



Plate I Frontal, laid and couched work. 15th century? National Museum of Iceland, No. 4380b.
Photo: Gíslí Gestsson.

TRADITIONAL ICELANDIC EMBROIDERY

By

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Iceland was settled largely from Norway in the period from A.D. 874 to about 930. A few settlers came from other parts, mainly the Scottish Isles and Ireland. In 930, the first republic was established, and it lasted until 1262 when the Icelanders submitted to the King of Norway. Iceland remained under Norwegian rule until about 1380 when, together with Norway, it became subject to the Danish Crown. Partial autonomy was acquired in 1918, but it was not until 1944 that Iceland gained complete independence from Denmark with the establishment of the second republic.

Christianity was adopted as a state religion in Iceland in the year 1000. In 1056, a bishopric was established in Skálholt in southern Iceland; a second see for northern Iceland was founded at Hólar in 1106. Iceland remained Catholic until the middle of the sixteenth century, but since 1550, when the last Catholic bishop, Jón Arason of Hólar, was executed, the state church has been Lutheran. This date, 1550, marks the end of the middle ages in Iceland.

The collections of the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavík, containing objects of cultural and historical significance from all periods of the country's history, include the group of domestically produced embroideries to be discussed here. A thorough examination is not possible within the limits of a short article; in addition, detailed studies of many of the embroideries have yet to be undertaken. An attempt will be made, however, to describe the most typical work wrought during the past centuries by Icelandic needlewomen, who, apparently taking great delight in their craft, produced embroideries intended to enhance not only the churches, but also their homes and dress as well.

Only church embroideries are known to have survived from mediaeval times, and the oldest of those produced in the country date back to the fourteenth or perhaps the thirteenth century. From the time after the Reformation, both ecclesiastical and secular work exists. Among the church embroideries are frontals, altar cloths, chasubles, chalice veils and burses, while secular examples consist mainly of coverlets, bed-valances, saddle cloths and cushion covers, besides such various items

of costume as women's jackets, skirts, collars, kerchiefs, caps and mittens.

Traditional Icelandic embroidery design is dominated by circles, hexagons and octagons enclosing various motifs such as scenes from the Bible and from lives of saints, human figures, plants and animals. This design feature dates back to the Byzantine silks, and was widely used in northern Europe during the middle ages. Developing in ways peculiar to Iceland, it there enjoyed a special popularity that lasted into the nineteenth century.

It is of interest to note the close relationship of mediaeval embroidery design with contemporary Icelandic illuminations. Illuminated manuscripts may well have served as pattern books, and most likely artists of the day undertook to draw embroidery patterns. This is at least strongly indicated by an artist's sketchbook of the early fifteenth century, as a number of the drawings in it appear to have been intended as embroidery designs; some even closely resemble extant mediaeval needlework.

From extant embroideries of more recent times, it is clear that Icelandic needlewomen had access to designs from the printed pattern books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. No such book has survived in Iceland, but the National Museum possesses four manuscript books of local production dating from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. These books contain a variety of geometric, floral and animal borders, all-over designs, and separate flower and animal motifs. Most of these are intended for counted thread work, and some are almost exact copies of designs in the printed pattern books.

The greater part of Icelandic needlework is executed in woollen handspun yarn, either natural, or dyed with vegetable dyes. Occasional use is made of linen, silk and metal thread. The grounds used for the embroideries are mostly domestic woollen and imported linen fabrics, the more costly imports such as silks and velvets being employed infrequently. The linens are plain tabby; the woollens are either a loosely woven tabby or an extended tabby (basket weave) for counted thread work, or closely woven tabby or twill for free embroidery.

The embroideries are worked in a variety of techniques. It might be mentioned at this point that several problems in connection with the

Icelandic terminology of embroidery stitches are still unsolved, even though research into written sources, such as church inventories and estate accounts, followed by a comparison of the findings with extant pieces has proved helpful in clearing up some of these difficulties. In this way, a few forgotten terms have been recovered, while the meaning of others has been defined more clearly. Much remains to be done before the nomenclature of old Icelandic stitches can be worked out satisfactorily.

Five embroidery techniques, together with the materials and designs employed, may be said to lend special character to old Icelandic needlework. These are laid and couched work, darning stitch, long-legged cross stitch, eye stitch, and split stitch; other stitches such as stem, chain, cross, Florentine, double running, satin, and surface satin were used in varying degrees, as well as gold and silver embroidery and some types of white work, mainly drawn work and laces.

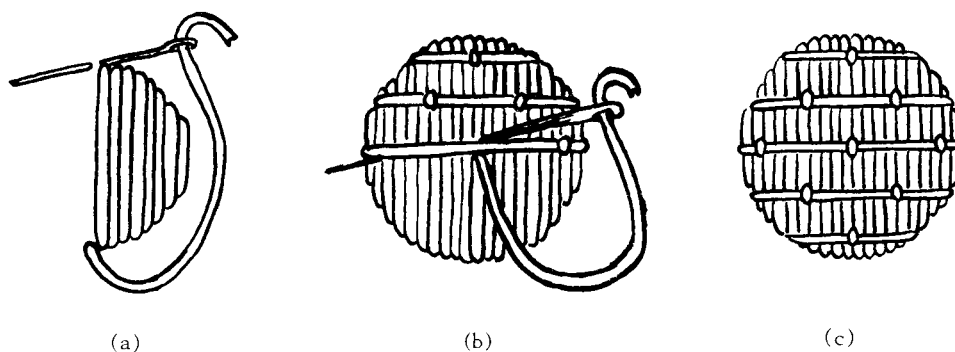


Figure 1 Laid and couched work: (a) laying ground threads; (b) couching of threads holding ground; (c) finished work.

Laid and couched work, *refilsaumur*, is worked in the manner shown in Figure 1. It is essentially a surface treatment. The main threads, often coarse and loosely spun, are laid close together from one side of the design area to the other (a), and across them finer, more tightly twisted threads are laid and fastened down at intervals with small, somewhat irregularly spaced stitches (b, c). The term *refilsaumur* is first encountered in written sources from 1550, the year which terminates the mediaeval period in Iceland, but the technique is best known from a group of altar frontals from the later middle ages. In the museum, there are five frontals¹ and a frontlet worked in this way, while three frontals²

and a long, horizontal wall hanging, a so-called *refill*,³ remain in the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen. Two other frontals exist, one in the Musée Cluny in Paris,⁴ the other in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe, in Enschede, Holland.⁵

The work is executed mainly in polychrome woollen yarns, with some blue or white linen yarn found on most pieces. Occasionally metal thread is introduced to highlight important details. One frontal in the museum is worked entirely in silk and metal thread.⁶ The ground used is most often a linen tabby; in three cases the embroidery has been worked on a woollen basket-weave ground. The technique and materials of the embroideries are much the same as those found on the Bayeux Tapestry, but in contrast to the tapestry, where some parts of the design as well as the background are left void, the Icelandic laid and couched embroideries – with three exceptions – are completely covered with stitchery. Small fragments of three Norwegian laid and couched embroideries also exist, as well as a Swedish frontlet from about 1600.

