

## Loop-Stitch Embroidery: Peruvian and Elizabethan

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During the reign of Elizabeth I (b. 1533, reigned 1558-1603) embroidery in England took on a new form<sup>1</sup> in both design and working. This essay is concerned with the way in which this occurred. Because of my interest in design I approached the field with the idea that the new designs were responsible for the new techniques. At the same time I had the opportunity to study some Peruvian textiles, and found a marked similarity between a stitch recorded in early Nazca embroideries (100 B.C.-A.D. 200),<sup>2</sup> and a stitch newly introduced into Elizabethan embroidery. (Figure 1) My viewpoint then changed from the hypothesis that design was responsible for the character of Elizabethan work, to the more fundamental possibility that newly introduced stitches had encouraged the choice of certain designs which are recognised as characteristic of that new form of embroidery.

Here I set out my reasons for believing that one stitch travelled from Peru to Elizabethan England. This loop-stitch (Figure 1) in the form now known as Ceylon stitch,<sup>3</sup> is seen on some of the many skillfully woven and embroidered textiles from a burial site of a community which flourished between 100 B.C. and A.D. 200 in the Nazca region. Nazca is a town and archaeological site on the coast of Peru about 450 kilometers south of Lima. This site was excavated by A. L. Kroeber in 1926 and the findings catalogued by Lila M. O'Neale in 1937.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that some similar ancient textile, or contemporary embroidery in which this stitch continued to be worked, was included among the objects admired by the Spanish on their arrival in Peru in the 16th century.

The intrinsic character of design for embroidery differs from that for weaving, where precise repetitions may be a desired and exploited feature of the technique. Handweaving had always allowed personal intervention, but in Europe, by the 16th century, the development of the loom had reached a stage where complex and repetitive patterns and weaves were freely, if expensively, available. This availability of intricate and reproducible designs did not eliminate the desire for personal and individual work. Embroidery fulfilled this need both for the worker and for the owner.

Embroidery is worked with needle and thread upon the surface of, or into woven fabric. It is not limited to any of the ways of woven ornamentation although some techniques, for example counted thread, impose restrictions upon the design. There are only a few basic ways of working embroidery stitches; these form families; chained or looped, running or darning, geometrical canvas, counted thread, and so forth. Inside each family there is a great deal of variation between stitches.

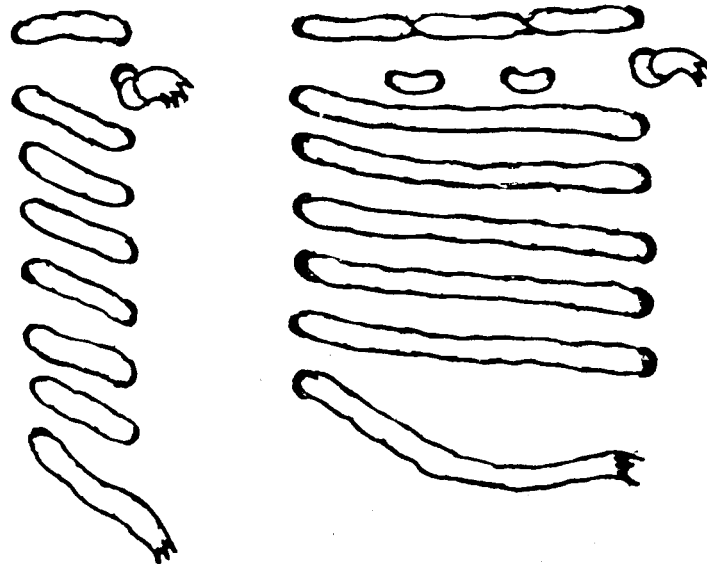
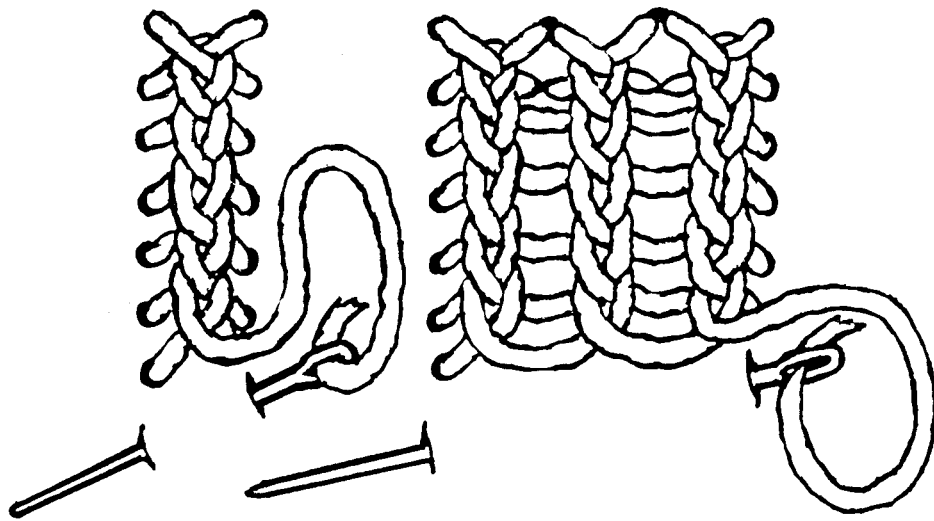


