

# Introduction to Counted Blackwork Embroidery

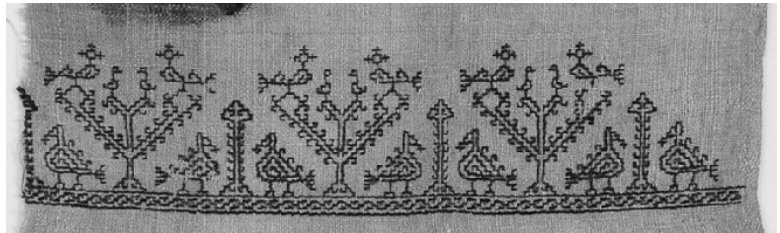
Double running stitch (a.k.a. Holbein stitch) uses a single thread to create a design that is identical on both sides of the work. It was used from the late 13th through 17th centuries in Islamic and Western European cultures to create reversible designs on a wide variety of personal and domestic linen textiles. It can be documented on handkerchiefs, towels, pillow covers, partlets, and the collars and cuffs of shirts.

The key components of this style are:

- linen ground fabric, usually bleached
- solid color embroidery thread, usually silk
- embroidery that contrasts with the ground, usually black, red, or dark blue
- counted thread technique to ensure regularity

## History

The earliest extant pieces have been found in Egypt and were dated to the late 13th century. These Egyptian pieces feature geometric designs and bird and tree motifs. The regular patterns are created by counting threads in the ground fabric to ensure each stitch is the same length. Additionally, they do not use diagonal stitching lines. If the design called for a diagonal shape, that line was created with right-angle, stair-step stitches.



Textile fragment from towel (detail). Linen with blue silk embroidery. Egypt, 14th-15th century. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (EA1993.182).

Exactly when and where counted monochrome double running stitch embroidery was introduced to Western Europe is uncertain. Some theorize that it entered via Spain due to the Moorish influences there. We know the stair-step design style was used in the early 16th century in England and in Germany. Examples can be found in portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) and in Nicolas Basse's *New Modelbuch*, published in 1568 using wood blocks of designs originally created between 1524 and 1545. Numerous paintings from the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), including many by Holbein, feature high-contrast embroidery on linen with predominately geometric patterns. The painting below on the right shows the next advancement in design: diagonal stitches rather than stair-steps.



*Jane Seymour, Queen of England* (detail). Hans Holbein the Younger, 1536. © Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna (GG 881).



*Derich Born* (detail). Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533. © Royal Collection Trust / Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (OM 26).

Starting with the introduction of diagonals, blackwork began to take on a more naturalistic style during the later 16th century. Eventually it transitioned from a counted to a freeform technique.



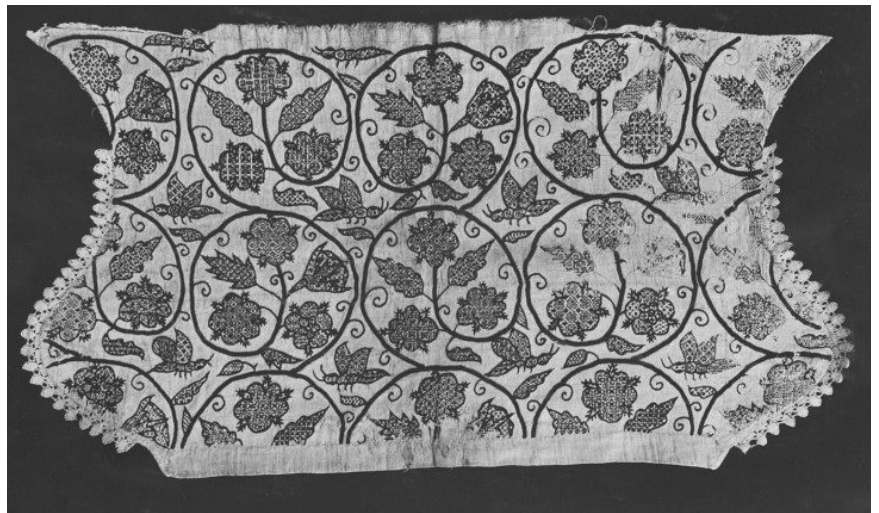
Sampler. Silk on linen. Italy, 16th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.14-1931).

In Italy, representations of animals and plants supplemented then replaced the geometric forms.

In England, freeform blackwork embroidery was used to create flowers, fruits, vines, insects, and other organic shapes. These shapes were often filled with small geometric patterns of different densities to suggest shading. This style of embroidery was seen on sleeves and coifs. Many of these pieces utilized other stitches in addition to double-running stitch, so they were not reversible.

