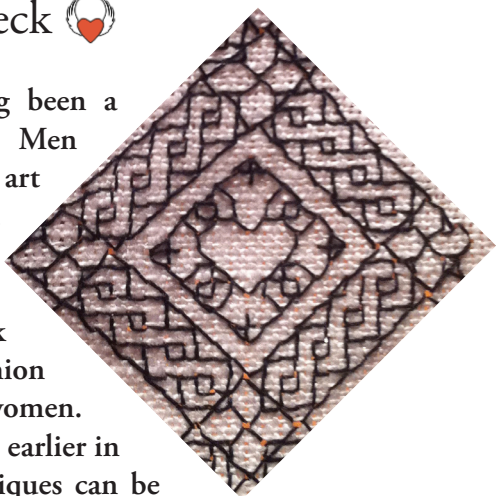


Blackwork Embroidery

by Genoveva von Lübeck 

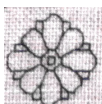
Skill with embroidery has long been a mark of a well-bred woman. Men also embroidered, turning the art into a trade and getting paid handsomely for their work as Embroiderours. And in 16th century Europe, blackwork embroidery was the height of fashion in apparel for both men and women. Yet blackwork has its roots much earlier in history than that, and its techniques can be used on clothing as early as the 10th century.



What is blackwork?

Blackwork embroidery, at its most basic, is black embroidery on white fabric. Yet it really isn't so "black and white." Other colors of threads were historically used in addition to black, typically green, blue, or red. Much blackwork is composed of geometric, counted stitches, but it can also be free-form. Some blackwork can be reversible, but not always. Four common characteristics I've observed on blackwork embroidery are:

1. small, straight stitches;
2. an intricacy of design;
3. a repeating motif; and
4. a contrast between the stitched threads and the ground fabric.



What is the history of blackwork?

Blackwork's popularity in the 16th century is attributed to Catherine of Aragon, who came from Spain in 1501 to wed Prince Arthur—her wedding trousseau contained several articles of black-on-white embroidery. It is said that Catherine embroidered these items herself, having been taught by her mother Queen Isabella, who in turn always made her husband's shirts. For this reason blackwork is also referred to as "Spanish work." Blackwork remained fashionable for more than 100 years, falling out of favor only in the 17th century. Yet, the simple stitches that make up blackwork had been around since at least the 10th century, so it's theorized that Queen Catherine popularized a particular style of blackwork rather than introduced it. Blackwork is even referred to in *The Canterbury Tales* (1390-1400) in this passage: "what was her smock and embroidered all in front and behind on her collar of coal-black silk, both in and out." Extant pieces with blackwork embroidery have survived from the 16th century, but our richest resource for blackwork designs are portraits, most notably those by Hans Holbein.

Why do blackwork?

Blackwork embroidery is excellent for the same reasons today as it was centuries ago—it looks amazingly rich yet is inexpensive to make. And despite appearances, the stitches are simple to learn. Stitching blackwork also creates an ordered yet meditative rhythm within you, which is both satisfying and stress-relieving. In short, blackwork will make you look and feel great, impress your friends, and not break your bank!

What is needed for blackwork?

With just three basic things, you can begin your first blackwork stitches. All are obtainable at your local craft store.

Thread—Use a natural fiber thread, preferably silk, but cotton or linen would also be acceptable. Look in the sewing thread section of your local store, not the embroidery section. While some people use six-strand embroidery floss, I do not recommend it personally—it's too thick, and if you separate the strands, they tend to unravel and fray as you work with them. Your thread should be about the same thickness as the threads in your fabric, finely twisted, and non divisible. You can get a spool of Gütermann silk thread at a Joann's store for about \$5-\$6. Gütermann silks are what I use for my blackwork (watch for sales). Another fine option is Au Ver a Soie 100/3 thread, which you can purchase online at places like Hedgehog Handworks (<http://www.hedgehoghandworks.com>) for \$3-\$4 per spool.



Fabric—Again, you want a natural fiber like linen. Cotton is acceptable on a budget. If you're doing counted blackwork, you need an evenweave fabric—this means that you have an equal number of horizontal and vertical threads in your fabric. Beginners can start with cotton Aida cloth (found in the embroidery section of a craft store)—look for a 16- or 18-count cloth (from \$2-\$8). Those who prefer a more historically accurate cloth should use an evenweave

