Stitch

threading lives together

BRIDGING ARTS

EDUCATION PACK

Patron: Her Majesty The Queen
President: HRH The Duchess of Gloucester

ROYAL SCHOOL OF NEEDLEWORK

Supported by The National Lottery® through the Heritage Lottery Fund

heritage lottery fund

The Brighter Borough Wandsworth

BRIDGING ARTS

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THE BRIGHTER BOROUGH
Wandsworth

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The aim of **Stitch** is to encourage cultural exchange through embroidery. It brings diverse groups together through a shared interest in sewing and needlework. Through the study of traditional British embroidery and Islamic patterns, and informal discussion, we hope to increase understanding of the ways cultures interact and histories intertwine.

This Education Pack, to be used with four embroidery kits, is for secondary schools and adult groups. For schools, it meets key areas of the curriculum: e.g. history, geography, DT, art, mathematics. No expert knowledge of embroidery is needed. The packs are designed for use by beginners and more advanced embroiderers.

Photo ©Sophie Gerrard/Bridging Arts

AIMS

Motifs and pattern can uncover and throw light on heritage. In this project, studying both will:

- awaken an awareness of the pleasures of pattern and ornament
- explore pattern and ornament as an engaging and accessible way of understanding different heritages, including the religious and social beliefs that give different groups their sense of identity and belonging
- encourage, through visual and practical means, an understanding of different aspects of Islam and British history.

OUTCOMES

After completing this project students will have gained:

- embroidery skills
- an increased understanding of Islamic and British culture and history
- an understanding of the power of motif, pattern and ornament to suggest identity.

BACKGROUND
STITCH WANDSWORTH

Stitch Wandsworth started in autumn 2008 in Wandsworth, south London, and was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Working with Muslim women and the Royal School of Needlework, we collected, identified and exhibited examples of sewing, embroidery, appliqué and needlework. We compared and contrasted the techniques used on traditional embroidery from South Asia and North Africa with traditional British sewing skills. We learned about the history of the embroidery and gathered information about its background and origin. We arranged visits to museums holding relevant collections for talks from experts to learn more about these techniques and this heritage.

We looked in particular at the way patterns came to the UK from South Asia and the Ottoman Empire and influenced embroidery traditions in the West (e.g. Jacobean and medieval and ecclesiastical goldwork) and vice-versa.

>>>
PAGE 6

BACKGROUND
STITCH WANDSWORTH

We then ran practical workshops where participants learned skills still used today in embroidery in the UK.

At the end of the workshops, we staged an exhibition of traditional work gathered and work created at practical workshops. This exhibition is available to tour and this Education Pack can be used as a tool for understanding more about it. It includes:

- new embroidery created in sewing classes
- traditional embroidery collected at focus groups.

New packs, inspired by the project, are designed for use with this Education Pack and the exhibition.

UNIT ONE
TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY

Sewing, embroidery and motifs can make unexpected connections, spark memories and bring people from different cultures and backgrounds together. Fabric and thread can tap into deep veins of identity and emotion. In **Stitch Wandsworth**, groups of Muslim women studied examples of their traditional embroidery.

Two examples have poignant stories showing personal histories and heritages intertwining.

UNIT ONE
TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY

FISH SCALE EMBROIDERY

Embroidery Loaned by Zubaidah Shah and Safia Qureshi. Photo ©Max Colson/Bridging Arts

This unusual piece of fish scale embroidery was worked more than 70 years ago in east Africa by the 14-year-old sister of Zubaidah Shah and Safia Qureshi. The young man in the photograph is their brother. Sadly, their sister died two years later of typhoid on her way back by ship to Pakistan to get married.

The fish scales remain tough and resilient. They were scraped from the fish, dried and cut into petal shapes.

>>>
PAGE 9

UNIT ONE
TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY

GOLDWORK

Loaned by Akhtari Al-Mahmood. Photo ©Max Colson/Bridging Arts

Akhtari Al-Mahmood ordered the green nylon for this sari from Japan almost 30 years ago: at the time, nylon was not readily available as a sari fabric but it was coveted as it was easily washable and crumple-free, unlike traditional cotton and muslin.

She then ordered the designs to be done in Bangladesh, and at the time paid about 50p for each pattern.

Akhtari only wears saris. She continued to wear them even in America, living through snowy winters in Colorado when she was studying there in the 70s. "When it was snowing I used to tuck my saris into my boots," she said.