During the 17th century, multi-colored embroidery styles regained prominence, and by the mid-1600s the monochromatic styles were no longer fashionable. However, samplers created by young schoolgirls learning various stitching techniques still included a variety of double-running stitch patterns, many of which

were similar if not identical to the geometric and early naturalistic designs from the 15th and 16th centuries. Hundreds of these samplers still exist and can be found in museums around the world. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England have especially extensive collections.



Coif. Great Britain, 1570-1599. Linen with silk thread embroidery. (c) Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.12-1948).

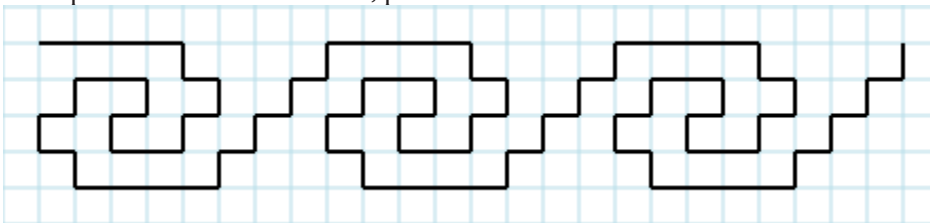
## Double running stitch

- This linear stitch is worked by making regular length stitches, evenly over and under the fabric, by counting the number of threads in the ground fabric which are crossed per stitch made. Cross at least two threads per stitch.
- When completed, this stitch produces the same image on both sides of the fabric. While you're working, the image will look like dashed lines, but if you hold the fabric up to the light, the dashed lines from both sides will meet up to make a solid line.
- Since the stitch length is regular, the patterns lend themselves to grid plots where each cell in the grid is one stitch.
- Start anywhere in the pattern. First work in one direction. When you've reached the end of the path or side trip, turn around and work the other direction, filling in the dashes by going through the same holes.

## Pattern Types

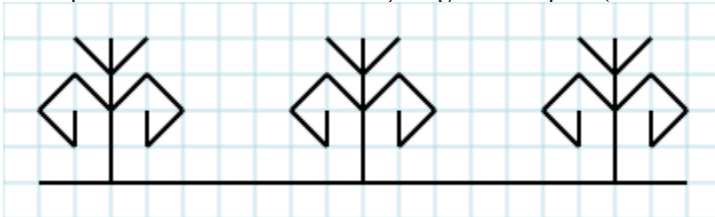
### Single path

- These patterns require no side trips. Just follow the design until you get to the end of the path, then turn around and come back to fill in the dashes.
- Example from New Modelbuch, plate 84.



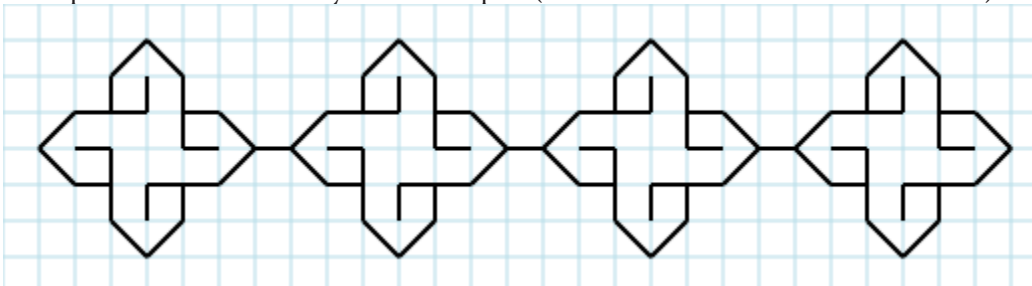
### Path with side trips

- These patterns require you to find the main path through the design and occasionally deviate from it onto a "side trip". When you get to the end of a side trip, turn around and fill in just the side trip. Once you get back to the main path, keep going in the same direction you were going before you took the side trip.
- Example from a mid 17th century English sampler (Victoria & Albert Museum: 739-1899).



### Path with loops

- These patterns are worked like the side trips above but require more planning to ensure all of the threads are covered exactly once in each direction.
- When you get to the end of a loop, turn around and go back the way you came.
- If you have a chain of loops, you'll need to follow the path into each loop, completing the last one in the chain, before you come back and finalize the ones you worked first.
- Example from a 16th century Italian sampler (Victoria & Albert Museum: T.14.1931).



## Tips & Techniques

### *Fabric*

- Aida cloth is a Victorian-era invention that is conducive to counted thread work since it is a natural grid pattern with large holes. The “count” is the number of squares per inch.
- Evenweave fabric has the same number of threads per inch in the warp and weft of the fabric. This property is good for grid patterns since you’re always counting the same number of threads per stitch.
- Regular linen fabric may have a different number of threads per inch in the warp and weft. Thus, to make a pattern square, you may need to count a different number of threads depending on whether you’re working across the warp or the weft.