Fig. 1: The loop stitch as recorded by Lila M. O'Neale in *Textiles of the Early Nazca Period*.

A number of techniques and stitches are found in English embroideries executed before the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, but during the second half of the 16th century a new and intricate stitch appeared together with a number of variations.<sup>5</sup> It was this stitch which was, I believe, responsible for the unique character of the embroidery known today as Elizabethan.

Earlier techniques and stitches used in England had included:

1. The stitch found in the embroidered work known as the Bayeux tapestry is a form of solid couching, in which a number of threads laid upon the surface of the fabric are caught down by stitches of a contrasting or matching colour. In the variant stitch the initial threads, laid side by side, are crossed by a single thread itself held down by tiny stitches. There are still doubts as to whether this work was English or French but the stitch would certainly have been known in both countries.

2. Linear couching is a single thread upon the surface of the fabric caught down by tiny stitches. This is seen in many earlier Tudor portraits, and was encouraged by the availability of heavy gimp<sup>6</sup> and metal thread.

3. In the split stitch the thread left upon the surface of the fabric by a small stitch is pierced at about a third of its length by the needle returning from beneath the fabric in the process of forming the next stitch. This stitch is in turn split by the ensuing stitch as the work continues.

4. The underside couching used in *Opus Anglicanum* is produced in the manner of surface couching, but here a slight tug on the working thread pulls a loop of the laid thread, in this case metal thread, to the back of the fabric. The working thread now remains perfectly flat. The tiny loops of couched thread act in the manner of hinges, so permitting soft draping of the richly encrusted fabric. This suppleness is I believe one of the reasons for its value, though this value is usually seen today as residing in the design and workmanship.

5. A number of canvas stitches are seen on the Calthorpe purse of 1540, in the Victoria and Albert, London, the majority of which are easily devised by any competent needlewoman.

6. The double running or Holbein stitch used earlier and seen in many of Holbein's paintings<sup>7</sup> consists of a colored thread passed above and below a series of counted threads of the ground fabric, producing tiny, discontinuous, stitches. Upon completion of a length of such stitches the embroiderer returns the length of the work in the same manner, coming up and across the spaces left in the previous working, filling all gaps and producing a fine continuous line on both sides of the fabric. Corners may be turned but on both journeys the thread must reach the point or a diagonal stitch would result, and this is not permitted.

It is impossible to provide precise dates for the working of embroideries in the 15th and 16th centuries. However, by the end of the 16th century the character of Elizabethan embroidery was fully developed, suggesting that a fundamental change in stitches and working had taken place. Some of the earlier stitches, including linear couching, canvas stitches and Holbein, continued to be used throughout the 16th century, but in embroideries worked after about 1570, and during the following fifty years, new stitches, and designs sympathetic to these, are seen in extant examples and contemporary portraits.

The most important of these new stitches, known today as Ceylon stitch, was, I believe the first to be introduced, and it was upon this that the notion of threading, (whipping)<sup>8</sup> common to so many of the innovative stitches depended. The other stitches first seen at this time included threaded or whipped chain and threaded (whipped) dot stitch and Elizabethan loop stitch. Today's versions of these threaded and looped stitches are far less complicated. Indeed the complex stitches which, by their very popularity, suggest competent and swift working, were very soon to disappear from the embroiderers' repertory. They were replaced by a simpler, and by comparison, quite ordinary buttonhole stitch, which during the following century was worked detached from the fabric. During the second half of the 17th century this detached buttonhole stitch was fundamental to the type of raised work now sometimes known as stump work.

