The Art of English Blackwork

Hans Holbein painting of Henry VIII, 1536, with an interlaced arabesque and strapwork design on his doublet. While the nature of the black line stitch cannot be determined, nor how the outlined design was filled with gold (latter not visible in these images), the embroidery would have been of black silk and silver-gilt threads on a white linen ground fabric. (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Technically, blackwork is any embroidery executed in black thread on a white ground fabric. However, our reference today is to the form this style of needlework took in 16th- and early 17th-century England.

The origin of the English black-on-white embroidery is obscure, likely having its roots in several cultures. Most modern authorities accept the likelihood that 15th-century Spanish needlework was its predecessor. However, since there are no documented surviving examples of this Spanish style of needlework, it is not possible to make more than suppositions about its characteristics, except that the work was executed in black thread.

Certainly, the ornamentation found on the personal attire and household linens of Catherine of Aragon (the Spanish princess who was Henry VIII’s first wife) and her Spanish ladies-in-waiting and courtiers would have influenced the fashion tastes of the Court in the early 16th century. However, some form of black embroidery had been known in England more than one hundred years earlier. In Chaucer’s late 14th-century Canterbury Tales there is a passage in which a miller’s wife is described as having a white smock decorated with some form of reversible stitching in black thread.
Portraits indicate that black-on-white embroidery may have been a dress fashion in several of the countries of Western Europe during the first half of the 16th century, not just in Spain and England. It is often claimed that the style of embroidery used for the black band patterns depicted in these portraits is Spanish Work or that the embroidery was executed in double running stitch. How this can be stated with confidence is difficult to understand, since we cannot look at the back of a painting and determine the nature of the stitching! It is true the paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger, depict embroidery that could have been stitched with short straight stitches (as seen in the bridal dress on the next page and Jane Seymour’s portrait on page 4). However, the technique could have been back stitch as easily as double running stitch. In other words, since there are no known surviving examples of black-on-white embroidery from the first half of the 16th century, it is impossible to make a definitive statement about what Spanish Work was or what it was not. We do know that the term "blackwork" was never used during this time period.

Similarly, double running stitch should not be referred to as “Holbein Stitch” simply because the early form of black-on-white embroidery appeared at times in his paintings. The term “Holbein Stitch” has no historical foundation; it apparently was first used in the late 1800s and then was popularized by the Royal School of Needlework in the 20th century.
Above: Detail from a Hans Holbein painting of Anna Meyer at her wedding in Switzerland in 1526. The black embellishment of her dress is obviously embroidered with short, straight stitches. (Schlossmuseum, Darmstadt, Germany.)

Right: Portrait of Bess of Hardwick in 1557. The embroidery of her narrow sleeves and smock's wrist frills is executed in red silk, possibly in double running or "Spanish Stitch". (Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire)

Above: Detail from a portrait of an unknown lady about 1595 with a French farthingale skirt and trunk ("bombasted") sleeves embellished in black, white and gold. (Fereno Museum, Kingston)

While "Spanish Work" and "Spanish Stitch" do not appear to have been interchangeable terms, it is possible that the former was the general term for the early stage of black-on-white embroidery in which various stitches could be used, one being the Spanish Stitch. It is also possible, maybe not until the second half of the 16th century, that Spanish Work was distinguished by the use of silk threads in any single color, with black always the most popular.

In its "Spanish" stage, English blackwork was first and foremost associated with costume. Rather delicate in appearance and typically an edging ornamentation, this linear monochromatic embroidery was popular for use on collars, cuffs, jackets, night shirts and smocks.
Portrait of Jane Seymour (Henry VIII's third wife), Holbein, 1536. The grandeur of the garment is expressed in the use of plain but rich cloth of red velvet and brocade (not with an extensive amount of embroidery as seen later in the century). The garment is worn with three pairs of sleeves, the last acting like huge leg-of-mutton cuffs covered with a network of silver-gilt cord. The black-on-white cuffs, or frills, are attached to the smock. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

