

Chapter One



Back Stitch to the Future

Pop quiz: What Upper Paleolithic invention arguably enabled humans to conquer the earth?

- A. The monkey-operated traffic signal
- B. The mastodon-powered vacuum cleaner
- C. The triceratops juicer
- D. String

If you answered D, String, you're correct—although I think we can all agree that the triceratops juicer also played a pivotal role (at least, it did on *The Flintstones*). While old-school anthropologists have generally cited the invention of stone and metal tools in the evolutionary success of knuckle-draggers—indeed, the word “Paleolithic” is really just smart-people speak for “Old Stone Age”—recent scholarship indicates that theory may be as much hooey as the urban legend about eating Pop Rocks with soda. Instead, many anthropologists now believe it was *string*—as in spun plant or animal fiber—that enabled these Cro-Magnon grunTERS to ascend to the top of the food chain.

Given this new understanding of its importance, I could reasonably argue that *my* interest in string—specifically, in the string used in needlecrafts—is simply a product of latent survival instincts, the outcome of eons of evolution, as much a result of my DNA as my hair color (pre-highlights, of course). Whether this is in fact true remains to be proven, but it certainly *sounds* adequately scientific in the event my bankruptcy attorney questions my needlecraft-related purchases. In case you, too, find yourself cross-examined about your stitching stash, this chapter—while by no

means a thorough account of the history of needlecrafts—contains enough historical information to snow any jury.

Weave Are the World

Look, I'm sure there are skeptics among you. I mean, if Captain Caveman was facing a marauding, ferocious beast, odds are he wouldn't extract a length of freaking *fiber* from his fur to fend it off; he'd probably opt for something sharp and hard. Plus, it's not like early people-ish types needed to use string to sew up animal skins and fur for clothing; some proto-Einstein of an earlier epoch had already figured out how to use critter sinew and needles made of bone for that purpose. So what gives?

Here's the deal: String was invaluable to early humans because it had so many uses. One, it could be employed to entertain cave kittens for *hours*. Plus, in the event one of our early ancestors had important stuff to remember, she could tie string around her index finger as a cue. But perhaps most importantly, in the words of renowned paleontologist Dr. Elizabeth Wayland Barber, string "opened the door to an enormous array of new ways to save labor and improve the odds of survival."

And how. The development of string yielded such handy items as snares, nets, and, ultimately, such tools as the bow and arrow—all of which enabled humans to hunt from afar rather

It's to Dye For

It was only a matter of time—in this case, a looooooong time—before the neutral, Armani-inspired palette of Paleolithic fashion became *so* last era. Enter the ancient Chinese who, sometime before 3000 B.C., figured out how to whip up red, black, and yellow dyes. Subsequent discoveries in other pockets of the world yielded a yet broader palette. Ancient Indians used indigo to create blue dye, while the Phoenicians produced a vibrant purple dye by cracking open the mollusks that littered the Mediterranean coast and extracting the mucus within. Coastal people in Mexico also used shellfish to obtain colorant, but their approach involved a bit more foreplay: tickling and blowing on the creatures until they obligingly spit out their own dye. Other Central and South Americans employed the bodies of cochineal insects to concoct various shades, as did the Egyptians.

As you might guess, the process of extracting the materials necessary to formulate dye involved more labor than tutoring Kevin Federline for the SATs. In order to produce a measly 1.5 grams of purple colorant, the aforementioned Phoenicians bludgeoned some 12,000 mollusks to extract their dye snot. Even those of us with only a cursory understanding of simple economics can conclude that this dye was as prized as an Hermès Kelly bag, and priced accordingly. Read: If you weren't a Hilton sister, you could forget about wearing anything brighter than beige.

than engaging in hand-to-paw combat. This increased the likelihood of their continued existence a gazillion-fold. Also, string could be used to lash together planks in order to build a raft, which, along with the aforementioned nets and with newly invented fishing lines, could be used to haul in great quantities of fish.

