

Holbein Stitch Embroidery



The Gek Contemporary

www.gekart.net

gekminiature@gmail.com

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Cover

Blackwork Sampler, 7.0 x 13.0cm

Foreword

Having for some time admired one of Gek's early blackwork pieces, with her encouragement I took up the needle whilst on a week's staycation in Pwll in June last year. The pieces in this exhibition are the result of the subsequent 9 months efforts.

The three sections illustrate some of the different ways in which the counted thread stitching method can be used for different purposes , from Tudor collar and cuffs decoration to art derived from a digital photograph.

Reading up on embroidery in general has been an eye opener as to its origins and the many different styles it evolved into.

Needless to say, I have become somewhat smitten with the double running stitch.

Blackwork

Blackwork is a counted thread method of embroidery using straight stitches in a contrasting colour on an even weave fabric. The origin of this type of embroidery appears to have been the Moors and Arabs who travelled to England in the 13th century with soldiers and noblemen returning from the Holy Land Crusades. In Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, there is a description of what seems to be blackwork in The Miller's Tale.

'Her smock was white and embroidered front and behind with coal-black silk and embroidered also on the inside and outside of the collar.'

Katherine of Aragon is credited with making it popular in England when she married Henry VIII in 1509, eight years after she arrived from Spain where it has a legacy left from when the Moors rule there. Paintings of the period by Henry's court painter, Holbein, show many of his sitters displaying it on their costumes in his extraordinary, detailed portraits. In fact, the double running stitch used here is also known as the Holbein Stitch. Not many examples of these early blackwork garments have survived the test of time, the iron base black dye corroding the silk on the English made thread. If he had not painted it in such detail, we would never have known about it.

All the embroideries in this exhibition are made using No. 6 silk thread on 25 count white evenweave.



4.5 x 4.5cm

Example 1.

The next seven examples are from patterns in Lesley Wilkins's book and are based on 15th to 16th century designs.

Example 2.

Borders for cuffs and collars were stitched one to another, often inverting them as shown here.



9.0 x 4.0cm



5.5 x 4.0cm

Example 3.

Fruit, flowers, leaves as well as the owners motifs form the basis of most patterns. In Tudor times very few people could read, and these designs were used as a label to identify the owner when the court moved around the country.

Example 4.

Getting a little more colourful. If you have the skill, the back of the fabric can be stitched to look identical to the front.



5.0 x 4.0cm



4.0 x 4.0cm

Example 5.

There are so many silk thread colours and shades to choose from these days but 500 years ago, gold and perhaps red may have been used in the design.

Example 6.

A standalone piece, a blackwork in colour.



6.5 x 6.0cm



8.5 x 6.5cm

Example 7.

Here all coloured.

Coloured Borders

Perhaps the colour choice is a bit over the top here.



11.5 x 9.5cm

Modern Designs.

With the many silk colour shades available today, DeVere Yarns alone sells 96, a collection becomes a pallet from which you can create different effects in designing your own patterns. Whilst still using the black thread and the Holbein stitch for the outline, in a similar way you might sketch with a pencil on paper, the spaces created can be filled with coloured patterns to good effect.

Whilst you can buy patterns and kits to make them, the following examples were created from images downloaded from the web.



5.5 x 6.5cm

Moth

A pattern created from a moth on a Portmerion table mat.

Butterfly

This is a good example of the different infills that can be used, not only the colours but also the patterns using the Holbein stitch.