Left: Unknown man by unknown artist about 1548 in a costume that had reached its height of extravagance and a style which emphasized masculinity with its massive shoulders and protrudent cod's piece. The linen shirt is boldly embroidered with black thread so likely a variety of surface embroidery stitches were used, not of Spanish Stitch, or at least not in entirety. (Location unknown)

The energy and extravagance seen in the clothing is typical of the Renaissance, with its ideas of love of beauty and pleasure in one's own existence. Art was now used by man to glorify himself, this leading to the beginning of a most important era of secular
needlework throughout the western world. Henry VIII, the Renaissance Prince, displayed a profound love of splendor and extravagance in his attire, which was emulated by those around him, as the unknown man on the preceding page. The recently-invented printing press must also have stimulated the interest of the Tudor embroideress of the mid-16th century, for book illustrations could easily have been translated into the black-on-white embroidery. This influence becomes increasingly more apparent as the 16th century advances.

Right: Male nightshirt from the late 16th to the early 17th century. A small variety of surface stitches, such as back and outline in addition to double running are used. The design elements were very likely taken from printed patterns. (Costume Gallery, Bath)

The next stage of blackwork, developing during the second half of the 16th century, the Elizabethan Era, was purely English in character. The use of symmetrical edging patterns and the term Spanish Work began to disappear, and blackwork became primarily an allover filling, often of back-stitched, geometric repeat patterns, for the array of flowers, leaves, animals and insects of Elizabethan coiling stem designs

To return to the Spanish Work/Blackwork terminology question, *That Spanish Work was not identified as being the same as Blackwork is apparent from the lists of New Year gifts that were presented to Elizabeth I, in which the two terms are so clearly distinguished that a difference of technique is surely indicated*, states John L. Nevinson, former textile curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

During the Elizabethan period, the vanity men and women alike seems to have known no bounds. Keen to display the extent of their affluence, Elizabethans apparently felt that the more elaborate the total costume, the better. Based on portraits, accounts, and commentaries by contemporary authors it appears that opulence in costume reached its peak during the last decades of the 16th century, a period of time when people were manacled, fettered, and imprisoned in their attire. Such opulence has been without parallel in the Western world.

Although the English had no use for foreigners, they did adore foreign fashions, and as fashions from Spain, France, and Italy crossed the English Channel, they were transmuted into a unique style which reflected the bravado, swashbuckling, and arrogance of the Tudor spirit. The general immobility found in the man's costume during the second half of the 16th century was enforced by garments of substance and weight with a tight-fitted waist, inflexible sleeves, and fantastic ballooning at the hips. And similar features were found in feminine fashion throughout the century.
Every joint of the woman’s body seems to have been pinched and restrained by the costume. However, this constriction was readily accepted by both men and women because it signified social superiority and conspicuous idleness—it was simply impossible for an individual in such burdensome clothes to earn his living by the sweat of his brow.

Blackwork is an important element in the extravagance of Elizabethan costume. Articles on which blackwork was used included not only underlinen and bedclothes but also men’s shirts, doublets, cuffs, sleeves, and caps and women’s jackets, coifs, forehead cloths, hoods, handkerchiefs, collars, sleeves, partlets, stomachers, foreparts, and underskirts. Judging from portraits of royal and noble women in formal dress, it became typical to use blackwork on the detachable sleeves and the partlet (which filled in the chest and neck area of the low, square neckline of the outer garment). Sometimes a standing neckband or collar would be attached. While the sleeves were made of a medium-weight linen, often covered with outer sleeves of a very sheer linen, the partlet was of lightweight linen. On occasion the stomacher (an inverted triangle placed in the opening of a woman’s bodice) or the forepart (the insertion into the front opening of the skirt when an underskirt was not used) were of medium-weight linen heavily embellished with blackwork and highlighted with gold threads.
Elizabeth I, late 16th century, panel painting attributed to John Bettes the Younger. Her blackwork sleeves are of a bold pattern embellished with black, silver-gilt and jewels, with a large jewel on the left sleeve. The guards, the ribbon-like bands down the front of the black velvet garment, were heavily decorated with large jeweled buttons and silver-gilt thread with likely some pearls. The closed ruff and cuffs are of fine needlepoint lace. (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)

