

# **Blackwork Embroidery for Beginners**

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## **History of Double-Running Stitch (Blackwork) Embroidery**

Double-running stitch originated with Arabic traditions that date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century but, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was popular all over Europe. The earlier forms of this embroidery were a geometric, counted stitch. The later forms of this embroidery included more curvilinear patterns. The first evidence found of the existence of blackwork embroidery dates back to Egypt around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, per radio-carbon analysis. This Egyptian embroidery was done in a counted-thread technique, usually with 2 threads, using a double-running stitch with largely geometric plant and animal motifs built up from horizontal and vertical segments. (Jones) On the rare occasion, diagonal stitches or cross stitches were used. This specific type of embroidery is recognizable because it is usually made with silk thread embroidered on linen fabric using a double-running stitch.

Through the Moorish occupation of Spain from 711-1492 A.D. and the Mamluk trade routes in Italy, blackwork embroidery became popular and spread throughout Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The technique of black, double-running, reversible stitch embroidery became extremely popular in England when it was displayed by King Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and was dubbed 'Spanish work' in England. In Spain, Catherine had been born to the new Spanish monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand. Having grown up learning the geometric embroidery, she continued her embroidery when she was sent to England to marry Henry VIII's older brother, Arthur, in 1501. After Arthur's death in 1502, Catherine later married Henry in 1509. After King Henry VIII divorced Catherine, the embroidery was re-named 'blackwork' and 'Holbein stitch' (due to the number of portraits with blackwork in it painted by Hans Holbein the Younger). By the time King Henry VIII's second daughter, Elizabeth I, came into reign, blackwork embroidery was popular among both nobility and monarchs. However, by Elizabeth's reign, blackwork had taken on a new look, which was curvilinear patterns with floral designs iconic of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, blackwork embroidery had become popular in other countries besides England, such as France. Louis XI and Charles VIII of France were both very interested in embroidery and summoned Italian embroiderers to court, so early French work was much influenced by Italy. (Snook) Examples of blackwork embroidery in Scotland have not survived, except for in portraits, such as that of Agnes Keith and her husband, the Regent Moray, painted by Hans Eworth in 1561. (Swain) Found among the garments left by Mary, Queen of Scots were four English chemises with blackwork designs. Other countries also had blackwork, including Hungary, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Russia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. (Nickels) Each country took blackwork embroidery and put their own individual twist on it.

After this beautiful reversible embroidery was introduced to European countries and Catherine of Aragon helped to inspire its popularity, it was widely used during the 16<sup>th</sup> century before slowly going out of fashion in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, somewhere around 1630. Blackwork had

been one of many ways for Europeans to display their wealth, as well as being fashionable. However, it soon became overshadowed by lace. Lace first started to make an appearance in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and was brought to Zurich from Italy around 1536. By the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when sumptuary laws began to relax and lace was no longer taxed, there was a demand on lace for anything and everything, from the edges of gloves to the edges of sashes and ruffs.

## **Materials and Methods Used during the Renaissance**

When looking at the pre-15<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian embroidery, blue, red, and brown (this could be a faded black) were common embroidery thread colors. The brown threads that we see in examples in museums may have originally been black, since the iron used to dye the threads can fade over time, as well as erode the thread. The Egyptian linen fabric was undyed. European blackwork could have been found on almost any type of fabric: silk, linen, satin, velvet, and netting. Wool may have been used for threading, but black silk on white linen was definitely the most favored in Europe. Once in a while, gold and silver threads may have been used to demonstrate visual drama. However, a person had to be careful when using gold or silver threads due to the sumptuary laws. Among the restrictions listed in Elizabeth I's 1574 statute was that for gold, silver, or pearl embroidery: it was reserved for only dukes, marquises, earls (including the children of all three), viscounts, barons, and Knights of the Garter.

Other colors of thread were used too. One immediate example of this comes to mind, which is the portrait of Bess of Hardwick from the 1550's, with both her sleeves and collar embroidered with red thread. However, black silk on a white linen background was indeed the most popular for double-running stitch embroidery. It is possible that the use of black thread embroidery was influenced by the newly-established printing presses.

