

Keepers of Athena's Thimble

How to Evaluate Embroidery Categories

Applique

Definition: The application of one piece of fabric onto another one, either by inlay or onlay.

Materials: Cotton, linen, silk, velvet, wool

Stitches/techniques: couched cords, whip stitch, various embroidery stitches

What to look for: The fabrics should lay flat against one another, no puckering or pillowing. Generally, the lighter fabric is applied to the heavier fabric. Stitches used to apply the fabric should be even with good tension. Edges of applied work should not be frayed or raw; they should be smooth with no bunches. Ideally, the applied work should be attached with a basting or whip stitch, then covered with decorative stitches or couched cord. Using a glue substance such as fusible interfacing or Wonder Under to set applied pieces to larger fabric is fine—as long as the pieces are stitched down afterward.

Blackwork

Definition: A form of stitchery used mainly on 16th century dress, characterized by a regular, counted running stitch that may or may not be reversible.

Materials: even weave fabric, silk or cotton floss

Stitches: running stitch, speckled stitch

What to look for: Fabric should be even weave, linen or cotton. Stitches should be even and regular, with little thread wastage on the back. Tension should be even with no puckers. Colors such as blue, red, pink, and green are acceptable. Reversible blackwork should be identical on both sides. Watch for loose "tails" of the ends of threads that have been worked into the stitches.

Canvaswork

Definition: A heavy counted technique that uses canvas as a ground and/or which the entire ground is covered with stitches and the fabric holes are bigger than the thread the ground fabric is woven from.

Materials: needlepoint canvas, petit point canvas, even weave fabric, wool or cotton floss

Stitches/techniques: predominantly tent stitch, also brick stitch, cross stitch, running stitch; needlepoint, Florentine

What to look for: Stitches should be even and uniform throughout. Watch for the telltale diagonal stretching, a sign that the piece was not worked in a frame. Tension of individual stitches should be even, but not loose. Stitches should also be short, with no long floaters.

Couching and Laidwork

Definition: Solid or open fillings that consist of working threads couched down by other stitches.

Materials: cotton, linen, velvet, silk, wool; cotton, silk, wool, metal thread

Stitches: couching

What to look for: Couched cord/thread lays flat against the ground, with no wiggles or waves. Stitches are not necessarily evenly spaced; they should be spaced so that the couched cord/thread lays flat and makes smooth curves. If used in applique, couched cord/thread should cover the edge of the applied fabric. Even tension. In laidwork, the solid bottom stitches should be parallel within the design and completely cover the ground.

Counted Thread

Definition: Stitchery that is planned according to counting the weave of the ground rather than measuring or estimating distances.

Materials: cotton, linen, any even weave fabric; cotton, silk, wool floss

Stitches/techniques: pattern darning, cross, long arm cross, assisi work, running stitch

What to look for: Ground fabric should be even weave—discourage the use of tearaway grid fabric whenever possible. Stitches should be even, with good tension. Stitches should not be too long, look for floaters. Counted pattern should be uniform and follow the weave of the ground fabric. Aida fabric is acceptable, but strongly encourage experimentation with other fabrics.

Free Embroidery

Definition: A variety of stitches and styles that cover the ground fabric to create or fill designs.

Materials: cotton, linen, silk, velvet, wool; cotton, silk, wool floss

Stitches: stem, split, chain, satin, couching, and others

What to look for: Stitches should cover the ground and fill the design. Tension should be even, work in a frame preferable. Stitch length should be regular and uniform; watch for overly long or floating stitches. Piece should demonstrate a variety of stitches for competency, fewer for working knowledge. Stitches should be appropriate for the materials and style of design.

Lacis

Definition: A darned pattern worked on a ground of square-mesh net, usually white.

Materials: net, linen thread

Stitches: darning stitch

What to look for: Darned stitches should fill each square of net to create the pattern. Tension is vital; look for stitches that pull or distort the net. Commercial net is fine, extra kudos for handmade net. Lacis can also be made from a ground fabric; examine the size of the squares to determine a uniform look.

Metal Thread

Definition: The use of metal threads in embroidery, in which the threads are couched down to form a pattern.

Materials: linen, cotton, velvet, wool; metal thread, silk, cotton, linen

Stitches/techniques: couching, underside couching, plaited braid stitch, or nue

What to look for: Appropriate use of the metal: should NOT be passed through the ground fabric except in cases of very late-period embroidery, and only with a very thin gold thread. If gold is passed, make sure it is in a period fashion. Couched metal should be uniform with even tension. Generally, ground fabric should not be visible beneath a section of metal thread work. Usually two metal threads are couched down together to form the pattern/design.

Needlelace

Definition: A variety of open, usually fine, lace designs created with a needle

Materials: linen, cotton

Stitches/techniques: buttonhole, overcasting, darning stitches; reticella, tenerife, punto in aria

What to look for: Even tension, no unevenness within the design. Buttonhole and overcast stitches should be uniform and completely cover the ground threads.

Openwork

Definition: Style of embroidery that relies on the manipulation of the ground fabric by cutting and withdrawing of threads or by distorting the weave to create a lace-like effect.

Materials: linen, cotton

Stitches/techniques: linen, cotton; hardanger, hemstitching, drawn and pulled work, cutwork

What to look for: Even tension and uniform stitches within the design. Appropriate ground fabric is critical—must be an even weave that is sturdy enough to hold a design and evenly woven enough to create the open areas for the design. Stitches within the design must stabilize the piece; no overly large open areas or long floating threads.

Padded Work

Definition: The stitching together of several layers of fabric for warmth, decoration, or protection

Materials: cotton, linen, velvet, wool; cotton, linen floss

Stitches/techniques: quilting, stumpwork, cord quilting, trapunto

What to look for: Padding should be uniform, no lumps or uneven areas. Stitches should be small and even, carrying through all layers. For trapunto, the stuffed areas should be firm, not soft. For cord quilting the stitches should lay as close to the cord as possible. Note: no machine quilting is eligible for ranking in this form.

Smocking

Definition: The gathering of fullness on garments.

Materials: cotton, linen; cotton, silk thread

Stitches: smocking, stem, honeycomb

What to look for: Most examples will be English smocking, so the gathers should be even and the stitches holding them together should be uniform. The smocking should stretch; the stitches should be worked loosely enough to enable the piece to stretch somewhat. Earlier forms of smocking do not have to stretch; merely gather large amounts of fabric into a small space.