The antependium from the cathedral church at Hólar (Plate I) is the largest of the embroideries in this group, its maximum height being 99 cm, its maximum width 182.5 cm. As indicated by the inscription, it depicts three Icelandic bishops, the beatified Gudmundur Arason (1160-1237), and the sainted Jón Ögmundsson (1052-1121) and Thorlákur Thórhallsson (1133-1193), standing between two censuring angels.⁷ Almost the whole surface of the frontal is embroidered; three small details are not worked and may originally have held jewels. The ground is an unbleached linen tabby and, in addition to gilt thread to emphasize a few outlines, and a little white and blue linen thread, eight colors of woollen yarn are used: two browns, green-blue, yellow-green, yellow, white, red, and red purple. It should be noted that, due to fading and ageing, white appears as light tan, yellow as tan, red-purple as greyed red, and yellow-green as blue.

Plate II shows a laid and couched frontal from the parish church of Draflastadir in northern Iceland.⁸ On it are depicted – framed in barbed quatrefoils – the Virgin and Child, saints and bishops, perhaps sainted. Its maximum height is 109 cm, and it is 117 cm wide; the ground is an unbleached linen tabby completely covered with embroidery. A little blue and white linen thread has been used, but otherwise it is entirely worked in woollen yarns similar in color range to those on the Hólar frontal. As in the latter, the background color is yellow faded to tan,

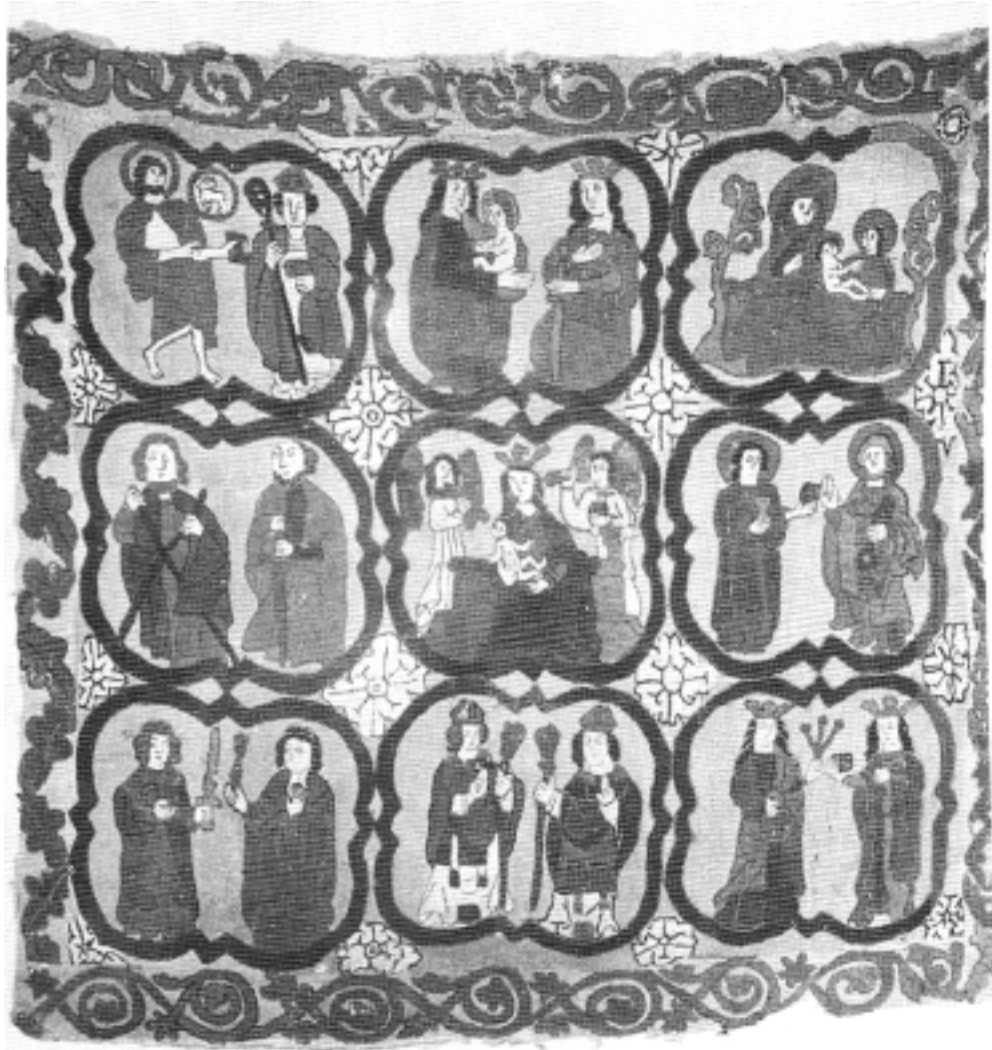


Plate II Frontal, laid and couched work. 15th century? National Museum of
Iceland, No. 3924.
Photo: Gisli Gestsson.



Plate III Frontal, appliqué. 16th century, 1st half? National Museum of
Iceland, No. 4797.
Photo: Gisli Gestsson.

a shade apparently popular as a ground in old Icelandic needlework. The outlines, all in wool, are mostly chain stitch; a few are couched.

Very few pieces of appliqué work have been preserved in Iceland, although eighteenth century documents indicate that a number of pieces worked in this technique, mostly church textiles, were then in existence. The earliest certain reference to appliqué that has been found, a frontlet of "cut-out cloth", dates from 1693, but from mediaeval times, more exactly the late fourteenth to late fifteenth centuries, church textiles are mentioned in inventories worked in *skorningur*, a term that may mean appliqué work.

The appliquéd frontal from the church at Reykir in northern Iceland (Plate III) very likely dates from the close of the middle ages.⁹ The ground of the panel is a dark blue, closely woven, wool tabby, 96 cm high and 82 cm wide. The two bands on either side, 8 cm wide, are linen. The pattern on the panel is made up of pieces of gilt leather, and many-colored woollen, linen and silk materials, with narrow gilt leather strips for the framework, all fastened down with white linen thread. The faces of the figures are padded; details, such as the scattered stars, are worked in silk thread. Work of similar nature was produced in other European countries, in Germany, for instance, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in Sweden in the sixteenth century.

Another church embroidery from the very end of the mediaeval period is a frontal from Skard in north western Iceland (Plate IV). It is worked in polychrome wools on linen, the embroidery being solely in stem stitch, a technique often combined with other stitches but rarely used alone.¹⁰ The stitching is rather crude and uneven, as if produced by an unskilled worker. The frontal apparently is the one listed in the 1675 inventory of the Skard church as an altar frontal with *varpsaumur*; this is the earliest certain reference found to the technique, but most likely the word *varp*, found in inventories as early as 1523, was often synonymous with *varpsaumur*.