Back in the UK she did a variety of jobs, from working in the civil service as a tax officer to heading curriculum management in Tower Hamlets Adult Education Department.

UNIT TWO
NEW EMBROIDERY

After studying the patterns and motifs of traditional embroidery, women took classes with the Royal School of Needlework on four different stitching techniques. They created their own pieces, which are on display in the exhibition, using new and remembered skills and images.

They brought together images from their cultural heritage and their lives in the UK today.

UNIT TWO
NEW EMBROIDERY

DAFFODILS
By Chhaya Biswas
Photo ©MaxColson/Bridging Arts

The daffodil is Chhaya's favourite flower. She recalls studying Wordsworth's poem, *To Daffodils*, as a girl in Bangladesh but had never seen a daffodil. "They told us that they were yellow and swayed in the wind, but I had never seen one." As a young bride, in Wandsworth, at the age of 18, she saw her first daffodils on Wandsworth Common, and was enchanted.

"And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils."
From *To Daffodils* by William Wordsworth

>>>
PAGE 12

UNIT TWO
NEW EMBROIDERY

TILE
By Ferdous Rahman

Ferdous, who has travelled widely since leaving her native Bangladesh, is a poet and an artist. Her embroidery is inspired by a tile at the entrance to the Eyüp Sultan Mosque in Istanbul which she visited just as the sewing workshops started.

The mosque is built close to the place where Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, a close companion of the Prophet Mohammed, was buried in the 7th century. Ferdous has added her own choice of vibrant colours to decorate the original motif.

UNIT THREE
THE EMBROIDERY PACKS

Each embroidery pack provides background information on the stitches involved in the design and the motif itself. It is intended to spark discussion on the traditions that cultures share as well as their differences. The motifs are:

- a pomegranate
- a fish
- a rose and nightingale
- a horn of plenty.

Elements in these designs reflect the traditional geometric decoration of Islam (e.g. the Moorish influence in Spain) and the cultural heritage of western cultures. The stitches used are used in both Islamic and western embroidery.

For teaching purposes, participants need to be in groups of four or five around tables. Discussion around the topics raised by the packs can start as sewing begins. Teachers should allow time at the end of the session for participants' ideas to be gathered and recorded. We have created a blog, where

