

Tips to improve the quality of your stitching

General Comments

Some fabrics and threads, often found in kits, or which have been purchased online, have been manufactured in countries with unregulated standards for the finished product.

The fabrics, in particular Aida, may have been "improved" with the addition of nylon or polyester, which can affect the way the thread wears as it travels through. Make sure you regularly monitor the thread and replace it before it becomes "hairy" or worn.

Some stranded threads have also had "improvements" and may not feel as soft or be as colourfast as those which have been inherited from Grandma.

The addition of nylon and/or polyester to fabric has an impact on its fraying- it frays differently from fabric found in Grandma's stash.

Care needs to be taken when cutting fabric threads in a design (Hardanger) because the threads may not cut cleanly and the embroidery thread may be accidentally cut. Make sure your scissors are sharp!

Cross Stitch designs

When there is a large area of a single colour to complete, the temptation is to do a row run from left to right and then back, crossing the stitches as you go. It seems to be quicker!

This method of stitching was encouraged in the 1960's and 70's.

Back then, Danish Flower Thread was often used because kits from Europe came with this type of thread that covers the fabric well. It does not have a sheen and is slightly thicker than two strands of stranded thread.

Stitchers from England commonly used stranded thread for cross-stitch as it was readily available. Two or three strands were acceptable, depending on the fabric.

Even when stitching a large area of the same colour, their method was to complete each stitch individually. They tended to avoid rows and stitched large colour areas in random patches. This method produced a more even overall tension.

Stitching a long row often inadvertently tightens the fabric threads as it is sewn from left to right. Returning to the start over the long row is often a different tension. And the next row, underneath the first and with a change of thread, could be a different tension again. Pay attention to detail as you stitch. If you notice tension change or the thread is not covering the fabric as well as at the start, or if it becomes worn, overly twisted or dirty, finish off the "old" thread and use a "fresh" length.

By completing each stitch individually, there is less likelihood of tension change ridges being seen in the finished work from the row runs. Also, there is less likelihood of continuing to stitch when the thread is worn. The difference is quite noticeable.

Give finishing each stitch individually a try and evaluate the results.

Edging a rectangle/square

When finishing a piece of embroidery which has a rectangular or square shape, whether it is an outline of goldthread or some ricrac, make sure that the join is not on a corner. This is because the eye/gaze tends to travel around the shape. It has to change direction at each corner and becomes "alert" and notices if there is a difference in the "flow".

If the thread is taken to the back (or if the join is made) half way along the long end at the base of the shape, the eye will not as readily pick up the slight difference in appearance and pause to examine more closely.

When stitching satin stitch

If using stranded thread, rather than using two threads which can become unintentionally twisted during the process, use one thread and oversew twice. That way you will get a smoother coverage.

Hardanger

Bars: Make sure that the tension for each bar is consistent. The number of wraps needs to be the same for each bar and they should lie flat. The twists must go in the same direction.

Kloster blocks: Tension must be kept even. If the tension varies, particularly when taking the thread to the next section, it affects the stability of the finished article and a foundation thread may be unintentionally cut, which may be very difficult to rectify.

Whiskers: Threads which are cut unevenly produce "whiskers". Some modern fabrics which may not be 100% cotton or linen are more difficult to cut evenly.

Make sure you use an appropriate pair of sharp, pointed scissors to carefully cut the threads. There are special "hardanger" scissors that can be purchased if you plan to cut lots of threads in the future. Make sure that you cut the fabric away from the twisted lower edge, not the upper edge.

Blanket Stitch (Same method but spacing of stitches is different)

When joining two pieces of fabric together, the base of the blanket stitch should be on the join between the two fabrics, not above or below.

The stitches must be even in height. Marking the fabric with a line parallel to the raw edge will help. The distance between the stitched threads must also be the same. Tighten the stitches equally for a neat twisted edge.

To finish off neatly, work to the end of the thread and unthread your needle. Thread it with an anchored fresh thread and bring it up to the place where the old thread is hanging. Work about four blanket stitches and then unthread the needle and rethread it with the old thread. Take the needle under the edge of the next stitch (this has been worked with the new thread) and into the fabric to finish it off securely. Rethread the needle with the fresh thread and continue working.

Buttonhole stitch

When making a buttonhole stitch loop over threads, to avoid the loop twisting, point the needle towards you for the first stitch and away from you for the second. Do this alternately and you will have a flat loop with the twisted edge running in a straight line.

Thread showing

Make sure that you finish off the threads neatly so that they cannot be seen from the front. The thread path to a different area should not be visible. Consider placing a thin backing piece of fabric behind to avoid this problem.

Beads

These add interest to an embroidery, and they need to be a positive interest. Ensure that the beads are anchored well and all sit in the same direction. Poorly secured beads move when the glass in the frame is placed on the top.

Presentation

When your stitching session is finished, and you have been stitching with the fabric in a hoop, removing it from the hoop until your next session will help prevent hoop marks, which may be difficult to remove.

Make sure, when you are stitching, that the fabric in your hoop is drum tight!

Remove dirty smudges and hoop marks by gently washing in mild soap and lukewarm water. Rinse well and then roll the embroidery in a clean towel to absorb all the moisture and gently steam press on a folded towel. Use a pressing cloth.

If your work is framed, ensure there is no fluff, stray threads or other unwanted items between the glass and the fabric. e.g.: beetle leg.

Make sure that the grain of the fabric is straight on all sides and firmly tension the work over the backing board so there are no bulges, wrinkles or distortions.

Helpful hint

Sometimes when a fabric has been folded for a long time, e.g. in a kit, the creases are very difficult to remove.

Try this: (do it on a piece of waste fabric first to get the idea)

1. Soak the fabric in water until saturated, then gently roll in a towel to remove surplus moisture.
2. Place in the freezer and leave until frozen stiff.
3. When frozen, remove and place on a folded towel on an ironing board.
4. Cover with a clean tea towel or pressing cloth then iron with a hot iron.

The wetting, freezing, and then melting the ice with a hot iron changes the molecules in the fibres. In the olden days in cold countries, tablecloths were spread on bushes in the frost because "it did them good". Then they were ironed with the flat iron.