

Off the Surface 20 May – 9 July 2017

This exhibition is a collaboration with The Royal School of Needlework (RSN), the only institution in Europe to offer a degree level course in hand embroidery. The school's second-year degree students have used the RSN's rich archive of over 2,500 historical pieces from diverse cultures across the world to inform their pieces on show in this exhibition.

Stitching is a way of joining material. It is known to have existed before painting and is likely to have evolved from lacing bark or skins together with strips of hide. It's a small step to then imagine the impulse to embellish the joined hides, either to register identification for the purpose of ownership or simply from our predisposition to adorn our daily lives.

As humans evolved so stitching developed; needles, once made from thorn or bone, were subsequently made from ivory, bronze, silver and gold and eventually steel.



Bone sewing needles, 30,000BC

Threads could be twisted from animal fur and fibrous vegetation. The earliest known embroidered textiles have threads made from twisted flax, wool and silk. Wool from goats, sheep or llamas indicates a society of herders whereas flax and silk show a more sophisticated culture as making flax and silk thread requires a more complex process. Cotton first appears in history around 3000 BC. Generally speaking historians agree that, like so many things, needlepoint most likely originated in China.

By the time Homer wrote his *Odyssey*, near the end of the 8th century BC, embroidery was widespread and Homer refers to Ulysses' mantle, embroidered with a hunting scene, and Helen of Troy embroidering a picture showing a Trojan War scene.



The Butler-Bowden ¹Cope
1330-50, V&A Museum

As Christianity expanded throughout Europe so did embroidery. Kings and clerics required fine garments and in medieval Britain, *Opus Anglicanum*,

a technique used by professional guilds and workshops, reached a level of splendour and skill so desirable that a Vatican inventory dated 1295 lists 113 pieces made in England, more than from any other country. Although convents were associated with embroidery, it appears that lay workshops, mainly in London, did the main part of production and at this time some, if not all, the embroiderers were male. The technical accomplishment and craftsmanship of this early work still stands out as exceptional.



The medieval Islamic world placed a similar importance on beautiful craftsmanship and rich decoration with distinct patterns from different cities and countries.

Richly embroidered clothing and religious garments signified wealth and status but despite this type of embroidery being the preserve of the few, almost all cultures have rich folk art traditions where distinct styles and techniques mark out clothing, flags, uniforms, horse trappings, tents, wall hangings and all sorts of domestic items.

18C Ottoman barber's apron

'Femininity' and embroidery became increasingly entwined in Britain through the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. In the 17th century girls of all social classes were taught to sew from an early age; by the 18th century embroidery was beginning to signify a leisured, privileged lifestyle, *not* working was a hallmark of femininity - docility, obedience

¹ A cope is a liturgical garment – a long mantle or cope fasted at the front with a band or clasp.

and a love of home. By the 19th century, in the leisured classes, femininity and embroidery went hand in hand until the end of the century. Freud, obviously not entirely responsible for rapid social change, commented that endless sewing 'rendered women particularly prone to hysteria'.

The industrial revolution, the development of machine embroidery and mass production inevitably caused the decline of small workshops and studios which used hand embroiderers. Coupled with the growing acceptance and provision of education for women, the necessary social environment for time-intensive, skilled hand embroidery changed radically.

Today embroidery may carry meaning of an entirely different kind and is as likely to be imbued with social or political meaning as it is with traditional notions of beauty or 'women's work'.

Toe Tag, named after the form of identification used in a morgue, (image right) is a hand embroidered, screen printed work by Julie Sirek showing the stitched names of 34 women from Minnesota who died in domestic violence incidents in 2015.

'Women's work' is increasingly used to raise women's voices.

Happily, embroidery is no longer a wifely or domestic duty; practitioners, male or female, do it because they recognise the rich possibilities that the materials, history, skills, fabric, thread, needle and stitch offer as both a fine art and craft medium.



Embroidered runner, Beryl Weaver, reproduced in *Spare Rib*, 1978

Our 14 Royal School of Needlework students, inspired by archival pieces designed and stitched long ago by un-named, unknown makers, have worked within guidelines given by Angie Wyman (Course Leader), Sophia Malik (Senior Lecturer) and Saffron Wynne (Devon Guild Exhibitions Manager). The brief given to the students for this project was to create work for public exhibition in Devon Guild of Craftsmen's Jubilee Gallery, connecting contemporary stitch practice with the RSN's archive collection. Students were asked to research, as if for a client, work either in fashion, interiors or textile art, with documentation of the process presented alongside the final creation.

Devon Guild of Craftsmen is pleased to be showing work by these students, alongside the exquisite historical pieces collected by the RSN from across the world. The combined exhibits show extraordinary levels of skill, both realised and still developing, and, emerging from the work of the students: evidence of future career paths. We hope the exhibition gives viewers a fresh insight into the complexity of textile art skills - aesthetic as well as practical - and furthers appreciation of this most ancient and versatile craft.

More information on Royal School of Needlework can be found at royal-needlework.org.uk

Further images and information on exhibitors' work and archives can be found on the Devon Guild website www.crafts.org.uk and will feature on our social media platforms:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/DevonGuildofCraftsmen/

Twitter <https://twitter.com/devonguild> / **@devonguild**

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/devonguildcrafts/>
@devonguildcrafts

Our venue offers ***Discover the arts*** level support for **ARTS AWARD** students and advisors, with activities for participants such as workshops, an artist's talk or demo, a chance to review/record exhibitions, use our information about craftmakers & skill-sharing.

We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk & tour. Chat with Anna or Phil 01626 832223

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