The combination of black silk and gold threads was also frequently used for the embroidery of caps, coifs and forehead cloths—linen head covers worn with informal attire. The woman’s coif was a tight-fitting article that covered the hair over which was tied a triangular forehead cloth. It is likely that the coif and forehead cloth were at-home wear.

The most difficult problem in studying at least the formal dress of the Elizabethan era is the fact that absolutely nothing remains. Gone are the court gowns of elegant Italian silk fabrics heavily ladden with pearls and precious jewels, embroidered with metal threads and linen with exotic furs from foreign lands. Gone are the fantastic cutwork and needle lace collars and cuffs made of threads of incredibly fine imported linen or metal.

Fortunately a large number of portraits have survived, which provide a continuous chronology of the development of costume for the nobility. However, since none of the articles of costume shown in existing portraits still exist, it is impossible to determine how accurately these costumes are portrayed. It is possible the artist took liberties in depicting the garments and jewelry of his sitters. He could have introduced some of his own “imaginary” textile and fashion designs or changed
the colors of clothing, in order to make the sitter more attractive or appear more prosperous. (For example, red pigment was expensive, so its use in a portrait would indicate the sitter was affluent and powerful—whether or not the red clothing actually existed.)

Also many paintings (which were on wood panels easily damaged by cold, damp weather) underwent restoration in the 18th and 19th centuries. This practice apparently often involved some clumsy overpainting which could have destroyed original details. Therefore, it is imperative to also rely upon literature, inventories, household expense records, private correspondence and official papers to have a more complete picture of what Elizabethan fashion in its most sumptuous form was really like.

Elizabeth I—panel painting in the late 1580s, attributed to John Bettes school. These dramatic sleeves of white linen embroidered with black and gold threads and slightly stuffed are covered with a fine gauze or cobweb linen. This sheer fabric overlay was typical for Elizabethan costume in the latter part of the 16th century, probably used to protect the embroidery and help to keep it clean. A wide slightly open sheer ruff frames her face which is described as being cutwork with inserts of needle lace and points of detached needle lace around the edge. She wears turned-back cuffs that match the ruff. (Arbury Hall, Numeaton, Warwickshire)

Elizabeth and wealthy noble women would have many pairs of white linen sleeves, smocks and partlets, typically of matching appearance, embroidered in black silk, sometimes with metal threads as well. In formal dress at least this was the favorite use of blackwork. All parts of the costume
were separate units, these pinned, tied or hooked together. One husband stated *a ship is sooner rigged than a gentlewoman made ready.*

**The "Pelican" Portrait of Elizabeth I** about 1575, panel painting by Nicholas Hilliard. The stomacher, divided skirt, armlets and "wings" (padded shoulder rolls) were of red silk velvet, these heavily embellished with pearls and jewels. Most of these velvet elements were slashed and a small puff of sheer white linen was pulled through. Her partlet (article that filled the chest and shoulders) and matching sleeves were likely of linen lawn. The almost transparent overlay of cypress linen for both is decorated with silver-gilt thread so this covering is no longer plain and functional. This was Queen Elizabeth I at her grandest! (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Elizabeth was learned, brilliant, and magnificent and appears to have believed that it was not possible for a queen to be overdressed. Records indicate that upon her death in 1603, her wardrobe consisted of some 1900 articles of costume, none of which exists today except in the seventy surviving portraits of this great queen. Elizabeth was also the personification of the era’s concept of female beauty. From the portraits and the writings of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, we know that the ideal features for a lady were white skin, red lips, bright eyes, thin eyebrows and raised hairline with crimped, red-blond hair.

