

BLACKWORK SAMPLER

Blackwork embroidery had been used to decorate garments and household linen from the early Renaissance but was made fashionable by Catherine of Aragon. She is said to have had a trousseau full of garments decorated in 'Spanish work'. It remained popular throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods.

During this time it was used in two ways. Firstly, as narrow bands of pattern worked in a double running stitch to form a reversible design. This was used to decorate shirts and similar garments along seams and on the frills around the neck and cuffs where both sides of the embroidery were visible. This type of Blackwork can be seen in many of the Tudor portraits painted by Hans Holbein, and double running stitch is now also known as Holbein Stitch.

Larger 'foliage' patterns were often used to cover entire garments and household linens. Hence portraits of ladies with sleeves and underskirts covered in scrolling Blackwork patterns. These designs were not reversible and were less geometric than the border patterns. Fruit, flowers, animals and mythical beasts were popular, often supported by geometric designs.

Much Blackwork was worked in black thread on natural cream linen or silk, often decorated with touches of silver or gold. Sometimes it was worked in colour. Pearls and other precious gems can also be seen worked into the embroidery in some court portraits.

The sampler is composed of designs taken from a number of 16th and 17th century sources.

BAND 1

A decorative band intended to be reversible, albeit with different designs on each side. This stitch, now known as long-armed cross-stitch, is one of several contenders for 'Spanish stitch' mentioned in contemporary needlework manuals. This can be seen in a number of portraits.

BAND 2

Acorns and oak-leaves were very popular in both Tudor and Stuart patterns, probably initially symbolic of 'England', they later came to allude to Charles I. This and the following two bands are worked in Holbein stitch to create identical reversible patterns.

BAND 3

Border design for cuffs/ruffs, etc. Worked in Holbein Stitch.

BAND 4

Twisted band worked in Holbein Stitch. A favourite design often used to separate one area of Blackwork from another in a different style. It was quite a puzzle to work this to obtain the reversible effect!

BAND 5

A foliage band based closely on a 17th century example showing several favourite motifs. The central pomegranate was one of Queen Catherine's symbols and often occurs in Tudor art. The pea-pod is an even older royal symbol representing the Plantagenet dynasty (Planta Genista-Broom). This design also includes a strawberry, another favourite Tudor motif.

BAND 6

This design is taken from a 17th century coif, where it was worked in a deep band. The 'star' shape is another popular motif. In other examples it can also be seen rotated with the 'points' upwards. The shapes can be linked in many different ways. Two are shown here (cross stitch and squares). Whilst I took the challenge of working it 'reversibly', it is most likely this would not have been the case on the coif.

BAND 7

This beautiful foliage pattern of grapes and vine leaves is inspired by the work of Jane Bostock in the oldest known, dated sampler (1598) and dedicated to her daughter, Alice Lee, 'borne the 23 of November, being Tuesday in the afternoone 1596'

Jane included cross-stitches to highlight the grapes where I have used seed 'pearls'.

The Sampler and accompanying text has been supplied by Linda Howell on behalf of Guernsey Museums & Galleries Education Service.

Linda Howell as 'Lady Margaret' demonstrates Blackwork embroidery in Castle Cornet during the summer season as part of the 'Living History' programme. Please telephone 01481 721657 or 01481 726518 for dates and times of presentations.



Left: Sampler of Blackwork Embroidery showing the 'bands' referred to above.

Below: Linda Howell as 'Lady Margaret' in Castle Cornet, Guernsey.