Plaited braid stitch, a truly complex sequence of needle movements, frequently incorrectly displayed and thus indecipherable in modern diagrams, was at one time believed to be the stitch used to work the ubiquitous coiling stems of Elizabethan embroideries. Recent examination suggests that this may not be the case. Although plaited braid stitch is found on some embroideries, its appearance when worked with metal thread is similar to that of a narrow line of two Ceylon stitches. (Figure 2) In some extant examples of this design a row of fine chain or stem stitches has been worked in black silk on each side of the narrow stem. Such black lines beside Ceylon stitch would cover traces of any side threads and confuse the appearance of the stitches, making it almost impossible to differentiate between Ceylon and plaited braid stitch without actually unpicking the stitch. On many occasions Ceylon stitch may have been mistakenly recorded as plaited braid. Jennifer Walkinshaw writes of the examination of an Elizabethan stomacher now in the Burrell Collection (Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, Glasgow).

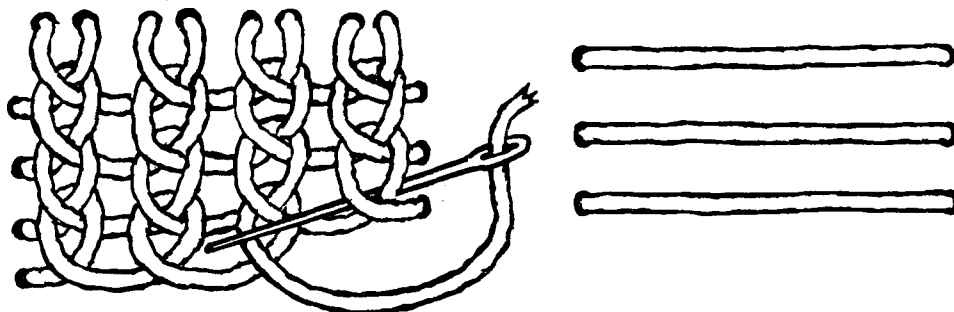


Fig. 2: Ceylon stitch with view of reverse side.

The scrolling stems in metal thread are broad and where as in the characteristic stitch for coiling stems in Elizabethan embroidery—plaited braid stitch—you have what looks like two lines of closely packed V's, in this case there are four lines of V's. After much careful scrutiny and experimenting with needle and metal thread, this stitch proved to be Ceylon stitch and the key to several other Elizabethan stitches (Figure 2).<sup>9</sup>

I have found what I believe to be an unrecorded connection between Ceylon stitch, apparently unused in England before the reign of Elizabeth, and a stitch identical in appearance found in embroideries of the early Nazca period of Peru, an example of which is now in the Museum of Anthropology, University of California.<sup>10</sup>

Both in Nazca and Elizabethan embroidery Ceylon stitch is a surface decoration worked on to existing fabric. In manner of working it resembles an ancient looping technique used to make fabric. This fabric is seen in Coptic knitting,<sup>11</sup> Danish Bog Burials<sup>12</sup> and early Peruvian textiles.<sup>13</sup> Although similar in appearance, the embroidery stitch and the looped textile differ in intention and in end product, belonging to two unconnected traditions. It is necessary to recognise the existence of the textile but it does not form part of this argument.

To confirm a connection between Nazca and Elizabethan embroideries, it will be necessary to show that the particular form of looped Ceylon stitch was unknown in European embroidery before Pizarro<sup>14</sup> landed in Peru in 1532, and that it was possible for the stitch from Peru to have been seen in England in the latter half of the 16th century.

There is no doubt that Ceylon stitch, together with other new stitches, which I believe were dependent upon it, as explained above, appeared in England in the late 16th century. There is equally no doubt that what we call Ceylon stitch was worked in Nazca embroideries.

My reasons for suggesting that the history of this stitch involves its transportation across the Atlantic from Peru to Europe are as follows:

1. The apparent absence of the stitch in Europe prior to this time: examination of embroideries and portraits gives no indication that this stitch was used in England before 1570, and contemporary designs were not conducive to this kind of stitch.
2. The evident ability of the Elizabethan needlewoman to work from samplers: that is the ability to ascertain and duplicate a process or stitch from an example. If a foreign embroidery were available, a skilled embroiderer would have had no difficulty in reproducing the technique.
3. Intercourse between travellers and embroiderers: Jacques le Moyne (des Morgues) the Huguenot traveller and artist, who had visited America,<sup>15</sup> escaped from France to avoid the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572,

