

# A Catte

Researched and Stitched by Lady Ariesian Eldclaw

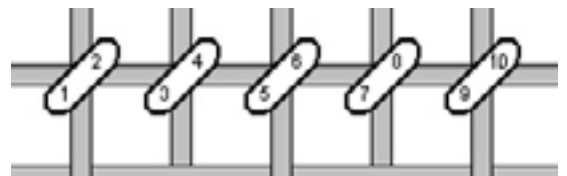


It is often thought that “Cross Stitch” is a modern invention, and that in period such stitches were simply not done. This is a misunderstanding and myth!

The beginnings of ancient Cross Stitch as we know it started with the “Tent Stitch”, first practiced in ancient Egypt to - you guessed it - hold tent sections together! Tent stitch is the simplest and most common stitch in canvaswork and is the foundation for many other stitches, and it is easy to find many examples of this technique in museums across Europe and the United Kingdom from period.

But, what of Cross Stitch? Perhaps first we should define what we are discussing!

***Tent Stitch*** is a diagonal stitch, usually worked across a single intersection of canvas from \ bottom left to top right.



***Cross stitch*** consists of two straight, crossing stitches which can be worked individually or in rows.



One also must not forget the Blackwork connection to historical cross-stitching, as the holbein stitch is very commonly used to run your lines. Making stitches in the manner that modern cross-stitchers do would not seem out of place to a 15th century English Blackworker, and indeed many of the common motifs of the time even included sections of cross-stitch within them.



The earliest evidence of cross stitch (*silk floss on cotton evenweave fabric*) is from burial excavations in the Qadisha Valley, Lebanon dated to the 13th century AD.

In this discovery, so-called ‘the Maronite mummies’, the embroideries found were worked in floss silk in various colours, notably blue, brown and red. The stitches attested to on the items are: cross stitch, long and short cross stitch, darning stitch, herringbone stitch and double running stitch (Holbein stitch).

From the 1500s, cross stitch features across different countries and traditions: the Metropolitan Museum holds a Portuguese pattern book, showing counted thread cross stitch; further east, Indian kanthas were being stitched using cross stitch, rather than the traditional running stitch; Mary, Queen of Scots and her household stitched canvaswork cross stitch pieces (now held by the V&A museum).



above and below: cross stitch from Qadisha Valley, 1283AD



It is this last example that I have chosen to draw inspiration from and focus on for my reproduction of historical cross-stitch. This embroidered panel depicts a ginger cat and a mouse, seated on a chequered floor, bearing the cipher of ‘Mary, Queen of Scots’. When Mary escaped from Scotland in 1568, she fled to England to seek help from her cousin, Elizabeth 1. Instead of providing refuge, the English queen put her in the custody of George, Earl of Shrewsbury. Most of Mary’s embroideries, including this one, were carried out between 1569 and 1584 during this captivity. She employed the services of many

tapissiers (professional embroiderers) and artists- most famous and long lasting in her employ being Pierre Oudry, who would draw the designs onto canvas for her to execute in tent or cross stitch. The inspiration for this cruciform-shaped design came from the book Icones Animalium by Conrad Gesner, published in 1560, with the addition of the little mouse. It is suspected that the ginger cat is a veiled reference to the red-haired Elizabeth I who kept Mary (the mouse) her captive.



My adaptation of Mary Queen of Scots’ work is executed almost entirely in cross stitch, 1 thread of silk worked over two threads of 32ct linen. Like many other Scots embroiderers, the Queen used a limited repertoire of stitches and her panel is worked in cross stitch and tent stitch. In England, the fashion was for intricate stitches for their own sake. This type of work is associated with French rather than English techniques, which is not really surprising as Mary was brought up in the French court before she came back to live in Scotland.

I have stitched this piece over the course of approximately eight months, working often upwards of 50 hours a week. It has been a passion project, as this has been a piece that I have always wanted to stitch. My work is entirely in silk on a field of 32ct linen, worked

entirely with 1 strand over 2, in cross stitch. The border stitch is 2 strands of silk worked in satin stitch, as the best I can determine that is how Mary also finished her piece. To help me determine many of my choices with how to guide the stitching for this piece, I relied on some independent research that I did several years ago when I visited the United Kingdom and was able to make an appointment with the V&A Clothier’s Guild to arrange for a private viewing of some of Mary and Bess Talbot’s pieces. Below are some close-ups of photos I took on that trip that helped guide my judgement.





And here are some progression shots for my piece as well



Finally, after 8 months of near unstoppable work, I present my finished Catte! Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed learning about the fascinating history of Cross Stitch in our period!



## References

Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, 'Qadisha Valley Embroideries (Lebanon)', TRC Leiden. Available at: <https://www.trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/regional-traditions/middle-east-and-north-africa/medieval-middle-east-and-north-africa/qadisha-valley-embroideries-lebanon> (Accessed: 25 September 2023)

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