Most importantly, with the invention of string came the ability to *weave*—that is, cross horizontally situated threads, called *weft threads*, and vertically situated threads, called *warp threads*, in an over-under fashion in order to create textiles. These textiles could then be used to construct lightweight containers for carrying food, making the whole “gathering” thing a bit easier (although constantly being asked “linen or mammoth hide?” by the bagger guy at the grocery checkout probably became annoying). These containers could also be used to *store* food, which meant that with a little foresight, early people could hoard enough eats when the pickings were good to withstand the inevitable downturn.

In addition to being used to construct lightweight containers, woven string could be used to fashion washable garments, reducing the need for smelly animal skins—a major victory for members of NETA (Neanderthals for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). String could also be woven into baby slings, thereby freeing the Wilmas of the world to berry-pick with *both* hands.

Just when did this so-called “string revolution” occur? It’s hard to say. Unlike stone tools, which are incredibly durable, string and woven textiles are as ephemeral as the dewy skin of one’s youth, susceptible to decay over time. So although experts date the oldest examples of fabric ever discovered to 16,000 B.C., secondary evidence such as impressions of early textiles on ancient fragments of clay indicates that string and woven textiles have been around *waaaaay* longer. Some scholars contend that human-ish types began weaving at least as early as 40,000 B.C., and possibly much earlier.

Ancient Chinese Secret

Unless they personally claimed dominion over all they surveyed, ancient types could assume their clothing and household items would be free of any decorative stitching—an art form whose precise origins are as cloudy as Mel Gibson’s judgment, but that appears to have originated in China circa 4500 B.C. No doubt spurred on by their early mastery over the silkworm, which yielded exquisite threads and fabrics, the Chinese have since enjoyed an impressive tradition of stitching. Heck, by the end of the Han Dynasty, which spanned from 206 B.C. to A.D. 220, just about everyone with a vagina was a pro. Over time, the decorative stitching techniques introduced by the Chinese oozed across

We Got the Bead

Although decorative stitching as a craft in its own right didn’t materialize until 4500 B.C.-ish, humans embellished their clothing by stitching beads onto it much earlier. In fact, the fossilized remains of one Cro-Magnon hunter who lived circa 30,000 B.C. sported clothes, boots, and a hat decorated with Paleolithic bling: horizontal rows of ivory beads. You’ll learn how to incorporate beads into your stitching in chapter 6 in the project “I’ll Stop the World and Belt with You.”

Asia to the Middle East—namely Egypt, Syria, Persia, Babylon, Israel, and Byzantium; trade and conquest spread it yet further, to such diverse regions as India, the Roman Empire, Africa, the Americas, and beyond.

Vestment Opportunity

Of course, like textiles in general, fabric containing decorative stitching, a.k.a. *needlework*, is transient and, unlike Dick Clark, subject to the ravages of time. Translation: Few early examples of it survive. In order to trace the development of needlework from China circa 4500 B.C., historians must rely on ancient paintings, sculptures, and literary sources. One early mention of decorative stitching appears in the Bible—namely Exodus, chapter 26, which, oddly enough, describes in excruciating detail the decorative requirements for a tabernacle.

Some of the earliest examples of *actual* thread work that have survived to the present day were produced in Europe in medieval times (as opposed to *at* Medieval Times, that restaurant chain where they re-enact jousts and stuff). Many artifacts from this era, most likely stitched with needles made of bronze, were commissioned by the Church and were therefore ecclesiastical (that’s “church-y” to you and me) in nature: vestments, copes, albs, chasubles, surplices, stoles, *et al.* All were ornately stitched with vibrant colors, especially around the edges—hence, it was during this period that the term “embroidery,” from the Anglo-Saxon word for “edge,” was coined. Other embroidered pieces were made to order for royalty and similarly wealthy patrons for secular use: tents, banners, tabards, horse trappings, wall and bed hangings, and of

Hey! Whitey!

While the opus anglicanum style dominated the British Isles, opus teutonicum (Latin for “Teutonic work”) took root in the area now called Germany. Embroiderers who stitched in this style produced monuments to blandness described as whitework—white thread on white fabric that yielded an effect Spiñal Tap’s Nigel Tufnel could only describe as “none more white.” (Presumably to keep from falling asleep, Teutonic embroiderers broke the monotony of working these white-on-white pieces by developing new types of stitches, including the chain stitch, the buttonhole stitch, the encroaching Gobelin, and the long-arm cross, many of which are still used today.) Speaking of whitework, it’s also a component of Norway’s traditional Hardanger style, which is also characterized by cutwork—a form of needlework in which portions of the background fabric are cut away. Likewise, Danish Hedebo embroidery involves whitework, but also entails the drawn-thread technique in which certain warp and/or weft threads are removed from the fabric and the remaining threads are gathered together.