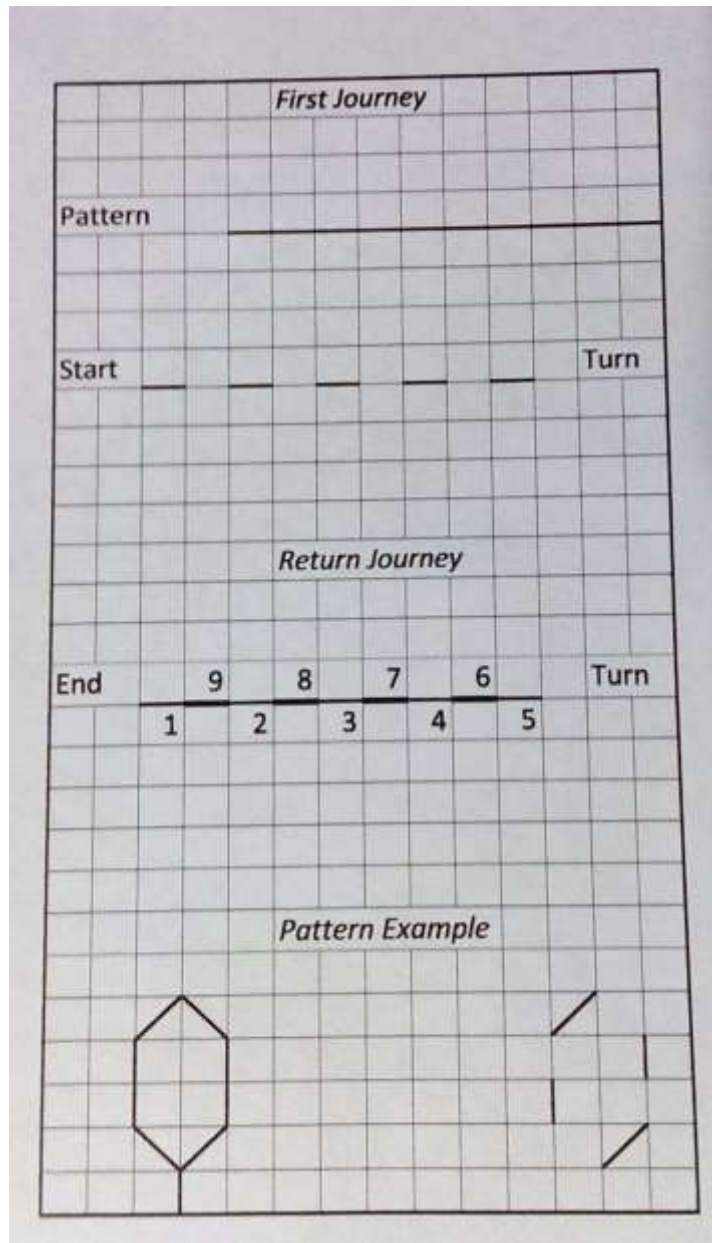
The Moorish embroidery had been used to decorate various household items such as towels, napkins, and cushion covers, as well as garments such as robes and veils. European shirts were the most common to have blackwork as decoration, especially on the cuffs and around the neck. There are many portraits from the Elizabethan time era of nobility wearing blackwork on the sleeves and cuffs of their shirts and chemises. By 1530, a man's shirt had a high neck, which had resulted in the origin of the ruff. Aside from ruffs, blackwork was commonly used on handkerchiefs, coifs, doublets, night-caps, and falling-bands. There is an example of blackwork embroidery on a stomacher at the V&A Museum in London.

The technique used to create blackwork is quite simple. Over the centuries, blackwork has also been referred to as Holbein stitch, backstitch, Spanish work, festoon stitch, square stitch, or double-running stitch. By counting the threads, the double-running stitch is a series of two 'journeys'. On the first journey, the pattern is to work every other stitch. Then on the return journey, fill in the blank spots to create one continuous line. A slate frame should be used for this type of embroidery. It is historically accurate, as well as not having to worry about warping the tension on the fabric or embroidery thread. Circular hoop frames did not become popular until the 18<sup>th</sup> century with tambour work.