On the frontal, which measures 114 cm by 75 cm, are depicted six saints enclosed in square frames. The name of each saint is inscribed below his picture, while the following inscription is placed above the two uppermost figures: *abbadis: solve [ig rafns]: dotter:i: reynenese*. Sólveig Rafnsdóttir was the last Mother Superior (from 1508-1551) of

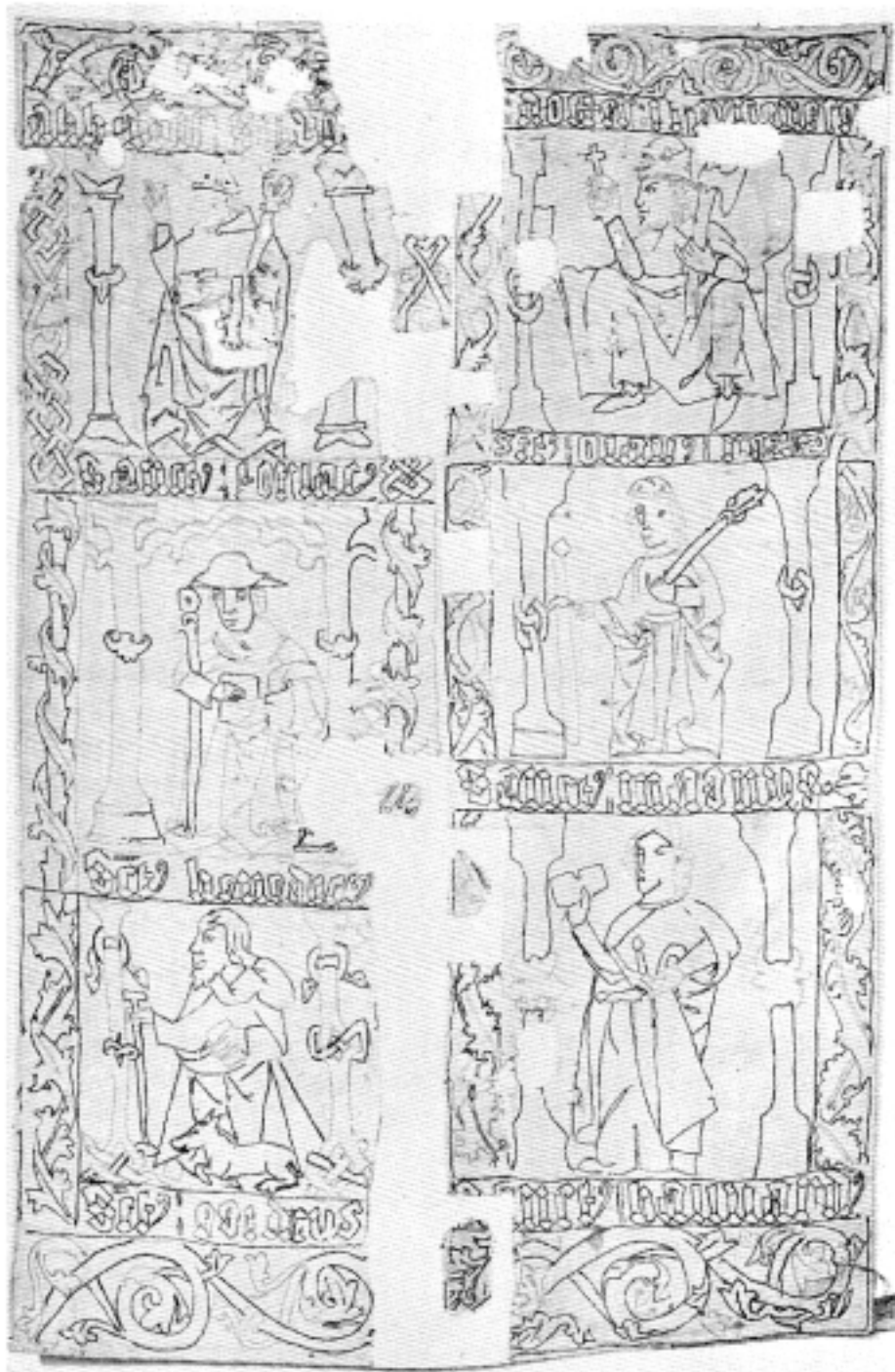


Plate IV Frontal, stem stitch. 16th century, 1st half. National Museum of Iceland, No. 2028.

Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

the convent at Stadur in Reynines – one of the two convents in Iceland – but no explanation has been found as to why an embroidery bearing her name came to be preserved as a frontal in the rather distant church at Skard.

Noteworthy among Icelandic needlework from Post-Reformation times are long linen bed-valances. Those still extant are dated from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, for the most part, are embroidered in woollen yarns of many colors in a straight darning stitch called *glitsaumur*, i.e. *glit* embroidery, which produces the same effect as Swedish *dukagång* weaving (Figure 2a). The earliest reference found for the term *glitsaumur* dates from about 1540, but as early as the first part of the fourteenth century textiles with *glit* are mentioned. Exactly when these terms took on the meaning they have today is not known; the first certain reference to *glitsaumur* as the type of darned embroidery still associated with the word dates from the beginning of the eighteenth century. In early times, *glit* and *glitsaumur* may have meant either glittering or colored textiles, or textiles embroidered with glittering or colored threads.

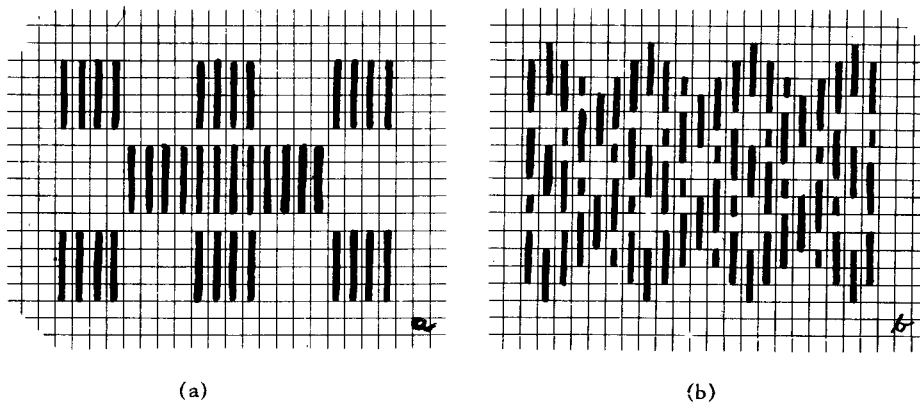


Figure 2 Darning stitches: (a) position of pattern threads in *glitsaumur*, straight darning stitch; (b) position of pattern threads in *skakkaglit*, slanting darning stitch, known as pattern darning or weave stitch.