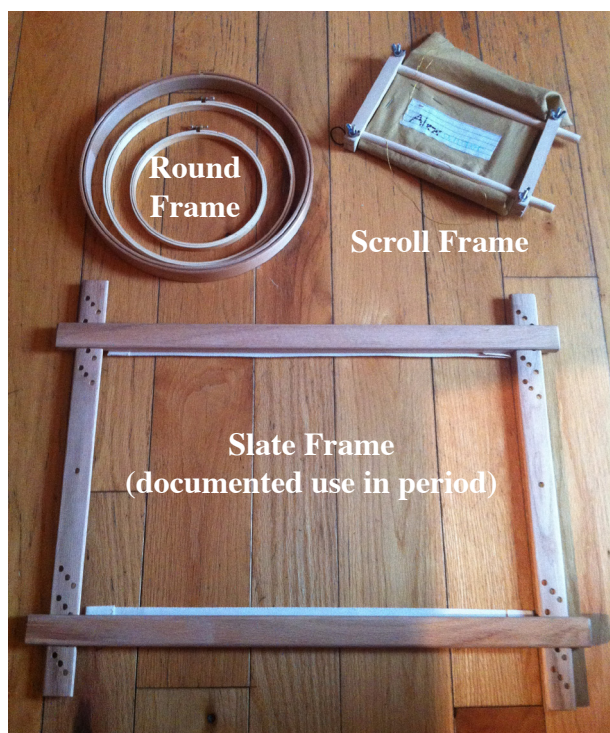


linen, which I've also found in the embroidery section—look for a 28- or 32-count 100% linen (about \$10). You may also find good, evenweave linen on the bolt—bring a magnifying glass and count threads!

Needle—A blunt-ended needle, such as a tapestry needle, so that threads are not pierced as you stitch. I use a No. 24 tapestry needle. You can get packs of these at a local craft store for a couple of dollars.



Other accessories I use are a small pair of scissors, reading glasses to see the individual threads of my fabric, and, beeswax to strengthen my thread and prevent tangles while stitching.



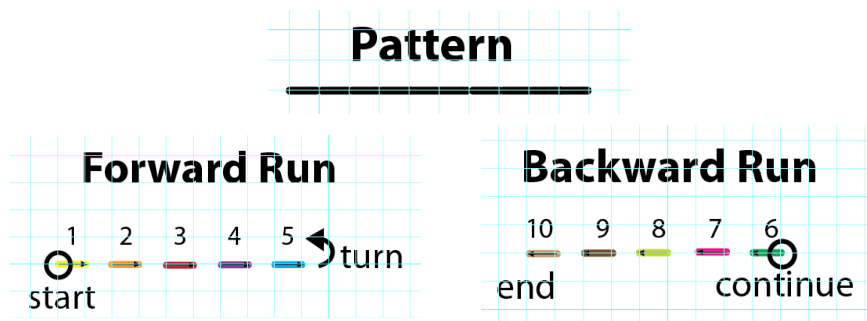
For larger embroidered pieces, you'll also want a frame (round, scroll, or slate, whatever works best for your project). It's important to have good, stable tension in your fabric while stitching.

What are the blackwork stitches?

Two main stitches make up the majority of blackwork. The first is the double running stitch, also known as the Holbein stitch, which looks the same from both sides but requires a bit more attention. The second is the backstitch. Beginners find the backstitch the easiest of the two, but it's not quite as smooth nor is it truly reversible.

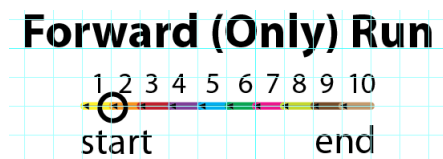
The Double-Running (“Holbein”) Stitch

The double-running, or Holbein, stitch is the basic stitch of blackwork embroidery. This stitch is reversible—it looks the same on the back and the front. It requires a forward run where you generally skip every other stitch, and a backward run where you fill in the skipped stitches, to complete, as shown below.



The Back Stitch

The back stitch is a very old stitch. To start, push your needle up from the back of the fabric. Push the needle into your fabric to make one stitch backward along your pattern. Push the needle through the fabric in front of the first stitch (one thread away in Aida, two threads away in linen) and still on the line. Pull the thread through the fabric. Make the second stitch backward, bringing the needle out in front of the second stitch and still on the pattern line. Repeat this along your pattern.



What are blackwork designs?

Traditional blackwork designs are usually geometric or floral. You can find period designs in paintings and pattern books. Be wary of designs found online, which are more likely to be contemporary.

If you are interested in period blackwork designs, I recommend you study paintings or extant pieces. For example, below is a miniature painting of Jane Small by Hans Holbein, done in 1536. I found it at the Victoria and Albert Museum (P.40&A-1935), where I was able to download a high-resolution image to study the stitching on her collar. I then charted the stitches, as you can see below.



A portrait of Jane Small by Hans Holbein in 1536. To the right is a close up of her blackwork—the lines represent my interpretation of the embroidery (red and gold line = original; blue line = my modifications)

The Victoria and Albert Museum has several extant pieces of blackwork and similar embroidery (see resources at the end of this booklet). I find studying the high resolution images of these pieces very helpful in understanding stitching and designs.

Of course, you can come up with your own designs, whether they be based on what you might have found in period, or simply patterns you like.

Getting Started With Blackwork

Prepare your work area

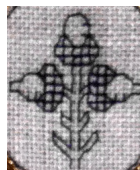
You'll need good lighting, which generally means twice as much light as you'd normally need to read. Use a bright light, such as an Ott light, or another light with at least 150 watts incandescent or 60 watts florescent (use a warm tube to avoid color distortion). You'll want your light to have a shade over the light and the light should be positioned about 15 inches above your work surface. Position the light about one foot to the left of where you'll stitch (or go one foot to the right if you're left handed). If you still find it hard to see the individual threads of your fabric, use a pair of magnifier reading glasses from a drugstore—you'll find it makes a big difference!