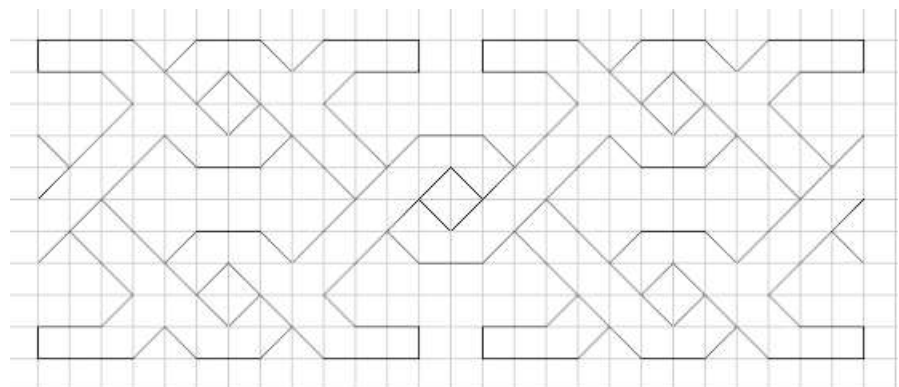
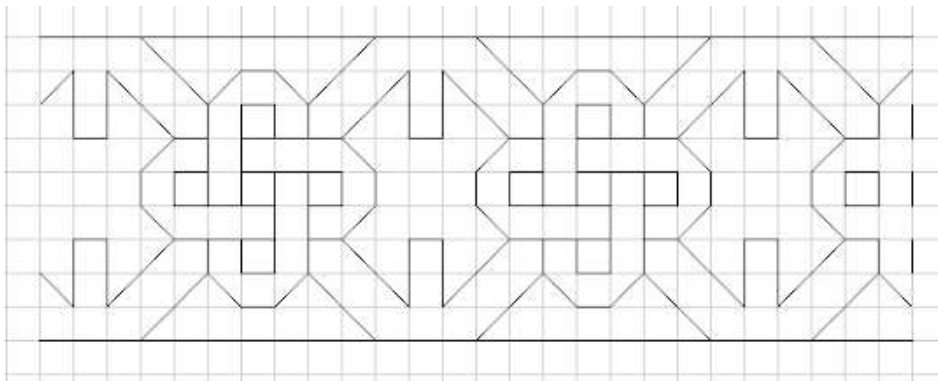
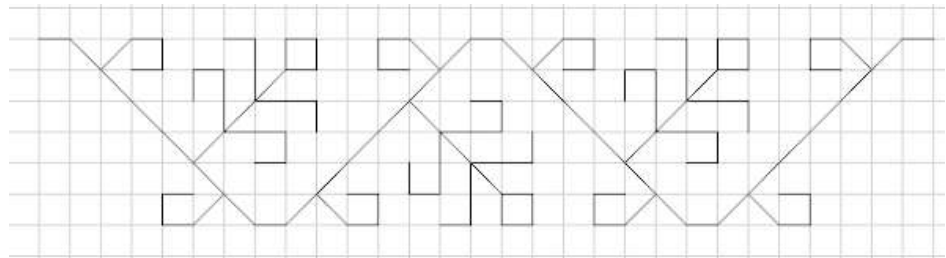
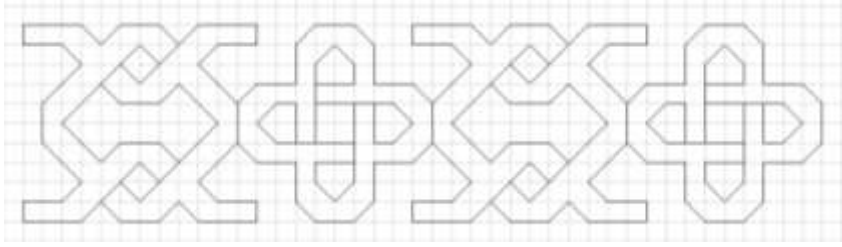
William Shakespeare even described blackwork in his works. In *Pericles*, Act V, Sc. I, I.5 Shakespeare wrote:

“...with her needl composes  
Nature’s own shape of bud, bird, branch, or berry,  
That even her art sisters the natural roses;  
Her inkle, silk, twin wit the rubied cherry:  
That pupils lacks she none of noble race  
Who pour their bounty on her...”

## Blackwork Directions



## Practice Patterns



### Blackwork Patterns from an Italian Sampler

The Italian sampler is from circa 1600. It is on display at the Met (Metropolitan Museum of Art). It features silk embroidery done in a double-running stitch, as well as white cutwork.