The valances usually measure about 350 to 400 cm in length, and 50 to 60 cm in width. The three examples shown in Plate V, all from northern Iceland, date from the eighteenth century. The design in each case consists of the traditional round or polygonal frames enclosing

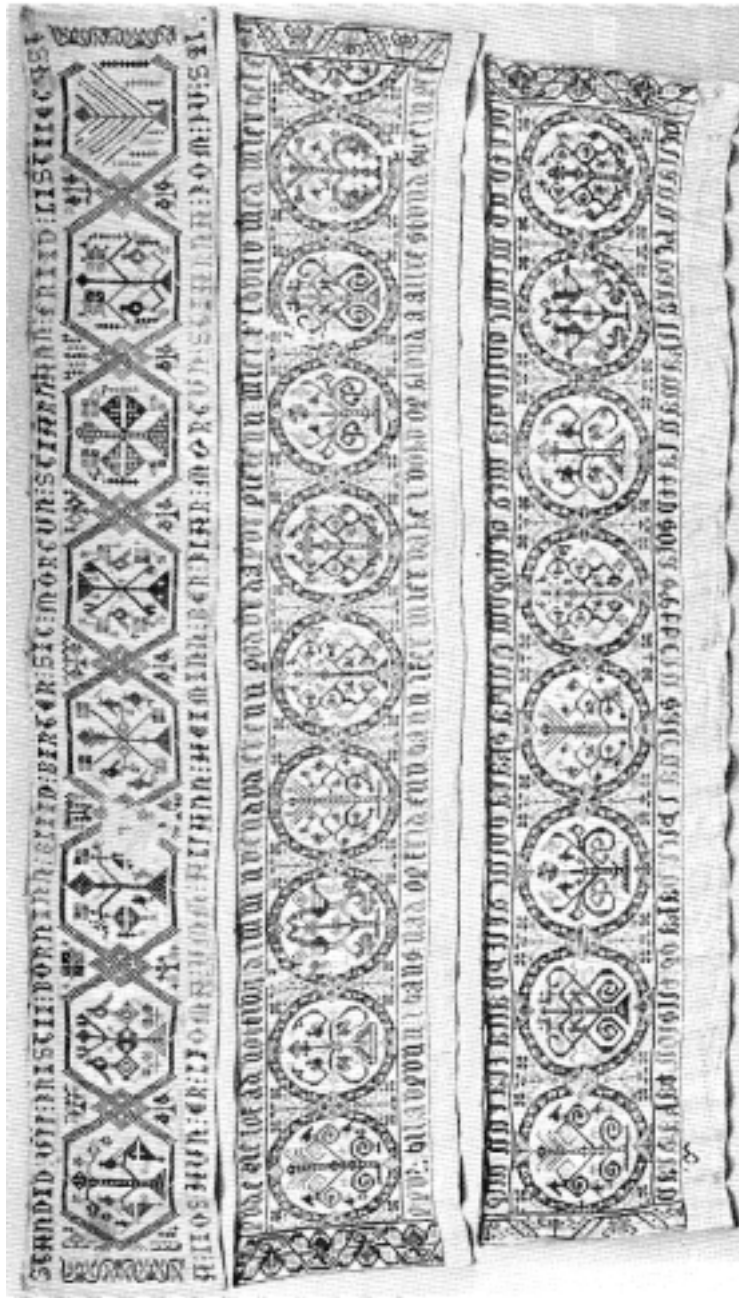


Plate V Bed-valances, darned stitch. 18th century. National Museum of Iceland, Nos. 160, 161, 615.
Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

flower and bird (tree of life) motifs. The inscriptions are parts of evening hymns. Biblical scenes, human figures and various animals are also frequently depicted within the design frames of valances. A detail of another eighteenth century example, from eastern Iceland (Plate VI), shows, for instance, two warriors or hunters, and a crowned lion.¹¹ In the left circle, the inscription “*tirpinn biskup*” indicates that the figure is meant to represent Bishop Turpin, one of Charlemagne’s paladins.

A variation of the *glit* embroidery is the so-called *skakkaglit* or slanting *glit* embroidery, sometimes called pattern darning. In this the darning stitch gives the impression of the Swedish *krabbasnår* weaving. Swedish needlework of this kind is called *vävsöm*, or weave stitch (Figure 2b). Like the ordinary *glit* work, the slanting *glit* is worked with polychrome woollen yarns on a linen ground. The term *skakkaglit* does not seem to appear in written sources earlier than 1675, but perhaps the technique is identical with what, about 1500, was referred to as *veanda-saumur*, a term that may be interpreted as weave stitch. *Skakkaglit* is found, for instance, on frontals from both mediaeval¹² and more recent times, and some bed-valances are also executed in this manner.

Plate VII shows a frontal with an all-over design worked in *skakkaglit*, with lettering in ordinary *glit* and Florentine stitch. With a maximum height of 98 cm and a maximum width of 124 cm, this embroidery from the Laufás church in northern Iceland carries the date 1694, and a long inscription relating that RAGNEIDUR IONSDOTTER presented it to the church in payment for the burial place of her mother. According to church inventories and other sources, Ragnheidur Jónsdóttir, twice married to bishops of the see of Hólar, was a frequent donor of church embroideries; she is also known to have been active in teaching needlework to young girls of her family, and the oldest of the pattern books in the museum may have belonged to her.

Also characteristic of Icelandic Post-Reformation needlework is a group of coverlets completely covered with long-legged cross stitch worked horizontally. The technique, formerly known as *krossaumur* or cross stitch, is today known as *fléttusaumur*, literally braid stitch. It appears as a supporting stitch on a few late mediaeval frontals; in written sources, it is first found mentioned in 1550. The coverlets, measuring about 150 to 175 cm in length and 100 to 125 cm in width, are



Plate VI Detail of bed-valance, darning stitch. 18th century. National Museum of Iceland, No. 1808.

Photo: Gisli Gestsson.

Plate VII Frontal, pattern darning. Dated 1694. National Museum of Iceland, No. 404.

Photo: Gisli Gestsson.

embroidered with multicolored woollen yarns on a tabby, or more often, an extended tabby or basket weave ground.¹³

The coverlet shown in Plate VIII, believed to date from the seventeenth century, was at one time part of the furnishings at the bishop's seat at Hólar. The main design consists of decorative frames encircling biblical scenes: the Nativity, the Baptism, the Crucifixion, and the Burial of Christ, while in the half-circles may be seen Noah's Ark, and a tree-of-life motif.¹⁴ The surrounding inscription contains part of an evening prayer. The letters, as well as some details in the spandrels, are worked in eye stitch. Another seventeenth century coverlet (Plate IX) is popularly known to museum visitors as *Riddarateppid*, the Coverlet of the Knights. It is of unknown provenance. The main design consists of twelve octagonal frames, six of which show gentlemen seated at tables, or knights or mounted horsemen in sixteenth century dress.¹⁵ In the other six are deer entangled in flowering trees. The color scheme of both these pieces is somewhat similar, although the colors of the latter are less faded: a somewhat greyed or golden yellow ground with the figures worked in blue, green, red, brown and white.¹⁶

Long-legged cross stitch was also commonly used on various ecclesiastical embroideries and on such items as cushion covers, one of the former being a frontal from the church at Háls in northern Iceland (Plate X). This piece, which measures 98 cm by 88 cm, is rather coarse both in material and execution. A few details are worked in double running and stem stitches. It is of interest to note that this frontal is the oldest known piece of Icelandic embroidery, still extant, to have carried a date as well as a name, the latter most likely that of the embroideress. Some letters: *Brett*, and parts of others [*efaT?*] may still be made out at the mutilated lower edge of the frontal, while inventories reveal that it carried the date 1617 and was presented to the church in 1631 by the minister, Tómas Ólafsson. The name of one of his daughters was *Brettefa*, an uncommon name in Iceland by the way, and it was undoubtedly she who embroidered it. The date of *Brettefa* Tómasdóttir's birth is uncertain, but in 1617 she was evidently quite a young girl; this might explain the rather crude execution of the work.

