

hoopla

the art of
unexpected
embroidery

Leanne Prain

co-author of *Yarn Bombing*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF CHRISTENSON





While crafters rarely have trouble amassing materials, embroidery projects generally require very little equipment. One of the pleasures of an embroidery project is that you only need the most basic tools to get started: some fabric, a needle, some floss, a hoop, and scissors. If you are the type to collect a lot of craft materials, it is likely that many additional embroidery odds and ends will have a way of finding you.

Spend a long time at the craft store, falling in love with all the options, buy something to play with, and then set aside some time to work. Stop hesitating, just do it, and don't be afraid to mess up. Accidents sometimes make the best pieces. – ABBY KRAUSE

In embroidery, as with most arts and crafts, great tools can help but ultimately it is your imagination that will create a successful end product. If you can dream it up, you can stitch it!

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Stitch Like You Mean It

The place that you choose to embroider will affect how much you enjoy working on your project. Be sure to find a comfortable chair –you may be sitting there for hours. As you work, keep your most-used tools within arm's reach.

While you try not to prick your fingers, don't forget to also take care of your vision. During daylight hours, try to work near a window. In low light situations, set up a task lamp.

Crafts are also mood-dependant - don't try to work when you are tired, angry, or distracted. Tension in your body will affect how you pull your thread, and you may find that your stitches may not be consistent.

Don't let a terrible mood tangle up a long term project – set your work aside until you are feeling better.

Kitted Out

Filling your embroidery basket does not have to be expensive. You should be able to purchase new floss, needles, and fabric for under twenty dollars. It can also be rewarding to repurpose unused supplies. Look for materials at thrift stores and garage sales or talk to older relatives and friends to see if they have spare needles, thread or fabric. As you ask, you are likely to get some stories about stitch-work and even pick up a lesson or two.

You will also need something to hold your supplies. While fabric-lined baskets have traditionally been used to hold embroidery – there are all sorts of containers that you can use. If you live in a child and pet free apartment, why not use something decorative and beautiful like an open bowl? If you are surrounded by family– a vessel like a lunchbox or a food-safe container may serve your needs better. Recycled glassware, such as wide mouthed mason jars, are an inexpensive but pretty way to hold your work. Artist Sarah Haxby (page X) uses a recycled plastic case that was originally a package for a duvet cover. The case has handles for easy-carrying, a zipper enclosure, a waterproof exterior, and is transparent so that she can be inspired by the materials inside. Find a container that works for you!

Quirky Containers

Perhaps one of these unusual containers may suit your personality:

An old eyeglass case

A tackle box

A 1950's ceramic planter

A coffee or tea tin

A typewriter case

A cigar box

Here is a photo of artist Jacque Davies' favorite embroidery supplies:

This photo has all my favorite embroidery tools:

Deep basket with a sturdy handle that I can carry out to the porch

A 6" embroidery hoop because 7" hoops are too large for my hands

A fabric tube that I made with magnets in each end to hold needles and the blunt nose Gingher scissors!

a DMC #18 chenille needle. It has a good sharp point and the eye is large enough that I can easily use craft thread or all six strands of embroidery floss

Read about more about Jacque on page X.





Needle Me

There are many types of needles used for stitch work – most commonly crewel, chenille, and tapestry needles. For embroidery, crewel needles, which are short and sharp, in a size between #5-7 are most commonly used. Blunt ended tapestry needles are preferred for cross stitch as they will poke through the holes in evenweave fabric, without piecing the fabric itself.

Embroidery needles are numbered for their gauge or thickness. The higher the number of needle, the finer the needle will be. The thickness of your needles will dictate the thickness of your thread. When choosing a needle, ensure that the eye is slightly thicker than your strand of thread, and that the thread can pass through the eye of the needle with ease. Your needle should also pass through your fabric

evenly when threaded with floss. If you are using a fabric that has a tight weave, choose a thinner needle. The opposite is true for thicker fabrics. If you are unsure of what needle to choose for a piece of fabric, try slipping several sizes through an inconspicuous part of your fabric to see what slips through easily.