7.0 x 7.0cm



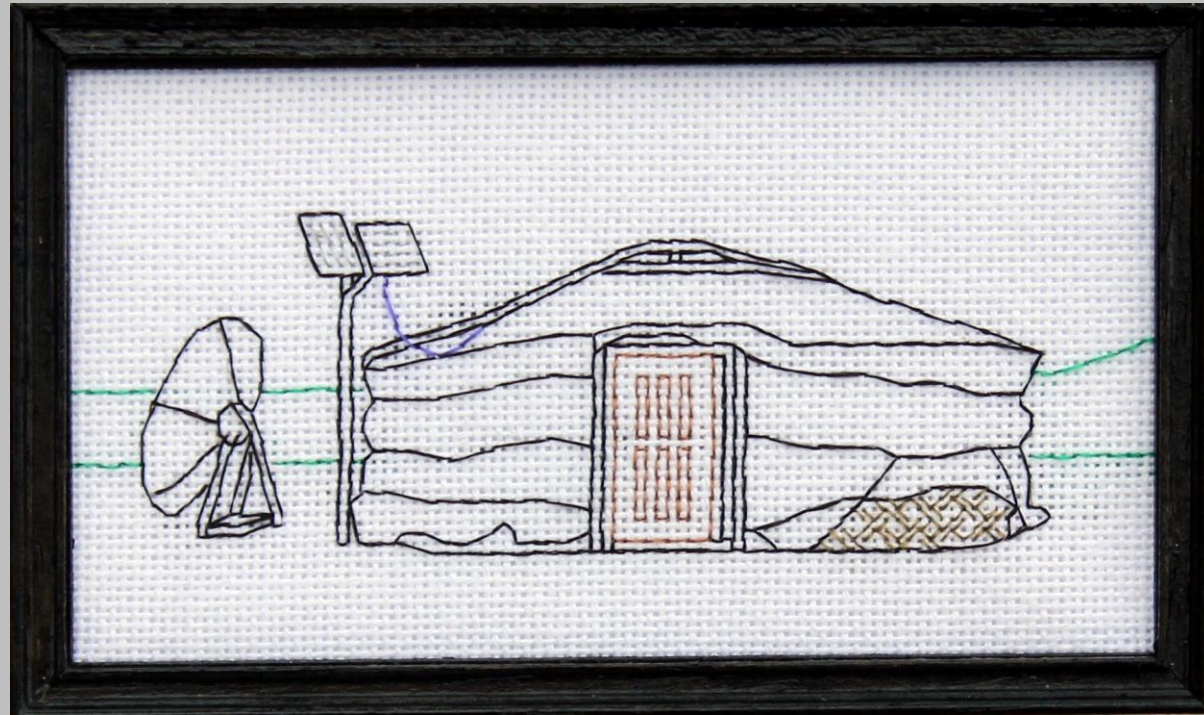
7.0 x 4.5cm

Bee

Another example.

From Photographs and Drawings

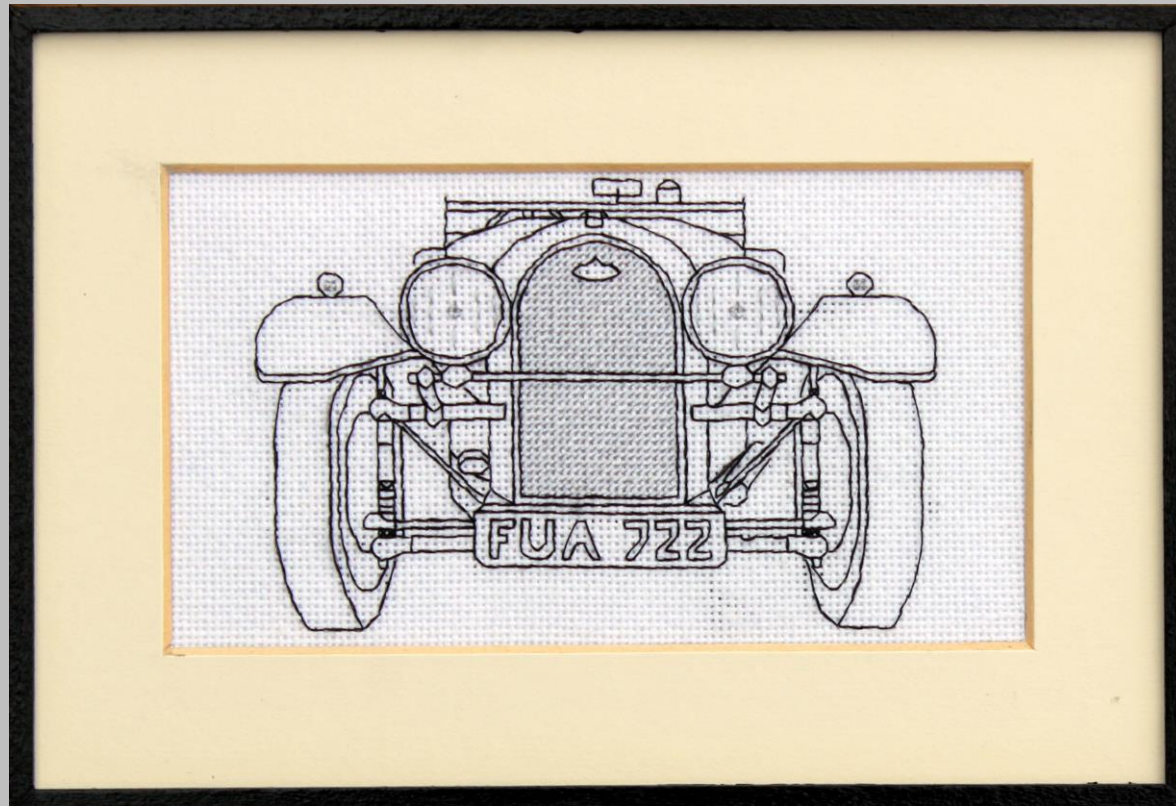
The patterns were created from prints using tracing and graph paper. Evenweave and Holbein stitching does restrict what type of images can be used, needing ones with strong contours to trace and little clutter.