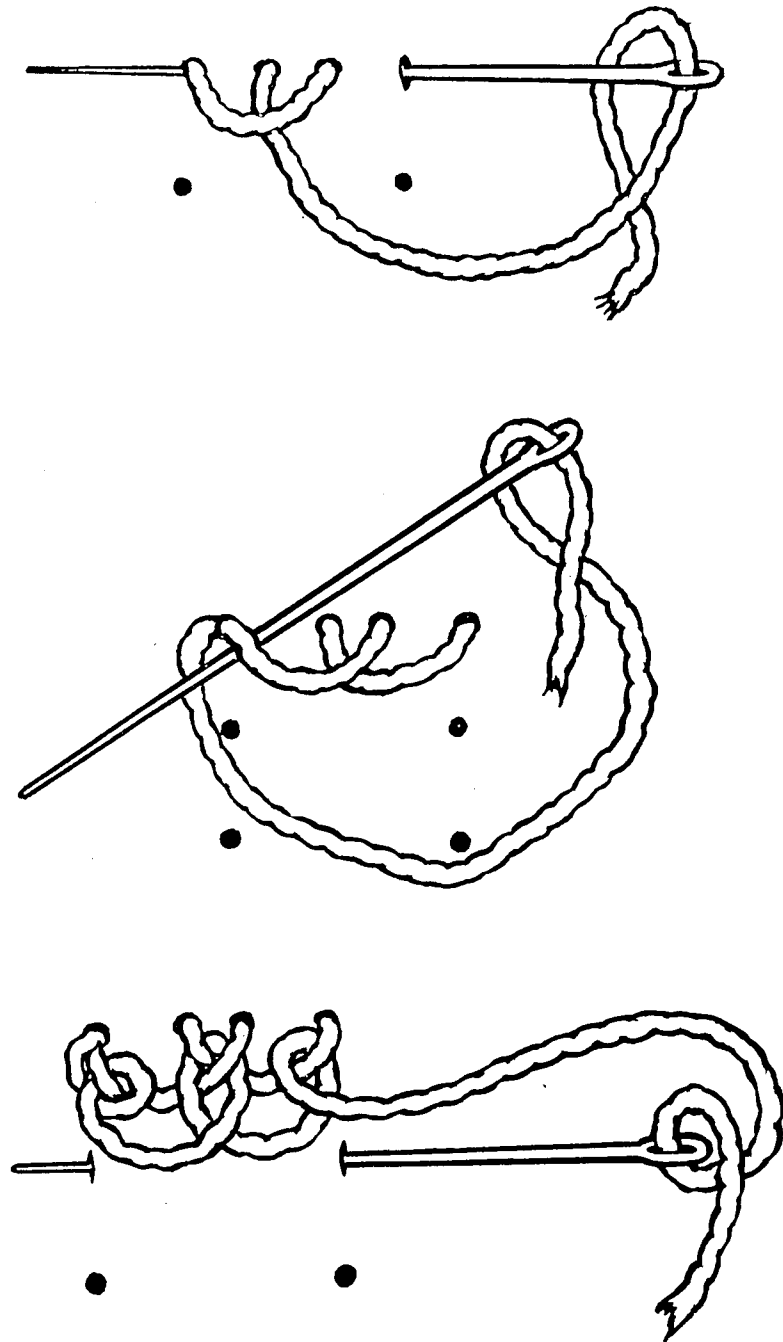


Fig. 3: A variation of loop stitch found on a costume in the village of Lagatera, Province of Toledo, Spain. Redrawn from *Weaving and Embroidery in Spain*, by Mildred Stapley.

and settled in England where Sir Walter Raleigh became his patron. In 1586 he produced a book illustrated with botanical woodcuts which he dedicated to Lady Sidney, whose son, Sir Philip,<sup>16</sup> was interested in the colonization of North America.

The dedication of *La Clef des Champs*: “pour Trouver plusieurs Animaux, tant Bestes qu’Oyseaux, avec plusieurs Fleurs et Fruittz,” to helping among others “aucuns pour la Broderie ou sorte d’ouurage a l’eguille.”

4. This direct connection between at least one traveller and an embroiderer suggests the probability that a similarly interested traveller to South America would be likely to return with samples of embroidery.
5. The return of travellers from the Americas and the resulting interest shown in drawings and samples of plants and animals is coincidental to the appearance of the new stitch in embroideries in England. The degree of interest can be gauged by the fact that potatoes and tobacco were soon to be widespread in Europe. And rich patrons, for example the Medici, set great store by their collections of interesting artefacts from the new world.