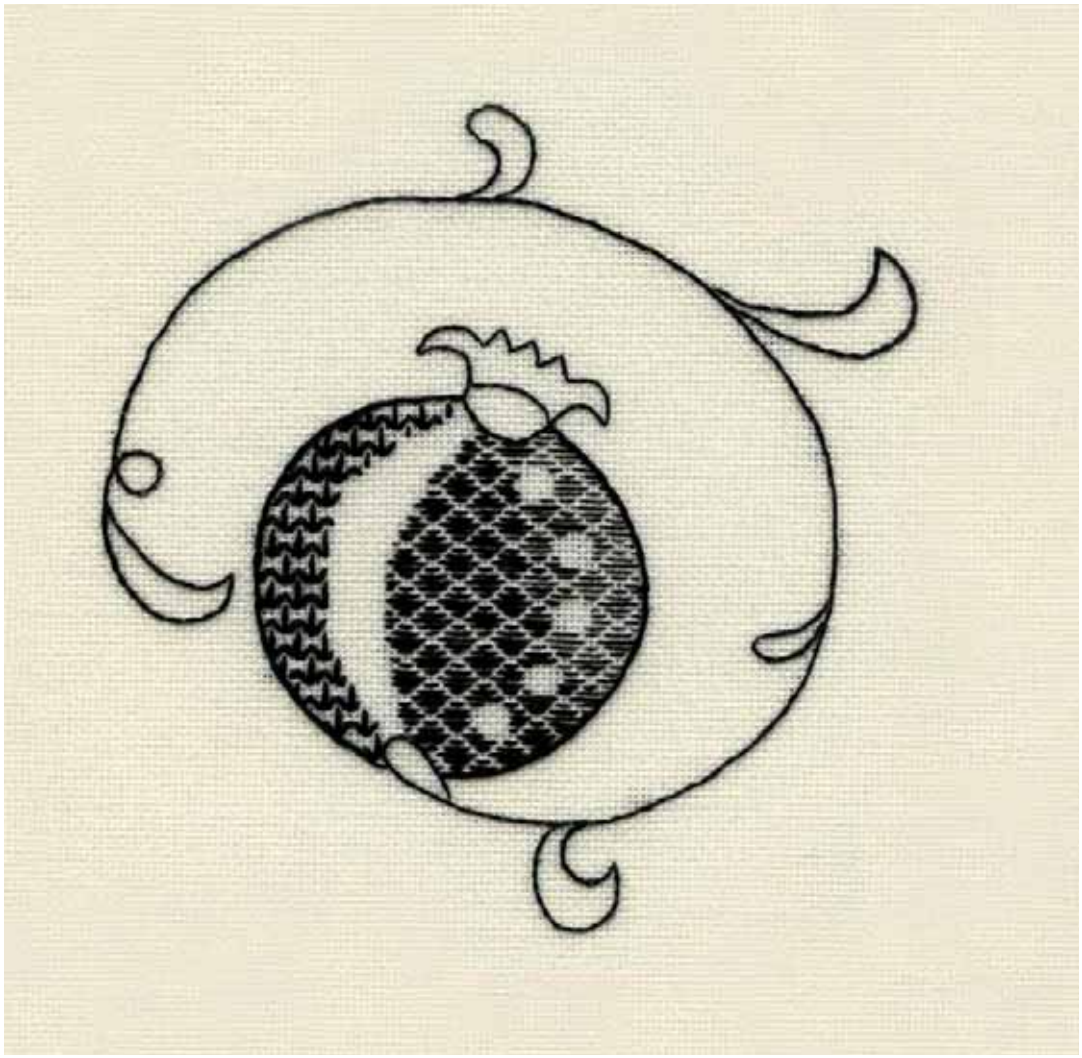
UNIT THREE
THE EMBROIDERY PACKS

previous participants' thoughts and discussions have been added. These could be used as a starting point for further discussion, or referred to at the end of the project. Please add your group's reflections to the blog **http: //patternsandplace.blogspot.com**. We hope that sewing together will facilitate discussion.

Suggested timing for a 2 ¼ hour session:

Introduction (20 minutes)
Discussion/sewing instruction (35 minutes)
Break (15 minutes)
Discussion/sewing instruction (45 minutes)
Feedback from groups (15 minutes)
Conclusion (five minutes)

WEEK ONE
BLACKWORK: THE POMEGRANATE



Embroidered by Elizabeth Lansberry , Royal School of Needlework

THE STITCH

Blackwork historically consisted of designs worked as counted thread stitch on even-weave linen. Black thread on white linen was commonly used but sometimes designs were worked in other colours. Blackwork is said to have been brought to England by Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. She came from Spain in 1501, when the Moorish rulers there had only just been vanquished. The geometric patterns that were popular in Islamic Spain travelled with her to Britain and became popular here.

>>>
PAGE 16

WEEK ONE
BLACKWORK: THE POMEGRANATE

THE PATTERN

The pomegranate was the emblem of Catherine of Aragon and appears on her coat of arms and on her clothes. It symbolises life and fertility.

The pomegranate is widely cultivated in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. According to the Koran (the sacred book of Islam), pomegranates grow in the gardens of Paradise.

Photo ©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Lucky charms and talismans