Stop licking your embroidery thread!

While many sewers were taught to moisten when threading their needles but this is not a good idea. Moisture in the eye of your needle can cause it to deteriorate. Rust will cause your thread to snag and can cause damage to your project. If you have trouble threading your needle, use a needle threader.

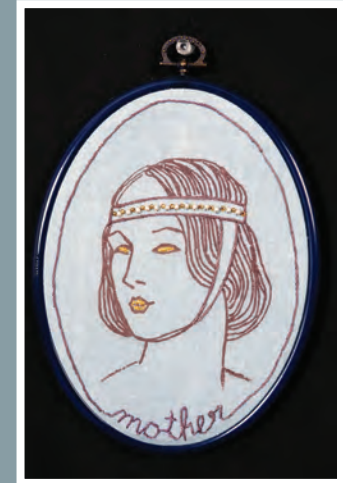
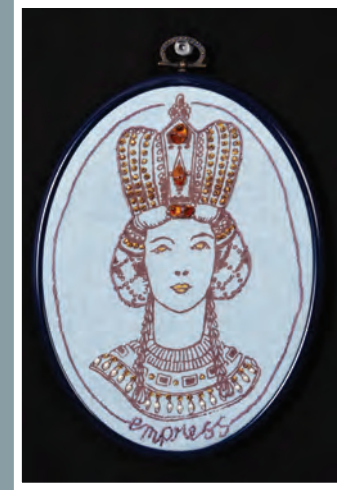
Sasha Webb lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Since finishing a multi-disciplinary degree in 2005, she has worked as a yoga teacher, waitress, cheesecake baker, federal tax employee, tree-planter, clothing designer, nanny, doula and weaver. Inspired by an old costume book, the tiny works of Ray Materson, and Mary Lou Twinkwon's expansive samplers; Sasha Webb wanted create that could be hung in a series and created these 'Goddess Women'. To make the pieces look timeless, she used natural dyes such as logwood and simple embellished elements.

Find more of Sasha's textile work online at imperialindigo.blogspot.com

Sasha Webb. *Goddess Embroideries: Her many facets*, 2009. 7 ovals. Hemp cotton, indigo, logwood, cotton thread, metallic thread, amber, pearls and glass beads 19cm x 14cm. *Destroyer, Priestess, Temptress, Empress, Healer, Mother.*



GODDESS EMBROIDERIES: Sasha Webb



I am enamored with the colors and elements of nature, and focused on natural dyes in school. I thought it was crazy when I learned that some people dyed their own embroidery floss, and was even more shocked when I started to do it myself! It seemed like too much work; but you simply cannot find thread that matches the luster and tones of natural dyes. I prefer to embroider on hemp cotton fabric, using mercerized cotton thread.



Kirsten Chursinoff's *Octopus* in progress.
Photograph by Kirsten Chursinoff.

Once you have collected the basic tools that you need to embroider – it's time to put your needle and thread to fabric. This chapter covers the simple stitches that you will need to complete the projects in this book. Remember that these stitches merely an introduction to the world of embroidery, cross stitch, and counted needlepoint. There are hundreds of stitch techniques that you can learn when you are ready to seek out new challenges.

Before you thread that needle – make sure that you do two critical things. One, make sure that your foundation fabric has been pre-washed and pressed (see page X for more details). Two, always wash your hands before you pick up your hoop! Any dirt or oil on your hands may stain your work.

One Stitch Wonders

I don't use many types of stitches – mostly running stitch and satin stitch. I kind of just draw with the thread. I think it is because I picked up a needle and thread one day and tied on a knot and started stitching. A lot of people say they only use a few stitches.

– AUBREY LONGLEY-COOK

Even those who only know one stitch can create an embroidered masterpiece – many of the artists profiled in this book only use a few types of stitches to create their work. It is often not the stitch that matters, but the way that you choose to use it.

