



# Broad Introduction to Blackwork

Class notes by THL Ceara Shionnach of House Burbage  
Written May 2014



## Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Resources for period examples of blackwork.....	1
3. Resources for some examples of stitches used in blackwork.....	1
4. Some resources for extant blackwork pattern ideas .....	1
4.1 Examples of period model books.....	2
4.2 Examples of period portraits.....	2
4.2 Examples of period needlework samplers.....	2
5. References.....	2

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide references that give an overview of the technique, some embroidery stitches and how they're done, references for extant blackwork from various periods and provide examples of period patterns and pattern inspiration. It aims to assist beginners in identifying resources they could use to complete their own blackwork project, including the design and execution stages as well as placing blackwork in a period context.

Blackwork is known by many names, including Spanish work, Crimson work (specifically referencing the use of red thread) and monochrome embroidery. It was a popular and common style of embroidery during the 16th century throughout Europe. Blackwork embroidery may have evolved from the "double-running stitch...[found] in the Islamic countries south of the Mediterranean in the 14th and 15th centuries" (Laning, 2008). Laning also suggests that this style may have become popular in Western Europe following the marriage of Catherine of Aragon to King Henry VIII in 1509 as prior to that time there appears to be a lack of solid evidence of the use of blackwork in Western Europe.

## 2. Resources for period examples of blackwork

Blackwork was used in to decorate many personal items for both males and females, such as handkerchiefs, coifs, other headwear, jackets, stomachers, stockings, shirts/chemises, as well as appearing on embroidery samplers.

There are several examples of extant pieces incorporating blackwork readily available in the online collections of various museums and blogs, including:

- Historical Needlework Resources has an overview of blackwork (particularly in the 16th century context), including materials, stitches and links to various extant examples: [http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique\\_blackwork.html](http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique_blackwork.html)
- Extant examples of 12th-15th century Middle Eastern blackwork and some embroidery charts of these pieces are available on Miriam's Middle Eastern Research Blog by THL Miriam bat Shimeon: <http://awalimofstormhold.wordpress.com/tag/embroidery/>
- Victoria and Albert Museum – search the collections –search for blackwork (and I recommend setting the latest year to 1600): <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>
- Metropolitan Museum of Art – search the collections - blackwork: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections>

## 3. Resources for some examples of stitches used in blackwork

In period, blackwork could include one or more different stitch types. Perhaps the most common examples consist of Holbein (aka double running) stitch and stem stitch (Historical Needlework Resources, 2013). Reversible patterns (that are the same on the back as on the front) and geometric patterns are often done in Holbein stitch. Some resources for the most commonly used stitches and how they're executed include:

- **Holbein stitch:** Wikipedia article on Holbein Stitch (last accessed May 2014) - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holbein\\_stitch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holbein_stitch)
- **Stem stitch:** Historical Needlework Resources article on Stitches (last accessed May 2014) - [http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique\\_stitches.html#stem](http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique_stitches.html#stem)
- **Cross stitch** (of which there are many variants): Wikipedia article on Cross Stitches (last accessed May 2014) - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross\\_stitches](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross_stitches)

The colour of the embroidery used was typically black silk, however, red, blue and other coloured silks were also used (Laning, 2008; Root, 2004). Blackwork was also used in conjunction with other techniques such as plaited braid stitch in a metal thread (Historical Needlework Resources, 2013). Instructions for plaited braid stitch (and many others) can be found in *Elizabethan Stitches – a Guide to Historic English Needlework* by Jacqui Carey (2009): <http://www.careycompany.com/elizabethan-stitches.html>

## 4. Some resources for extant blackwork pattern ideas

To begin a blackwork project, you first need to decide on the time and place, and then devise a pattern. Blackwork designs were published in various pattern books (also known as model books or modelbuchs) in period. The style of the pattern could vary anywhere from rigidly geometric to freeform and common motifs commonly included repetitive geometrics, flora and/or fauna. Designs can also be copied from contemporary portraits or extant embroidery pieces. Blackwork patterns can also be adapted from elements in correlating period illuminated manuscripts, given that model books were often used for embroidery and illumination (as well as other crafts - Historical Needlework Resources 2, last accessed May 2014) – resulting in shared motifs and patterns across the different art forms.

I have completed and documented three 16th century blackwork projects that are available on my blog. They provide insight into how I designed my patterns and the resources I used to do so in an English and a German perspective:

English collar for Edmund of Shotley  
<http://cearashionnach.wordpress.com/2010-2/blackwork-collar-for-edmund-i/>

German collar and cuffs for Eva von Danzig  
<http://cearashionnach.wordpress.com/2013-2/german-blackwork-collar-and-cuffs-for-eva-i/>

English collar and cuffs for Gabriel de Beaumont  
<http://cearashionnach.wordpress.com/2014-2/english-blackwork-collar-and-cuffs-for-gabriel/>