Prepare your fabric

I recommend you pre-wash and pre-shrink any fabric you intend to use for embroidery. Once that is done, consider whether you will put it on a frame (recommended for large pieces so the fabric stays taught and your stitches stay straight) or not (better for small pieces). If you decide not to use a frame, you must secure the edges of the fabric so it doesn't unravel as you work with it—you can either stitch a blanket stitch around the edges (best option) or use a tiny bit of Fray Check around the edges. If you use a circular frame, cover the bottom frame with a strip of cotton to minimize damage to stitches.

Prepare the thread

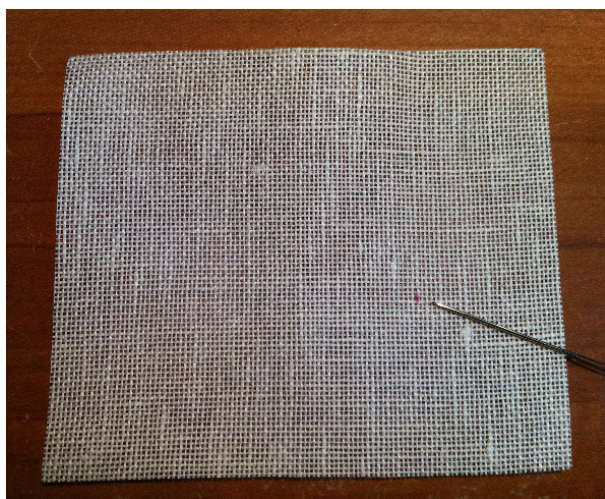
Cut about 18" (you don't need or want more than this) of your embroidery thread from the spool, making note of which end you cut off the spool. Wax the thread by pulling the thread three or four times across the beeswax edge, then run your thumb and forefinger down the thread slowly to work the wax in and remove any small bits of wax (optionally, you can iron the waxed thread between two sheets of paper). Now thread your needle with the start of the thread (not the end you just cut off the spool). Allow 4" of thread to pass through the eye of the needle before stopping. Now tie a knot in the end of your thread -- I recommend the easy method shown in the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVlpXvenkqU>



Making Your First Stitch

Your first stitch will actually be to anchor that knot you tied in the end of your thread. Pick up your fabric in one hand and locate the spot where you'll begin stitching your design (I recommend the center of your work, but this is a personal choice).

Now pick up your needle in the other hand (holding it with your thumb and forefinger), and push the needle DOWN into the right side of the fabric in a spot at least three inches to the left of where your design will begin and pull the thread through until the knot stops it. You'll see the tail of your thread sticking up on the right side of your fabric. It will look odd at first, but you'll be removing it later on when you're done stitching.



Here is a small piece of Aida fabric. The pink dot is about where I plan to start stitching my design.

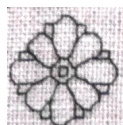
Now that your thread is anchored, it's time to make your first stitch of your design. Bring your needle straight UP into your fabric at the first point of your design (there is no hard and fast rule about where you start unless you, or your pattern, designates it). Draw your needle through the fabric pulling the thread taut without overpulling. Now push the needle straight down into your fabric at the desired point (this is usually one thread away in Aida fabric, or two threads away in linen fabric). Pull the thread taut but not overtight. You should see a small, straight stitch on the surface of your fabric.



Now just rinse and repeat about a million or so times and you have blackwork! Well, there's a bit more to it. Let's talk about your next stitch.

If you're doing the double running stitch, also called the Holbein stitch, your next stitch will be an equal number of threads away from your last (Aida=one, linen=two or more), and you'll continue forward, leaving a gap in between the stitches. If you're doing a backstitch, your next stitch will be an equal number of threads away from your last, but you'll then stitch backward at the point of the previous stitch, leaving no gaps in between stitches. Which stitch is better? It really depends on your goal. I think backstitch looks a little nicer on the surface, but it's mess on the back. The double running stitch can give you a lovely reversible design, but it's a bit more complicated to decide where the next stitch goes until you get the hang of it. Both stitches are appropriate for period blackwork.

While stitching, pay attention to where your needle is pushing into the fabric beside already completed stitches—it's important not to pierce the stitched threads (this is one reason why we use a blunt-ended needle). Try to position your needle between the fabric threads so that it follows the direction you intend to stitch -- for example, if your next stitch will be to the left, try to push your needle to the left side of the threads. This minimizes pulling of other threads and makes your design look better.



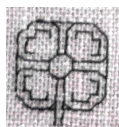
As you stitch, you may begin to notice that small knots form in your thread as you pull it through your fabric. First, this is often a sign that your thread has become twisted—to untwist it, let your needle hang free and gravity will usually untwist it for you. Second, you need to remove the knot—I usually use the tip of my needle to loosen the knotted threads and straighten it out before pulling the thread through. You may need to poke your needle tip right into the heart of the knot to loosen it. Occasionally you can just pull the thread to release the knot, but this can potentially make the knot worse. Knowing when to pull and when to loosen requires experience. If you cannot loosen the knot, or damage your thread while doing so, you'll need to cut the knot out and secure the thread before moving on. If the knot is too close to your fabric, you may need to cut the knot, pull out stitches, and then secure the thread. Sad, I know, but you'll thank yourself later for it!

