SUGGESTIONS FROM THE SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM. BY ISABELLE AIKEN SINCLAIR

The other day, at South Kensington, I was especially interested in the English embroideries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I was surprised to find how closely they are related to the recently revived New England needlework of colonial times. Yet I soon saw that my surprise was unreasonable, for our grandmothers must have brought their fashions of handiwork from England, and looked to their English cousins to send them the patterns of that day, as they successively came into use.

The embroideries which I examined were of the home kind in which our grandmothers delighted. There were bed-coverings, garments for infants, work-bags, collars—all the little things made at home and for intimate home use. This English work was, much of it, done upon very serviceable materials, such as cotton or linen, and some of it had plainly held its beauty through many washings. There was embroidery all in white; the design being made with little bunches of cotton-wool quilted in between two thicknesses of the stuff, the pattern thick with cotton and the background quite flat. So our grandmothers made bed-quilts.

Other smaller pieces in white had cords quilted in between two thicknesses of cotton cloth, usually in a scroll pattern, and the background further ornamented with dots of the eyelet-hole work now again popular. There were white pieces in which the design was made entirely in thick bunches of French knots standing out against a flat background, like a little piece which I possessed of my grandmother’s work, and like a modern collar which I have just seen in France.

Quite beautiful bed-coverings were made of white cotton with an all-over pattern—a flower-scroll—in wools of many colors. There was another large piece worked in wool in red shades only, the washing having softened the colors without destroying their beauty. I was especially interested in large covers wrought on white linen, with outlining in a black silk hardly thicker than ordinary sewing silk. Perhaps, in our time, we should hesitate at the amount of work required, but the effect was very interesting. It was like a wood-cut, like the title-pages of old German books: a tracery of vines, flowers and foliage, which was not lessened in beauty when the silk had turned brown, or even where parts of the design had been worn away.

I noticed a cushion cover embroidered on white with quaint little bunches of flowers in many colors, the background strewn with a set pattern in gold outlining, as I supposed at first, but upon looking more closely I saw that it was yellow sewing-silk in fine back-stitching which gave this effect of gold.

There was also the eyelet-hole work again in fashion, now known in France as broderie anglaise. It is seen among these English pieces, and also in beautiful Venetian cloths of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which squares of linen embroidered with simple rosette designs in cut-work, are set with squares of fine netting showing darned patterns.

In the Italian pieces combined with the beautiful needle-made lace, there is linen work in many simple and artistic patterns which the needlewoman of to-day might well
imitate. It can be seen at any of the art museums. The Musée de Cluny in Paris is, of course, rich in such things. In America, too, beautiful examples exist in the Boston Art Museum, or in the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

I was interested, also, in red and white patterns in cross-stitch and similar stitches, sometimes combined with drawn-work, seen in Spanish and Italian cloths of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, done in red cotton or silk, upon white linen, and evidently holding good through repeated washings. The patterns on modern Greek, Bulgarian and Roumanian embroidered pieces are not very different from some of this old Italian work. Even in the ancient Greek and Egyptian fragments, there are beautiful, and yet often very simple, designs giving useful suggestions for the artistic handiwork of to-day.

It is very pleasant to observe this enduring impulse to make beautiful the things destined for daily use, so evidently shared by women of all times and countries, from Helen, Penelope, and other skilful ladies of even earlier periods down to our own times, in spite of all pessimists may like to say of the ugliness of modern life.

I have spoken of only one direction in which a great art museum, like that at South Kensington, is useful and suggestive to us. In pottery and porcelain, in carved wood, in stained glass, in illustration, there are treasures which must be of the greatest use to workers in each department. Among such great variety of examples of artistic workmanship in all materials, and illustrative of all schools, one feels how independent the artist really is of his materials, how little it matters what means he employs, what manner he pleases to adopt, or even may be compelled to adopt, as long as he appreciates beauty and sets himself to express it sincerely, without grudging labor and without falling into the over-elaboration which is affectation.