

## Embroidery as a Form of Decorative Stitches in Art

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**ABSTRACT:** *Embroidery is an art associated with beauty. The technique employed in making embroidery involves working on strands of several colourful threads to weave an attractive clothing material. This paper engages in a critical analysis of the relevance of embroidery in art, materials for Embroidery, Equipment , for Embroider and Embroidery in Nigeria. Also, the thread, colour and its importance, background fabric, motifs and pattern suitable for a successful embroidery design are given adequate consideration in the paper.*

**Key Words:** *Embroidery, decorator, stitches, Art*

### Introduction

Embroidery is the craft of decorating fabric or other materials using a needle to apply thread or yarn. Embroidery may also incorporate other materials such as pearls, beads, quills, and sequins. In modern days, embroidery is usually seen on caps, hats, coats, overlays, blankets, dress shirts, denim, dresses, stockings, and golf shirts. Embroidery is available with a wide variety of thread or yarn colour (Wikipedia, online free encyclopedia).

Presently, embroidered clothing has gained huge recognition far and wide. The unique feature and elegance of the fabric endears it a lot of people. Embroidered also brings about the significance of thread with which it is created. Jones (1969) defines embroidery "as the art of producing patterns on textiles or background leather in threads of wool, linen silk or metal by means of a needle". It is a pattern made on varieties of cloth, or leather, exhibiting intricate designs. The designs are made of colorful threads of evenly strands in most cases.

Adigun (2000) defines embroidery "as the ornamentation of fabric for decorative purposes" Either it is work on fabric or leather, the therapeutic satisfaction in the work remains the same. For an embroidery work to turn out successfully, plan must be made in such a way that shape, tones, texture and colour are all in the right places.

Embroidery is commonly used to decorate practical articles like chair seats, dresses, shoes, waist coats, tray cloths, curtains, aprons, towels boxes and books. This art has existed for so long. However, the satisfaction the users gained from it makes it difficult to be replaced by any other type of design. Jones (1969) explains that "embroidery in a primitive form was known in Europe in the Neolithic times". As civilization advanced so is the art of embroidery, it calls for dexterity in the manipulation of threads with needle. In this age of civilization as remarked by Anderson (1977) "we are re-discovering a craft that had its beginnings over a thousand years ago, and we are re-learning how to express creative individualism and talent". The stitches employed are reasonably simple and involves several practice of different styles. Today this art is commonly used on textural traditional dresses, on the robes of priests and nobles, on seat and book covers, clothes and so on. The embroiderer of today is entrusted with the preservation of an art handed down from one generation to the other thereby enriching its tradition as a form of art.

### Materials for Embroidery

Fabrics - Fabrics are made from textile materials. According to Lewis (1974), "textiles are knitted and woven fabrics made from fibers such as silk, wool and the like". Jones (1969) described textile as a "continuous manipulation of a single thread, woven simply or woven to create a pattern". In most cases the simply woven ones are used since the embroidery will still form intricate patterns on the fabric. In making embroidery, it is worthwhile to use good fabric which need not be costly but should be of best quality.

It must be taken into consideration that to make a delicate work like embroidery, cloth of finer texture such as linen or silk can be used for a big bold stitching or a coarse fabric could be chosen. Silk are not the best for embroidery (Kallem, 1975). Instead of using corded silk that will make the work looks hard, silk, damask or any other fabric can do better. If satin must be used it should be stretched on a frame because of its slippery texture although, it is necessary to place all fabrics on frame while working for easy

handling. Some workers do embroider the outlines of damask and brocade only, they can as well be used without embroidery because of their good background.

### Know Your Fabrics

**Brocade** - A patterned weave using several colours or metal threads, for dress or furnishing materials; in cotton, silk, rayon and so on.

**Tweed**- A rough surfaced, coarse-woven wool often checked.

**Damask** - A pattern made by dull and shiny threads for household fabrics or for dress. It could be in cotton, linen or rayon.

**Corduroy**- Firm weaves with a velvety rib made of cotton.

**Chiffon** - Sheer, soft silk, nylon or rayon fabric, mostly for blouses and scarves.

**Organdie** - Sheer, very crisp, dull-surface cotton for blouses.

**Satin** - Shiny weave in silk or polyester, showing mostly the warp threads. Sateen - Shiny weave in cotton or rayon showing mostly the weft threads used for linings and cheap dresses.

