is helpful in a neighbourly, well-intentioned way. Her knowledge is reasonably sound and her diagrams satisfactory. She has something for everybody and knows how to keep a toe in two camps at once. Here for instance she is on the side of the embroiderer whose aim is "to express herself in original designs," and over there is hastening to defend the use of printed transfers. Today it all looks terribly dated but in 1936 it was just the kind of book embroiderers wanted, and the reviewer in the *Church Times*, whose perception one cannot but admire, declared it "sufficient to make most women's fingers itch for needle and thread." It did.

When the Second World War was over there was dear, familiar Mary Thomas, a slightly dowdy but nevertheless faithful friend, waiting to help them into the brave new world where all embroiderers would draw their own designs.

### III. BOOKS ON DESIGN AND COLOUR

The first "modern" book on embroidery was published in 1893 by May Morris, the younger daughter of William Morris. She called it *Decorative Needlework*. She writes as an artist, designer, professional embroiderer (since 1885 she had been in charge of the embroidery workrooms at Morris & Company), and as a teacher. She addresses herself to the embroiderer's mind as well as to her fingers. She is writing for serious students who know that embroidery is art as well as craft; that the practice of embroidery need not be an end in itself; and that design and colour are every bit as important as technique. But the beginner is not to be frightened by the skills that have to be mastered; she is to take them "easily and naturally." As she progresses she is to learn about the *positive* and *relative* values of colour for "clear and beautiful colouring, sometimes complex, sometimes simple, is one of the principle features of fine embroidery." But she is also to learn to draw and to make her own designs. "Draw flowers you must," she wrote. "The flower borders you draw for embroidery can be only a rough sort of note or *symbol* of the loveliness of garden and field; but the symbol reminds us pleasantly of spring and summer." Nobody had ever before tried to stir the embroiderer's imagination in just this way.

But the student must also learn how to look at historical embroideries; to examine the technique, the way in which the colors are used, and how the design has been composed; and eventually she will do better embroidery because she has experienced these things. More than twelve years before the 1905 exhibition Miss Morris was, we find, studying medieval vestments. If Mrs. Christie could produce a profound scholarly catalogue on the subject, May Morris makes us want to look at them and to find out - from the embroiderer's point of view - what we are looking at. She makes the designs intelligible and relates them to the other decorative arts of the period.

By 1899 the embroiderer was ready for a book on design. It was written for her by W. G. Paulson Townsend, one of the government examiners in art, who taught drawing at the School of Art Needlework. Amongst his collaborators was Louisa Pesel. The book is called *Embroidery or the Craft of the Needle*.

Paulson Townsend knew that the embroiderer was frightened of both drawing and design. Long experience had taught him that the best place to learn about design is in a museum. "The advantage offered by our museums of being able to examine old methods of embroidery is not sufficiently appreciated by the modern needleworker," he wrote. To help her,

he took fifty-six examples of embroidery ranging through the centuries from the *opus anglicanum* to the latest designs his contemporary, Walter Crane, was drawing for the School of Art Needlework, and analyzed them in terms of method, design and colour. He wrote, he said, for the intelligent embroiderer, who was bored with the monotonous filling in of little squares on specially prepared canvas with certain fixed colours, and who was convinced of the ugliness of the prevailing fashion for "fancy work."

Hard on the heels of this came a book by another teacher and designer, Lewis Foreman Day, who in 1900 published *Art in Needlework*. Determined not to be accused of writing a man's book on a woman's subject, he chose Mary Buckle as his collaborator. Lewis Day was surprised and delighted by the variety of different effects that can be created with stitches, and by the ways in which the appearance of a design can be changed according to the stitches or method in which it is worked. He believed that through her knowledge of stitches, the embroiderer would inevitably - sooner or later - learn to make her own patterns. He teaches her about stitches, materials and textures. In this he is the precursor of Rebecca Crompton.