### *Tools*

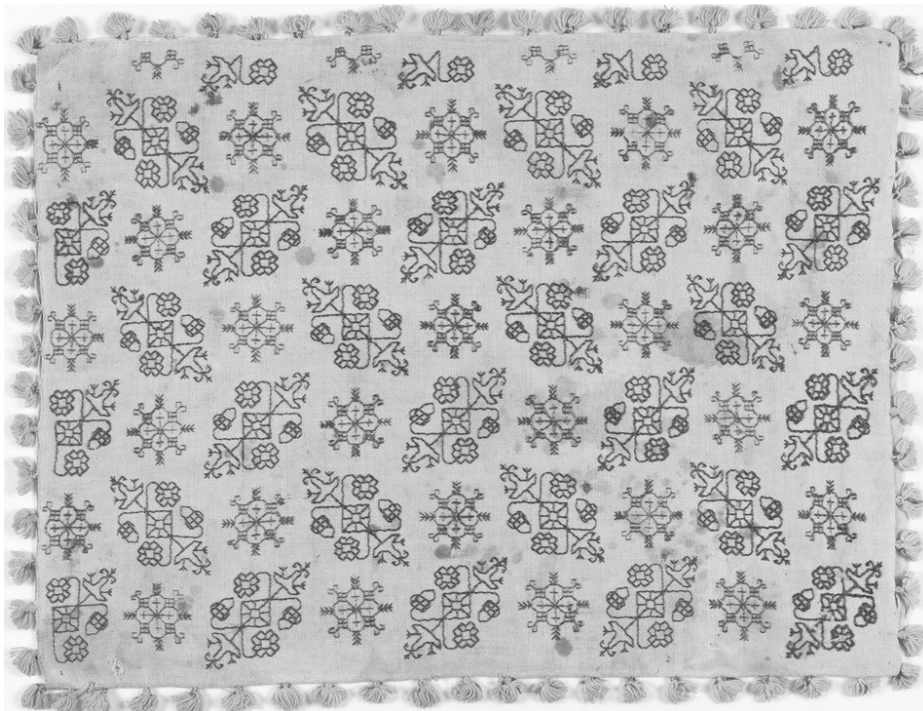
- Stiff cloth can be worked without an embroidery hoop or frame. When using a hoop or frame, don’t stretch the fabric too tightly.
- I prefer tapestry needles since I find their blunted tips pass between threads rather than piercing them.

### *Starting a new thread*

- The tail **must** be on the opposite side of the work as the tail of the thread you just finished.
- Weaving in ends before a path is done on both sides may result in the ends popping out when you come back along the path.

### *Weaving in ends*

- If you are working on a reversible piece, there is no back side. You must hide the ends in the embroidery. Follow the path of the embroidery through at least five stitches, then cut the thread very close to the work.
- Having another strand of thread may make the area where you weave in the end appear a bit darker.
- Weave in the ends after you have completed both directions on the path. If you weave it in after only one pass, the reverse trip might cause your woven in end to come loose as you go through the holes.

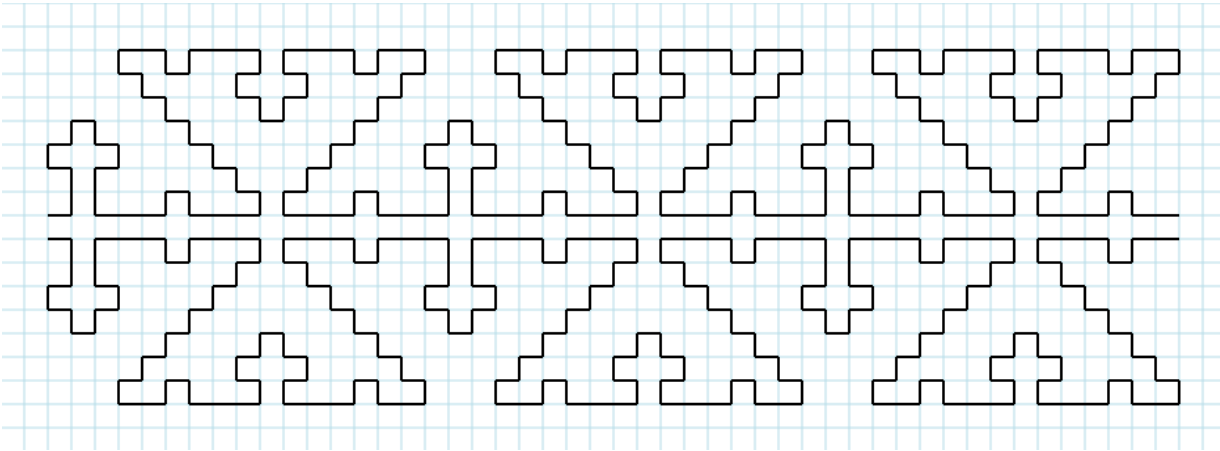


Pillow cover. Linen with silk counted running stitch embroidery. Italy, 16th century.  
© Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York (1949-63-1)