As you learn more stitching techniques, you may find that an embroidery stitch has been given different names or to a stitch of the same name worked differently. Historically, embroidery was taught orally from one stitcher to the next, which resulted in the names being recalled from memory. The stitches in these chapters have been called by their most common names, and well-known pseudonyms have been provided. However, feel free to name your stitches in a way that will aid your memory.

Tips for Easy Stitching:

- Ensure that you stitch with a length of floss that is as long the space between your thumb and elbow.
- Your floss should be smooth before you begin –you can do this by separating the strands and the smoothing them back together again. A floss conditioner, such as Thread Heaven, may help you do this.
- Always begin your work by entering your needle through the fabric from the wrong side of the work. Leave a tail of floss at the back and stick your needle through at the point where you want the stitches to begin.
- Ensure that you are using the correct size of needle for your floss (see page X for tips)

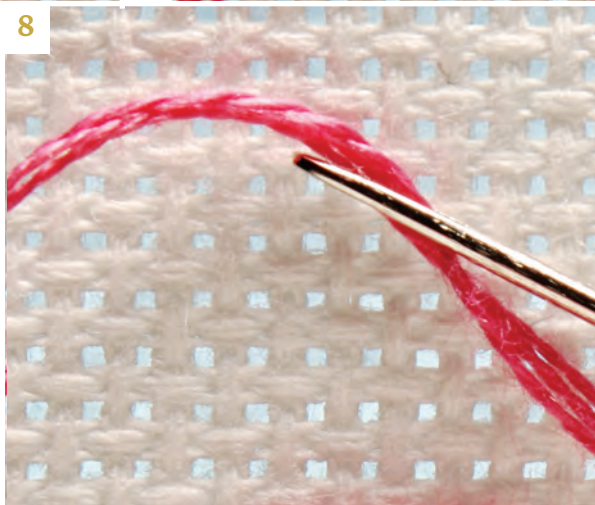
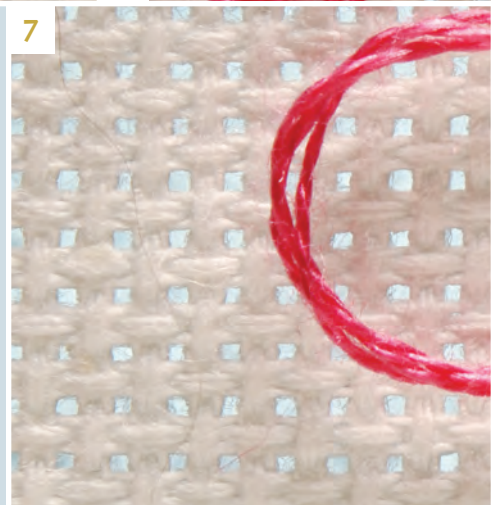
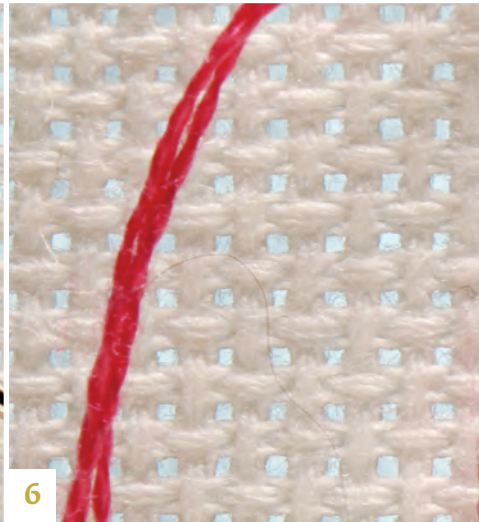
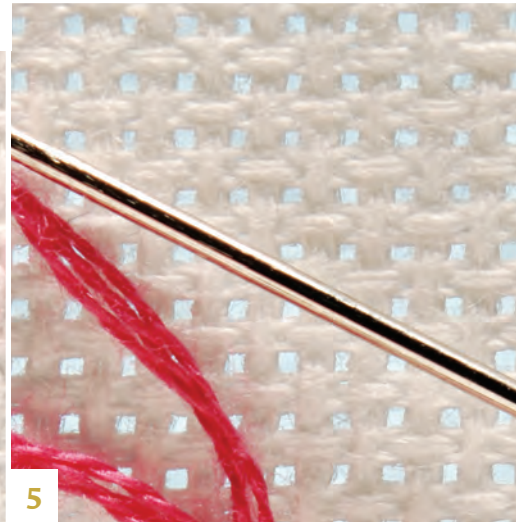
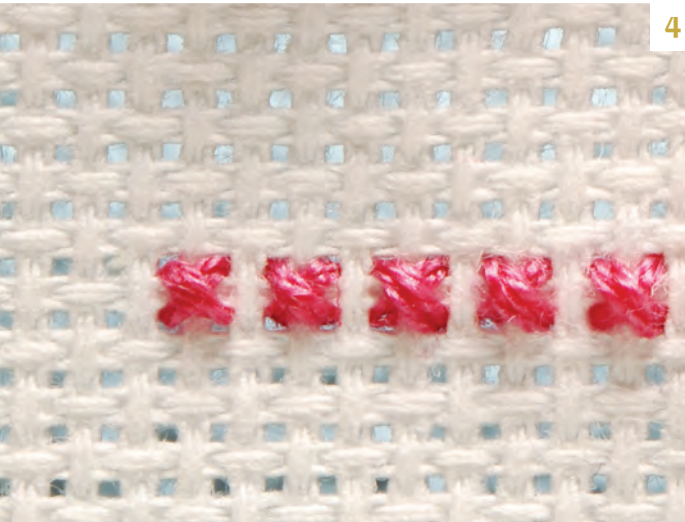
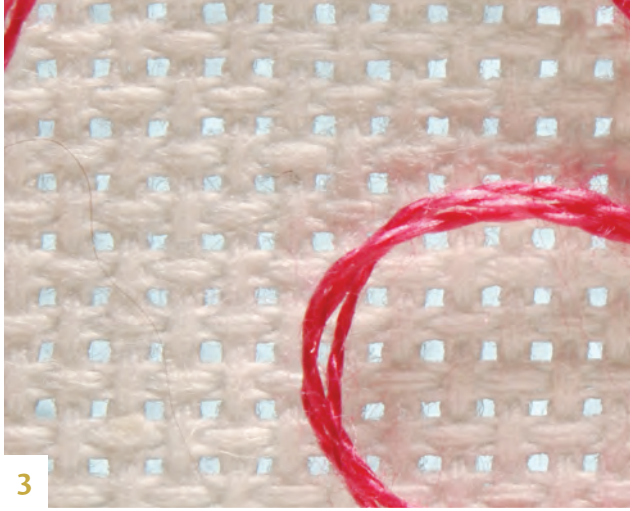
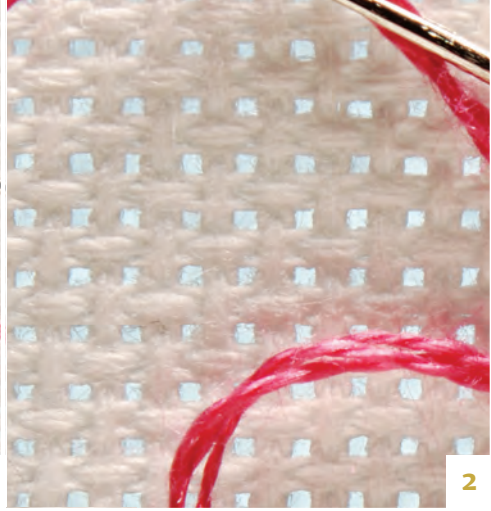
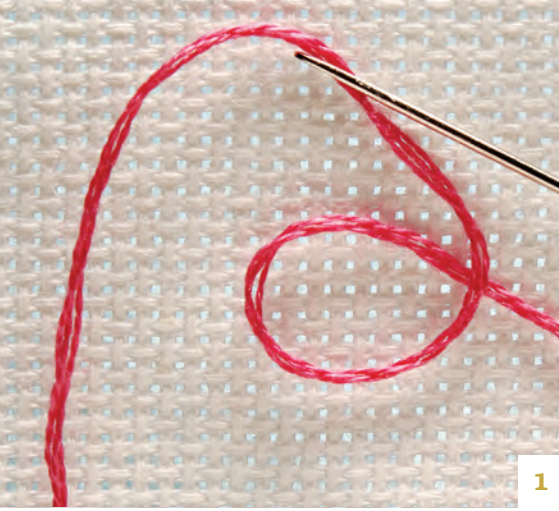
I only know one stitch; the running stitch. So that's all I ever do and I like to kind of consider it, 'the walking stitch'. I'm embroidering these streets very slowly. My project is inspired by the Situationists who encouraged people to get to know their city by walking.

