11th century

Gobelin Manufacture in Paris

Weaving pictures is an ancient art. Originally the term Gobelin meant a hand-woven pictorial carpet mainly showing figures. Already in ancient Egypt we find pieces that were burial gifts in a strictly surface-covering ornamental style. In Europe individual pieces dating from the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries show that both sacral art as well as the adoration of the royal lines provided weaving impulses at an early stage. Only very few examples from this period have been preserved. In parts we only have indications of such work. This is, on the one hand, due to the material used, i.e. wool which was easily destroyed by moths. On the other hand, however, it was due to the widespread destruction as a result of various acts of warfare at that time.

Woven carpets are produced and differentiated according to two different techniques. First the flat weaving technique where the warp threads run horizontally and then the pile weave technique, in which the warp threads are arranged vertically. The material used was wool, later also silk and spun gold threads. It goes without saying that this considerably increased the value and the preciousness of the finished products. The exclusive use of wool as weaving material is not only due to its easy production and simple processing but also to the efficiency as these carpets were used both as decoration as well as to protect against the cold. In the production of pictorial rugs two things are closely intertwined. On the one hand the art of the artist and on the other the art of the weaver who had to produce the painted picture in a weaving technique as closely as possible to the original. In 1824 the Royal Gobelin Manufactory in Paris included no less than 14,400 shades of colour with which the enormous effect of the pictorial carpets was achieved.

14th century

Gobelin Manufacture in Paris

The strictly stylised era of the Romanic early Gothic period was followed in the course of the 14th century by more of a pictorially playful one that came into its prime at the turn of the 15th/16th century. The most significant successes
were without doubt enjoyed by the French, especially in Paris where the dyeing works of the Familie Gobelin were already outstanding for being particularly active in this sector. In 1662 they were bought by Louis XIV and converted into the State Manufactory for Pictorial Carpets. The name GOBELIN then became the top name for pictorial carpets.

16th century

Peter Paul Rubens

In France apart from the manufactory in Paris the Manufaktur Royale des Gobelins which was founded in 1664 in Beauvais developed. But it was always outshone by Paris, because at that time centralism was also developing in France which said that only something manufactured in Paris was good. Everything else that was not from Paris was provincial. Gobelin or tapestry weaving was also gaining significance outside of France during the 16th century. Brussels shot up like a comet in the skies to become the new tapestry metropolis. Most certainly Raffael had a great influence on the spread of the Brussels tapestries. His Acts of the Apostles was produced on one of the most famous Brussels weaving looms. In 17th century it was then Peter Paul Rubens who decisively endowed this art with his own skills. Just when the Brussels weavers were at the peak of their renown, the favour of society turned away from Brussels towards France again.

18th century

Art of woven gobelin tapestries flourished

With the beginning of the 18th century the transition from baroque to the fanciful rococo was complete. The taste of society changed again and with it art also changed. The pictorial rugs lost a part of their function that they had had for centuries. As wall coverings they were replaced by other materials. Tapestries adapted to the situation by becoming a precious piece of decoration within the home; to fulfil this function it was, naturally, necessary to comply with the taste of the time. During this time in particular, apart from Carlo Coypel, Francois Boucher was in high favour with his creations. His topics were the favourite motifs of the gallant period – pastoral scenes and his masterpiece The Loves of
the Gods came onto the weaving looms of the manufactory for the first time in 1758.

The particular attraction of the tapestries of the 18th century could be found in the alentours. These were woven frames that thanks to their refined composition and design led all parts of the tapestry to an impressive interplay. Before it was the motif of the picture, now it was the whole piece that gained its effect from the framing; this meant that the tapestry had been awarded a permanent place as wall picture and room decoration. Besides the development of the French, Flemish and Italian works we can even find a corresponding flourishing of the art of tapestry weaving. The German princely families became supporters of this type of art towards the end of the 17th century.