The connections between South America and England were indirect, for that conquest was the province of the Spanish, but it is thought that Drake raided Callao, the port of Lima, and English seamen did, of course, plunder Spanish boats returning from the New World. The absence of direct contact did not prevent the spread of potatoes and tobacco by the later 16th century. The nature of the interest in embroidery at that time required only one example to reach a competent embroiderer.

One would expect to find something similar in Spain, but I have not yet found any comparable Spanish embroideries of that period, and there is no recognised connection between 16th-century Spanish embroidery and the newly introduced stitches found in England. Late 16th-century extant Spanish embroidery is by nature flat, and worked in smooth flat stitches, for example satin stitch in silk thread, or of fabrics applied to velvet and outlined with couched metal threads, reminiscent of English embroidery of the early 16th century. It is possible that the loop-stitch was introduced into Spain and used in a less spectacular manner, perhaps on costume. A braided stitch, slightly different from Ceylon stitch, but worked in a similar way, is found today on the *pechero gorguera* or yoke found in Lagartera, in the province of Toledo (Figure 3)<sup>18</sup> but there is no record of its history.

Further examination of English, Spanish and Peruvian embroideries will be rewarding. And a great deal more work is possible on individual inventories, as well as on the records of Spanish chroniclers.<sup>19</sup> If a record of an embroidered fabric being brought into England from South America were found, this might be considered circumstantial evidence sufficient to back up my proposition, but with or without such documentary evidence I suggest that the similarities between the complicated stitches introduced into English embroidery during the 1570s and such stitches recorded in Nazca embroidery, appear to be far more than coincidental.

## NOTES

1. J. L. Nevinson, *Catalogue of English Domestic Embroideries of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1938, p. xii. Hereafter cited as Nevinson.
2. Lila M. O'Neale, "Textiles of the Early Nazca Period," *Archaeological Explorations in Peru*, Part III, Chicago, Field Museum of Natural History, 1937, Vo. II, Plate LXIII. Hereafter cited as O'Neale.
3. There is no traceable continuity in the working of the loop stitch seen in English embroidery of the sixteenth century and that same stitch which is known today as Ceylon stitch. I can find no certain explanation for this modern name being given to that stitch.
4. O'Neale.
5. J. Walkinshaw, "Stitches Found in Elizabethan Embroidery," *Embroidery*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, Summer 1970, London, The Embroiderers' Guild, pp. 50-53. Hereafter cited as Walkinshaw.
6. A. Cole, *Ornament in European Silks*, London, Debenham and Freebody, 1899, p. 168.
7. For example, Hans Holbein the Younger's *Portrait of Anne of Cleves* in the Louvre and his *Meyer Madonna*, Grand Ducal Palace, Darmstadt (D.B.R.).
8. Threading (whipping) stitch is used over another stitch for a raised, corded, striped or other contrasting effect. The needle travels over the first stitch without entering the material except at the beginning and end of a row.
9. Walkinshaw, p. 6.
10. O'Neale, Pl. LXIII.
11. Linda Parry, Victoria and Albert Museum, personal communication.
12. Margrethe Hald, *Ancient Danish Textiles from Bogs and Burials: A Comparative Study of Costume and Iron Age Textiles*, Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark, 1980, pp. 284-285, figs. 303-305.
13. Raoul d'Harcourt, *Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1975, p. 104, fig. 73.



14. Francisco Pizarro (b. 1471/1475-d. 1541), discoverer and conqueror of Peru, was governor and captain-general of the province of New Castile for 200 leagues along the coast and invested with the authority and prerogatives of a viceroy.
15. Jacques Lemoyne des Morgues, cartographer and painter of seascapes, accompanied Jean Ribaut (Ribault), navigator and ardent Protestant, to Florida in the 1560s. Blackefriers published his book *La Clef des champs* in 1586.
16. Sir Philip Sydney was largely interested in the discoveries in the New World, including the enterprises of Martin Frobisher, his old friend Richard Hakluyt and Sir Walter Raleigh.
17. Nevinson, p. xxv.
18. Mildred Stapley, *Weaving and Embroidery in Spain*, London, Batsford, 1924, p. 41, fig. 15.
19. I. Vanston, *The Fabrics of Peru*, Leigh on Sea, F. Lewis Publishers, 1966, p. 23.