#### 4.1 Examples of Period Model Books

- *Il Burato by Paganino* – 16th century Italian model book: <http://www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/books.html>
- *Modelbuch aller art Nehewercks und Stickers* by Egenolff – 16th century German model book: <http://www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/books.html>
- Kingdom of Atlantia's *Online Facsimiles of Period Pattern-Books for Embroidery and Lacemaking*: <http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/wsnlinks/index.php?action=displaycat&catid=1103>
- *Period Embroidery Pattern Books and Modelbuchs: References and Links* published by Genoveva von Lubeck (last accessed May 2014) has a list of links to 16th century model books: <http://honorbeforevictory.com/period-embroidery-pattern-books-and-modelbuchs-references-and-links/>
- *A Bibliography of Pattern Books in the 16th Century* by Mathilde Eschenbach (2007). This site lists numerous pattern books for embroidery, lace, and other textiles: <http://home.comcast.net/~mathilde/embroidery/bibpatbk.htm>
- The West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild (2012) – *Annotated Booklist: Historic Model Books and Pattern Books*: <http://wkneedle.bayrose.org/booklist/Book-Model.html>

#### 4.2 Examples of Period Portraits

Holbein stitch is thus named because the Italian artist Hans Holbein the Younger painted many portraits including examples of detailed blackwork in clothing and accessories in the 16th century. There are also many other artists who included detailed blackwork in their paintings. Some sources include:

- Scroll down to *Images of 16th and 17th portraits* published by Rissa Pearce Root (2004-2009) on A Blackwork Embroidery Primer website for some links to portraits showing blackwork: <http://www.prettyimpressivestuff.com/blackwork.htm>
- *The Art of English Blackwork* by Jane Zimmerman 2008: [http://www.janezimmerman.com/Site/Needlework\\_History/Blackwork.pdf](http://www.janezimmerman.com/Site/Needlework_History/Blackwork.pdf)
- You could also search the *Web Gallery of Art* through period portraits matching the time/place you're interested in: <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>

#### 4.3 Examples of Period Needlework Samplers

Embroidery samplers were used for many purposes throughout history. They were known to be used as a tool (for recording stitches and patterns), decorative, and as a learning exercise (VAM, accessed January 2014). The samplers documented the ability of an embroiderer and documented not just the patterns they used, but the types of threads, stitch variables (e.g. types and lengths of stitches), the textures brought about by different techniques and they give the observer an insight into the 3 dimensional nature of embroidery.

The Victoria and Albert Museum online collections (VAM, last accessed May 2014) has a collection of SCA period samplers ranging from the 14th through 16th centuries, originating from countries including Egypt, Germany, Italy and England. Some specific sources include:

- *Linen sampler embroidered with silk and metal*, by Jane Bostock, England, 1598. Museum no. T.190-1960 (VAM, last accessed May 2014): <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O46183/sampler-jane-bostocke/>
- *Sampler by unknown maker*, Egypt, 14th-16th century. Museum no. T.326-1921 (VAM, accessed January 2014): <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69669/sampler-unknown/>

#### 5. References

Historical Needlework Resources (accessed June 2013). *Blackwork*. [http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique\\_blackwork.html](http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique_blackwork.html)

Historical Needlework Resources 2 (accessed June 2013) – *Patterns and Modelbuchs*. This page includes a description of period pattern books, which can be used to design blackwork (and other) embroidery. [http://medieval.webcon.net.au/period\\_16th\\_c\\_modelbuchs.html](http://medieval.webcon.net.au/period_16th_c_modelbuchs.html)

Laning, Chris (last updated 2008). *The roots of blackwork embroidery*. The West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild.

[http://wkneedle.bayrose.org/Articles/blackwork\\_roots.html](http://wkneedle.bayrose.org/Articles/blackwork_roots.html)

Mathilde Eschenbach – *A Bibliography of Pattern Books in the 16th Century*. This site lists numerous pattern books for embroidery, lace, and other textiles.

<http://home.comcast.net/~mathilde/embroidery/bibpatbk.htm>

Root, Rissa Peace (2004). *A Blackwork Embroidery Primer*. Accessed 2013.

<http://www.prettyimpressivestuff.com/blackwork.htm>

The German Renaissance of Genova – *German Blackwork Modelbooks: Patterns, Designs, and Motifs from the 16th Century*.

This page provides links to German 16th blackwork patterns.

<http://germanrenaissance.net/german-blackwork-modelbooks-patterns-designs-and-motifs-from-the-16th-century/>

The Met (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 2013). *Search the collections*.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections>

The West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild – *Annotated Booklist: Historic Model Books and Pattern Books*.

<http://wkneedle.bayrose.org/booklist/Book-Model.html>

VAM (Victoria and Albert Museum, last accessed May 2014). *Search the collections*.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>

- Linen shirt embroidered in blue silk with similar motifs on the collar and cuffs. c1540, England, museum number T.112-1972.
- Linen coif embroidered in blackwork using red silk. 1600-25, England, museum number T.32-1936.



These (and other) class notes are available for download from Ceara's blog:

<http://cearashionach.wordpress.com/>