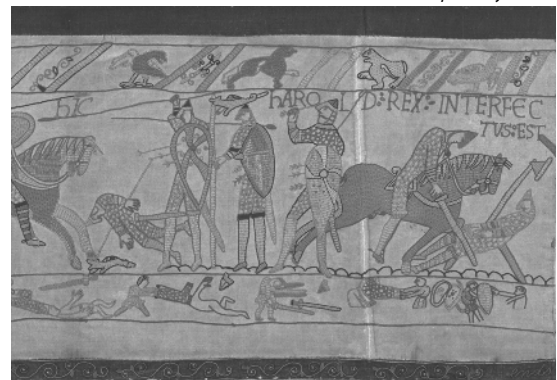
course garments of all types. (Sadly, few of these embroidered garments survive, as they were generally worn until they disintegrated into a stinking, festering pile of string.) In short, many of the embroidered goodies from this period served much the same function as illuminated manuscripts, jewelry, wall paintings, sculptures, etc.: to convey to others the extent to which you were wealthier and/or more powerful than they were.

Among the most advanced embroiderers of the time were the English; one early example of their skill is an incredibly detailed stole and maniple from the tomb of St. Cuthbert at Durham, which dates from A.D. 906-ish. (In time, this British style would be called *opus anglicanum*, Latin for “English work.”) A more famous example of early needlework—also believed to have been produced by English stitchers—is the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the Norman conquest of England using 626 human figures, 190 horses, 35 dogs, 506 birds and critters, 33 buildings, 37 ships, 37 trees or groups of trees, and 57 Latin inscriptions. A whopping 231 feet long (that’s 39.6 Gisele Bündchens to you and me), the tapestry, which was probably commissioned in the 1070s by the half-brother of William the Conqueror, consists of eight colors of wool threads embroidered on linen fabric—making the whole “tapestry” aspect of its name a bit of a misnomer, as the images that appear in tapestries are, by definition, woven, not stitched. Rather, the Bayeux Tapestry is among the earliest examples of *crewel*, which, although often assumed to be a needlework technique, simply refers to the type of wool used in an embroidered piece: crewel wool.



Courtesy Durham Cathedral

St. Cuthbert's maniple is among the earliest embroidered pieces to survive the ravages of time.



Courtesy Reading Museum

The Bayeux Tapestry is among the oldest, most ambitious examples of embroidery. This portion of the “tapestry” depicts the Battle of Hastings.

Women's Work, My Ass!

Although it's true that embroidery has long been a diversion for girly types, plenty of men also practiced the craft. Take St. Dunstan, the 10th century ladies' man who designed and stitched his own embroidery patterns. Monks, too, were known to embroider. In fact, it is said that embroidery was *so* popular in monasteries and convents that the high clergy chastised monks and nuns alike for eschewing their devotional responsibilities in favor of their needlework projects. The truth was, embroidered pieces were so *de rigueur*, the royal, noble, and clerical types who commissioned them didn't much care *who* made them—man, woman, child, or other—as long as they were sufficiently fancy-schmancy.

To meet this demand, skilled embroiderers opened shops, some of which were familial in nature and many of which were staffed by both women and men. Other skilled embroiderers served in the employ of a particular patron. In time professional embroidery guilds, many with a membership consisting entirely of men, formed both to protect artisans and to ensure quality. As to the latter, only those who had endured a seven-year apprenticeship as well as a period as a journeyman were permitted to ascend to Master Embroiderer status—and that only after enlisting a priest to recommend him, paying a fee, and producing a sample of work that met the strict standards of the Wardens of the Guild.