### Types of Thread

Threads are yarns of different sizes which could come in a wide range of colour. Crewel wool is an example of fine wool for embroidery work. It is a two-ply thread highly spun to a tight twist. Other threads like two-ply knitting wool can also be used. Applying appropriate thread to a particular design brings great opportunity for making texture.

Anderson (1977), remarks that "much of the pleasure in embroidery lies in its textural appearance. Thick areas must alternate the thin for a good effect to be achieved. The overall result must not be thin, it must go *pari passu*. Any other thin materials can also be used provided it will not get destroyed or rot. Raffia, cords, ribbons, strings can work as well as thread. If any item is big for the eye of the down needle, Phillipott (1976), suggests stitching it down with a thinner thread. There are some other threads available for the work such as:

Machine thread: - For zigzag machining and very fine handwork.

Button hole twist on a reel: - For bolder machine work and thin lines of hand embroidery.

Crochet threads: - Firmly twisted washable thread which can be dull cotton or creating shiny man-made fibre.

**Raffia**: - Shin/ and dull versions available from arts and crafts shop. Very strong and easily used with a large needle (Knitter's needle).

**Knitting wool**: - (Plain four— Ply, double - knitting) most of these are as tapestry require wool and much cheaper, especially in skeins. It is mostly used when doing canvas work for chair and seats. It does not fluff up so much.

### Equipment

There are some equipment needed for embroidery work such as:

**Needle**: Embroidery needle should have large eyes capable of sliding the thread through the fabric without tugging. It should be able to take two strands of thread through the fabric. The smaller sizes are shorter and are easier to handle for working knot. Some have blunt end which is useful where the threads are not taken back through the fabric.

**Frames**: There must be tension on the fabric while working, therefore a frame is necessary. If work is done by mere holding the fabric, the stitches will be less accurate, if the tension is uneven, the most important lines that should be straight will probably waver (Phillipott 1976). With this, there will be no professional skill in the work.

Sometimes, rectangular frame, like a picture frame is used by making the outside dimensions the accurate size of the fabric. The embroidery stays permanently after the completion of the work which retains its form and tension.

**Embroidery Machine**: Embroidery could be done with the use of embroidery machine. Despite the differences in cultures and textile materials, the stitches throughout the world are basically similar either with the use of machine or hand. First embroidery machine, according to Adigun (2000), came into being in 1828. The emergence of this technology since then has lessening the stress involved in making embroidery. In Nigeria, for example, the 20U machine Seiko and Tinko are largely used for designing fabrics. It is now possible for the embroiderers to cover large areas within few hours to make ends meet.

**Other Tools**: Other equipment such as scissors, pins are also needed. The scissors should have a sharp, short, strong and pointed edge for the success of the work. Embroiderer should always use steel pins and rust-proof tacks in order not to leave marks on the fabric.

## Motifs and Stitches

The embroiderer should make appropriate use of her sense of imagination when creating motifs. The design might take after floral (leaves), fauna (animals) of geometric shapes like triangle, rectangle, circle etc. If the tone of a motif is in contrast to most of its surrounding motifs, then this shows up first, regardless of any other factor.

In order to understand stitches, embroiderer must try it by herself. A stitch does not require any ever length. It could be done as desired and should change as one wants it to make a far or thin line. Phillpott (1976) said further that stitches fall into three categories:

- linear stitches: those making lines;
- broken stitches: those for textures, e.g. French knots; and
- all' over stitches: those that overlap e.g. buttonhole stitch.

Other example stitches are chain stitches, fly or Y stitches.

## Colour and its Importance

Colour is vitally important in the history of embroidery. Colour choice is personal affair which could be used according to taste. There are no hand and fast rules on how colour must be used, it depends on what pleases or displeases every individual. A beginner can choose one main colour, gradations of that same colour and one harmonious colour which will bring solidity to the work, these are mainly in darker shades.

To get a suitable colour, it is very important for the observer to make choice from natural colours. Arderson (1977) writes "observing changes of green on a tree, various shades of reds and pink so delicately balanced on a rose, interesting colour like in a flower garden, beautiful shades of rainbow such as red, orange, yellow, green, blue indigo and violet. Every colour ranges from light to dark, white stitches among various colour throw light on the design, it conveys purity and innocence, meanwhile a very deep tone will give strength and enrich it.

Yellow can also represent gold and stands sometimes for sun in design. Black symbolizes sleep and rest. Dean (1981) is of the opinion that blue represents the feminine principle.... green, the earth... purple is the royal colour originally associated with queens and crimson red for kings.