Securing a Finished Thread

When you're done stitching with a thread, whether it be because you finished a run of stitches or because your thread is close to running out, you need to secure it. I secure my threads in two ways:

1. The simplest way to secure a thread is to triple-knot the thread as close to the fabric as possible (insert the tip of your needle into the knot and hold the needle right up against the fabric as you draw the knot closed) and then slide your threaded needle under several of your finished stitches on the underside of the fabric before cutting it off to secure the tail. It is important to secure the tail because that knot you made can get poked through the other side of your fabric, and this secured tail provides some insurance that your stitches won't all come loose. You would then do the same thing to the anchored knot you made at the start of your stitching.

2. The harder, but more aesthetically pleasing, way is to “hide” the thread ends in the completed stitches on the underside of your fabric. This method is necessary for reversible blackwork, too. To hide your threads, do not knot your end after stitching. Instead, weave the tail (still threaded in the needle) back through 4 or 5 stitches on the underside, running parallel to the stitches so that the thread blends in with the stitches (see figure A). Whenever possible, gently pierce the threads of those stitches -- this will secure the thread even better. Then cut the end of the thread off, being careful not to cut into any of your stitches (figure B). Do the same thing with the anchored thread that you began with (you'll need to thread your needle with it to get it under and through the stitches—see figure C). This does take some practice, but it makes the underside of your fabric look smashing! Tip: If you want the backside of your piece to be even neater, you can separate the strands of your tail's thread and weave each individual strand under stitches going in different directions to minimize the darker look you get with this technique.



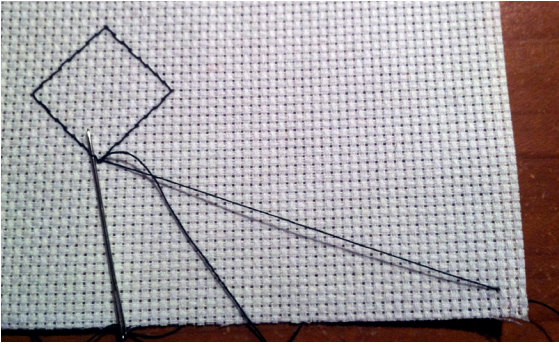


Figure A. Weaving the end of the thread back through stitches on the underside of the fabric

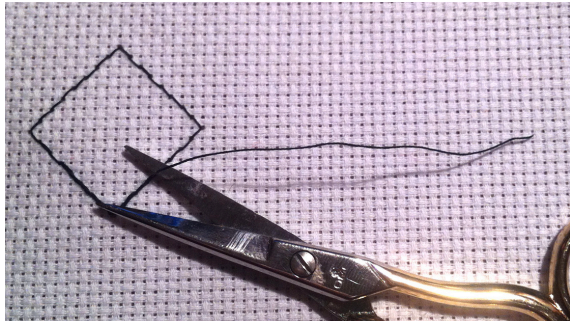
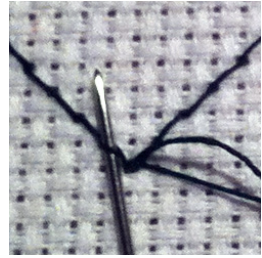


Figure B. Carefully trimming the end of the thread tail after weaving it through the stitches

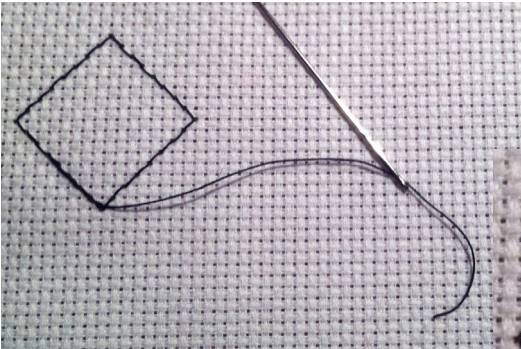


Figure C. Threading the end of the anchored knot into the needle to weave it through stitches.

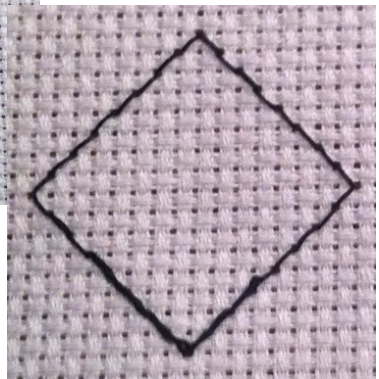


Figure D. The secured threads. You can barely tell they are there!

