

# EARLY AMERICAN CREWEL EMBROIDERY

## An Introduction

Crewel, also known as crewel embroidery, crewel work and Jacobean embroidery, is surface stitchery worked with wool yarn on a firm fabric. The stitches are freely worked, rather than counted.

The term "crewel" formerly referred to a two-ply, worsted wool yarn and probably came from an Anglo-Saxon word for a ball of thread. Today, crewel refers to a decorative form of embroidery in which wool yarn is used. A limited number of other threads may be used in accent stitches.

The earliest surviving crewel embroidery is the Bayeux Tapestry, dated 1067-1070 AD.

During the Elizabethan era (1558--1603), the British East India Company opened trade routes to the Far East, and new embroidery designs flowed from east to west. There is much symbolism in the designs of this period, and the colors were generally monochromatic, frequently in blues and greens, with an occasional red.

With the advent of the Jacobean era (James I, 1603-1625), the fanciful "Tree of Life" designs were frequently seen and the colors were brighter.

The Queen Anne period (1702-1714) saw the use of silks replacing wools with the designs much lighter in appearance.

In Colonial America, fewer stitches were used in crewel embroidery. The New England laid stitch became popular because of its economical use of wool yarn.

Today, most designs are embroidered in wool yarn with possible highlights in other threads and the majority of the designs show Jacobean influence.

It should be noted that the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework used only linen thread in their designs. Consequently, the work cannot be called crewel, even though the designs were based on colonial crewel embroideries found in local museums.

The above is taken from the EGA Glossary of Embroidery terms printed in "NeedleArts": March 1990, page 51.

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(Slides donated by Muriel Baker and Mary-Dick Digges)

1. The Embroiderers' Guild of America presents a collection of slides of Early American Crewel. This set of bed hangings and chair are from the historic Readbourne home in Centreville, Maryland.
2. In the eighteenth century the bed was one of the most important pieces of furniture in a house. It stood in the parlor and was always on display. For this reason, it was often decorated with embroidered hangings.
3. Bed hangings from the Prentis House, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont. It is rare to have a complete set of bed hangings such as this, including head curtain, side curtains, and valances. Embroidered bed furnishings were so valuable that often only part of a set was willed to an heir.
4. These bed hangings were stitched by Betsey Lee Fairchild, who attended Miss Pierce's School in Litchfield, Connecticut, where she lived. These are now in the Webb House in Wethersfield, Connecticut.
5. This is a detail from the hangings in the previous slide. The broad stem treatment and the use of blue and white were typical of the Connecticut River Valley.
6. These valances and spread were worked by Mindwell Pease of Suffield, Connecticut. They are also in the Webb House. One of the more interesting facets of early American crewel is the fact that we often have documentation to accompany the work. We frequently know the maker, the designer, and where the stitching was done.
7. This is a detail of a valance in the previous slide.
8. These bed hangings from the collection of Colonial Williamsburg are displayed seasonally in the Peyton Randolph house. What appears to be crewel on the vanity skirt is actually tambour work.
9. One of the largest repositories of early American crewel is Historic Deerfield, Massachusetts. This bedspread is in the Dwight Barnard house.

10. These hangings in the Ashley house in Deerfield are displayed on a press bed which can be folded up to the wall during the day.
11. These bed furnishings are from the collection of the Winterthur Museum. The motifs on the foot of the spread, the head curtain, and the valance are typical of the Connecticut River Valley; the very geometric motifs are less usual.
12. One of the most sophisticated pieces of early American crewel in the Winterthur collection, this spread incorporated tape in the design. Handmade tapes were routinely used to bind the edges of curtains and bed furnishings. Tape was made on a small loom which sat on a table. This set was made for John Hancock.
13. This bedspread was worked by Elizabeth Taylor of Westfield, Massachusetts and is now in the collection of the Litchfield Historical Society.
14. These two bed curtains and valance were worked by Eunice Brewster about 1745 in Norwich, Connecticut. They are now in the collection of the Faith Trumbull Chapter, D.A.R. in Norwich.
15. This is a detail of the previous slide.
16. Another detail shows this fanciful and typical bird which could have flown right out of the eighteenth century.
17. This close-up of the valance from the set shows the front and reverse of the stitching. One of the names given to New England laid stitch was "economy stitch." This slide graphically illustrates the reason for this name. Areas which are solidly covered on the front are open on the back of the work. The majority of the wool lies on the visible surface of the fabric while little is wasted on the back.
18. This bed curtain was worked by Rebekah Dickinson. It is in the collection of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association at Deerfield, Massachusetts. The top two lines of the lettering worked over the ship have never been deciphered.
19. This detail of the ship shows the possibilities for shading when only one color was used.

