

Italian Counted Needlework
"Assisi Embroidery"
By Genevieve De'Valois

In the small town of Assisi a new style of counted needlework came to life. We know it today as "Assisi Work", but this name did not become popular until the late nineteenth century. The style of needlework itself began around the 13th century. There are two legends as to its origin. One states that St. Francis of Assisi himself introduced the style in the early 1200's, shortly after his return from the Holy Land. Another legend, which seems to be more viable, is that it was started by nuns in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, shortly after his canonization as a saint. The nuns copied portions of the church murals in order to decorate church linens and altar cloths. The popularity of the style grew out of it's ecclesiastical uses.

The earliest examples of Assisi work are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and are primarily ecclesiastical. They are mostly stylized animals and geometric designs. Later examples from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries include entire biblical scenes, mostly from the Old Testament. This is also the time period that the use of mythological beasts became popular and the style of embroidery itself began to be used outside of the church. The most common "Period" uses of this style of embroidery, besides the aforementioned ecclesiastical uses, were for domestic uses such as table linens, curtains and chair cushions.

This style of embroidery is very easy to emulate. The design is first worked in running backstitch, or holbein stitch and then the background is filled in with long armed cross stitch. The background is worked in either rust/red or a bright blue/green. While there are other colors used today, those are the only known colors used in period. The designs should be worked on and even weave fabric such as linen or cotton, using a pearl cotton thread. The materials they used were common materials, not exotic.

Assisi Embroidery is strikingly beautiful and simple to do. In my opinion it is an ideal style for beginning embroiderers. The most difficult thing about this type of embroidery is finding sources to document your work, and with a little extra effort these can be obtained.

Bibliography

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