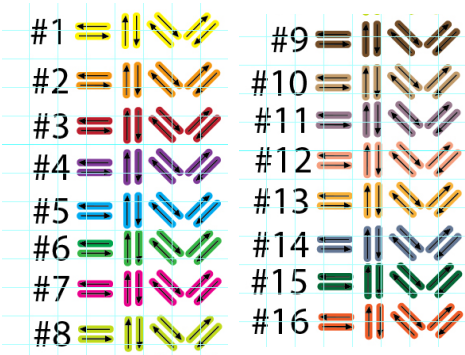
Your First Design

Knowing what design to stitch is often the biggest hurdle in starting blackwork, so I've patterned a simple blackwork design in four stages with four different levels of difficulty for you to practice on. The design is patterned after Mrs. Jane Small's blackwork collar painted by Hans Holbein in 1536. I did alter the pattern slightly to have it depict a small heart rather than a cross, but otherwise I believe it is very similar. This pattern uses the double running stitch, and can be done completely reversible, but you may also do it in the backstitch if you prefer and do not mind that it is not reversible.

Hands-On Practice Stage 1: Square

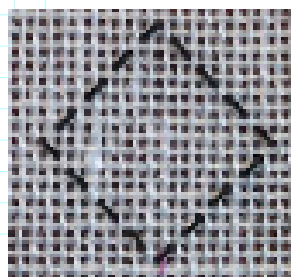
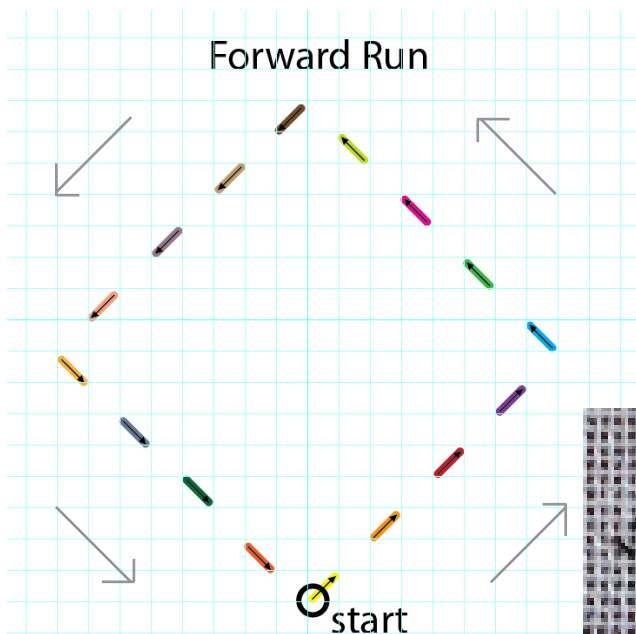
First we'll make a square. The square is 8 stitches on each side and is set at a 45° angle on your fabric. Start at the bottom and stitch a double running stitch all around in counter-clockwise order as your forward run, as shown on the next page. When you reach the end of the square, turn around and do the backward run in clockwise order. When complete, secure the start and end stitches (see pages 10–11).

Stitch Order Key



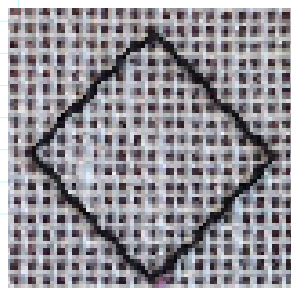
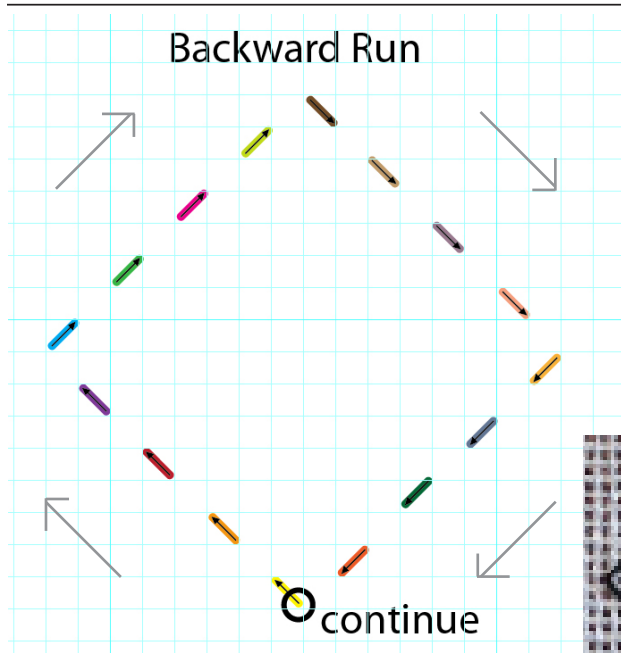
My Notes: _____

Forward Run



Shown on Aida 18 fabric

Backward Run



Hands-On Practice Stage 2: Smaller Square with Corners

Next we will make a smaller square inside the square you just made, and this square will have fancy corners. This square is 6 stitches on each side and is also at a 45° angle on your fabric. Count up three threads on your Aida fabric (or six threads on linen) and begin your first stitch at that point, as you can see in the Forward Run chart below. Follow the stitch order as indicated by the stitch colors and directional arrows. It's important to go in the same order if you want your work to be reversible. When you reach the end of the square, do the backward run. When complete, secure the start and end stitches.