Not surprisingly, splendor was equally important in the furnishing of Elizabeth’s homes. They were hung with paintings and rich woven tapestries, her beds were decorated with elegant embroidered hangings and pillows, and her tables and floors were covered with Persian and Indian carpets.
Left: Mary Cornwallis about 1575-1580, a panel painting by G. Gover. Her forepart or underskirt is embellished with a strapwork design of black; the stitching could have been that of double running or back stitch. The large-scale design of oak leaves, lilies and Tudor roses used for her linen sleeves is also embroidered in black thread. An almost transparent overlay of cobweb linen was used for the sleeves. (City Art Galleries, Manchester)

Right: Unknown lady about 1587, a panel painting by John Bettes school. There is a portrait with the identical large-scale blackwork sleeves from the late 1580s, which presents the possibility that the artist “preprinted” the figure and its costume, and later added the sitter’s face. Or perhaps these large linen blackwork trunk sleeves were the product of professional needleworkers who supplied local haberdashers in different places in the country. The immense collar is of cutwork, propped with wires and tilted to show its needlework to greatest advantage. The invention of starch made this grand display possible. (St Olaf’s Grammar School, Orpington)

These portraits demonstrate the discomfort suffered by the lady of fashion when the collars and sleeves reached an extreme. The linen unembellished ruff on the left has been referred to as a "millstone ruff", as in “having a millstone around my neck.”

Both young woman have plucked high foreheads and a padded roll under the hair around their faces. Developments in fashion in the late Elizabethan period were characterized with an ever-increasing preoccupation with decoration and exaggeration. For a court affair, records indicate that it was not unusual to require five hours to dress. The millstone or "cartwheel" ruff alone, of approximately 25 yards of linen, could require an hour to get it just right.
Unassembled coif of white linen embroidered in blackwork using the speckled/flecked technique, late 16th or early 17th century. The charming coiling stem design has typical flowers of the Elizabethan period, including honeysuckle. Between the coils is a fantastic array of birds, butterflies and other creatures, including a snail. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

The needlework of the Elizabethan era that has survived is not a true cross-section of what originally was produced. This is why the study of portraits and written records is so important. What has survived are small embroidered articles, such as coifs and caps and small bags, all of which were used for informal wear.

As designs became more naturalistic at the end of the 16th century, the final stage of blackwork evolved. Now tiny random stitches were used for the filling, it what appears to be an effort to copy engravings down to their smallest detail and shadings. Often the filling, or seeding/speckling, is so fine that it is almost indistinguishable from a paper copy of the engraving that was its design source. In addition to black silk, a twist of black and white silk was used; this would have been of considerable assistance to create shaded effects in the similar technique of flecking.
Left: Woman’s white linen coif from the early 17th century. The coiling stems were executed with silver-gilt thread in plaited braid stitch. The other stitches used include: seed ("speckling") for filling the motifs, chain, french knots, stem and ladder. This close-fitting informal Elizabethan garment was worn about the home by all female members of the household. Of the large number of extant examples one finds many which were embellished with blackwork, often with gold threads. (Platt Hall, Manchester)

Right: Details from another woman’s coif using the identical design, so coifs were likely the product of a professional workshop purchased by the noble woman at her local habadasher. From the early 17th century, the coif was embroidered in black silk and silver-gilt threads. Stitches include: plaited braid for the heavy coiling stems, seed ("speckling") for the filling of the motifs and stem, chain and ladder. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Drawn wire of silver plated with gold, referred to as "silver-gilt" in museums, has been the basic material for the Western metal threads since the Middle Ages. This gilt wire, flattened and wrapped around a core of silk thread, was important to the needleworker during the Elizabethan period, and its high gold content made it flexible enough for the execution of such stitches as plaited braid, Ceylon, and detached buttonhole.
Above: Detail of early 17th-century coif with embroidery executed in crimson silk with the speckling technique and herringbone and buttonhole stitch. The background is powdered with gold spangles. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Right: Detail of a late 16th-century sleeve panel worked in stem stitch and incredibly fine seed stitches (speckling). From a short distance this looks like an engraving, not an embroidery. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Left: Detail of late 16th-century coif classified as blackwork although the black silk thread was used almost exclusively for heavy outlining while the filling is executed in gold thread with variations of twisted, ladder and looped stitches. (Costume Gallery, Bath)
Left: Early 17th-century coif of coiling stem design with filling of speckling/flecking. (Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York)