As already mentioned, some details on the cross-stitch coverlets were sometimes worked in eye stitch, a technique that was called *augnsaumur*, or rather *augnasaumur*, which literally means eye stitch. When

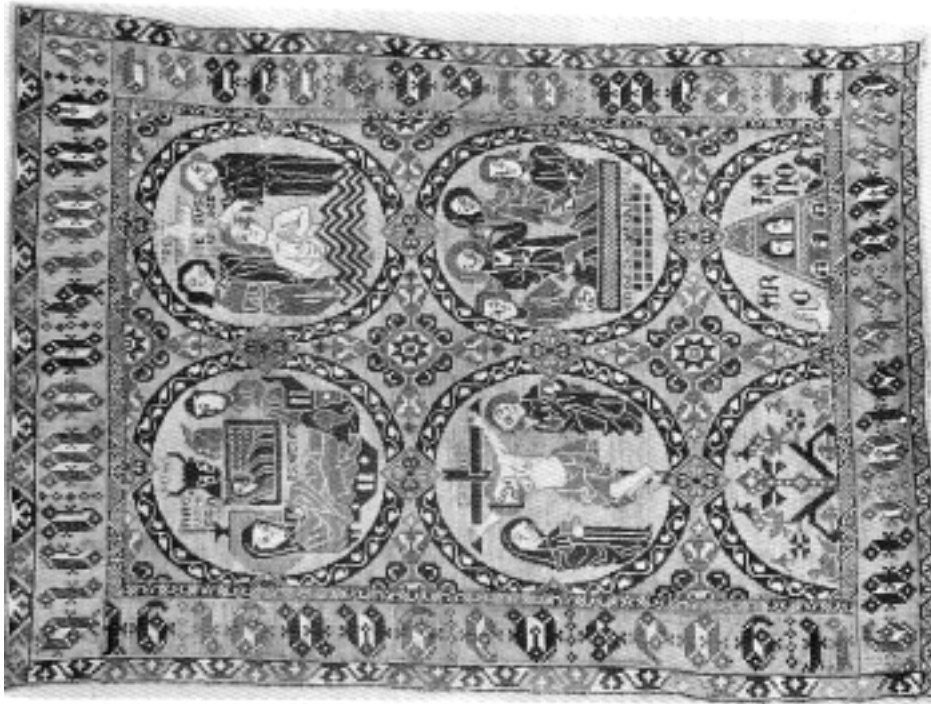


Plate VIII Coverlet, long-legged cross stitch and eye stitch.
 17th century. National Museum of Iceland, No. 1065.
Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

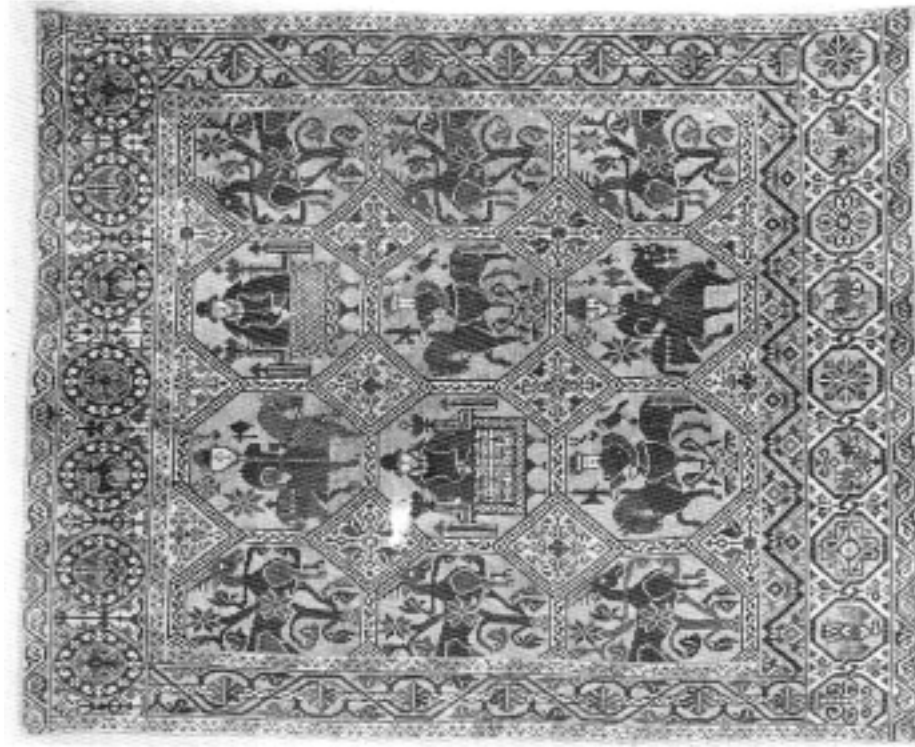


Plate IX Coverlet, long-legged cross stitch. 17th century.
 National Museum of Iceland, No. 800.
Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

used in Iceland, this is never outlined with back stitch. *Augnaumur* is found mentioned in inventories as early as 1659, and it is believed that the terms *borusaumur* and *gataumur*, first listed in the years 1550 and 1657 respectively, refer to the same technique. The bulk of extant eye-stitch embroideries in the National Museum, however, date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These pieces, executed in a manner apparently unique for Iceland and evidently produced in a limited number only, consist of coverlets and cushion covers completely covered in eye stitch worked in colored yarns on a woollen ground woven either in tabby or extended tabby.