Stitch Order Key

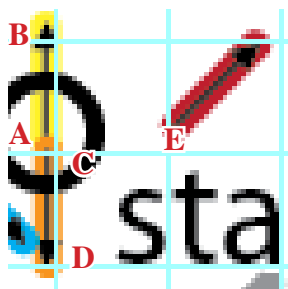


Note: Stitches repeat after #5

Stitches completed in previous stages appear as gray, like this:

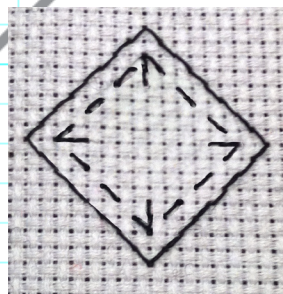
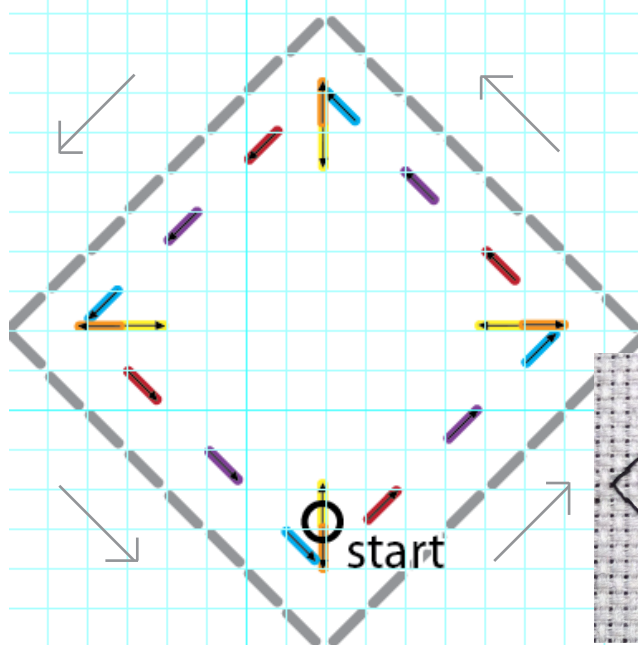


Close-up of the corner stitches—come up at A, down at B, up at C, down at D, then up at E



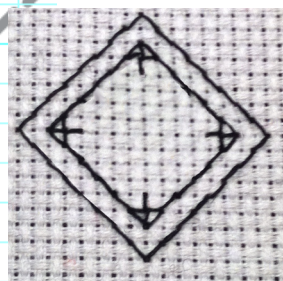
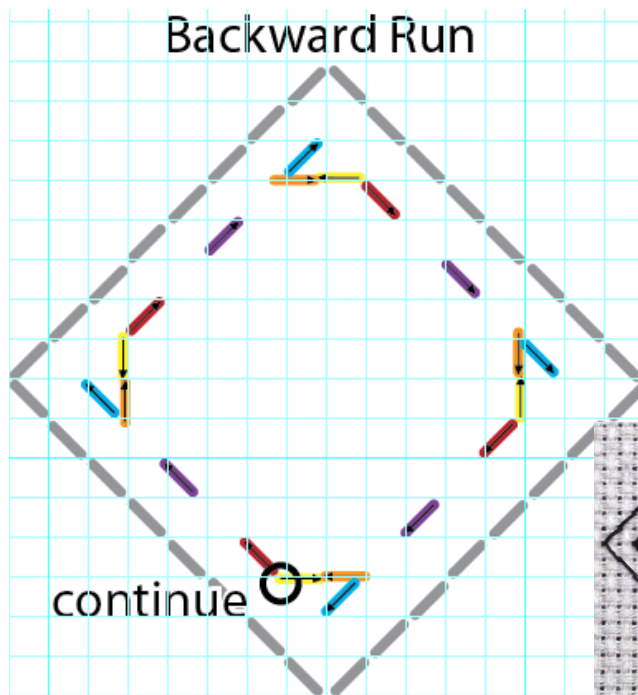
My Notes: _____

Forward Run



Shown on Aida 18 fabric

Backward Run



Hands-On Practice Stage 3: Decorated Heart

Next we will make a decorated heart within our boxes. This pattern is more complicated because the stitches are less regular and unpredictable, and the image does not take shape until you do the backward run. When I get to designs with this level of complexity, I find it is actually better to figure the design out as a I stitch. The key is to take “side trips” in your stitching when they deviate from your “main path.” In the pattern below, the main path is the heart, and the side trips are the four shapes around it. So as I’m stitching the main path of my design, and come upon a shape that is off the main path, I immediately take the “side trip” into the shape, stitching it in one direction, then turning around to stitch it in the other direction, and finally coming back out on my main path when I’m done with the side trip. The stitch order on the next page represents this main path and side trip concept.