8.5 x 5.0cm

Mongolian Ger

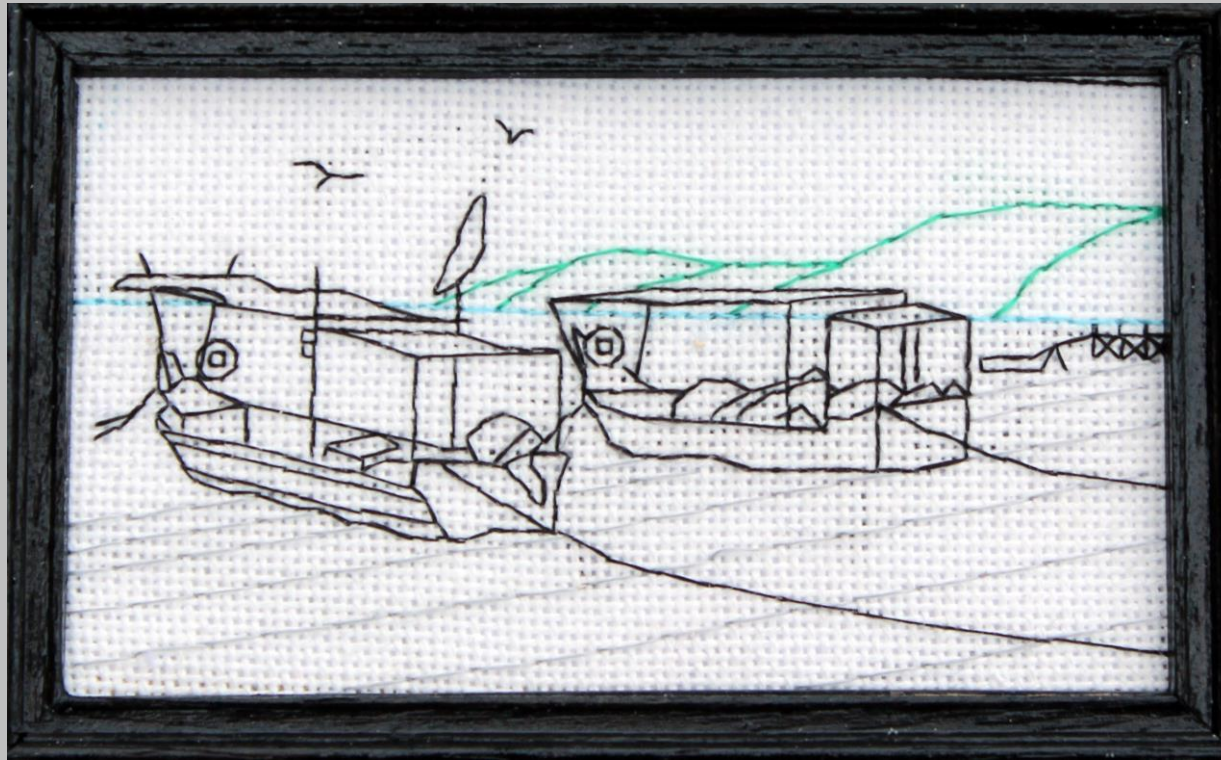
Breaking away from set patterns and symmetry to contours, copied from a photograph, this ger we passed on our way across the Mongolian Steppes between Ulaanbaatar and Dadal Soum in 2007. Not totally off the grid it seems.



11.00 x 6.5cm

1937 Morgan, Series 1 4/4

The car dad bought after passing my driving test in 1963, although she wasn't driven till 17 years later after a much needed rebuild. FUA now lives in Nottinghamshire and was recently awarded a prize by Alan Titchmarsh at a local classic car show, no less.



8.5 x 5.0cm

Gertak Sanggul Beach, Penang

Based a photograph taken in 2013. The beach is on the southernmost tip of the island, a very peaceful, lovely place with the Tua Pek Kong Seafood beach side restaurant a must place to visit. Fish fresh from the sea.



Chinese Painting

The embroidery in the gallery is based on this Ming Dynasty brush painting, *'Landscape with Pavilion and Willows'*, attributed to Shen Zhou. Gek made a pencil drawing from which the pattern was made.

Once the running stitch out lines were completed, Gek finished the work with the cross stitch lillies and trees on the distant shore. A joint effort this one.

Acknowledgements

Gek for introducing me to blackwork.

Christine and Carolyn from the Ystrad Mynach Quilters for lending books of patterns to work from.

Lesley Wilkins book, *'Beginner's Guide to Blackwork'*, for guidance and tips on Holbein stitching.

And thanks to you too, for visiting the Gek Contemporary. Hope to see you again soon.