19th century

Change in embroidery

During the Biedermeier period between the Vienna Congress (1814-1815) and the March Revolution (1848) professional embroidery on the whole lost its significance as a decorative art for ornamenting clothing and the palaces of the rich and mighty of this world. In addition in 1804 came the invention of the Jacquard weaving loom with the help of which complicated patterns could be made on an industrial basis. Also industrial fabric printing became possible so that the art of picture embroidery could be easily imitated.

As a result of the beginning industrial development there was a middle-class society that was becoming increasingly wealthy. The ladies of that society had more time to devote to enhancing their homes with various artistic crafts. The private tapestry embroidery could be seen in armchair, settee and cushion covers. Hand-embroidered bellpulls operated the bell with which domestic staff were called to service. The professional production of wall-covering embroidery in tapestry, petit point and cross-stitch was adapted to the taste and the requirements of the gentry. The ladies of the bourgeoisie were able to earn a modest living as hand embroiderers or also with operating embroidery machines.

Berlin established itself as the centre of the production of numerical patterns on cartridge paper for this type of embroidery. A fine rayon staple fibre of
high quality, known as zephyr yarn and also produced in Berlin, was able to compete with the English embroidery wool. „Berlin Wool Work“ became a major export product to the rest of the world. Between 1840 and 1850 there were more than twenty companies in Berlin producing embroidery patterns and these were said to have produced thousands of different patterns. There were other branches of industry such as canvas factories, dealers in embroidery accessories and silk merchants. As part of this tradition the company Jacob Wiehler was founded in 1893, also in Berlin. Today pattern drawings on cartridge paper can be found in the company’s archives and also some colour samples of the old rayon staple fibre yarns have survived the destruction of two World Wars, as well as the flight and banishment of the Wiehler family.

### 20th century

**Production of fine works of handicraft art**

Hand embroidery has almost completely lost its significance as a craft. Whether justifiable or not, over the years it has been tainted with the reputation of long being a major factor in the education of young ladies who were damned to non-independency as eternal housewives. In nationally and regionally differing intensity hand-embroidery has survived as a hobby. Whereas in the USA thanks to the „Society of Decorative Arts“ socalled „Embroiderers’ Guilds“ were founded throughout the land.

These were devoted to teaching and upkeeping many old embroidery techniques. The art suffered serious setbacks in many parts of the highly industrialised Western Europe (with the exception of Great Britain which also has many active guilds). With decreasing demand the range of qualitatively high-class materials also sank, a fact that people who are now taking up the old techniques again such as e.g. parament embroidery, very much regret. With regard to picture embroidery this clearly intensified the age-old challenge of producing a successful synthesis between the painted original and the embroidered replica. Ironically, in times in which there is hardly a technical limitation to the production of fine colour shadings in embroidery yarns, business economic considerations limit the range of finely adjusted yarn shades available more than ever before. In order to be able to link up in some form with the artistic
tradition of picture embroidery as a pleasant alternative to many technical, simply produced yet striking illustrations, it is necessary to find a compromise between material suppliers and tapestry specialists. Only far removed from strictly economic considerations can one experience the joy of still being able to offer ambitious private embroidery enthusiasts the colour ranges and fabrics that are conducive to producing fine works of art with needle and thread

21st century

Quo vadis?

Our present times are characterised by a progressing compaction of all life’s processes. People are becoming more and more the object of the complex links between professional and private life. There is therefore an increased longing for a counter-balance, for a private sphere of tranquillity, contemplation and simplicity. Producing creative handicrafts is one possibility of fulfilling this longing. Apart from pleasure in the activity itself, a kind of confrontation with oneself also takes place when doing handicrafts of this kind. The human being who is forced into so many situations in life, threatens to act against his innermost convictions and to lose himself in doing so, can find himself again in the tranquillity of and concentration on the creative activity.

Embroidery already had this function in ancient times. In the convents it was always considered a type of meditation. Particularly as a consequence of our current way of life, embroidery could experience a special opportunity for an unsuspected comeback. Picture embroidery with its high number of stitches and colour shades and its special expressiveness – depending on the motif design – can certainly pay a very special contribution towards this.

Designer:

Olgica Pesa

http://www.AlgolRecipe.com
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