That's not to say all early embroidery was stitched by a pro. Plenty of amateurs dabbled in the craft—especially noblewomen, who were among the few hobbyists able to afford the necessary supplies. Indeed, many a medieval queen was handy with a needle, including Queen Aelgifu, whose husband, King Canute, ruled England from A.D. 1016 to 1035; and Queen Edith, whose husband, Edward the Confessor, reigned from A.D. 1042 to 1066. (Later queens, too, practiced the art of embroidery, most notably Queen Elizabeth I and her rival for the English throne, Mary Queen of Scots.)

Urban Outfitter

In A.D. 1095, when Pope Urban II got a bug up his butt about Muslim Turks occupying Jerusalem, he rallied Christians to swarm the city and boot them out—a maneuver designed to ensure the safety of Christian pilgrims. Answering his call to arms, European nobles and serfs alike enlisted in vast numbers for the campaign that would eventually be called the First Crusade.

Not the most disciplined of troops, these Crusaders haphazardly slaughtered Jews and heretics whilst sacking turf already held by allies en route to Jerusalem. By the time they finally reached their destination more than three years after Pope Urban's rallying cry, the very Turks they had come to evict had already scrambled—expelled by the ruling Fatimid Muslims. Although these same Fatimids promised to protect Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem, the Crusaders, spoiling for a fight, opted to conquer the city and claim it as their own—a feat that would have thrilled Pope Urban had he lived to hear the news. This new Christian-ruled kingdom of Jerusalem would endure until 1291, when Islamic soldiers achieved their stated objective of cleansing the region of the infidel outsiders. (Whoa, *déjà vu!*)

Look, I know what you're saying: This is fascinating, but exactly how does it relate to embroidery? Simple. The Crusaders' eastward march exposed them to lands and cultures—and styles of embroidery—they'd never experienced before. Naturally, when the victorious Crusaders returned to their homelands, new embroidery styles, such as the Byzantine style (much of which was copied from the Persian style), came with them. Indeed, the influence of Byzantine art of all types, characterized by rich colors and ornate designs, can be found throughout Europe—at least in part the result of the First (and subsequent) Crusade.

Read the Twine Print

With an artistic oeuvre that spans *Three Men and a Little Lady* to *Police Academy 1–4*, Steve Guttenberg's contributions to society cannot be denied. But it was an earlier Gutenberg—namely Johannes Gutenberg—who *really* made a difference. By inventing the printing press in the 1440s, Gutenberg launched an information revolution the likes of which would not be repeated until Al Gore invented the Internet. In fact, because the ability to produce many copies of a book meant that information and ideas could spread more quickly than bird flu, many consider Gutenberg's invention to be the turning point from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, an era characterized by rapid technological progress, a rise in scientific thought, secularized civic politics, the nation state, and the emergence of Protestantism.

Protestantism in particular benefited greatly from the advent of the printing press. Case in point: Just weeks after being nailed onto the door fronting Wittenberg's Castle Church in 1517, printed copies of Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, which dogged the Catholic Church's practice of *indulgences* whereby the wealthy could pay down their time in purgatory by filling the church's coffers, had circulated throughout Germany. Soon thereafter, copies of Luther's treatise had surfaced as far away as Italy, France, and England. This momentum eventually

Speaking of Henry VIII ...

Among the most famous embroidery traditions is *blackwork*: black thread stitched onto white fabric. Sometimes called *Spanish work* after its area of origin, the blackwork aesthetic was deeply influenced by Islamic Moors, who ruled portions of the Iberian Peninsula from the 8th century until 1492, when they were vanquished by the forces of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. Interestingly, although blackwork's origins lie in Spain, it is more closely associated with Tudor England. According to legend, if not actual fact, Ferdinand and Isabella's daughter, Catherine of Aragon, brought blackwork to England upon her (ultimately doomed) marriage to Henry VIII, and its popularity in the British Isles endured for nearly a century thereafter. For examples of blackwork from this period, peruse Hans Holbein's portraits of Henry VIII and his many wives; the prevalence of blackwork in these paintings likely explains why the double-running stitch commonly used in blackwork was subsequently christened the *Holbein stitch*.

spawned the Protestant Reformation, thereby creating four new religious institutions that opposed the papacy: the Lutheran church, the Calvinist church, the Anabaptist church, and the Anglican church.