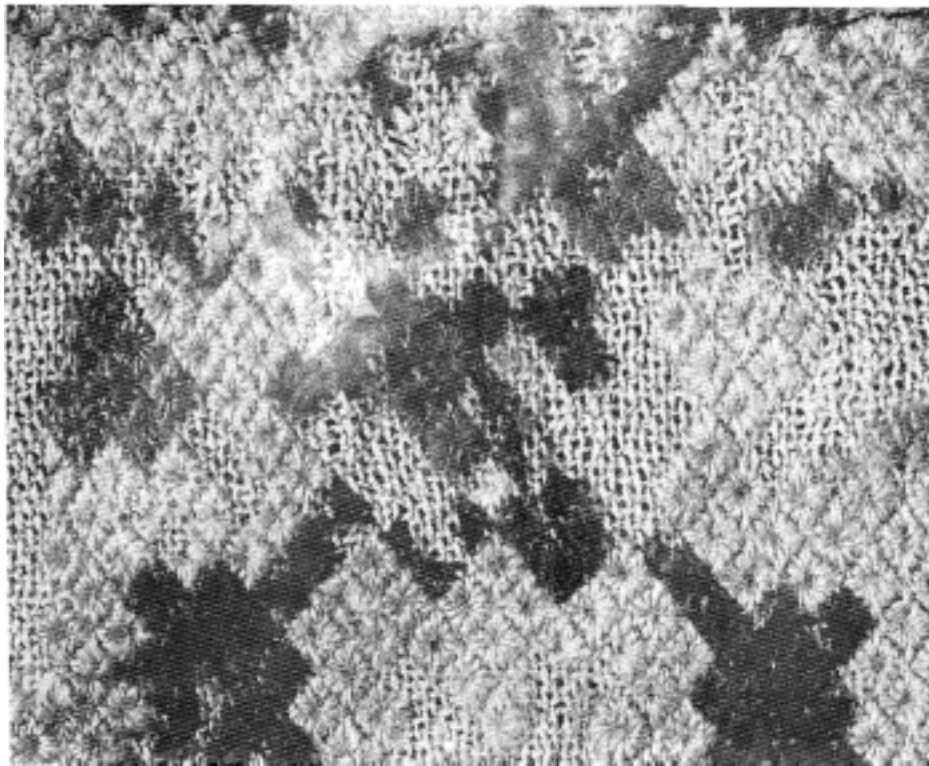


Figure 3 Detail of cushion cover, showing lozenge eye stitch or “diamond daisy” on woollen tabby ground. Actual size. National Museum of Iceland, No. 12423.

Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

The largest of this group is the coverlet shown in Plate XI which is about equal in size to the largest of the cross-stitch examples. As indicated by an inscription across one end, this coverlet was worked or completed in 1751, the owner and perhaps the worker being Dómhildur Eiríksdóttir, wife of a minister at Hrafnagil in northern Iceland. The all-over pattern consists of linked octagonal frames, each enclosing a vase with flowers or an eight-pointed star surrounded by small floral motifs, while the spandrels are filled with geometric knot patterns. The work is executed in polychrome wools, now very faded, on a coarse woollen tabby.

A rare variety of eye stitch has been observed in only two Icelandic embroideries: a coverlet of about 1700 also worked in long-legged cross stitch now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London,¹⁷ and a cushion cover of the second half of the eighteenth century in the Museum in Reykjavík (Figure 3). The eyes are worked diagonally, appearing as a lozenge rather than a square; each eye consists of only twelve stitches rather than the sixteen found in ordinary eye stitch. If this stitch ever had a name of its own in Iceland, it is now unknown. Judging from pictures, it seems to have been used on the morse of a Swedish cope of about 1500, and on a number of English samplers of the seventeenth century. It does not seem to be referred to or described anywhere except in *Elementary Embroidery* by Mary Symonds where it is depicted under the name "diamond daisy", while eye stitch is called "square daisy".

One of the puzzles of the nomenclature of Icelandic textiles is presented by the word *sprang*.¹⁸ Church cloths with *sprang* are mentioned in inventories as early as 1318. In later sources, the earliest dating from 1327, textiles with *sprang* and *glit* are sometimes mentioned together, leaving the impression that *sprang* and *glit* were two different, perhaps contrasting, ways of adorning textiles. References in seventeenth century inventories to embroideries that still exist show that *sprang* was then used synonymously with what today is called lacis or darned netting. The word *ridsprang* was also used at times, probably to further qualify the term. Although it cannot be ascertained at present, *ridsprang* might be regarded as referring especially to darned netting, with *sprang* being a more inclusive term for open or white work techniques such as drawn work, cut work, and lacis.



Plate X Frontal, long-legged cross, double running, and stem stitches. Dated 1617. National Museum of Iceland, No. 10940.
Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

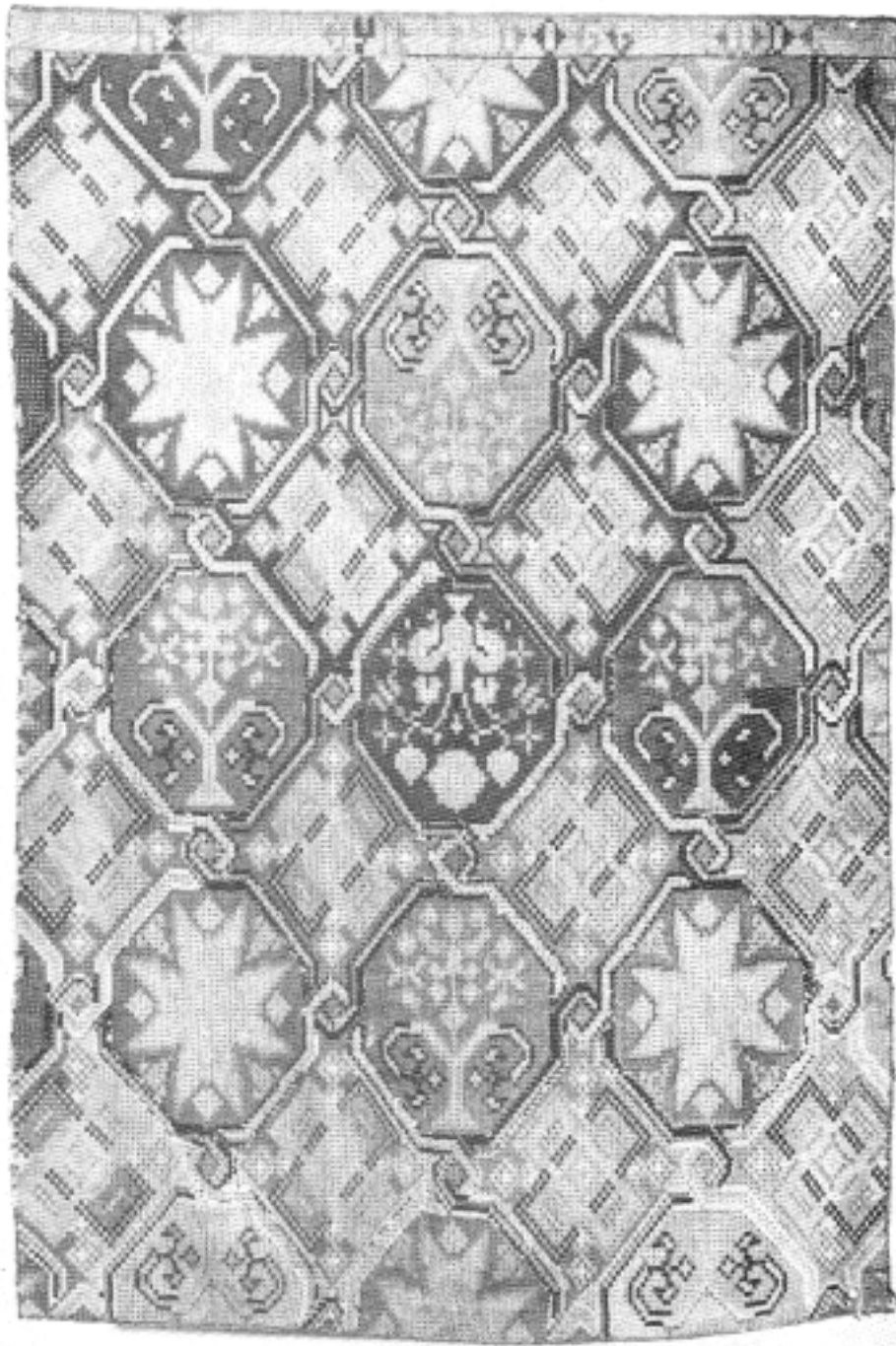


Plate XI Coverlet, eye stitch. Dated 1751. National Museum of Iceland,
No. 270.
Photo: Gisli Gestsson.