– LIZ KUENEKE

Basic Embroidery Stitches

Thread, needles, and fingers exist in the three dimensional world which can make written instructions for embroidery stitches somewhat confusing. If these directions make your head spin, be sure to find a friend who can teach you in person – or find some online videos that demonstrate stitches in real time. Remember that learning to embroider should be fun and choose the method that works for you!

RUNNING STITCH (AKA THE HIDDEN STITCH) –You likely encountered this stitch in early elementary school craft projects – it creates a broken line, which can be used for outlining a shape. To make a running stitch, move your needle in and out of the fabric evenly to create regularly spaced stitches of an even length.



From top to bottom, left to right: 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch, 1 Stitch.

BACKSTITCH – Learning the backstitch feels awkward at first, eventually you will get used to it. When you make your first stab at the fabric, anticipate where your stitch will end by pulling your needle from the backside of fabric to the front. Once your needle has been pulled through the right side of the fabric, stitch ‘backwards’ by entering your needle at the point where your stitch should ‘begin’ Repeat this motion by drawing your needle back up to the right side of the fabric, coming through the wrong side a stitch length away from where your last stitch ended. The backstitch can be worked in straight or curved lines.

Backstitch is my favorite stitch. It’s very simple, it gets the job done.

–ROSA MARTYN

WHIPPED BACKSTITCH – this is a more decorative version of the basic backstitch. Create a foundation row of backstitches which are slightly larger than normal, and leave a tail of thread at the front of your fabric, close to where you began stitching. Darn the beginning and end tails of this thread to your work. Choose a new piece of floss to be your ‘whipping thread’. Using your needle, ‘whip’ your thread over and under your backstitches without piercing your fabric. This should result in a neat, raised line. Whipping can also be applied to other stitches including the running stitch, the stem stitch, the chain stitch, and satin stitch.

BLANKET STITCH (aka the buttonhole stitch) is a looped stitch that can be worked in straight or curved lines. It can be used for surface embroidery or as a decorative finish to make a hem. To create the blanket stitch, imagine that there are two parallel lines running the width of your cloth. Working from left to right, bring your needle to the right side of the cloth on the ‘bottom’ line. Moving over one stitch length, bring your needle down through the fabric, pulling your needle out in a parallel space on the bottom line, catching the thread underneath your needle. Repeat to the right, ensuring even stitches as you work.

SEED STITCH (AKA SPECKLING) –This fun, erratic stitch is made by making a bunch of little back-stitches (pg X) placed in random order.

SPLIT STITCH - In order to create a split stitch, you should work with floss that has an even number of strands. Create a straight stitch, then bring your needle through to the right side of the fabric to ‘split’ the existing stitch by passing your needle through the thread. Then enter your needle through your fabric a stitch-length away from the first stitch, and pass your needle through to the front of the work. Create another straight stitch to split. The split stitch is great for outlines, or can be used in rows to fill stitches.

The split stitch is the first that I learned.

It is the easiest to do with the greatest effect.

