

Needlework Tools

Period and Modern

Pre-Amble

I've tried to focus mainly on European finds from the 10-16th centuries. Sewing tools including thimbles, scissors, and needles have been found throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, dating back many centuries Before Common Era.

NEEDLES

Firstly, which needle you use is 100% personal choice.

Metal needles have been found in Europe throughout our period. The needles found are often large by our standards (most in the 2-3mm in diameter range). However, the excavations at Coppergate have found two needles from the 12th and 13th century levels that are "especially fine", in 19 and 20 gauge wire. For comparison, my favourite embroidery needle is 21 gauge. (remember with wire gauges, the higher the number, the thinner the wire)

Needles were made with iron, copper alloy (bronze or brass) and organics (bone, horn and wood). The eyes in the metal needles were of two types, round or long. The round ones were made with a punch, and the long eyes were made by splitting the end of the wire and soldering the tips back together. Centering the eyes in either method is a Pain In the Neck (I speak from experience), the needles we've found are clearly made by experienced crafts-people.

The Coppergate findings reveal that copper alloys with round punched eyes became increasingly more popular in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, there were no bone needles found in the 12-13th century levels, but several in the earlier levels.

You can find several merchants all over that sell reproduction needles. A word to the wise: choose iron needles when you can find them. Brass is easy to work with, and is the choice of merchants everywhere – but because of how pure modern brass is, it is difficult to harden. It will therefore bend very easily and won't hold a point for more than two stitches. If you are looking for a useable needle, brass will make you unhappy.

CARING AND STORAGE OF NEEDLES:

All needles eventually lose their sharpness, even the modern ones. The difference is that when the modern ones dull, we throw them out. The plating on modern needles makes it hard to sharpen them, and they're so cheap now, it really isn't worth it.

Period needles, on the other hand were dear, and do not keep a point as well. So, we sharpen. Your period sewing kit should have a whetstone, and every sewing session should start with a good sharpening. You'll get used to how often you need to sharpen your needle.

Iron and copper both oxidize without care. This oxidation could stain the fabric, and cause drag on the needle. The copper alloys are less prone, but nothing is stainless steel.

Our skin oils are corrosive, so your needle should be wiped down with a cloth periodically. Preferably a slightly oily cloth. Note you can get lanolin cream at the pharmacy in the baby section.

Storing the needle in wool, either roving or fabric, can keep it oiled when not in use. If your fabric doesn't seem oily enough, you can add lanolin.

Which brings us to storing.

Needles are precious, and easy to lose. Not a good combination. Therefore, we need to keep them safe. Enter the needle case.

The Norse favoured open-ended tubes made of bronze, silver, or bone, where the needles were kept in place by embedding them in a scrap of wool fabric or roving and then stuffing the tube with this.

The middling centuries saw capped tubes. The Copper Alloy needles need less oiling, so there's less need to stuff the whole needle case with fabric or fiber. However, these also benefit from some fluff in the bottom. The fluff/roving gives something for the needle to rest in, so they don't cling to the sides of the tube, making it easier to get them out.

The 16th century innovated with a needle case down the center of a multi-sectioned thread bobbin.

PINS

Pins are less necessary when hand sewing than when using a machine, but they do come in handy occasionally. There are so many pins with the coiled ball at the top that museums don't bother to put them in the collections databases. The pins are copper alloy for the most part, though some have been found in silver. Pins of this sort could equally have been used for clothes or sewing.

Today we have pincushions with emery in them to keep our pins sharp. I am not aware of any pincushions having been found from our period, however, emery is a documented substance for sanding/shining metalwork. It's not out of the realm of possibility that period persons also had emery stuffed pin cushions.

THREAD

The thread is less interesting than the tool that holds it. The content of the thread is just what you'd expect: linen and silk mostly, wool on occasion, cotton in later period or more Easternly locales.

BOBBINS

There have been a few bobbins found. Earlier periods preferred the flat cards with indentations, made from wood or bone. Middle years liked a more spindle like shape, usually lathe-turned, made of bone and wood. The 16th century brings us things that look like what a modern person would call a spool.

There have been not purpose-made objects with string wound around them found in every period. These itinerant objects include a small bone right off the leg of the beast, and smooth sticks of varying descriptions.

Whatever you use, be it the DMC plastic or cardboard bobbins, or hand carved wooden spools, winding the floss or thread from the hank/ball will make your life easier, and your kit prettier.

WAX AND CONDITIONER

Thread can be delicate. The constant friction of passing through the fabric can wear and fray it. To smooth its passage, if you will, one passes the thread over a cake of beeswax. This provides a measure of strength, lubrication, and protection. You're less likely to get knots and snarls, breaks or fraying. Less needed for silk thread, it's an absolute must for linen threads. The Coppergate excavations even found a small ball of beeswax in with the sewing tools.

When embroidering, you don't want to cake the whole length of your floss with your wax, but it is sometimes beneficial to wax the working end (the opposite end of the knot). With floss especially, because of its looser spin, the loose end gets slowly worn away with repeated passings through the cloth. Wax or conditioner will help prevent that, and will make it easier to rethread if it comes out of your needle for whatever reason.