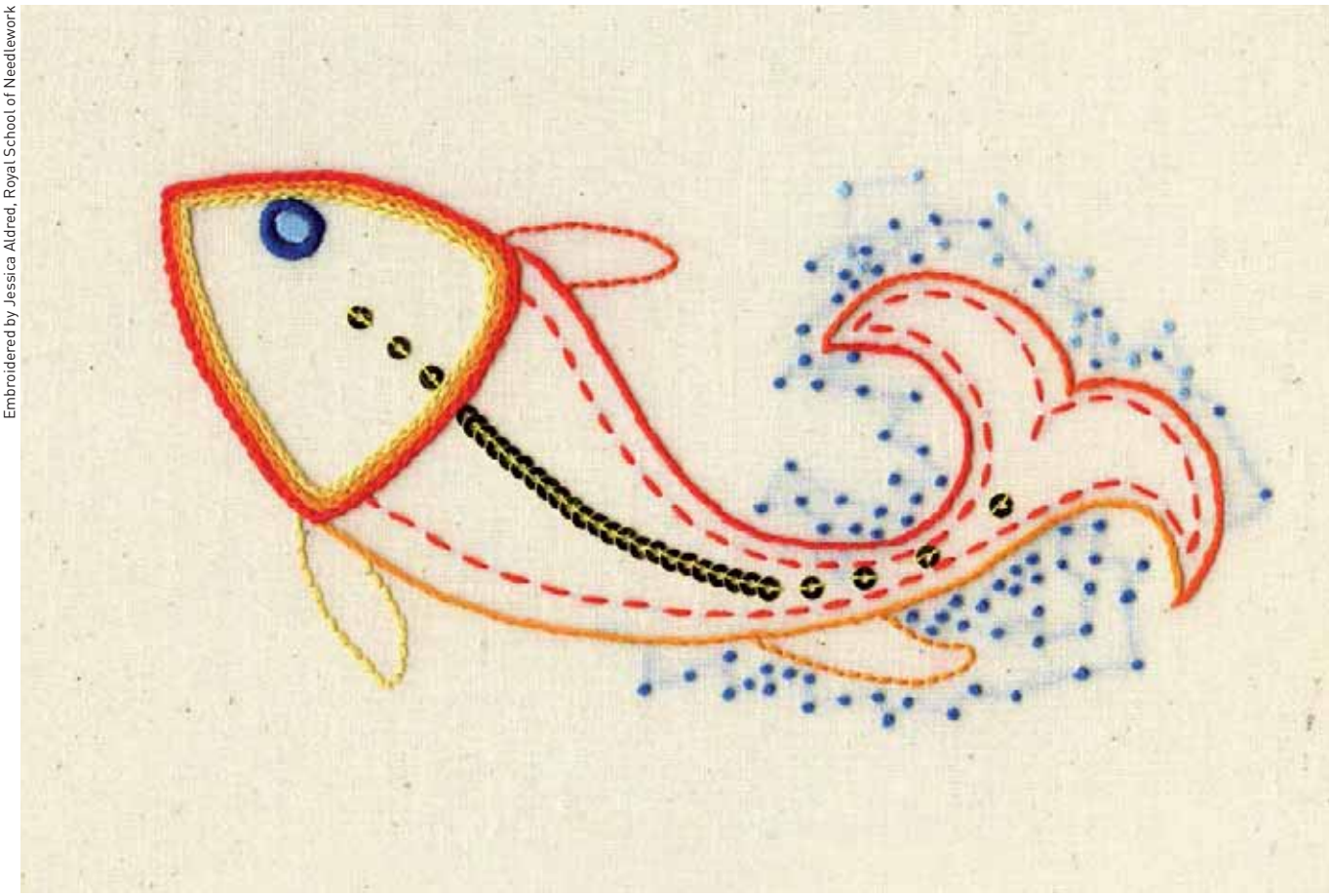
MORE INFORMATION

In England, blackwork was often used to decorate collars and cuffs, sleeves and skirts. It became popular in the 16th century when the Elizabethans typically outlined leaves, fruit and flowers on linen then filled them in with geometric patterns.

There are many examples of exquisite blackwork on the cuffs and sleeves of dresses in the Elizabethan era. One can be seen in the portrait of Jane Small (formerly known as Mrs Robert Pemberton) by Hans Holbein the Younger at the V&A Museum.

>>>
PAGE 17

WEEK TWO
SURFACE STITCHES: THE FISH



Embroidered by Jessica Aldred, Royal School of Needlework

THE STITCH

A variety of simple surface stitches are used in this motif – running stitches, French knots, split stitch and silk shading. Variations of these running stitches are found in all traditions of embroidery.

THE PATTERN

The fish is a symbol seen in embroidery across the world.
It has many different meanings.

In Christianity, the fish is an ancient symbol of Christ. In traditional folk embroidery, fish can symbolise the power of water as the origin and preserver of life. They are often embroidered in areas where fish is an important part of the diet. Some embroiderers believe they are the emblem of the soul. In Bengal, fish are sometimes embroidered on *kanthas* (quilts) as fertility symbols for a marriageable daughter. >>>

>>>
PAGE 18

WEEK TWO
SURFACE STITCHES: THE FISH

Photo ©Bridging Arts

This *kantha* (quilt) is typical of Bangladesh and features a powerful fish motif as well as peacocks and a lotus flower. Traditionally, these quilts are produced from layers of old cotton fabric, sometimes saris, which are quilted together with a tiny running stitch.

