

Reversible 'Spanish Stitch' Embroidery based on Civil War Period Samplers

One-Day Workshop

'There is another aspect which is not always realized in this work done by the counted thread, and that is its value in regard to health. The work needs sufficient concentration to keep the mind occupied without undue strain ... very often the obvious weariness following a long day in school or office will disappear. In these days of rush and hurry, I believe half an hour each day spent in embroidery of this type would act as a real tonic ...'

Etta Campbell, Winchester School of Art, 1931

Preface to *English Embroidery: Double Running or Back Stitch* by Louisa Pesel, 1931

'it ... makes a wrong side ... quite as tidy as the right. Though the condition of the reverse side does not matter, say, for a cushion, it is very important for table mats, as it sometimes happens that they are placed wrong side up. If the back is really tidy, this mistake is of no matter—only a compliment to the worker.'

Louisa Pesel, *ibid.* p 25

This workshop brings to life the techniques and skills used in the kinds of continuous-line embroidery designs found on samplers in the 1640s.

Stitching these designs is like travelling a labyrinth – the first part of the journey takes you through from one end of the pattern to the other, mapping out the pathway as you go; the return part reveals the path you've mapped out, and completes it, echoing the motto popularised by Francis I of France and Mary Queen of Scots: 'en ma fin git mon commencement' (in my end is my beginning).

The workshop starts simply and builds up complexity gradually in a graded step-by-step way, with each stage of the process made easy with clear explanations and approaches. The work is both intriguing and fun to do.

The design covers techniques of mapping pathways, techniques for attaching double-sided embellishments, starting and finishing threads invisibly, and techniques for creating the illusion of seamless continuous lines – the markers of top-quality professional work in this technique.

The workshop will involve you working a small sampler project from where you can go on to stitch a showpiece that will exemplify the stage of mastery you have attained by attending this workshop.

The workshop will also cover the history of this technique. Originally worked in one colour, its history can be traced through Coptic embroideries, from where it is picked up in Islamic samplers, and popularised in Moorish Spain. The earliest mention of the monochrome technique worked specifically in black on white in relation to English embroidery is found in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* ('The Miller's Tale', lines 3238-40). Perhaps through Katherine of Aragon's influence, it became extremely popular in English culture from around the first quarter of the 16th Century onwards. Stitchers increasingly worked such design in colour on samplers during the Civil War years and there was a revival of interest in its possibilities in the early and late twentieth centuries, with embroiderers like Louisa Pesel in the 1930s, Jack Robinson in the 1980s, and Leon Conrad today (who did his apprenticeship with Jack Robinson) working and innovating in this long-standing tradition.

The workshop covers

- Design for reversible blackwork embroidery – historic precedents, modern innovations
- Execution of pattern – pathways and approaches
- Thread and fabric choices
- Appropriate tools (needles, threads, cutting implements)
- Starting and finishing threads
- Techniques of applying two-sided embellishments
- An overview of techniques for setting up and finishing projects

Stitches: Running stitch, double running stitch, whipped running stitch, reversible cross stitch. Other reversible stitches and techniques may be covered if time allows.

Output: Pattern darning sampler, double running sampler with reversible cross stitch and two-sided embellishment.

Experience Level: Some experience of needlework is preferable to get the most out of this workshop, but Leon is flexible enough to support participants with different levels of experience.

Materials provided for you to take away: Fabric, black silk thread, embellishments, workshop handout.

Please bring: A sewing kit including needles and sharp scissors to cut thread; any black or gold thread you may already have; any small gold or black embellishments you may already have; any aids you require such as needle threaders, magnifiers, or lamps.

Materials available to use during the workshop: A selection of threads, embellishments, needles, and scissors for use on the workshop, magnifier.