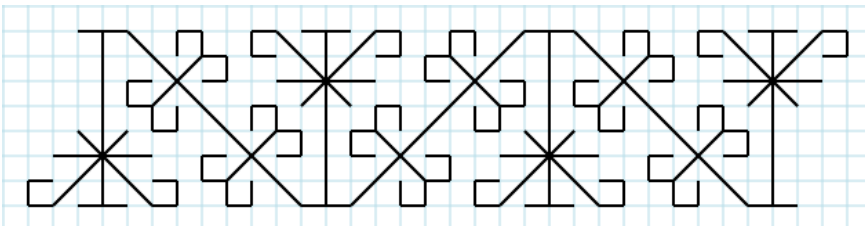


Handkerchief. Linen with silk embroidery and metal thread bobbin lace. England, ca. 1600.  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
(T.133-1956)

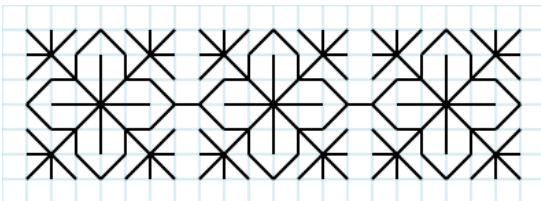
## More Patterns from Period Sources



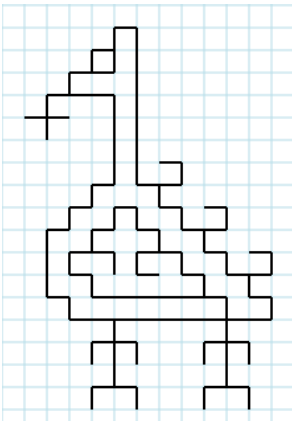
*New Modelbuch*, plate 81



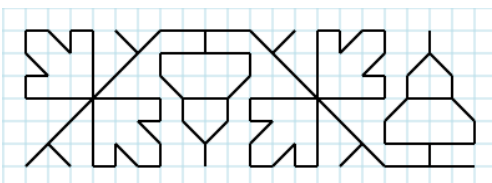
Sampler. Mildred Mayow, England, 1633 (Victoria and Albert Museum: T.194-1927)



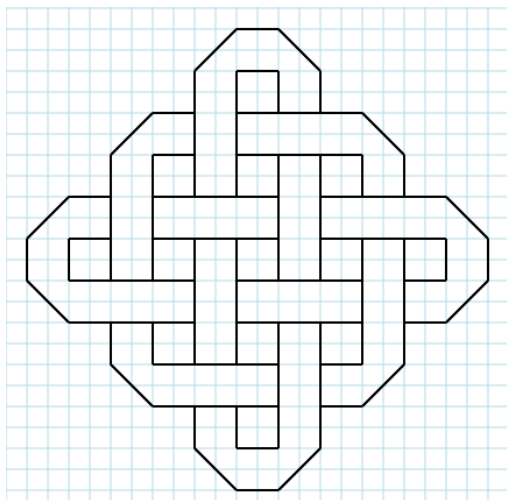
Sampler. England, mid 17th century (Victoria and Albert Museum, London: 739-1899)



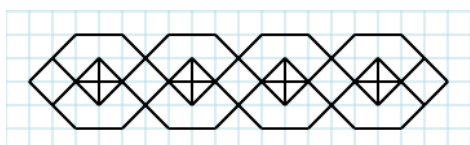
Sampler. Egypt, 14th-16th century (Victoria and Albert Museum, London: 326-1921)



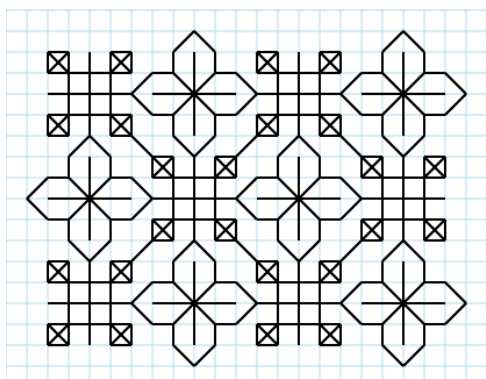
Band Sampler. England, mid to late 17th century (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge: T.66-1928)