<https://tudorblackwork.blogspot.com/2020/09/blackwork-patterns-from-italian-sampler.html>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/221177>

## For More Historical Patterns

- Patterns from Jane Bostocke's 1598 sampler:  
<https://tudorblackwork.blogspot.com/2020/03/patterns-from-jane-bostockes-sampler.html>
- 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian sampler patterns: <https://tudorblackwork.blogspot.com/2022/01/16th-century-italian-embroidery-patterns.html>

## Historical Embroidery Samplers

*Jane Bostocke sampler (dated November 23, 1598)*



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(<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O46183/sampler-jane-bostocke/>)

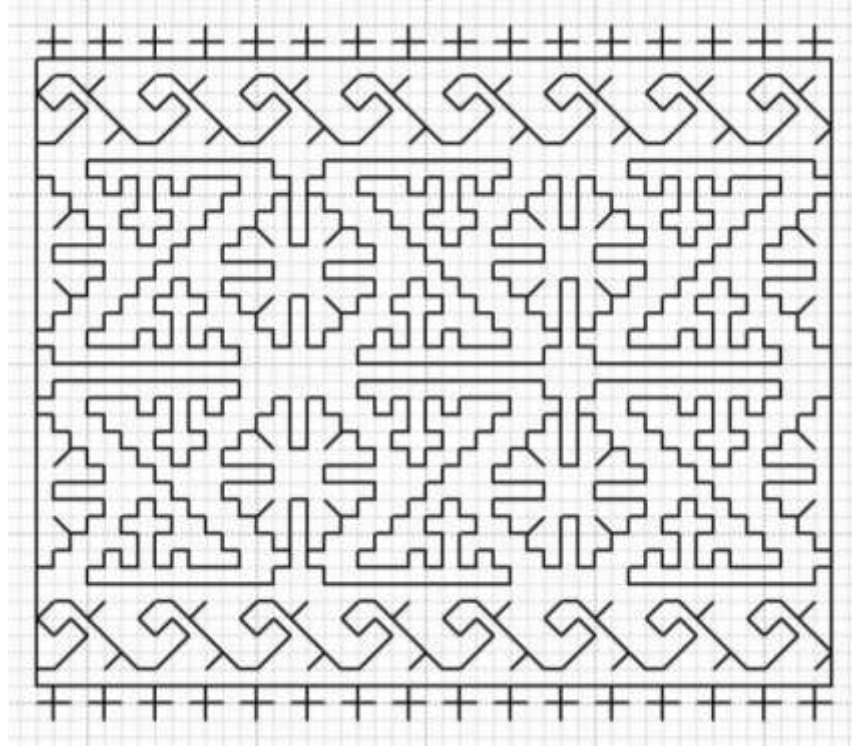
*16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Sampler*



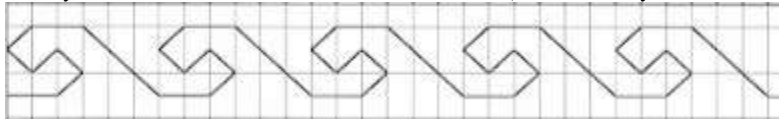
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(<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70028/sampler-unknown/>)

## Blackwork Patterns

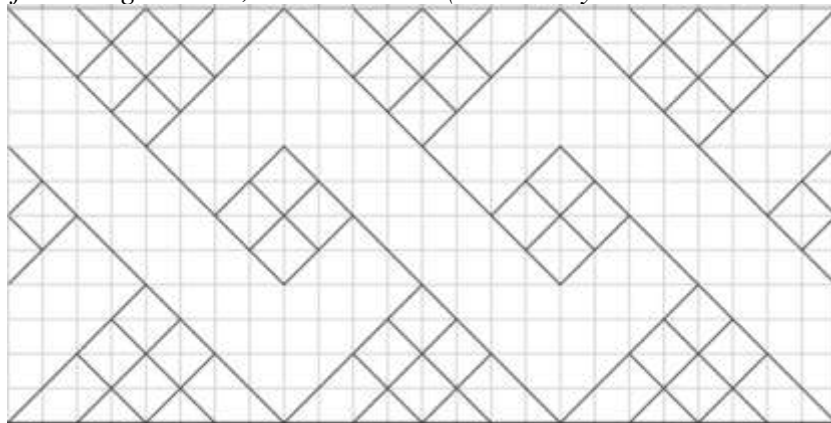
*Jane Seymour's cuff (Third wife of King Henry VIII) circa 1536-1537  
(Painted by Hans Holbein the Younger)*



*Portrait of a Noble Boy with a Marmoset, circa 1532-35 (Painted by Hans Holbein the Younger)*



*Portrait of a Young Woman, circa 1540-45 (Painted by Hans Holbein the Younger)*



## Works Cited

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## For further information...

- How to do blackwork embroidery videos: <http://www.youtube.com/c/LynneFairchild>
- For more historical patterns, visit my blog at <http://tudorblackwork.blogspot.com/>