In 1915 Isaac Pitman & Sons published a book on *Embroidery Design* by Joan Drew. The author described it as "a handbook on the principles of decorative art as applied to embroidery." In 1920 and again in 1922 she was in charge of a course held at the Victoria and Albert Museum for teachers of needlework subjects, and in particular for those who taught in village institutes. In the context of the Museum she brought together history, design and decorative stitchery. In 1926 she published a portfolio of her own designs, not with the intention that they should be copied, but that those who were unable to visit a museum might have something to adapt for their own embroidery.

As early as 1896, Jessie Newberry had begun to teach embroidery at the Glasgow School of Art. In 1911 her student and eventual successor as head of the department, Ann Macbeth, collaborated with a colleague, Mary Swanson, in writing a book called *Educational Needlework*. Their object was to persuade teachers in primary schools to encourage their pupils to decorate the things made in needlework classes with simple stitch patterns of their own invention. Years later - in July 1932 - embroideries by these two progressive embroiderers were included in an exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum under the auspices of the British Institute of Industrial Art. It was the first large scale exhibition of modern

embroidery. Another teacher whose work was exhibited was Kathleen Mann who wrote *Design from Peasant Art* and *Embroidery Designs and Stitches*.

Out of the exhibition came a Studio Special Publication by Mary Hogarth entitled *Modern Embroidery*. It was published in 1933. The author was a painter of some distinction who had studied at the Slade School of Art and was a member of the New English Art Club. Her sympathies were all with the embroiderers who looked before rather than behind them; and although she herself preferred to interpret designs drawn for her by Wyndham Tryon and Duncan Grant, she was whole-heartedly committed to the idea that the embroiderer should draw her own patterns. Her forthright views shocked many traditionally minded embroiderers but she cared for none of them. "Modern embroidery should be the invention of today, and technique should be governed by design," she wrote. For many this was revolutionary talk indeed. In *Modern Embroidery* she declared that "the design should be built up by stages on the material" and that the designer and the embroiderer should be one and the same person.

Two years later Molly Booker produced a book called *Embroidery Design* in which she too contended that the embroiderer generally paid too little attention to design and too much to technique. Like May Morris she thought people should draw flowers. "Sketching from nature is a necessity," she wrote, "for flowers and leaves of some kind are certain to be required in a design sooner or later."

Finally in 1936 came Rebecca Crompton's *Modern Design in Embroidery*, the book that by no means all embroiderers were ready for. The battle between design and technique was warming up, and the reviewer in *Embroidery* wrote:

Mrs. Crompton's main interest is with colour and design: Stitchery and technique are secondary matters to her, and one feels bound to add that neither stitchery nor technique is her strongest point. . . . She fails to keep clear the real difference between embroidery and painting. She proves once again that it is possible to make a picture without paint as other artists have done before her, but she does not make an equally valuable contribution to embroidery as an applied art. . . . It should, however, be taken seriously, especially by those who disagree with it most.

Like Mary Thomas, Rebecca Crompton was ready when the war was over, for the next generation of embroiderers. There can be little doubt that the influence of her book was inestimably the greater.

#### IV. EPHEMERA

Because embroiderers are people of widely varying tastes and interests, no survey of the literature of embroidery would be complete unless some brief reference was made to the minor publications which are, in effect, receipt books of "artistic nonsenses." The fact that they enjoy astronomical sales does not, however, prevent serious embroiderers from being constantly saddened by the banality of many of them.

As Miss Caulfeild's *Dictionary of Girls' Societies, Clubs and Unions* shows, innumerable Victorian ladies of all ages were prepared to devote a certain amount of time each week to sewing for charitable purposes. More often than not this included the manufacture of endless small articles to grace the stalls of the Fancy Fairs, church bazaars and missionary teas that featured so prominently in their lives. Patronage began at the top. Miss Lambert, in dedicating her *Handbook of Needlework* to the Duchess of Gloucester, makes it clear that few fairs are without at least one example of her work; and here is Mrs. Mary Mallet, one of the Maids of Honour to the Queen, who writes from Balmoral on 1st June, 1899, about a stall for a bazaar to be held at Bagshot on 17th July, every article on which is to be of Royal Manufacture. Needlework is, she reckons, "a excellent outlet for the artistic energy with which the Royal Family is gifted." Inevitably, therefore, the market for books of patterns and diagrams accompanied by detailed instructions for making novelties of every description was a flourishing one.

