

# BLACKWORK EMBROIDERY FOR BEGINNERS

CLASS & HANDOUT BY LADY ÆSA GYLDIR

In this handout you will learn a short history of the blackwork embroidery technique. Also included is a beginner's pattern for a biscornu style pincushion and instruction on the three main stitches you will need to create your own blackwork creations.



## AN INTRODUCTION...

Legend has it that the blackwork technique was brought to England from Spain around 1501 with the court of Catherine of Aragon, betrothed to Prince Arthur, heir to the throne of England. Fate saw Arthur die a year later, and Catherine was then married to Arthur's younger brother, Henry, heir to the English throne. This man would later come to be known as the famous Henry VIII, and Catherine would become the first of his famously ill-fated wives. *This story of how blackwork reached England, while romantic, is almost certainly false.* Techniques which could be called blackwork can be found in Spanish embroidery before 1501, but they also appear in England and many other countries well before Catherine's time. However, the association with Catherine led to the use of the term "Spanish work" as another term for blackwork, and the association with the queen certainly gave a boost to the popularity of blackwork in England during this period.

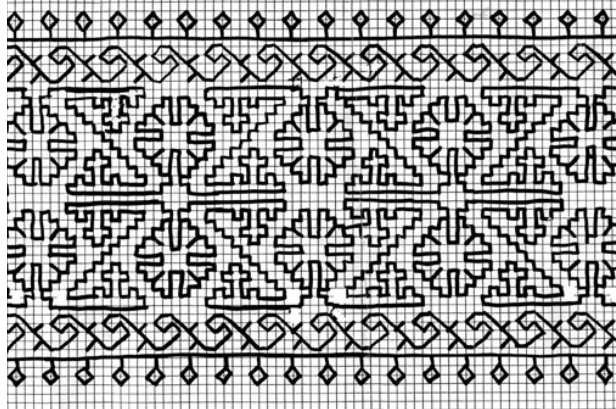
Another famous Englishman that gave blackwork a lasting impression in history lies in Hans Holbein the Younger, court painter to Henry VIII. Holbein's paintings are so realistic that the stitching on the sleeves and collars of his subjects, including Henry and many of his wives, are clearly identifiable as blackwork,



*Jane Seymour, Queen of England*  
*Hans Holbein the Younger*  
 1536, Oil on wood, 65,5 x 40,5 cm

and in fact can be reproduced by modern stitchers. Holbein's portrait of Jane Seymour, Henry's third wife, is a good example of such. (left & below)

**JANE SEYMOUR'S LACE CUFF**  
**HOLBEIN PORTRAIT 1536/1537**



Blackwork dropped out of stylistic favor in England with the passing of the Tudor dynasty in the 17th century. In the twentieth century blackwork has enjoyed a revival among embroiderers, historical reenactors, interior decorators, and others who enjoy its combination of art, technical challenge, and intellectual creativity. Modern stitchers can choose from a large number of patterns, both those reproduced from period examples (either from paintings or artifacts) and newly created designs inspired by our modern world.

Patterns may follow the traditional colorways of black, or sometimes red, thread on a light-colored background. Or, they may use other colors including light thread on a black or dark background. Many examples can be found easily on the internet through searches, as well as on community repositories such as Facebook communities, Pintrest, and forums. Never has it been easier to be an embroiderer, with all information on styles and techniques just a click away!



# MATERIALS NEEDED

Aside from the usual items you would have in an embroidery basket, you will also need a few special items to do blackwork:

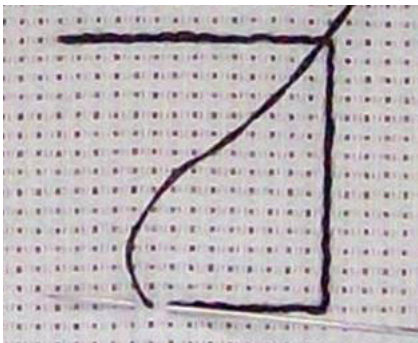
- **A blunt needle** - we want the thread to go between the threads of our fabric, not pierce it, so a blunt needle is key to the success of a good blackwork project. I use a size 22 tapestry needle, but experiment with them and find what size works for you.
- **evenweave fabric** - for our class project we are using 16 count Aida / cross-stitch fabric. This is an easy to find, cheap fabric that can be found in any craft store. Once you feel more comfortable with blackwork, experiment with other sizes, and even other fabrics - osnaburg cotton muslin is a great fabric to stitch on and can sometimes be found in evenweave.
- **specialty thread** - Many people do blackwork with regular embroidery floss, split into single threads, and that's just fine! Others prefer to use different thread, such as silk, polyester/ cotton blends, and historically gold- and silver- gilt threads were used. Different threads give completely different looks, so again - experiment and find something you like!