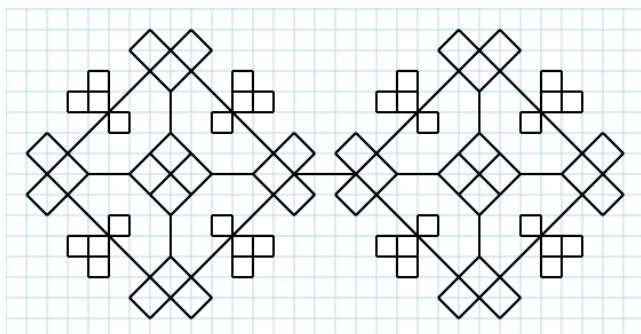
Sampler. Jane Bostocke, England, 1598 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London: T.190-1960)



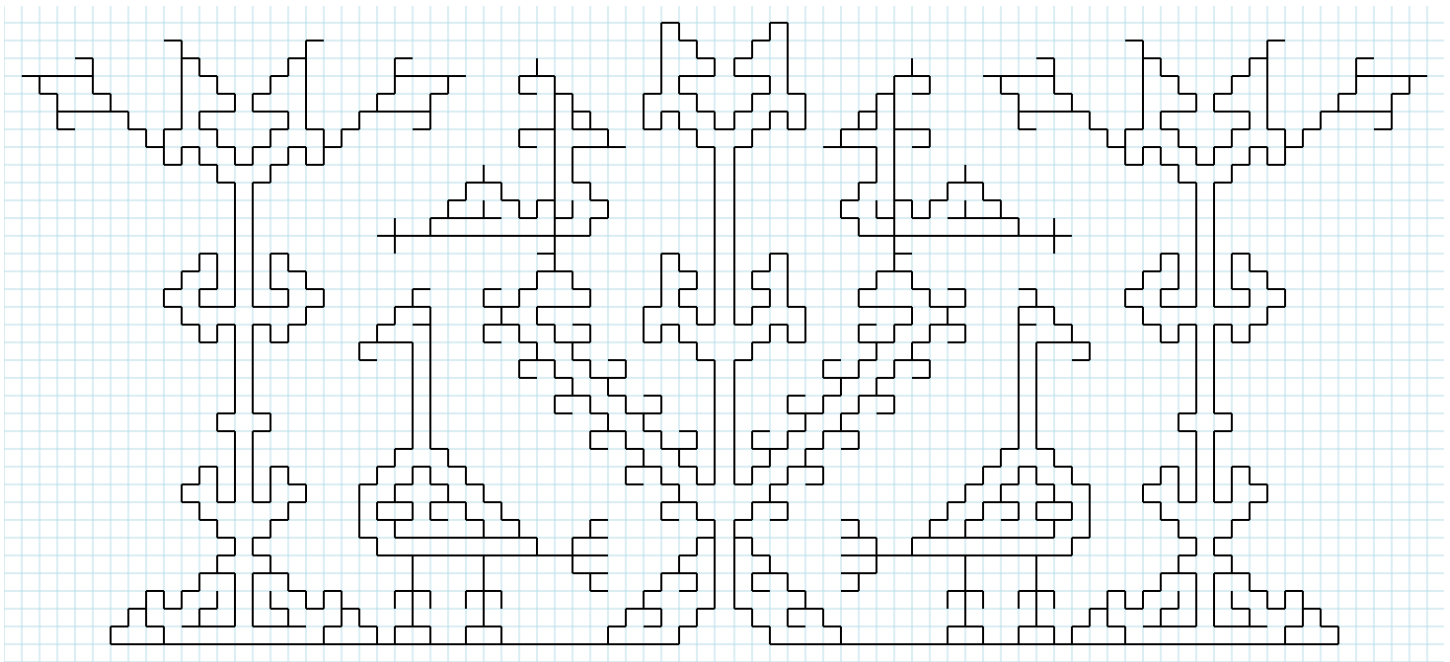
Sampler. England, mid 17th century (Victoria and Albert Museum, London: 739-1899)



Sampler. England, 1600-1650 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London: T.230-1929)



16th century Italian sampler (Victoria and Albert Museum, London: T.14.1931)



Textile fragment. Egypt, 14th-16th century. (Benaki Museum, Athens: 15943).

### Bibliography & Further Reading

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The patterns in this handout were drawn using online graph paper from:  
<http://www.garrettbartley.com/graphpaper.html>