Bottom left: Man’s late 16th- or early 17th-century lingerie cap with main motifs filled with repeat geometric patterns. Main stems are executed in gold plaited braid stitch and background is powdered with spangles. (Castle Gate Museum, Nottingham)

Below right: Early 17th-century man’s lingerie cap with filling of flecking technique, possibly some areas using twist of black and white silk. (Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal)

Another significant silver-gilt material was the tiny spangle (or roundel) introduced to the Western world by the Italians during the early Renaissance. Spangles were attached through a center hole like sequins and were used as a background powdering for many pieces of Elizabethan blackwork.
Holland, lawn and cambric were the bleached linens used for the Elizabethan blackwork ground fabric, all of which were imported from the Continent. Holland (medium weight linen), was used for both the main articles of costume and the furnishing fabrics, while fine and semi-transparent lawn and cambric from France were important for soft ruffs, partlets, cuffs and handkerchiefs. The sheer cobweb lawn and cypress linen were used as a veil over such costume articles as sleeves and partlets.

Elizabethan household and wardrobe inventories and accounts, portraits, and numerous surviving examples, all confirm that blackwork was now a major form of all-over decoration that was important for the ornamentation of both costume and household furnishings.
Late 16th-century long pillow cover ("pillow bere") from the Lord Falkland collection. White linen ground was embroidered with black silk in a variety of stitches including braid, chain, back, coral and back stitch for the repeat geometric filling patterns. Cover measures 34" by 19" (approximately 86 cm by 48 cm). Note the deterioration of the embroidery, this photo taken over 25 years ago. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

With the rising prosperity of the second half of the 16th century, domestic building spread rapidly across the countryside. Nobles amassed large holdings on which they built palaces of enormous size and grandeur. England was at peace, so the fortified medieval home with its moats, small windows, cold stone walls and minimum number of large, sparsely furnished rooms gave way to the graceful Elizabethan manor house. Not unexpectedly, these people who covered themselves with rich, splendid attire of embroidered silk, velvet and linen covered their walls, furniture, and windows in a similar manner. An especially important symbol of prosperity and status for the nobility was the family’s sets of fabric bed furnishings, the bed being the most important article of furniture in an English home. When they were made of white linen, the coverlets, long pillow covers (pillow-beres), and window curtains were frequently embellished with blackwork, which due to the large size of these items, was probably done by professional workshops.
Detail of a late 16th-century long pillow cover ("pillow bere") of white linen ground embroidered with black silk and silver-gilt thread in a variety of stitches including back stitch for the repeat geometric filling patterns, ceylon, detached buttonhole, couching and woven wheel. Close-up shows the use of gold metal woven wheels in a pomegranete motif. (Art Institute, Chicago)

There is another cover of identical design in the Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, indicating that these are the products of a professional craftsman. It is possible that the pieces of work were originally part of a set, which could have included window and/or bed curtains, all used in a single household.

The popularity of blackwork continued into the early 17th century (the early Stuart period) but now this style of needlework was used less often. From the surviving examples during the time of James I, it would appear that blackwork, at least in its final stage, was once again used primarily for costume ornamentation. It was in the second quarter of this century, during the reign of Charles I, that the use of blackwork disappeared, not to return until the 20th-century revival. The last known reference to blackwork is in the 1633 household accounts of Howard Naworth: For sewing a pillow cover with black silk for my lady.