–JENNY HART

BRICK STITCH – is a filling stitch that can be created by making vertical and horizontal straight stitches of an even length. The stitches fit together in a brickwork pattern of short and long stitches. The brick stitch is worked from left to right with long straight stitches, then worked backwards from right to left with short straight stitches.

STEM STITCH (AKA CREWEL STITCH) – can be used to create straight or curved lines, and outlines. Working from left to right – create one straight stitch, then push up into the right side of your fabric, close to your previous stitch. End this stitch length slightly after the first stitch that you made. Repeat. Each stitch that you make should be approximately the same length and begin halfway along the previous stitch.

FEATHER STITCH (AKA FEATHER CHAIN) – This stitch is worked vertically. Bringing your needle through the front of the work, bring your thread down and pierce your needle through to the back in a parallel stitch. Do not pull your thread all the way through to the back,

PAINTING WITH THREAD:

Kirsten Chursinoff

Beaded octopi, translucent jellyfish, shimmering starfish – the detailed work of Vancouver artist Kirsten Chursinoff is a pleasure to behold. By creating her own techniques that combine hand stitching, raw-edge appliqué, and free-motion machine embroidery, Kirsten’s layered nature studies are detailed and charming – seen from across the room, they can manipulate a viewer into thinking that they are paintings rather than fiber.

Q How long have you been interested in embroidery?

A My grandmother taught me when I was quite small. I used to do those iron-on transfers of butterflies and flowers. My mother did a lot of needlepoint – while she was pregnant with me, and I feel like I assimilated it by osmosis.

I didn’t associate myself with being an artist because I couldn’t draw very well. My sister was the artist as she could always draw and paint, but I discovered myself through stitching.

The first time I went to college, I took environmental studies but I found that I was up late at night knitting or crocheting instead of cramming for exams. Luckily when I returned to college the second time, I found the textile program at Capilano College.

Q Your education explains the environmental interest in your work.

A Yes, I’ve been able to bring the two elements together – with textile design and with the oil spill that I recently created at a gallery.

Q Can you explain what techniques you use?

A I used to do primarily hand embroidery with French knots. I loved the denseness that they gave to the cloth – it transformed a flimsy piece of cloth to this heavy, rich textural surface.

To avoid repetitive stress injury – I started to use my sewing machine as an embroidery tool. I disable the feed dogs which is the mechanism that pulls the fabric forward. I can move my fabric in any direction underneath the needle to do



Kirsten Chursinoff.
Seaweed Cove. Floss, thread, yarn, beads, fabric.
Octopus and Anemones. Floss, yarn, thread, beads, fabric. Kirsten Chursinoff.
Octopus' Garden. Floss, yarn, thread, fabric.
 Photographs by Kirsten Chursinoff.



I applied for an art show called Low Tide two years ago so I had quite a lot of time to bring ideas together. I knew that I wanted to work with the West Coast of British Columbia and explore the seashore. But in the last few months, as I was working on the pieces all I could hear on the news was that this oil spill in the Gulf kept growing larger. I knew that I had to do something with my show. In my art, I try and find beauty in unusual things such as spiders, octopi or even tubeworms. While I searching for unusual subject matter, this oil spill was something that I couldn't find beauty in.

I came up with the idea of staging an oil spill that would happen on one of my pieces of art. I decided to destroy an embroidered landscape that contained a sea-shore with flotsam and jetsam. There was driftwood and seashells made of glass and wooden beads. I added yarn to represent seaweed and embroidered trees to represent the West Coast.

I immersed that piece in a tray of water. To the side of that I had an art palette of art materials. I filled these jars with black inks and paints, and some shimmery art materials. I covered the labels with logos of all the corporate oil companies – Exxon, Shell, BP. I even took a skein of embroidery floss and wrapped it with a BP label.



Left to right: Kirsten Chursinoff reenacts the oil spill off the Gulf Coast on one of her textile pieces at the Opening of Low Tide, her art show at Craft House Gallery, 2010. Kirsten Chursinoff reenacts the oil spill off the Gulf Coast on one of her textile pieces.

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