## Method

After choosing the appropriate background fabric, suitable colours of thread and the best stitches for the design, the next thing is working up the fabric. There are some stitches that could be simply worked on the fabric such as stem stitch, overcast shapes stitch, rope stitch, speckling stitch, buttonhole stitch and the like.

**Stem stitch:** - This is a line stitch where the needle will be inserted into the fabric in Fauna about one stitch length to the right to make a slightly slanted stitch. The second stitch will be directly above the-first but shifted slightly to the left of the first stitch.

**Overcast stitch:** - This is made up of tiny stitches well arranged in a parallel line textile to make a small neat line. Overcast stitch may be worked on a padding thread laid along the guideline.

**Rope stitch:** - Rope stitch can form a thick line or narrow shape by bringing the thread up through the fabric a little below the guideline and a little above the liner prints then bring the needle to the surface again and twist the thread once around it. Pull the needle and thread through the twist.

**Speckling stitch:** - Speckling does not describe a particular stitch but indicates an area covered by tiny stitches to give a textured effect. It could be arranged randomly or at regular intervals.

**Buttonhole stitch:** - This is a one-edge stitch mainly for outlining an edge of a form. To work this, the needle will be brought to the surface of the fabric from the back, insert into the ground above the line and slightly to the right. Allow the thread to be under the top of the fabric then pull the thread.

## Embroidery in Nigeria

Embroidery among other crafts underwent far-reaching changes. For a time, existing shapes and linear types of embroidery design hand been in vogue until recently when floral motifs are combined with linear types. The use of geometrical shapes is more pronounced on dress-styles, caps and sometimes at the edge of dresses. Fauna motifs are mainly used in abstract form such as, cock with a lion's tail, birds, with excessively big wings butterflies and so on.

It could be worked on fabrics either cheap or such as guinea brocade, locally printed textiles, dye textiles, lace materials, damasks, woven fabric (*Aso oke*), African prints Ankara and the like. When lavishly used, embroidery could turn a simple dress style into an exotic and elegant one; like those worn by President Olusegun Obasanjo, the President of Nigeria in some years back. Ayanniyi (2000) notes: "when he

was not in his army uniform, he done full *agbada* made with *ankara* prints". She said further his *agbada* are always heavily embroidered" be it *ankara*, *'adire*, *aso oke*, guinea brocade or whatever.

Embroidery on woven fabrics (*Aso Oke*) cannot be over emphasized. Clothes are mostly worn among the Yoruba people to important occasions such as wedding and burial ceremonies. The pattern can be worked round the neck of *dansiki* or big flowing *agbada*, round the trouser mouth or the cap. In most cases the design around the neck and the cap are the same; this gives uniqueness to the outfit. The same could be done on sleeve and neck of women blouses.

Moreover, embroidery design is widely used among the Hausa. Apart from its use on dresses, their caps are heavily embroidered with various colorful threads. The cap design; are mostly geometric shapes and the form always the same.

Sometimes embroidery pattern may be seen as modern or traditional. Among the Yoruba, there is a unique traditional design for embroidered *agbada*. it stays in a slanting position around the neck of the wearer, whereas the modern type can just be uneven lines with shapes, meanwhile, some people are yet crazy for the old traditional design. This is why imagination and taste must be a guide in choice making. Most of the designs as declared by Anderson (1977) both modern and traditional are adaptable for other pieces one may wish to make.

The Igbo people cherish embroidered wrapper with blouse and sometimes, lightly embroidered shirt among men. Apart from Igbo chiefs that use staff of office, embroidered and adorned staff are greatly used as part of their dressing. It commands respect and shows how important the user is.

Other clothing can as well be embroidered. The head and armrests on the sofa, if given a little touch of embroidery design may look more beautiful. The embroidery thread may pick up a colour from the curtain or wall of the room to give a harmonious effect. Embroidery had made a great impact on other home furnishings as table, mats, wall hanging, belt, bed spread, pillow case, hand bag, doll clothing, pocket tidy, chairs, table cover, trinket box and shoes.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that embroidery work brings joy and satisfaction to whoever engaged in working it. It makes one feel useful to himself or herself and the society at large. It is important to note that it cannot be done in odd times when other works are in standstill but if properly done can increase embroiderers sense of creativity. This can as well influence her future choice of home furnishings.

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