20. This beautiful indigo and white curtain is from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Originally imported, indigo was later raised in the southern colonies. Indigo is a very stable dyestuff and eighteenth century pieces survive with intense color.
21. This design is a contemporary stitching from a set of designs found in an old ledger book in Darien, Connecticut. It shows how the simple combination of blue and white would have been used. The fabric is a medium weight linen in tabby weave, the most common fabric used in the period.
22. Detail. The filling that appears to be laid work (trellis stitch) in this motif is actually composed of stem stitch. This is commonly the stitch used in early American crewel.
23. Detail. Pattern darning is generally worked in the deepest value available.
24. These curtains, worked by Mary Bullman, are in the Old Gaol Museum in York, Maine.
25. This curtain is from the Winterthur Museum collection. It was worked in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.
26. From the Boston Museum of Fine Arts comes this curtain. It is rather densely embroidered compared to the majority of early American crewel.
27. This fragment is also from their collection.
28. This spread is from the Faith Trumbull Chapter, D.A.R. in Norwich, Connecticut. It was assembled at a later date than the working of the embroidery, probably from parts of a set of bed hangings. The quilting was not present in the original stitching.
29. Three birds of a style typical of early American crewel grace this spread by Mary Geer. It is now in the museum of the Faith Trumbull Chapter, D.A.R. in Norwich, Connecticut.
30. This spread worked on black fabric is from the Hall Tavern, Deerfield, Massachusetts.
31. The work of Lucinda Coleman, this spread is from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.
32. This eighteenth century spread shows an unusually high degree of design unity.

33. Not all embroidery was dense or elaborate which this piece from the Litchfield Historical Society demonstrates.
34. The large leaves in this design are more realistic than usual.
35. This valance by Prudence Punderson is worked in motifs typical of the Connecticut River Valley.
36. A detail of the previous slide showing several variations of broad stem fillings.
37. This is a pomegranate motif from the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.
38. This valance was worked by Sarah Chester about 1750 and is in the Webb house in Wethersfield, Connecticut.
39. This is a detail of the piece shown in the previous slide.
40. This bucolic scene is densely embroidered. The treatment of the hills is typical of the eighteenth century.
41. This eighteenth century embroidery was worked in Pennsylvania. There is almost no extant early American crewel that was worked south of the Mason-Dixon line. Several possible reasons are proposed for this. Warm bed hangings were not as necessary in the South; bugs or high humidity could have contributed to the disintegration of the work.
42. This piece of fine work is from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is dated 1714.
43. This motif is from the collection of Historic Deerfield. It is entirely possible that the stems, which now appear as gold, were originally green. Since indigo was imported and expensive during most of the colonial period, a plant called "false indigo" was used in its stead. This false indigo did not have the permanent character of true indigo. When greens were created by overdyeing yellow (a relatively permanent color) with blue, the fugitive blue would often fade, leaving a gold color in areas which in nature would have been green.
44. This example from Deerfield also illustrates the point about dyes.
45. This piece is from the Nova Scotia Museum, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