One of the first major works in the field was a stout little book published by Ward Lock & Company in 1855 entitled *Treasures in Needlework*. The authors were Mrs. Eliza Pullan and Mrs. Matilda Maria Warren, and a precious pair they were. Their snobbishness is unbelievable.

We hope (they wrote) that while the book may grace the Boudoir of the Peeress, it will also penetrate to the cottage of the Poor; and that while it may be a useful recreation to the Rich, it will also prove a reliable aid to the industrious effort of the Poor; though how the latter would pay for a copy we do not know.

Both ladies wrote on a number of other subjects connected with household economy, and Mrs. Pullan was the proprietor of a needlework shop at 126 Albany Street, Regent's Park, where readers were naturally advised to buy their materials. In 1861 she collaborated with Madame Marie Girardin in writing a companion volume entitled *Elegant Arts for Delicate Fingers*.

1861 saw also the publication by Ward Lock & Company of Mrs. Beeton's famous *Book of Household Management*. Having got this underway, she turned her attention to needlework, and in 1870 her *Book of Needlework* appeared. Sad to relate, she did not live to see its completion and her husband, S. O. Beeton, publisher of the great middle-class periodical, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, penned these words by way of an introduction:

The idea of combining a series of minute and exact instructions for fancy needlework with useful patterns, was conceived many years ago by one whose life was devoted to the inculcation of the practical duties of a woman's life, to assisting her sex in their daily work of Household Management and Refinement. Her great wish was that her *Book of Needlework* should be as valuable in its way to her Countrywomen as her work upon Household Management was useful in providing for the diurnal wants of families. Other hands have brought to a conclusion her original plans. The best available workers have contributed to this volume. Only those who know the extent of the late Mrs. Beeton's design will miss, in the pages before them, "the touch of a vanished hand."

But the *Book of Needlework* enjoyed nothing like the same enduring popularity as the *Book of Household Management* and has never been reprinted.

The 1880's saw Ward Lock & Company with a new series in hand. With unerring instinct for the taste of the market to which it was addressed, they chose Sylvia for the name of the editor. Sylvia was interested in every aspect of home life. She was kind and reliable and inexpensive. She had an inexhaustible supply of patterns for nonsenses and was delighted to share them with everybody. There was *Sylvia's Book of Artistic Knick-Knacks*, *Sylvia's Book of Bazaars and Fancy Fairs*, *Sylvia's Book Ornamental Needlework*, *Sylvia's Fancy Needlework Instruction Book* and *Sylvia's Illustrated Embroidery Book*. Many other publishers jumped eagerly onto this profitable bandwagon, perhaps the most memorable being *Weldon's Practical Needlework Series* issued, unfortunately, without a date and apparently reprinted about 1900.

With the new century came the great craze for crewel work - familiarly if erroneously called Jacobean work - and an insidious desire to convince people that embroidery was easy. The ubiquitous Lazy-Daisy-Stitch made its appearance, and such publications as the perennially popular *Good Needlework Gift Book* was crowded with coloured illustrations



and large scale stitch diagrams for "Jacobean" firescreens and cushion covers, First Easy Designs for Applied Work and such irresistible trifles as The Simplest Cottage Cosy to grace the suburban breakfast table, and shadow work "showers" to throw over laden afternoon tea trolleys.

Looking back over this brief and necessarily idiosyncratic survey, it now becomes clear that while the books on design and colour highlight the controversy between the traditional and the progressive embroiderer over the relative importance of design and technique, the popular catchpenny books that are here today and gone tomorrow underline the difference between the embroiderers who count time and effort as nothing, and those for whom embroidery is a gentle amusement. In *Art in Needlework* Lewis Day had some hard things to say about the latter. "If they are not prepared to work," he wrote quellingly, "let them give themselves up to their play." The art of embroidery could, he thought, do very well without them. But whatever strong feelings may be aroused by the "popular" books on embroidery, there is no denying that every woman has the right to use her needle in the way that best pleases her, or that the books she buys will reflect her personal taste in embroidery and her appreciation or lack of appreciation of it as a decorative art.