Of course, many Protestants objected specifically to the pomp associated with Catholicism, *i.e.*, the aforementioned vestments, copes, albs, chasubles, surplices, and such, many of which were—you guessed it—embroidered. If you’ve ever torn a picture of your ex to pieces, you might be able to relate to those religious reformers who, after England split from the Catholic Church during the reign of Henry VIII, destroyed some of Britain’s finest examples of ecclesiastical embroidery. (Note, however, that even the most zealous reformers did not thereafter stalk said examples of ecclesiastical embroidery for six months.)

In a kooky full circle-type scenario, even as the printing press indirectly marginalized ecclesiastical embroidery by aiding in the proliferation of Protestantism, it nurtured the growth of secular embroidery. Specifically, with the advent of the printing press, common-born embroiderer wannabes—a growing population, thanks to a changing economy in which the merchant and gentry classes prospered—could embroider garments and domestic objects using printed pattern sheets and, later, books containing embroidery patterns. One such book was *A Clef des Champs* by Jacques le Moyne, which included illustrations delineated with pin pricks that allowed for tracing (a technique called *pouncing*). Other books—such as Conrad Gessner’s *Icones Animalium*, which contained a selection of hand-colored woodcuts depicting animals—served as inspiration, as did Pierre Pelon’s *La Nature et Diversité des Poissons*, which portrayed marine critters. In addition to disseminating patterns, books also occasionally *displayed* them. That is, embroiderers were known to stitch designs—usually monograms, insignias, and coats of arms—directly onto bookbindings.

Free Samplers!

Although books with patterns had become available, most young girls still learned the fundamentals of embroidery from their mothers or other women in their household, perfecting stitches by working *samplers*—bits of cloth on which various techniques, borders, and motifs were practiced, later serving as reference pieces for the stitcher. Although early samplers—a word derived from the Latin *exemplum*, meaning “an example to be followed”—were literally scraps of fabric on which stitching techniques were refined, over time they developed into more sophisticated pieces that were an art form all their own, featuring a variety of designs, stitches, shades, and materials. In fact, the oldest dated sampler known to survive, stitched by one Jane Bostocke in 1598, is so prized it is housed in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, younger needle wielders completed samplers as part of their school curriculum in order to prepare for impending wifehood or domestic servitude, sticking to simple sampler themes such as alphabets, numerals, and such. The ladies of the day, however, stitched samplers that were more complex, featuring Biblical verses, pictures, even maps. As their designs became more elaborate, sampler stitchers used fewer and fewer *types* of stitches to complete them—eventually settling on counted cross stitch as the technique of

choice. (You'll learn more about counted cross stitch in chapter 4, "Stitch Hitter: Your Guide to Cross-Stitch, Embroidery, and Needlepoint Stitches.")

Gros Point Blank

For those with sensitive *derrieres*, cushions were the primary source of comfort until the 17th century, when furniture upholstery was invented. Furniture makers quickly realized, however, that most fabric woven in the traditional manner was too delicate for such use. To rectify this, a new type of canvas was developed that was coarse and evenly woven, with holes large enough to accommodate yarn of varying thicknesses—more mesh than fabric. When stitched using techniques originally developed in the 16th century to copy Turkish rugs—primarily tent stitches—this new type of fabric proved as tough and durable as Jackie Chan; thus, needlepoint as we know it was born.

True to its roots, many early needlepoint pieces served as furniture upholstery, often with designs featuring flowers and faces (the latter presumably representing the origin of the phrase "Hey baby! Come sit on my face!" commonly shouted by modern-day construction workers). To render the details of these designs, stitchers used a technique called *petit point* (French for "little stitch"), essentially a tent stitch that diagonally crossed a single thread intersection on the canvas. Larger, less-detailed designs required less precision, hence the common use of the *gros point* (French for "big stitch") technique. This method, which yielded larger, coarser stitches, involved applying tent stitches that diagonally crossed *two* thread intersections. (You'll learn more about tent stitches and other needlepoint techniques in chapter 4.)

