

- » Discovering embroidery and its history
- » Incorporating embroidery into your life

Chapter **1**

Why Make Embroidery?

With so many of us extraordinarily busy in our everyday lives, pursuing hobbies and crafts can feel a bit frivolous. So, what is the benefit and purpose of creating embroidery? To answer this question, in this chapter I share some interesting embroidery history and discuss how it influences the work stitchers make today, and I talk a bit about embroidery as an art form. I think you'll find that embroidery is a wonderful outlet, well worth the time to learn.

Some Interesting Embroidery History

Embroidery has been around for thousands of years. There are plenty of artifacts, and the topic is well documented in history. One thing is for sure: It was a common craft performed by many groups from all around the world.



REMEMBER

Just as with any craft or art form, embroidery can teach us a lot about culture, events, and how people lived. It's a fascinating world to explore, and if you think about it, it's rather cool to be continuing a practice that has been around for so long.

The oldest embroidered artifacts still in existence date to around 1300 BC. But embroidery has been around for much longer than that: There were embellishments in the fossilized remains of clothing from the Cro-Magnon era!

Many embroidery artifacts are still preserved in museums today. I share a few interesting ones here, but these are just a few of many; I encourage you to learn more about them if you're interested in historical relics!

- » **Embroidered textiles of the Han and Tang Dynasties:** The Han and Tang Dynasties existed between 206 BC and AD 907. Embroidered textiles were found along the Silk Road, including some from grave sites. Many of the textiles were made of wool or silk, embellished with vines, floral motifs, and animals. Some of these artifacts are on display at the Xinjiang Regional Museum in Urumqi, China. Take a look at some of the textiles at <https://blog.fabrics-store.com/2021/11/14/the-silk-touch-embroidery-in-china/>.
- » **Embroidered Panel from the Tomb of Tutankhamun:** Embroidery was also found on panels in the tomb of Tutankhamun, an ancient Egyptian pharaoh whose tomb, which dates to 1323 BC, was found in 1922. The Textile Research Centre of Leiden notes that the garments found in the tomb included panels featuring intricate appliques, stitches, and beading. See one of the tunics at www.a3tex.com/progetti/the-veil-behind-the-mask-scientific-insights-into-tutankhamuns-textile-collection/.
- » **Bayeux Tapestry:** According to the Bayeux Museum, the Bayeux Tapestry is a massive 70-meter-long tapestry. Created in the 11th century, this tapestry tells the story of the Norman conquest of England. It was originally hung in a cathedral in Bayeux and features soldiers, battle scenes, ship voyages, horses, and more. Check it out at www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/pcrd.1b03973/.
- » **Butler-Bowdon Cope:** Housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, this religious vestment dates to the 14th century. Interestingly, it is made of velvet, silk, and beads, featuring scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary, and includes depictions of saints and angels. Check it out at <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-butler-bowdon-cope>.

Embroidery Today: A Modern Twist on Traditional Techniques

Despite the invention of computerized embroidery, people are still creating and learning the art of hand embroidery. Here's a look into how things have changed and how other aspects of the process, such as traditional techniques and embroidery stitches, have truly stood the test of time!

The evolution of tools and techniques

While the materials and the way in which tools are produced may be slightly different, you may be surprised to hear that much of what is used to create embroidery is still the same. (See Part 2 for details on embroidery supplies.)

Needles

According to the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, way back in the Paleolithic era, needles were made of ivory, antlers, and bone, and they were filed, shaped, and sharpened with stones. I can imagine this process was long and arduous!

During the Bronze Age (around 3300 BC to 1200 BC) and Iron Age (around 1200 BC to 600 BC), metals such as copper, iron, and bronze began to be more commonly used to make needles.

These days, needles are made with metals such as stainless steel, nickel, or titanium.

Frames

The way in which the fabric is put under tension has evolved over the years. During the 1400s (and maybe even earlier), slate frames emerged. Slate frames use wooden pegs and a rectangular wooden frame to help stretch the fabric and provide adequate tension.



TIP

While not as popular today, frames are a great option if you want incredible tension on your work. They're also useful for larger embroidery projects or ones you plan to frame.

Hoops

The first embroidery hoop, called a tambour embroidery hoop, emerged during the 16th century and was made of wood and bone. During the 19th century, adjustable embroidery hoops (with screw and/or spring tension) became available.

Spring and screw tension hoops are still very popular today. Many of these hoops are made of bamboo or wood, while others are made of plastic.

Fabric

Linen, a fabric made from flax fibers, has been around for thousands of years. In fact, it's one of the oldest textiles, yet it's still one of the most popular materials for embroidery today.

The process for making linen was much more involved and hands-on before industrial machines and automation entered the scene. The first step of making linen is a process called retting, in which the flax is chopped down and laid out in fields, exposing the plants to the elements for several weeks. Retting helps to break down the fibers, making it easier to process later.

The plants are turned and laid out to dry. Once fully dry, the retted flax is taken off in bales and put through the next steps in the manufacturing process: scutching (removing the stalk from the fibers by scraping and beating) and hackling (removing short fibers by running them through combs).

These finer extracted fibers are spun into flax yarn. The yarn is then woven into linen fabric on a loom.

Historical influences still seen today

Art and craft reflect our experience as humans, so just as historical events occur and technology develops and changes, it can directly influence what people produce. Maybe it's the subject matter, the style, or even the message.

Even with these new developments, it's common to be inspired and influenced by many historical books and works of art. If you look closely, you'll notice that these historical influences are still alive and well within the art people produce.

These days, you may see someone use wool yarn or include ornate nature motifs reminiscent of crewel embroidery from the medieval period. Another common style is the vivid, realistic blending of threads that uses silk shading, a technique originating in China thousands of years ago.

While many forms of embroidery may not be as popular, such as drawn thread, whitework, and ribbon embroidery, you can still find people working in these techniques if you look hard enough. See Chapter 2 for more information on different types of embroidery.

Embroidery as an Art Form: An Art, a Craft, or Both?

Historically, embroidery has served a variety of purposes. Some were more functional, such as embellished linens, pillowcases, and clothing. At the same time, others were visual displays of history, or even a way to enhance worship (as seen

in the ornate details of liturgical vestments). Fiber art can use the same principles of art and design as traditional art media: fabric as the canvas and thread as the paint.



REMEMBER

There is certainly nothing wrong with considering embroidery an art, a craft, or a mixture of both. Whatever your reason or intention for making, embroidery is a wonderful outlet to express yourself creatively. Part 3 gives you guidance on stitches and techniques, while Part 4 provides some beginner projects. When you're ready to build on your skills, head to Parts 5 and 6 for information on advanced techniques.

I never considered myself an artist growing up. Admittedly, it interested me, but it didn't feel natural, so I was scared to pursue it. I didn't start making art until I was in college. Something clicked when I began learning to embroider. I wasn't very good at it at first, but that didn't seem to be the point. I really enjoyed the process; it significantly reduced my stress, and it felt like I could express myself in a way I never had before.

These days, I consider myself a creative and an artist. The thing about any skill is that it may take some time, but it is learnable. While there may be outliers, you don't have to be a "natural-born artist" to be an artist, let alone make things!



REMEMBER

I encourage everyone to find a creative hobby or medium that they enjoy. We as humans are meant to be creative; you just have to find the right outlet. So let this be your sign to learn something new and to set aside any anxiety you're feeling about venturing into learning embroidery. You don't have to be automatically good at it. All you need to do is enjoy learning, stay curious, and enjoy the process. Art is a lifelong learning journey!