THIMBLES

A million and one thimbles have been found and half of all portraits of tailors depict them.

Ring style and dome style have both been found. Made from metal and leather. You should pick a thimble that works for you, and fits you. Your finger should go all the way to the tip and the thimble should stay on without any wiggle.

Thimbles are usually copper alloy, and have divots to help hold the needle.

I use a modern silicone thimble when sewing because I can feel more through it. If I can't feel anything on my thimbled finger, I'll just use a different finger to push the needle with making the whole thing pointless.

For embroidery, one doesn't often use a thimble. If you use the "stitch" method and are therefore pushing the needle, and you have a big project, you'll find your finger suffering. You'll want something to protect at least that bit of finger. There are various adhesive thimbles available today (I recommend a "thimble-it", which is a circular suede sticker).

SNIPS and SCISSORS

An important tool in a needlework kit.

When sewing, one needs both a thread snip and a larger pair of scissors/shears. The large shears are too unwieldy to cut the thread at the end of the seam, and the wee snips can't handle cutting the fabric.

Many scissors have been found in many sizes. Both the spring type and the pivoted type. Obviously not all the scissors would be used for sewing or embroidery. Sheep need to be sheared and people need to cut nails and hair, so scissors were a vital innovation.

Most of the ones found have been iron, though there are a few silver examples. The shape of the scissors found are remarkably similar to modern scissors. Spring type scissors are less popular today for large jobs, but are still favourites for string-crafts. Modern pivot scissors have made a few ergonomic developments like different sized finger loops and angled blade, but the concept remains the same.

Illustrations support the physical finds, with both spring and pivot style scissors represented. Some illuminations show pivot shears with some remarkable blades. These bulky angular blades are likely

there to give some rigidity and strength to the edge. Without the bulk, the blade might bend, ruining the shears and the cut. Modern alloys and metal-working advancements have allowed the blades to be slimmed down without losing the rigidity.

In embroidery, large shears are rarely needed - preparing the cloth and finishing the piece don't count as "embroidery". Instead, a special pair of small scissors is recommended. In period, it is likely to just have been a small pair of spring snips (think Lee Valley). In truth this is all I have used all my years stitching. I have only recently acquired the proper kind of embroidery scissors. What makes them special is how terribly sharp they are. They usually come to a wicked point and are the sharpest scissors available. They are excellent for removing delicate embroidery stitches, or trimming fluff that has been pulled through from the back of the work. They are not *required*, but are a nice to have (and they're sooo pretty). You'll want to keep these in a case, or attach a weighted dongle to the handles. The last thing you want is for your scissors to land point first on the floor – it's bad for the point, and bad for the floor.

OTHER SEWING TOOLS

In your travelling kit, you may want chalk, a tape measure, an awl and a needle threader. There is no evidence of needle threaders that I know of. Not findings and not illuminations. There are illuminations that show tailors with flexible tape measures, rigid rulers, awls and chalk.

Rigid rulers in any useful length are difficult to transport. To give your flexible tape a better look, take some beige cotton twill tape or gross-grain ribbon and mark the gradations in sharpie (ink)

EMBROIDERY FRAMES AND STANDS

In period, we see illuminations with embroidery laced onto what we call a "slate frame". A slate frame is four pieces of wood with holes drilled along the length. It is then pegged together at the size needed and the fabric is laced taught through the holes with strong linen thread.

There are reasons why you would want to use another style of hoop or frame. Not the least of which is that slate frames can be expensive these days if you don't make them yourself.

The same illuminations show the frames being supported by trestles. These are exceptionally transportable and make a good option. You should find the stand that is right for you

Please take special note of the middle image on this slide. You will see a cat there on the floor. It is absolutely vital to have a studio cat for your stitching. I'm just sayin.

MODERN EMBROIDERY GOODIES

There are four thoroughly modern tools that come in handy when stitching: A needle threader, needle puller, needle minder, and a stitch layer. There is no evidence for any of these tools in period.

For needle threaders, consider the thicker hook style (as is depicted in the deck), they also make micro threaders. They are less likely to break and easier to use. They are better suited to long eyed needles, which is where the micro threaders come in handy for the smaller eyed sewing needles.

A needle puller is really just a circle of rubber or silicone. They are handy to have to increase your grip on a needle that's stuck. It's rarely necessary to pull out the pliers, so you can stash half a broccoli elastic in your kit and call it a day.

A needle minder is a magnet with a charm. Most commonly it's a flatish decorative circle glued to a magnet that sits on top of the fabric, with a magnet under the fabric. The force of the magnet will hold your needles while you work. Depending on the size, it can also hold your needle threader and potentially snips. You can make one yourself with just two rare earth magnets. There are tonnes of adorable, affordable minders out there.

The last piece that you might like is a stitch layer. This is ... a stick. It could be wood or bone or metal. It needs to be smooth, because the floss needs to glide over it. It could be an awl, a chop stick, a second needle. It's not something I use often because it occupies a hand and I'm a two hand stitcher. I did buy, specifically for this class, a ring based model. It turns out to just be a tapestry needle welded to an adjustable band.