Icelandic embroideries executed in white work are comparatively few. One of the most striking examples is that from Höfdabrekka church in southern Iceland shown in Plate XII. According to the inscription, it was intended as a hanging for use around a baptismal font. In layout, the design is similar to the darned bed-valances, the four round frames enclosing an eagle, a griffin, a pair of dragons and a pair of lions. The embroidery, which measures 80 cm by 170 cm, is worked entirely in linen. The technique is drawn work: threads are drawn out at regular intervals, and those remaining are wrapped to form a mesh into which the design is afterwards worked. The date of the font cloth is somewhat uncertain, but in view of the close relationship of the design with that of the bed-valances, it might perhaps be tentatively dated to about 1700.¹⁹

Very different in character from the various types of counted thread work is the free style of floral embroidery known as *blómstursaumur* which came into vogue during the seventeenth century. The term is first encountered in written sources of 1715, but earlier work exists, such as the frontal shown in Plate XIII which carries the date 1683, and reached the museum from the church at Bær in south western Iceland. Measuring about 96 cm by 92 cm, it is executed in polychrome wools on a coarse blue woollen twill. The stitches used consist mainly of split, stem and long-and-short stitches, as well as French knots.²⁰

Blómstursaumur continued in fashion into the nineteenth century with split stitch becoming an ever more dominant feature of the work, so much so that today *blómstursaumur* has come to mean embroidery worked in split stitch. The technique found many uses, both ecclesiastical and secular. Cushion covers in *blómstursaumur*, for instance, became very popular, and some fine women's skirts of the eighteenth century were decorated at the hemline with wide bands of this work (Plate XIV).²¹

At that time, and right up to the present, silver and gold embroidery, *baldýring*, was also used to adorn parts of women's festive costume, such as jackets, bodices and collars (Plate XIV).²² How far back this custom dates has not been established, but all through the centuries some gold and silver embroidery was most certainly produced in Iceland for secular as well as for church use. In early sources terms such as

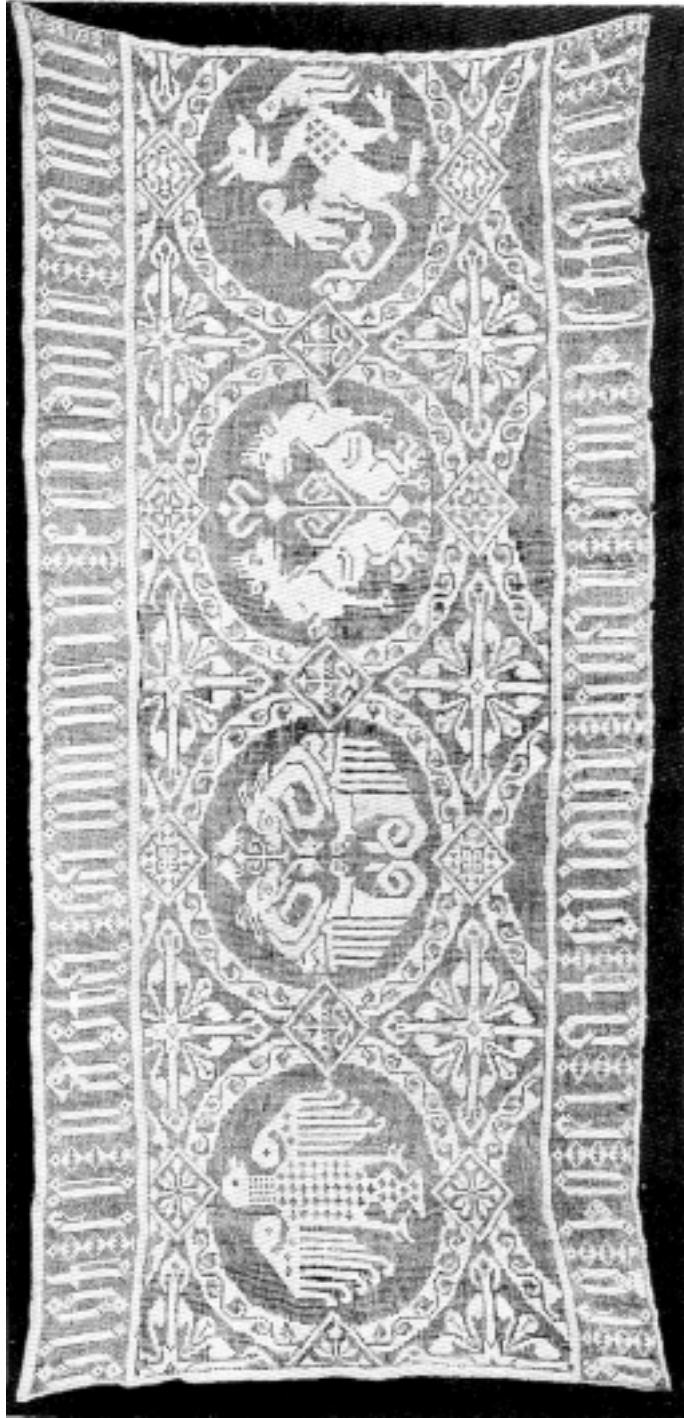


Plate XII Font cloth, drawn work. ca. 1700? National Museum of Iceland,
No. 1924.
Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

gullsaumur, gold embroidery, are found. The term *baldyring*, not found in written sources until 1659, seems to have been used at first as a general term for embroidery; not until 1750 is it found used in connection with gold work.

With the exception of one specimen from 1779, the few samplers in the museum are nineteenth century pieces. All completely lack national characteristics in design and execution, except for the lettering of an alphabet on one of them. A much more interesting "sampler", from 1795, has been preserved in the form of a chalice veil from the church at Brekka in eastern Iceland (Plate XV). Although intended for church use from the start, as is evident from the inscription around the edges, the veil is nevertheless worked in the manner of a sampler. The design is executed, quite successfully, in a great variety of stitches, some common, others rare in Icelandic embroidery. It measures 20.5 cm by 19.5 cm, and is worked in colored silk on linen, and backed and bound with silk. The silks, both threads and fabric, are very much faded, and now appear in various shades of tan and brown. The following stitches were used: cross, long-legged cross, darning, double running, Florentine, stem, satin, counted satin, and buttonhole stitches.