## THE STITCHES

There are three main stitches that are used in blackwork embroidery, and each is very easy to learn and master with practice. For the project that we will be making in this handout, you will be using all three of the main stitches.

### The Backstitch:

This is a very simple stitch that might seem difficult at first, but once you get the rhythm you can very quickly stitch a large amount of fabric.



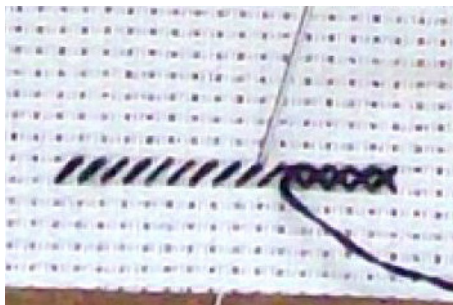
To start this stitch, bring the thread up from the back of the fabric on the line that you want to create. Make a small backward stitch through the fabric. Bring the needle through the fabric one hole front of the first stitch and still on the line. Pull the thread through the fabric. Make the second stitch forward two holes - one hole in front of the first

hole that you went into. Continue this “two forward, one back” stitch, and you’ve got it!

As an aside, this stitch is wonderful for any type of garment handsewing as well. :)

## The Cross Stitch:

A stitch that's still common today, the cross stitch is a quick stitch to fill in large areas. For our small project we'll only be using it a little, and as a note - the cross stitch is very difficult to make with the "same on the front and back" look that blackwork is so known for, so most patterns that contain this stitch are more modern invention.

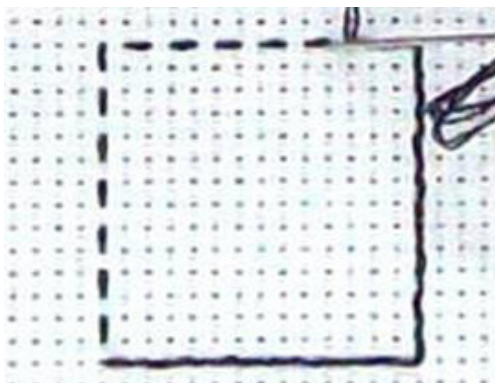


To begin, bring your needle up on the bottom left corner of your line, and pass it back down through the top right. From the back, come up through the next line's bottom left and repeat until you reach the end of your line. On the return path come up at the bottom right and pass the thread down through the top left.

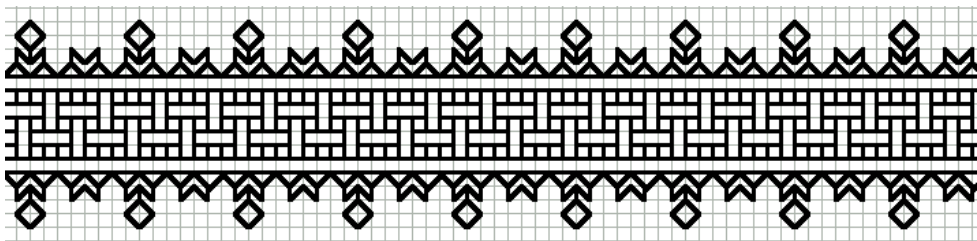
## The Holbien / Doube Running Stitch:

This stitch is the bread and butter of blackwork, and the one you will be using the most on any blackwork project you do.

To start, you will make a running stitch, coming up and down in every other hole. The trick to this stitch is that when you reach the end of your line, or about halfway through the length of your thread, return and make a running stitch back in the other direction, going into the "missed" holes, making the line a solid, fully filled line. This can quickly become a complicated process when you're drawing detailed



designs. It is very important to plan your path ahead and make certain that you will be able to draw each line with only one pass in each direction.





# CLASS PROJECT

For our class project, we will be making a “biscornu” pincushion. This small, uniquely-shaped sewing notion is very easy to make, and even modify the pattern some to make your own unique design.