Needlepoint canvas also proved ideal for the *bargello* stitching style, also called the Florentine stitch, the Hungarian point stitch, or the flame stitch. Although the details of bargello's roots are as murky as Heather Mills McCartney's past, we do know that it achieved prominence during the 14th century in Hungary and surfaced in Italy sometime thereafter. In any case, unlike gros point and petit point needlepoint pieces, which tend to be pictorial in nature, bargello needlepoint is typically geometric, featuring repeated patterns of long, parallel stitches that step up and down the canvas. Depending on the "steepness" of the steps, the result ranges from a sharp zigzag pattern to a fluid, rolling design that resembles waves or flames (hence the name "flame stitch"). Bright colors are often used, with graduated shades creating a sense of depth.

You Say You Want a Revolution . . .

If you watch *Project Runway*, you probably already know that the fashion cycle involves six distinct phases: innovation, rise, acceleration, general acceptance, decline, and obsolescence. During, say, the Upper Paleolithic, fashion cycles lasted eons. Literally. I mean, who has time to think about hemlines when the prospect of survival is iffy at best? As human-ish types matured from hunting and gathering to farming and settling, however, they could turn their

attention from such mundane matters as outwitting carnivores in order to survive to a far more critical issue: personal style.

Interest in fashion only grew as civilizations intertwined through trade, contracting the fashion cycle from millennia to centuries to mere decades. Take Elizabethan England, where the nobility wore embroidery the way Lance Armstrong wears corporate logos: *everywhere*. Hats, jackets, hoods, gloves, scarves, bonnets, hankies, even undies—if an item was wearable, it was probably jazzed up with embroidery. By the middle of the 17th century, however, European fashion had begun to shift to a more ascetic aesthetic. Although embroidery remained popular, the demand for such ostentatious decoration declined.

Even as the fashion cycle shrank, however, it remained hostage to the inherently slow schedule of hand-craftsmen. There was the spinner, who manually manufactured the necessary thread to weave, sew, and embroider textiles; the weaver, who wove said thread into cloth; the tailor or seamstress, who sewed the cloth into an actual garment; and finally, only after all that was complete, an embroiderer, who carefully stitched designs on the garment to embellish it. Hell, by the time the UPS guy delivered the piece to its intended owner, it was practically *passé*!

The Industrial Revolution, which occurred between 1750 and 1830 (the precise dates differ by region), put the fashion cycle in hyper drive. Where the creation of embroidered goodies formerly required the patience and skill of several craftsmen, machines could now do the job in nothing flat. Case in point: the spinning jenny and, later, the spinning mule. Tended by only one factory laborer, a single spinning mule could fabricate thread that was stronger, truer in color, and had fewer flaws than its hand-spun equivalent—200 times faster than a hand spinner.

Of course, producing thread 200 times faster than before was as pointless as giving Lindsay Lohan a library card if weavers, tailors, and embroiderers couldn't keep up. Hence the invention of the *power loom*, a mechanized apparatus that wove textiles at warp speed (no pun intended); the sewing machine, which boosted output by a factor of 10; and the embroidery machine, which, while not as skilled as a human embroiderer, was close enough to fool the unschooled eye. Fueling all these changes was the windfall of natural resources now available thanks to the conquest and colonization of territory in the Americas and beyond. What was the result of this boost in raw materials, output, and efficiency? More embroidered goodies at lower prices—meaning that many people whose wardrobes formerly consisted of the bare essentials could now afford multiple pieces that looked quite like those belonging to their betters.

Here's Lud in Your Eye

Not surprisingly, many artisans who had previously enjoyed a decent living rebelled against such advances, occasionally turning the machines that replaced them into kindling. These protests, however, proved as futile as Kenny Rogers' attempts to stay young; the new factory-based modes of production were simply too profitable. (These protestors would be dubbed *Luddites* after one Ned Lud, who, in 1779, incited English workmen to destroy labor-saving machinery. Today, "Luddite" refers to any opponent of technological progress—think Ted Kaczynski.)