As has been seen above, it is possible to point to a few instances where the embroideress, owner or donor of an embroidery can be identified, but on the whole, little is known about the women who planned, supervised and executed the work. That is especially true of the mediaeval period. None of the extant embroideries from that time carries date or signature, except for the frontal mentioned above with the name of Sólveig Rafnsdóttir; it is considered extremely unlikely, however, that the abbess herself executed the work. On the other hand, written sources reveal that in 1725 the cathedral church at Hólar possessed two riddells, now lost, which carried an inscription stating that Thóra Tumasdóttir had embroidered them to the glory of the Virgin Mary. The embroideress, who has been identified as a granddaughter of the mistress of Bishop Jón Arason, probably worked the riddells towards the middle of the sixteenth century.

Little is known, too, about the places where the embroideries of the period were executed, but work such as the group of laid and couched frontals certainly gives the impression of being produced at needlecraft centres or schools. It is to be believed that the art of the needle was



Plate XIII Frontal, split, stem, long-and-short stitches and French knots.
Dated 1683, National Museum of Iceland, No. 3942.
Photo: Gísli Gestsson.



Plate XIV Woman's festive costume. ca. 1800. Skirt, split stitch; bodice, jacket and collar, silver embroidery; handkerchief, drawn work. National Museum of Iceland, Nos. 2868, 4179, 2159, 9205, 11527.
Photo: Gisli Gestsson.



Plate XV Chalice veil, various stitches. Dated 1779. National Museum of Iceland, No. 7177.

Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

practised in the two convents in Iceland with no less diligence than in convents in other countries, but documentary evidence of this is very meagre. No doubt ecclesiastical embroideries were also produced from the earliest days at the bishops' seats, and an episode in the story of Jón Ögmundsson, first bishop of Hólar, testifies to this.

As already stated, extant embroideries with inscribed dates and names are more common from later times; also more common and much more detailed are sources giving information about embroideries, some still existing and others now lost. Most of these were made by or for women of comparative wealth, position and leisure, such as the wives and daughters of bishops, ministers, sheriffs and magistrates. To some extent this may be explained by the fact that the finer and larger pieces of needlework, whether ecclesiastical or secular, were better cared for and deemed more worthy of mention in records than lesser, ordinary objects. The main reason, however, would seem to be that the well-to-do women were in a better position to order or to produce costly and demanding embroideries, while the women of the common people would of necessity be restricted in their output of fancy work.

After the Reformation, when the convents were dissolved, the bishops' seats and the homes of other high officials most probably became the main centres of artistic needlework. The study of embroidery was a necessary part of the upbringing of young girls; one bishop, it is said, even sent for a teacher from England in order that his only daughter might receive the best possible education in the feminine arts.²³ As already mentioned, the wife of another bishop taught needlecraft to the young girls in her immediate family.

The study of old Icelandic embroideries is still in its early stages; numerous questions remain to be answered. The solution of many of them may never be found in spite of future research, but even if the majority of Icelandic needlewomen of past centuries must for ever remain anonymous, and the dating of their work inaccurate, the beauty of the embroideries they have left to posterity is by no means lessened, nor is our admiration of the unknown women decreased. These were the women who through the centuries added stitch to stitch creating some of the country's finest works of art.

- ¹One of these, not illustrated here, is shown in Gertie Wandel, "To Broderede Billedtæpper og Deres Islandske Oprindelse", *Fra Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark*, 71-82, 1941, Figure 6; another may be seen in Kristján Eldjárn, *Ancient Art* (Reykjavík: 1957), Plate 45 (or in the revised edition, Kristján Eldjárn, *Icelandic Art* (New York: [1961?], Plate 45) as well as in E.J. Kalf, "Een Interessant Borduussel in het Rijksmuseum Twenthe," *Textilhistorische Bijdragen*, 1: 50-70, 1959, Figure 8.
- ²Two of these are shown in Wandel, *op. cit.*, Figures 1 and 2; the former may also be seen in Sigfús Blöndal and Sigurdur Sigtryggsson, *Alt-Island im Bilde* (Jena: 1930), Figure 75, and the latter in Helen Engelstad, *Refil, Bunad, Tjeld; Middelalderens Billedtæpper i Norge* (Oslo: 1952), Figure 60.
- ³Details of this hanging are shown in Eldjárn, *op. cit.*, Plate 44, Kalf, *op. cit.*, Figure 9, Blöndal and Sigtryggsson, *op. cit.*, Figure p. IX, and Engelstad, *op. cit.*, Figure 6.
- ⁴Cf. Wandel, *op. cit.*, Figure 4; Kalf, *op. cit.*, Figures 5, 6 and 7; Louis de Farcy, *La Broderie du XIe Siècle jusqu'à nos Jours* (Angers: 1890) II, Plate 24; and Elsa E. Gudjónsson, "Íslenzkur Dýrgripur í Hollenzku Safni," *Andvari*, 4: 127-138, 1962, Figure p. 136.
- ⁵Cf. Kalf, *op. cit.*, Figure 1; Gudjónsson, *op. cit.*, Figure p. 128.
- ⁶Shown in color in Eldjárn, *op. cit.*, Plate 5.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, Plate 67, a detail in color showing Saint Thorlákur and an angel.
- ⁸A detail in color is shown in *ibid.*, Plate 56.
- ⁹A detail in color is shown in *ibid.*, Plate 43.
- ¹⁰A detail of another piece of embroidery, a long, horizontal hanging, worked predominantly in stem stitch is shown in *ibid.*, Plate 47.
- ¹¹This valance, as well as two others, one of which is in the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, are shown in Blöndal and Sigtryggsson, *op. cit.*, Figure 19.
- ¹²A mediaeval antependium worked partly in *skakkaglit* is shown in Engelstad, *op. cit.*, Figure 49.
- ¹³A detail of a long horizontal wall hanging, worked in long-legged cross stitch, now in the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, is shown in Blöndal and Sigtryggsson, *op. cit.*, Figure p. XI.
- ¹⁴The four circles are shown in Eldjárn, *op. cit.*, Plate 50.

- ¹⁵ A detail, one of the horsemen, is shown in *ibid.*, Plate 53.
- ¹⁶ A detail in color of still another coverlet worked in long-legged cross stitch is shown in *ibid.*, Plate 46, while two more coverlets may be seen in Blöndal and Sigtryggsson, *op. cit.*, Figures 22 and 23.
- ¹⁷ Shown in *ibid.*, Figure 20. The upper part of this coverlet is shown in Mary Symonds Antrobus and Louisa Preece, *Needlework Through the Ages* (London: 1928), Plate XXVI, 3.
- ¹⁸ The use of the word *sprang* for a form of plait-work will not be considered here, since, as far as is known, no tradition of this work has existed in Iceland.
- ¹⁹ A detail of a panel of a riddell worked in darned netting (*lakis*), dated 1650, is shown in Eldjárn, *op. cit.*, Plate 49.
- ²⁰ A seventeenth (?) century coverlet worked in this manner is shown in Blöndal and Sigtryggsson, *op. cit.*, Figure 21.
- ²¹ A skirt with a decorative border worked predominantly in surface satin stitch is shown in *ibid.*, Figure 56.
- ²² Cf. *loc. cit.*
- ²³ An embroidered portrait of the bishop worked by his daughter is shown in color in Eldjárn, *op. cit.*, Plate 63. It is worked mainly in laid and couched work, long-and