## To start:

Our fabric’s working area is 50 x 50 squares/stitches. I recommend marking your fabric edges at every 10 holes, you can pencil this as a guide before you begin stitching, or just do it as you work with a stitch. I always also mark the center of each side (at 25, for this project), just to save some time later. This “marking” is entirely a personal preference however, so do whatever makes your life easier.

At one corner, begin a backstitch and work along one edge. Doing this outline in backstitch will later be used to attach the front and back pieces together, so if you need to double up because you missed a hole, go back and make sure you get full coverage.

## The Outer Border:

The best place to start the actual design is in the middle of the outside border - where the small swirl connects with the “wiggly” line. Please take note - at this center intersection the line forms a point, instead of the flat section that the rest of the line forms as it goes up and down. Begin a running stitch and go around your entire piece. When you get to the center of each side, go up into the swirl. You should find that as you reach the cross-stitch on the end, you can determine which direction to do the stitch to make the blackwork stitch fall into the pattern correctly. This critical analysis is, unfortunately, something that happens a lot with blackwork. Don’t distress, you get better at it!

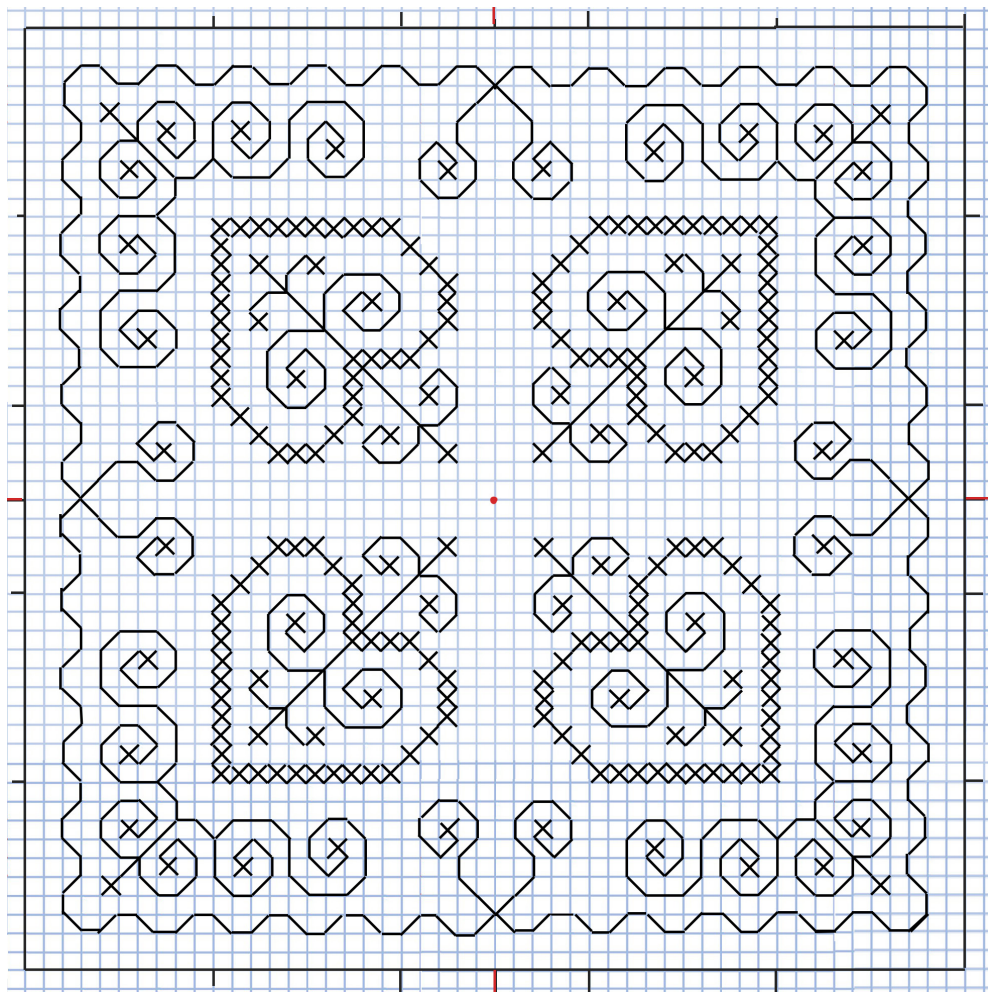
## The Central Design:

Find the exact middle of your fabric - this is where having the pre-marked area comes in handy! Count two over and two down in any direction, and begin to make a cross stitch in the square. If you are not exactly sure, please check the pattern on the next page - it should help you see. Keep in mind you are counting **holes**, not **threads**.