DISCUSSION TOPIC

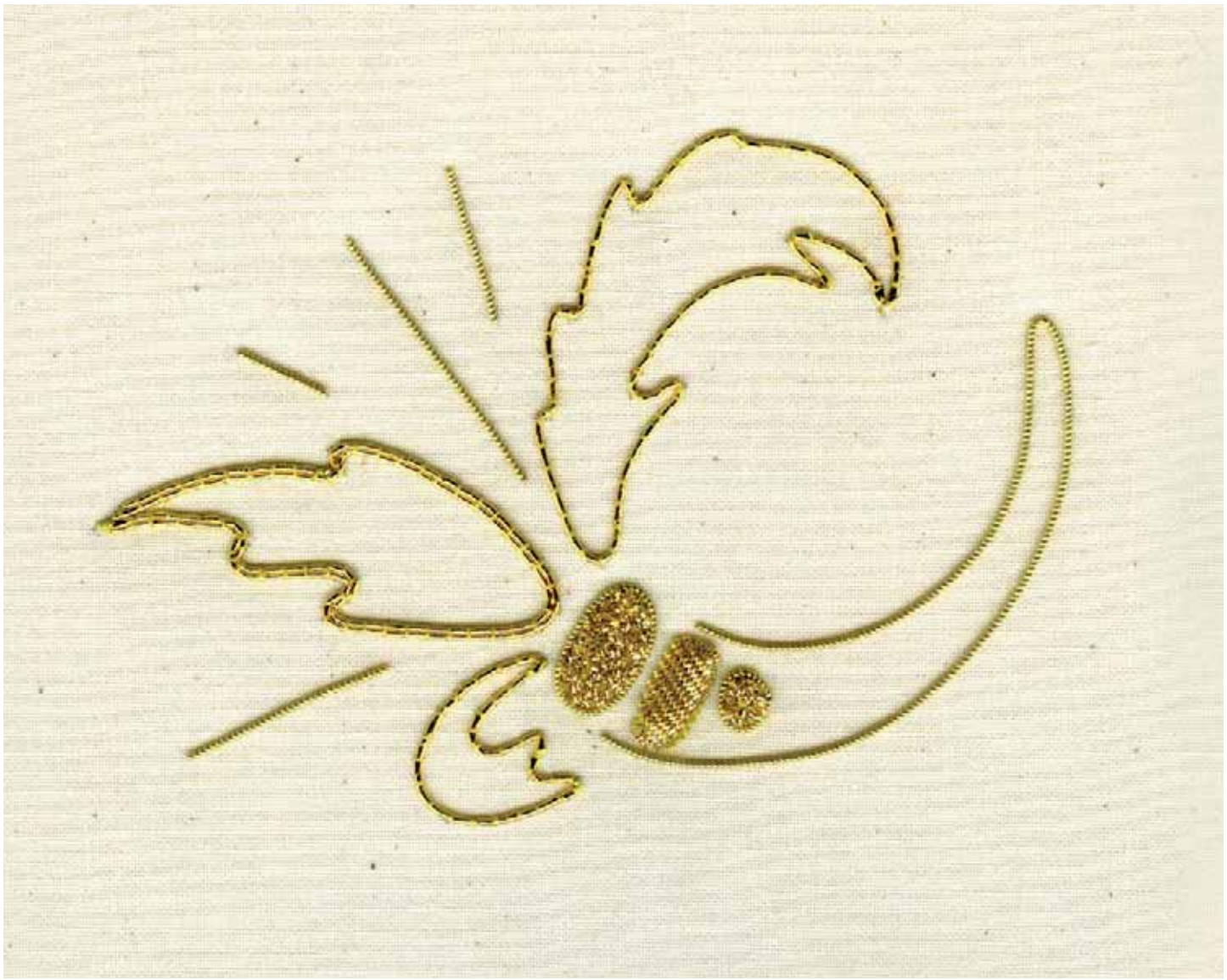
Favourite recipes

Photo ©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

MORE INFORMATION

This embroidered panel in coloured silks and gilt thread is part of a collection of needlework known as the Oxburgh hangings. They were made in the late 16th century by Mary Queen of Scots. Mary, considered a threat to the throne by her cousin, the formidable Elizabeth I, was imprisoned for 19 years in England. For much of this time she was near Sheffield on estates owned by the Earl of Shrewsbury. She embroidered the Oxburgh hangings with her friend, Bess, the Countess of Shrewsbury. Embroidery was a form of therapy for Mary. The fish is one of many symbols which help to express her private thoughts at a time when her letters were being checked by her captors.