46. This is a fragment from a wedding dress. Eighteenth century wedding dresses were not the white that we think of today as traditional.
47. This set of valances is from the Connecticut Historical Society. Note the similarity of the motif in the bottom right hand corner with the next slide from Litchfield.
48. A valance from Litchfield, Connecticut.
49. Another example of stems that were probably initially green can be seen in this fragment.
50. This fanciful bird is dwarfed by the rose motif. Accuracy in proportion was never a concern of eighteenth century stitchers.
51. This butterfly quite overwhelms the flowers.
52. The deer in these fragments from the Boston Museum are often found in early American crewel. Note that there is no concern about proportion. The bird is far larger than would be found in this size tree.
53. The fruit could never have grown from this tree.
54. This fragment shows seeding in the flower and pattern darning in the leaf, two typical ways of filling motifs without the use of much thread.
55. The colors in these valances from Colonial Williamsburg are still bright after two hundred years -- attesting to the quality of vegetable dyes. The next three slides show further examples of intense, lasting color.
56. (No comment)
57. (No comment)
58. This fragment is from the Old Gaol Museum in York, Maine.
59. The bunches of berries shown here are recurring motifs in early American crewel.
60. The broad stem treatment is typical of Connecticut River Valley designs. Note the different fillings.
61. From Colonial Williamsburg comes this picture of a bedroom in the George Wythe ("With") house. While the crewel is probably English of an earlier period, the embroidery stand is typical of the eighteenth century in America.

62. This is a detail from a valance worked by Sarah Chester. It is in the collection of the Webb House, Wethersfield, Connecticut.
63. Detail of motif on bed curtain fragment from New York.
64. Lucinda Coleman worked this bedspread which is located in the Metropolitan Museum, New York.
65. Crewel embroidery decorates this quilted bedspread found at the Dwight Barnard House, Deerfield, Massachusetts.
66. Detail of valance dated 1714 in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
67. Another detail.
68. Another detail.
69. Another detail.
70. This Jacobean style bedspread is part of a set of bed hangings made by Mary Thurston Fifield and her daughter between 1700-1715. Family history relates that Captain Richard Fifield of Boston brought the linen already marked with the design and crewel wools from England. The curtains were eventually made into bedcovers as bed hangings went out of fashion at the end of the century. The Boston Museum has two of the four bedspreads in their collection.
71. Detail of bedspread made by Eunice Brewster dated c.1745; Preston, Connecticut.
72. Detail of quilted bedspread in the Faith Trumbull Chapter, D.A.R. Museum in Norwich, Connecticut.
73. This chair is from the Ashley house in Deerfield, Massachusetts. While both the chair and the crewel embroidery are old, the needlework was not done for the chair. Crewel embroidery was not used to cover wing chairs in the 18th century.
74. This chair seat from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was worked by Mrs. John Barrett.
75. This embroidery hoop is from the Stebbins House in Deerfield. The needlework fragment was not worked in this frame.

76. This beautiful pocket is from the Springfield Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts. Pockets were worn in pairs, tied about the waist beneath the dress. They were reached through slits in the side seams of the dress.
77. The wedding dress of Abigail Wadsworth. The story is told that Abigail traveled many miles to purchase the materials to embroider her dress and for this reason she included the horse as a motif in her embroidery.
78. This detail is from the back of her dress.
79. This piece from the collection of Peg Lunt is obviously from the hand of the same designer. Much eighteenth century embroidery was professionally designed either by shop owners or by teachers.
80. A detail of the previous slide.
81. The wedding dress of Anne Grey now in the Webb House in Wethersfield, Connecticut.
82. A detail of the previous slide. The intense reds in this embroidery were probably dyed with cochineal.
83. Another detail.
84. This blue and white child's dress is from the Hawks House in Deerfield.
85. These simple curtains are shown in the General Lord Sterling room at the Thomas Neely house at Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania. [It is likely that they are a twentieth century reproduction used to furnish the house, as there is no evidence that crewel embroidery was used on window curtains in the eighteenth century.]
86. Surely this pot holder decorated a fireplace and never served for its nominal purpose.
87. This baby blanket is embroidered on woolen fabric and has survived the threat of moths in wonderful condition.
88. A detail of the previous slide.
89. This fragment of a petticoat border is from the collection of the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut. In the costume design of the eighteenth century, the front of the dress was parted and the petticoat became highly visible.



90. This petticoat border is from a private collection. It is dated as between 1750 and 1770.
91. Our last slide is of a fragment which inspired a design for a kit which was in the Elsa Williams' line for several years. With the addition of a horse and rider, it became the Paul Revere design, surely the period at which the original was stitched. Thus, as always, whether consciously or unconsciously, motifs and patterns occur and recur in the working of embroidery. We are part of the past and it is part of us. We stitch a legacy and create an inheritance for future generations.