If you find that at any point you have made a mistake DO NOT PANIC! Blackwork is very easy to pull out, and sometimes mistakes turn into even neater designs. Work your way through it and stay calm, and your project will turn out awesome!

# PROJECT PATTERN

Our pattern, which is rather simple and forgiving for mistakes - while blackwork is traditionally meant to be the same on the front and the back, this project will only have the front visible once completed, so there is a large margin to play around and discover techniques without fear or ruining the project's "flow". Just remember: THIS IS FUN, RIGHT? :)

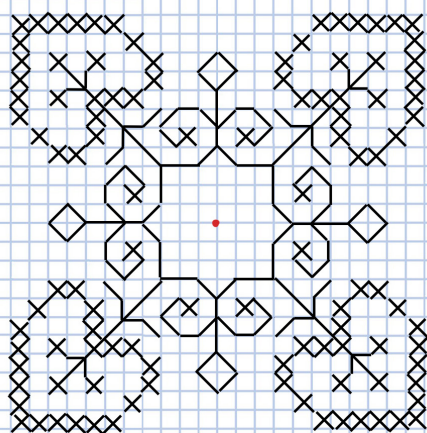


The "back" side of our pattern has a large amount of blank space - please feel free to be creative and add your own designs in this space - or not, if you like it. I've made several in a variety of different ways, and this side is where it's fun to make each one a unique piece of handmade art that any seamstress will covet to have in her sewing box.

Larger versions of the patterns can be found at:

<http://sca.brainmurk.com/classes/blackworkbiscornu1.png>

<http://sca.brainmurk.com/classes/blackworkbiscornu2.png>



## FINISHING

Once your two sides are finished, it is time to align them and stitch them together. This sounds far more complicated than it actually is - sometimes it's hard to wrap your head around how it goes together until you actually get it half-stitched.

To begin, Thread your needle with one strand of thread. Secure it on the backside of the bottom piece, in a corner, and bring your needle up in that corner. Run your thread under the stitch immediately to the left of that corner (going counter-clockwise). Then line up that stitch with the middle stitch on your top fabric.

Start sewing the pieces of fabric together using a whip stitch, one stitch at a time, lining up the backstitching and fabric. Be very careful not to miss a stitch, or use a stitch twice. The way I do this is by only going through the two anchoring backstitches that I ran first, then looping back through my previous stitch's thread tail before I pull that stitch tight.

Continue sewing around your biscornu, making sure you don't skip a stitch or use a stitch twice, until you get to the last side. You will need to now choose your filling! You can use wool or any other filling you like. I use polyfill because I don't like fighting moths. :) Pull off small pieces at a time and stuff your biscornu. How tightly you fill it is entirely a personal preference! Once you're satisfied, fold the edges in and continue sewing until you reach the last corner.

The final touch that I like to add is a small loop that I can hang them from my scissors or bag with - you can make any kind you prefer, I often just braid a small bit of black embroidery floss or use a bit of kumihimo scrap, about 4 inches long, with a knot in both ends. Put the knotted ends together, inside the final corner, and stitch them in with 10-12 passes of the needle, making sure you're catching the fiber of the loops on the inside when you're stitching them in.

And that's it! You've made your first blackwork piece! Congratulations!

## MORE INFO, DESIGNS & REFERENCES

[http://dragonlore.net/free\\_patterns.php](http://dragonlore.net/free_patterns.php)

<http://www.blackworkarchives.com/index.html>

<http://www.needlenthread.com/2012/10/looking-for-free-blackwork-embroidery-patterns.html>

<http://www.needlework-tips-and-techniques.com/blackwork.html>

<http://embroidery.about.com/od/Embroidery-Types/tp/Blackwork-Embroidery.htm>

<https://www.rose-hulman.edu/~holden/Preprints/blackwork.pdf>

<http://mktag.org/projects/sorchaBlackwork101/content.html>

PS: I've sprinkled a few other fun patterns throughout this handout. If you're feeling adventurous, give them a shot!

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