Stitch Order Key

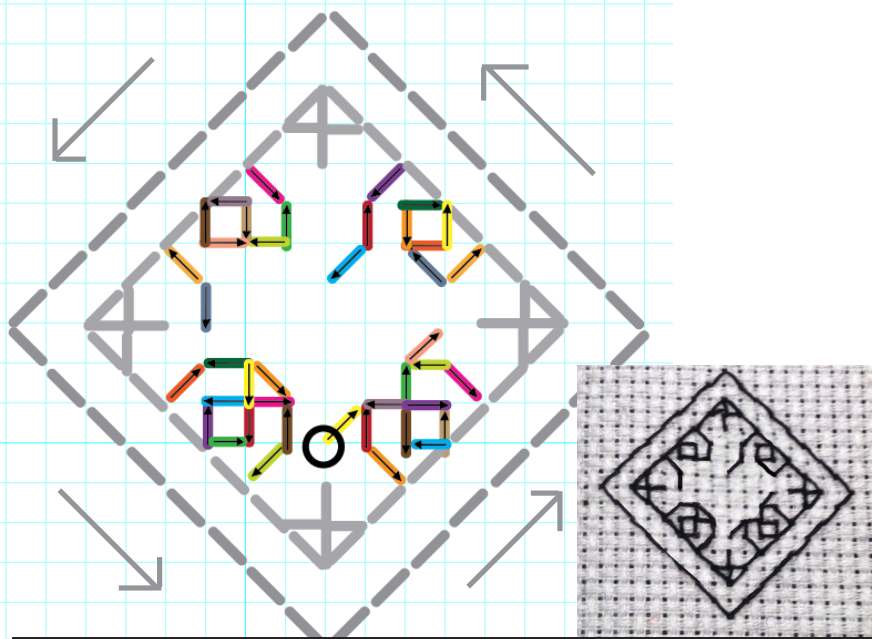


Stitches completed in previous stages appear as gray, like this:

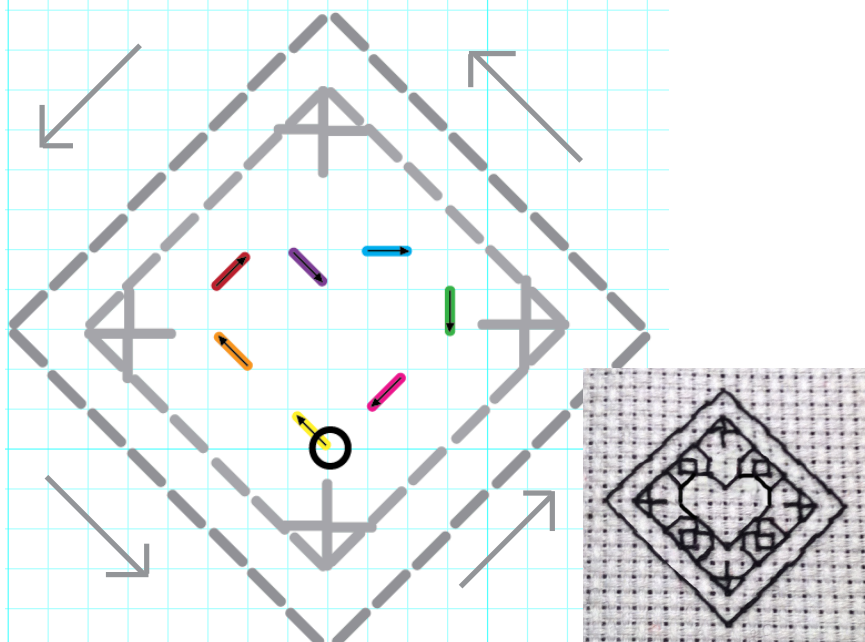


My Notes: _____

Forward Run

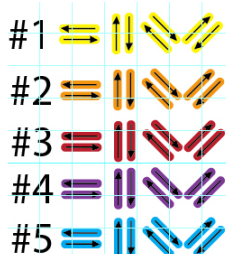


Backward Run



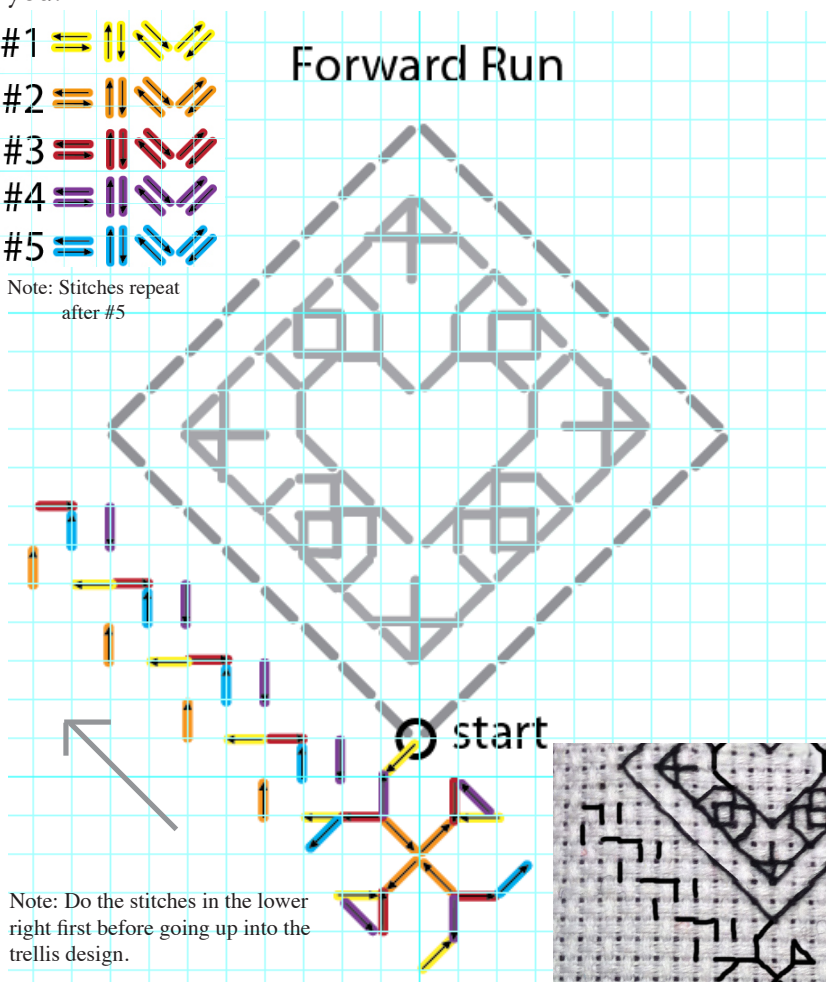
Hands-On Practice Stage 4: Trellis

The last stage is the trellis that can optionally run around/between the squares made in stages 1-3. This completes the motif, which can be repeated as many times as you wish on your fabric. The trellis is the most complicated of the four stages, requiring several runs up and down the design to complete. I should note that there may be other ways to determining the stitch order, but this is what I've found to work best for me. If you've made it to this stage, I encourage you to try to work out your own stitch order that feels most comfortable to you.

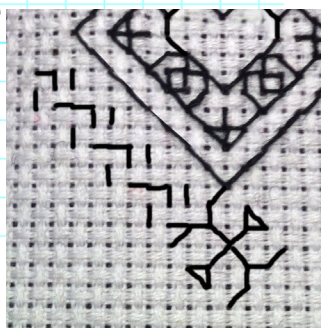


Note: Stitches repeat
after #5

Forward Run

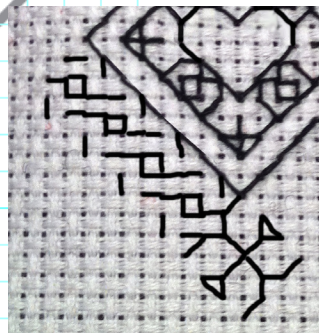


Note: Do the stitches in the lower
right first before going up into the
trellis design.

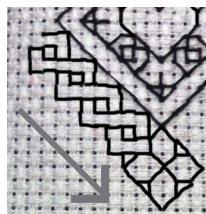
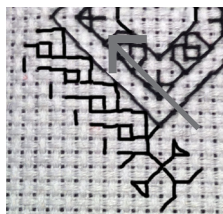


Backward Run

continue



After the forward and backward run, you'll notice your design still is not complete. At this point, you simply "turn around" and fill in the missing stitches, first going up and to the left, and then back down and to the right, completing the box, as shown on the right. I have not color-charted these stitches so you can practice stitching without them.



Now repeat this trellis design all around your heart box. To take it a step further, repeat this entire pattern—box and trellises—on your fabric, covering it completely!

Blackwork Resources

Patterns of Fashion 4: The Cut and Construction of Linen Shirts, Smocks, Neckwear, Headwear and Accessories for Men and Women C. 1540-1660 by Janet Arnold, ISBN-13: 978-0896762626

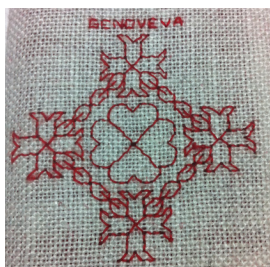
Blackwork by Mary Gostelow. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976; reprinted Dover Publications: ISBN-10: 0486401782.

The New Carolingian Modelbook: Counted Embroidery Patterns from Before 1600 by Kim Brody Salazar (Countess Ianthe d' Averoigne), ISBN-13: 978-0964208223

Blackwork Archives - <http://www.blackworkarchives.com>

The Atlantian Embroiders Guild - <http://aeg.atlantia.sca.org/index.htm>

Linen Smock at the Victoria and Albert Museum (T.326-1982) - <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O110103/smock/>



Blackwork Coif at the Victoria and Albert Museum (T.28-1975) - <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O364613/womens-coif/>

Sampler at the Victoria and Albert Museum (T.14-1931) - <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70028/sampler/>

About the Author, Contact Details, and Copyright Notice

Genoveva von Lübeck resides in the Barony of Cynnabar within the Kingdom of the Middle. She has been stitching and embroidering from the age of 7.

I love to help anyone who is interested in blackwork embroidery! You can e-mail me at genovevavonlubeck@gmail.com and visit my web site at <http://HonorBeforeVictory.com>, where you'll find tutorials, projects, photos, articles, and information!

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