The Agony of Effete

Of course, not everyone embraced the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Just as rich people today will happily spend \$197 on a hand-painted T-shirt in SoHo but wouldn't be caught dead wearing a \$4.92 Wal-Mart knock-off, the cultural elite of the day viewed mass-produced items with some degree of disdain. It wasn't just that the uniformity of these objects screamed soullessness (which, of course, they did). Mainly, the simple fact that working types could *afford* goodies like mass-produced embroidered garments and housewares made said garments and housewares anathema to the upper crust. This attitude gave rise to several anti-bling movements, most notably the Aesthetes, who eschewed ostentation on all fronts, and the Arts and Crafts movement, which celebrated hand crafts—including needlecrafts.

Indeed, the Victorian period saw a dramatic increase in the number of needlecrafts hobbyists—fueled, ironically enough, by the Industrial Revolution. For starters, the materials required to engage in such activities were now mass produced, making them considerably cheaper than before. Also, the ever-widening middle class that emerged as a result of the Industrial Revolution had the disposable income to purchase said needlecrafts materials. Plus, members of the middle class now had the leisure time to pursue such hobbies. In fact, stitching during this era conveyed what a BMW 5-Series did in the 1980s: upward mobility.

The most popular form of needlework for these proto-yuppies was *Berlin work*, a technique similar to needlepoint that involved applying tent and/or cross stitches to a painted meshy canvas using worsted wool. Indeed, Berlin work was as popular as Pokémon; it practically abolished all other types of embroidery. But as anyone who has spent a fortune on a pair of shoes one season only to despise them the next knows, the heart is fickle. By the 1880s, Berlin work had been almost completely replaced by cross stitch. As for traditional embroidery, it was for dorks only—although bead embroidery (*i.e.*, stitching beads onto fabric) was deemed acceptable.


Death and Threadsurrection

The early 20th century saw a sharp decline in the practice of needlecrafts—a trend that began in 1914 when some Serbian nut job triggered World War I by offing Franz Ferdinand (the Archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, not the band) and his wife as they paraded through Sarajevo. Ensuing years saw some nine million souls extinguished by the war; the onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917; and a global influenza epidemic in 1918. Frankly, no one was in the mood for jazzing up their clothes and household items with chipper embroidery. And even if they had been, the bulk of the necessary supplies and materials were swallowed up by the war effort—although it is said that needlecrafts *were* a popular hobby among British soldiers in convalescent homes.

The 1920s brought a respite from the grim realities of war—at least for the victors. Scrimping and saving was *so* last decade. Embroidery re-emerged, often to decorate women's stockings—now clearly visible thanks to scandalously high hemlines. Its resurgence was short-lived, however; the

Embroidery Overlord

In the spirit of the Bayeux Tapestry, one Lord Dulverton of Batsford, England, commissioned an embroidered recounting of Operation Overlord, a.k.a. the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944, a.k.a. D-Day. The Overlord embroidery, on permanent display at the D-Day Museum in Portsmouth, England, spans 83 meters—10 more than the Bayeux Tapestry stitched more than a millennium prior. (In yo' FACE, Anglo-Saxons!) Beginning in 1973, 20 embroiderers worked for 5 years to complete the piece, which consists of 34 panels that depict not only the invasion and subsequent liberation of Paris, but the back story beginning with the dark days of 1940.



stock market crash of 1929, after which the economies of the United States and Europe collapsed, put the kibosh on all the fun. Demand for purty needlecraft pieces fell, replaced in people's hearts by demand for the ever-rare calorie. The advent of yet another world war, largely the result of Adolph Hitler's successful marketing of a new and improved brand of evil, drove the urge to adorn yet further underground. Moreover, many women who might formerly have enjoyed needlecrafts left home to work in factories.

Even after the Second World War, needlecrafting was, for all practical purposes, a dead art. But like some lucky dead things—that Jason guy from *Friday the 13th* comes to mind—needlework would be resurrected. Specifically, the “Up with Earth” types who emerged during the 1960s rediscovered many decorative art forms—needlework included. These days, tons of people—many of whom, ironically, suck at other domestic endeavors such as cooking and cleaning—have tapped into their genetically programmed interest in string by exploring the joys of embroidery, cross stitch, and needlepoint. On behalf of all of us, welcome to the cave!

Next!

In the next chapter, you'll find out the most critical part of any undertaking: what you get to buy.