WEEK THREE
GOLDWORK: HORN OF PLENTY



Embroidered by Kate Farrer, Royal School of Needlework

THE STITCH

Goldwork is done in very much the same way in countries all over the world. The same techniques of couching and 'beads' cut from hollow gold thread are used. It has a long tradition of being used in embroidered textiles produced for important occasions.

It features on many garments from South Asia. It can range from expensive work with real gold on garments for weddings and important ceremonies to budget embroidery on everyday clothing.

>>>
PAGE 20

WEEK THREE
GOLDWORK: HORN OF PLENTY

THE PATTERN

The Horn of Plenty, or cornucopia, is a hollow horn crammed with fruit and flowers. In the West, particularly in North America, it is associated with Thanksgiving and the harvest.

This design is inspired by Turkish Rococo and dates from the late days of the Ottoman Empire when European influences started to appear in patterns. The immensely powerful Ottoman Empire stretched, at its peak in the middle of the 16th century, from what is now central Europe to the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and North Africa. Its capital was Constantinople, now known as Istanbul.

Embroidered textiles were used widely in daily life and during celebrations and had great significance. In the late 18th century, from which this pattern dates, traces of European influence started to appear in art and embroidery. Here it can be seen in the lavish leaves of the plant spilling out from the horn. At this time, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of the British ambassador in Istanbul, writes about a sumptuous lunch in the harem with the Sultan's favourites. Besides seeing jewels 'as big as a turkey's egg', she was stunned by the embroidered napkins, tablecloths and carpets and saw young girls in the garden being taught embroidery by slaves.

