



Florentine Style Embroidery for a Cushion Cover

Florentine Stitch Pillow Cover

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Motivation:

A modern embroidery friend showed me one of her projects that looked like a 1970s afghan, she told me the style was started in the 16th century, and I had to know more. I confirmed that the modern Bargello embroidery did in fact have its roots in the 16th century. The aesthetic, with all the different colours in neat rows enthralled me, and I was excited to try the novel style. I needed a cushion for my new wooden chair and a plan was formed.

History and Development of the Style:

This style is called Florentine stitch, though also flame stitch. Some use these terms interchangeably with Irish Point, Hungarian point, and Bargello. However, neither Hungarian Point nor Bargello are synonymous with Florentine style. Florentine style uses a uniform stitch length laid in regular rows to create a flame-like or zig-zag pattern. Hungarian point varies the stitch length for a similar effect. Bargello is a more modern interpretation that varies stitch length, stitch direction, and overlaps rows for a distinct style that is only reminiscent of the 16th century look.

Much of the information available on this style is muddled. This is mostly due to the fact that Florentine style has enjoyed several periods of popularity over the last 400 years, and as it waxed and waned, the style was updated to give us the aesthetic popular today. Most commonly, it is believed to have been first popular in the 17th century. However, there exists a few surviving pieces that show that this style was already fully developed by the latter half of the 16th century.

The one piece that is positively dated in the 16th century is the wall hangings in the West Room at Parham Hall. The 1966 Parham guide book, Needlework at Parham Park, describes them thusly:

In this room, two walls are hung with curtains each measuring 5ft 6ins by 20 ins. These are probably unique and may represent the earliest known attempt at a Flame Stitch design...The large zigzag pattern repeats in shades of blue, brown and fawn; yellow through pinkish beige to rust red; yellowish tones through brown, orange and fawn to blue; all dominated by the recurrent strong blue lines.

These wall hangings came to Parham from Quenby Hall in Leicestershire around 1590. Interestingly, records show that some part of the original hangings were cut off to make chair covers prior to being sent to Parham. This implies that the hangings were already of an age to be re-purposed and may be older even than the 1580's. Indeed, in a 1993 edition of the Parham guide book, Needlework and Tapestry at Parham Park, Judith Doré speculates that they could be as early as 1560.

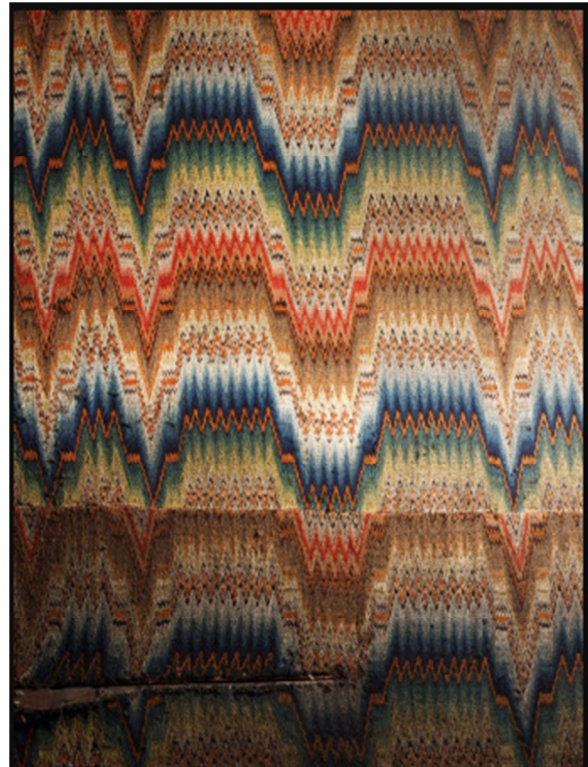


Parham Park, West Room, , Source: <http://www.parhaminsussex.co.uk>

Other examples of early Florentine style embroidery include a set of bed curtains, pelmets and valances at Parham, and wall hangings at Chastleton House, Oxford, which are practically identical to the Parham hangings. Both these, though, are dated to roughly 1610-1620.



Parham, Great Chamber, Source: <http://www.parhaminsussex.co.uk>



Chastleton Hanging, Source: <http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk>

The consistency in colour scheme and patterning between the Parham hangings, and the Chastleton hangings speaks to an established process and enduring fashion for these items by the latter half of the 16th century.

That some other part of the Parham hangings became chair covers, and the large number of Florentine style chairs and footstools in the museum in the Bargello district of Florence, indicates that there could be a large number of 16th century Florentine style embroideries lost to the wear of many bums. Therefore, while it's fair to say that the Parham hangings are the earliest surviving examples of this style, I don't believe them to be the beginnings of this style. (see Annex A for photos).

There are many arguments for how this style of embroidery came to be. The most common story is of a Hungarian Princess Elizabeth, who devised this stitch so that her peasants could produce the embroideries with little to no waste of wool. This story is repeated in every document to refer to the history of this style, but it is legend at best. There are other stories about different Hungarian noble women, one even from the 14th century, but these stories have as little in the way of references as the legend of Princess Elizabeth of Hungary.

