Cross-stitch Embroidery

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I

t is a matter of conjecture among craftsmen to-day as to what has brought about the revival of the cross-stitch embroidery, once so universally done, but which, for years, has been relegated to the attics and almost forgotten. Of late, people have awakened, either to the artistic value of their grandmothers' samplers, or merely to an appreciation of their quaintness and humor, and have brought them forth to decorate walls with their soft, faded beauty. Even this was done long before any one thought, or attempted, themselves to make use of the old stitch, a fact which seems strange when one sees how comparatively simple this stitch is and how very effective. Almost any one who can handle a needle should be able to do cross-stitch, but, of course, to execute really good things requires some artistic skill and an eye for good color schemes.

One thing to which might be attributed much of the newly awakened interest was an exhibition held in London, in the spring of 1900, by the Fine Arts Society, at which were shown samplers made during a period of two hundred and fifty years. These samplers were loaned from almost all quarters of the world, and the interest created by them was quite remarkable. Those who arranged the collection discovered that the samplers dated as far back as 1648, and that then occurred a sudden and perplexing stop. None can be found before that date, but they must have existed previously, for Mr. Marcus Huish of London, who has gotten out a very beautiful book upon the Exhibition, entitled "Samplers and Tapestry Embroidery," says that these earliest ones "are writ all over with the evidence that the sampler was then a fully developed growth, and these must have been the descendants of a long line of progenitors." We know that they existed long before the date given, from references which can be found in writings of earlier dates. Shakespeare and Milton both mention them, making it evident that samples were common early in the sixteenth century.

More exhibitions, such as the one held in London, would, without doubt, bring back the best and truest ideas in cross-stitch. Some of our museums have splendid specimens of the different varieties of cross-stitch, which are not generally on exhibition, but which should be shown, as well as the old Japanese and Persian
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embroideries, as examples of the work of our own people. Ruskin once wrote an article on the arrangement of a museum, setting aside six rooms "for the exposition of the six queenly and muse-taught arts: needle-work, writing, pottery, sculpture, architecture and painting." He also specified that the room for needle-work should contain beside rare, old works, "the counter-panes and samplers of our lovely ancestresses."

Cross-stitch—or as it is sometimes called, canvas stitch—was probably the earliest, and certainly the simplest stitch employed in embroidery. Originally it was used only on a canvas cloth with a square weave; but later, it was made possible to use any kind of plain material, by the aid of a coarse open-work canvas which is stiffly starched and basted over the desired material. The squares of this serve as a guide, and when the work is finished, the threads of it can all be pulled out. There are several kinds of canvas-stitch, but beside the ordinary cross-stitch, which is most used, some of the finest and most beautiful things are done in what seems a much more difficult stitch, but which is practically the same thing. This is done on very loosely-woven linen, and the back-ground is worked all over with cross-stitches, which being drawn very tightly, pull apart the threads of the linen, giving it an open-work effect. The design is left in the plain linen. There are many beautiful specimens of this kind of work to be seen in museums, some of which are so fine that it seems as if they must have been done with a magnifying glass.
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The shape of the old samplers was according to the way the linen was woven: generally long, narrow strips, with rough, irregular selvedges, and almost never hemmed across the ends. They were, at the very beginning, a sort of memorandum book for patterns, and were worked all over with portions of designs to serve as guides for future copying. There were no books of letters as we have now; so that all the different styles of letters which could be used in the marking of the household linen were worked upon the samplers; sometimes in the form of Biblical texts, or quaint verses, or simply the alphabet. This continued for years, until some ingenious spirits began to decorate their samplers; first with flowers, and later, animal forms were added. Flowers lent themselves quite readily to the domestic artist, as they were less rigid in their outline than animals, and could be made into really graceful and pretty designs. Birds and beasts, however, become necessarily rather crude in outline when put on to canvas; but this very crudity only adds to the quaintness of the design and gives it a piquancy that comes as a delightful change after ordinary embroidery. The angular lines of antique jewelry and furniture are in course of revival, and why should not embroideries follow in the same line? But in following, it is best to copy not only the style, but when possible, the designs themselves. It would be very difficult to improve upon these, and as there is an infinite variety, one can, with a little ingenuity, arrange them in very effective patterns. There are numberless pattern books to be had; generally, in this country, in little old-fashioned, out-of-the-way shops. But the best books come from Germany, and some of them can be seen in the Public Libraries, if it is impossible to buy them. Even though cross-stitch is not so well favored in Germany as it was, years ago, it is still sufficiently used to warrant the occasional publishing of new books.

The chief difficulty in much of the German work is lack of good taste in coloring: a fault which quite spoils the design. Walter Crane says: "If taste can be said to be more important in one art than another, it is cetainly all important in needlework. It enters in at every stage: in planning appropriate designs, in choice of scale, in choice of material and, above all, of color." The soft old colors used in our grandmothers' samplers are what we ought
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to have, but it is extremely difficult to get them. William Morris succeeded in dyeing the lovely old blues, pinks and greens, which seem faded in the samplers, although in reality, they are not; but it is next to impossible, in this country, to obtain any of his silks.

For cross-stitch the coarsely-woven materials are much more effective than smooth linens, and ordinary Russia crash in the various shades of gray, makes a fine background. The thread to be used depends largely upon the taste of the embroiderer. Silks can be used, but the modern mercerized cottons are found in pretty, artistic shades, and work up beautifully; while the German tambour cottons, in various shades of blue, appeal most strongly to the lovers of old blue-and-white embroideries.

Embroidery, to-day, does not occupy the same place that it did before the advent of machinery. Once it was the only means of decorating cloth for clothing or decoration, and a woman's time was of little value when household cares were few and simple. So the days were spent almost entirely at needle-work. Now, modern machinery weaves good fabrics with artistic designs, and, as a rule, those lacking the time or the ability to embroider, buy machine-

work, rather than pay the price asked for hand work. A woman should really be her own embroiderer, for it is the personality which gives the essential importance to a sampler, or any piece of needle-work. If that be impossible, then one should willingly pay the price, for a really good and perfect thing: the handiwork of some craftswoman, who for love of the beautiful, or through need, has fashioned a piece of artistic merit.