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Family occasions

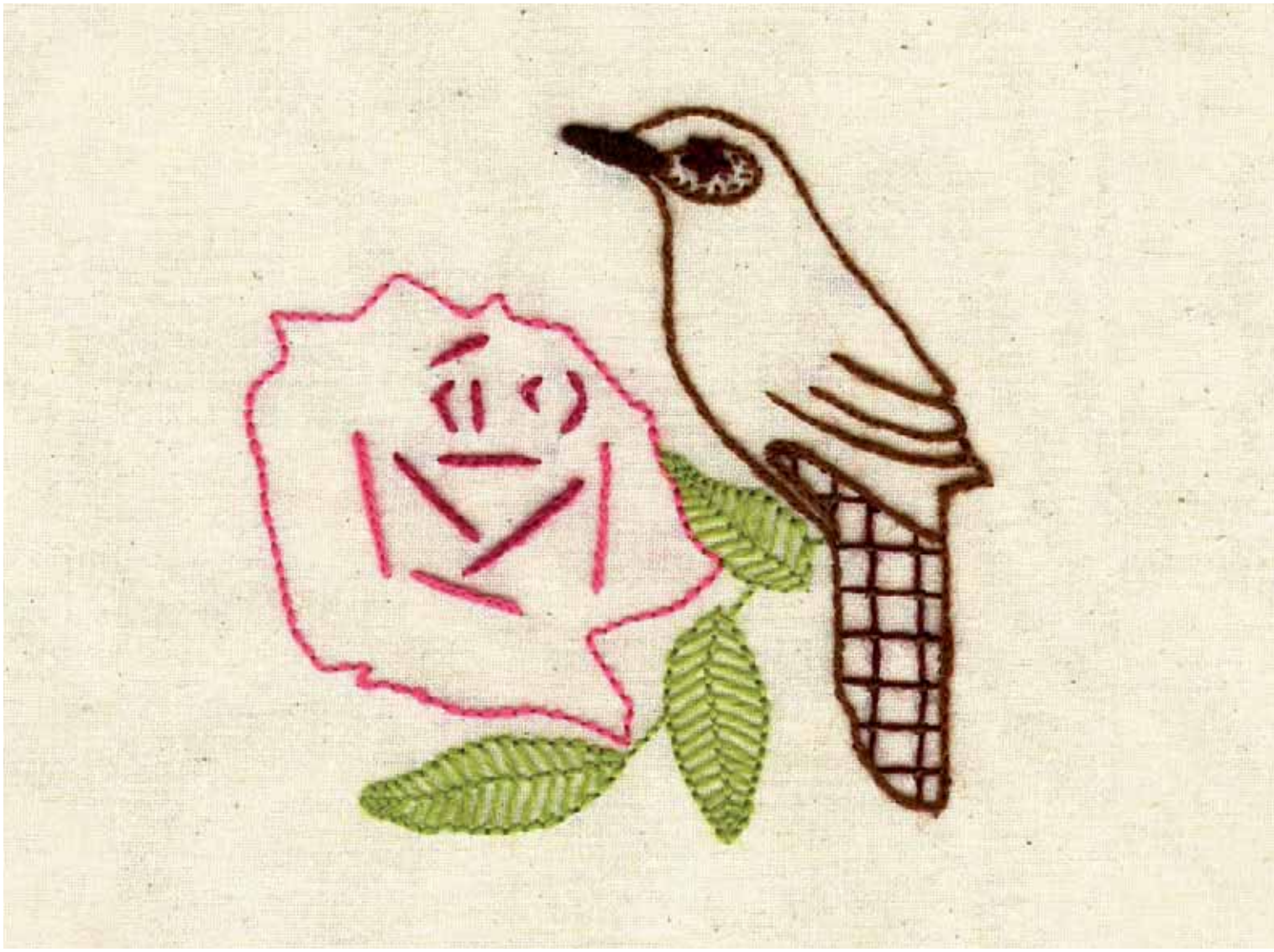
WEEK THREE
GOLDWORK: HORN OF PLENTY

MORE INFORMATION

There are many examples of gold embroidery in churches aross the UK. The earliest existing example of goldwork in Britain is St Cuthbert's Stole in Durham Cathedral.

This bath wrap, in the V&A, was made in Turkey in the 19th century. It is a large cloth made from three widths of fabric, used by people who visited the *hamman* (public baths) to wrap them round their bodies when they rested after bathing. This, like the Horn of Plenty, shows the way that Ottoman embroidery at this time involved new, lifelike floral decorations.

WEEK FOUR
CREWELWORK: ROSE AND NIGHTINGALE



Embroidered by Kate Farrer, Royal School of Needlework

THE STITCH

Crewelwork uses wool and a variety of surface stitches to trace a pattern. The technique is at least a thousand years old and was used in the Bayeux Tapestry and Jacobean embroidery. It is usually worked on linen and cotton.

Traditional crewel designs are often referred to as Jacobean – styles that flourished in the reign of King James I in the early 17th century. Designs involving flowers and animals, flowing vines and leaves were popular on clothing for both men and women. Crewelwork was also used in wall hangings and curtains.

>>>
PAGE 23

WEEK FOUR
CREWELWORK: ROSE AND NIGHTINGALE

THE PATTERN

The rose (*gol*) and the nightingale (*bolbol*) have featured for hundreds of years in literature and poetry in Persia, now known as Iran. The rose stands for perfection and beauty. The beloved is either human or spiritual – sometimes the prince, sometimes the Prophet Mohammed. The sweet-singing nightingale stands for the lover, or the poet. The rose can be beautiful, proud, and often cruel with its thorns. The nightingale sings endlessly of longing and devotion.

The motif evokes the exotic, poetic and mystical elements traditionally associated with Persia, one of the world's oldest civilisations. This romance is in stark contrast to Iran's reputation as a country ruled by a hard line, fundamentalist Islamic regime.

Photo ©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Courtship

MORE INFORMATION

The V&A Museum has many examples of crewelwork. These are bed hangings, pulled around a bed for warmth and privacy.

WHAT NEXT?

Suggested follow up for students

- Look at the Stitch blog on **http://patternsandplace.blogspot.com**. Add your thoughts and impressions after the course. If you remember any of the discussions in detail, please add them.
- Make connections with other people on this course. Make visits to some of the collections mentioned in the background to the Education Packs. Or start up sewing circles together, creating your own embroidery and designs.
- You could create your own embroidery and design, using a motif inspired by your heritage, using your own embroidery and patterns. If you use a 12" (20cm) piece of calico supplied by Bridging Arts, we will consider adding your piece to the Stitch Roadshow as it tours the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to everyone in the Asian Women's Group (Wandsworth), the Katherine Lowe Settlement (Battersea) and Restart 50+ (Tooting) for taking part in the project and making it possible by loaning their own possessions and creating new work. We are grateful, too, to Mor Thunder and Sem Longhurst of the V&A with help in arranging visits to the Museum. For many of the women this was their first visit.

We would also like to thank Professor Anne Morrell for invaluable advice and support, and Katrina Williams, Bridging Arts volunteer, for her enthusiasm, ideas and commitment.

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