Some say it was an attempt to simulate the ikat textiles of the Middle East. An examination of popular 18th century Florentine motifs will support this theory and certainly speaks to influence of Middle Eastern textiles on Italian fashion. However, the motifs seen in late 16th and early 17th century household textiles in England and Italy are dissimilar enough to the motifs in Middle Eastern woven textiles that I, personally, doubt an influence as early as the 16th century. The Ottoman textiles that I have seen lack both the array of colours, and the absence of negative space that marks Florentine style.

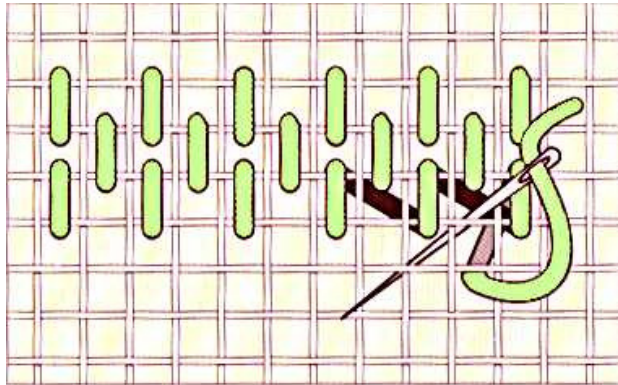


Left: Kemha fabric, first half of 17th century, Source Gürsu page 121
Right: Cup cover, 17th century, Source: <http://www.polomuseale.firenze.it>

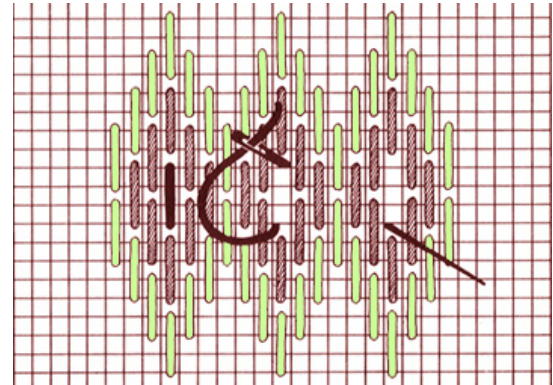


Left: Chatma fabric, first half of 17th century, Source Gürsu cover
Right: Stole, 17th century, Source: <http://www.polomuseale.firenze.it>

The way Florentine stitch is worked is certainly related to brick stitch, which was popular in Germany in the late 14th century. But the motifs are, again, significantly different.



Counted Brick Stitch, source: <https://www.artsanddesigns.com/glossary/>



Flame Stitch, source: <https://www.artsanddesigns.com/glossary/>

While I think it is reasonable to assume the Florentine stitch developed out of German brick stitch. I think it is impossible to determine the evolution of the motifs, given that this form of embroidery was used in upholstery as much as it was, and that it tended to be repurposed more so than religious vestments and altar cloths. In this way, the style's true origin shall remain lost.



German Almonieres worked in brick stitch, Source: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk>

Parham Hangings:

The Hangings in the West Room at Parham Park are wool worked on linen canvas, also called scrim. The pattern is described as repeating shades of blue, brown, fawn, yellow, beige, red and orange.

Materials:

I practiced my stitches on linen scrim first, with the intention of also trying modern embroidery canvas. I found, however, that the linen scrim performed perfectly, and saw no need to test the modern material.

I used Anchor Tapestry Wool for my floss. It is available in a multitude of colours; is 100% wool; locally available; and hard wearing. I choose colours as close to those used in the Parham hangings, without trying to be exact. The two specific exceptions were the choice of a dusty purple in place of brown - which is achievable with a combination of cochineal and brazilwood and alum - and the rather acidic orange - which can be achieved with cochneal and citric acid.

Process:

I stretched a square of scrim on my frame and tacked it well, then drew a 20"x20" square to indicate the edges of the pillow.

I began with a very small stitch length, and a very small number of stitches per repeat. After cresting the first curve, I noticed that the zigzags would be lost on this scale. I, therefore, ripped it out and started over. Instead of charting first, I decided how tall and how wide I wanted my zigzags, and stitched to fill the space. I also increased my stitch length from 2 threads to 10 threads. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Following my colour chart of the Parham hangings, I added row after row. Once the majority of the square was full, I went back to fill in the spaces in the hills under the first row and the valleys over the last row.

Conclusion:

I hate counted work. The first row was difficult as I had to count every stitch. Subsequent rows involved less counting, but I had to unpick a few stitches more than once because they were not long enough.

I love the look. The pattern makes me think of a cozy afghan and the colours make me happy.

I am particularly proud of the economy of thread use in this piece. I had started with one way of working the stitch, but switched it up after the first few stitches. Not only does it preserve the floss/yarn, but it also has a better rhythm.

References

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Annex A: Furniture Examples

Figure 1: Foot Stool, circa 1600

Source: <http://www.polomuseale.firenze.it>

Figure 2: Chair, circa 1600

Source: <http://www.polomuseale.firenze.it>

Figure 3: Chair, 16th or 17th century,
photo courtesy of THLVincenzo di Bartolomeo da Brescia



Annex B: In Progress pictures

