

Monday 10 February 2025 online talk

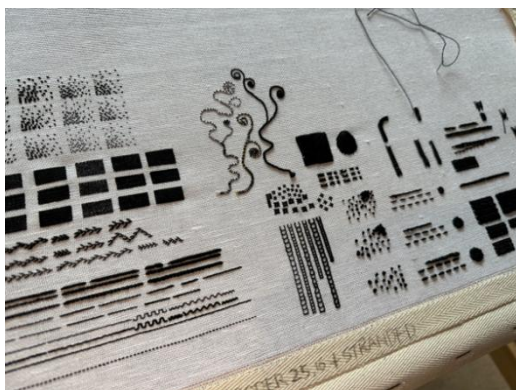
Toni Buckby – Re-embroidering Blackwork

Anyone wanting a crash course in blackwork should begin with Toni Buckby. Her talk introduced us to what blackwork is, the differences between historic and modern blackwork styles, blackwork fashions through its 120 years of popularity in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the technicalities of how to work it.

There are very few pieces of historic blackwork in English museum collections for two reasons: firstly, as a very expensive technique for the rich, pieces were re-used and cut up endlessly until there was nothing left. Secondly, the iron mordant used to fix the black dye on the silk thread causes the thread to decay to dust. This process can't be halted, and museums cannot display what they have as it is too fragile. Very often, studying English blackwork involves trying to join up the holes!

When she began her PhD in 2019, Toni approached the blackwork collection at the V&A not as a historian or museum curator, but as a practical stitcher, asking the question "What do I need to know to be able to reproduce these lovely pieces?"

When lockdown interrupted her access to the 50-odd blackwork items in the V&A's collection, she set about documenting as many blackwork patterns as she could find, and working the same stitches on different fabric counts to try and determine how long the items might have taken to stitch.



As historic blackwork uses many more different stitches than the modern version, she also had to learn many of the complicated stitches, which include braid stitches worked in stiff goldwork thread.



Released from lockdown, she wanted to reproduce a historic blackwork for herself, and lighted upon an unstitched coif – a simple cap worn over the hair beneath a fancy headdress or as part of more informal dress at home. Intriguingly, the coif seems to have been partly stitched and then unpicked – who knows why?

Although the coif is a relatively small piece, larger blackwork items would have been stitched communally and Toni sought to replicate the experience by sending out an invitation for other stitchers to join her. She was taken aback to receive 400 email replies! In the end, around 100 stitchers aged between 12-97 (but no men) took part in the Unstitched Coif project, with many providing their own materials.

Collective stitching sessions were arranged at Sheffield and the V&A, with online sessions for overseas participants. Friendships were cemented during the project, and many stitchers are still in touch. The timeline was quite short, but Toni received 78 finished coifs – all different – which the V&A have accepted into their collection.



A key part of the project was documenting the process, with stitchers writing to imagined stitchers 400 years in the future about their experience of working the coif. They felt connection to unknown blackwork stitchers of the past, with whom they could not communicate, so this aimed to “play it forward” to future embroiderers. You can see the finished pieces and read what they said on:

<https://blackworkembroidery.org/an-unstitched-coif-stitchers/>

Find out more about blackwork on Toni’s website:

www.tonibuckby.com

www.blackworkembroidery.org