

The Stitch Bank

The Royal School of Needlework celebrates 150 years with the creation of a virtual repository of stitches

The RSN working on The Queen's Coronation Robe



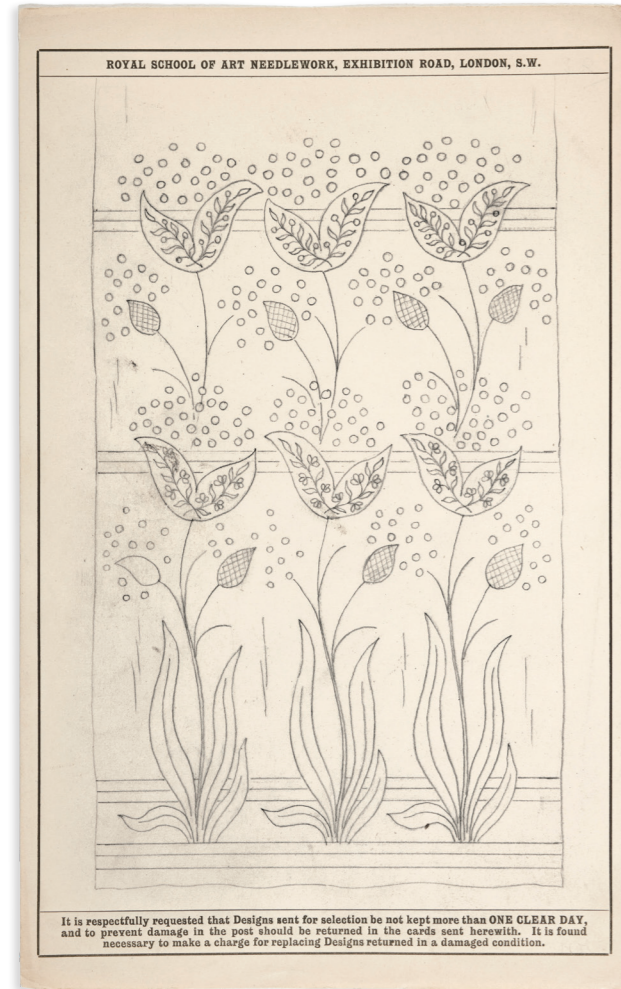
The Queen's Coronation Robe hand embroidered by the RSN



The Royal School of Needlework was founded in 1872 by Lady Victoria Welby, a self-taught philosopher and watercolour artist. Known then as the 'School of Art Needlework', it occupied a small apartment on London's Sloane Street and employed just 20 women. Its first President was Queen Victoria's third daughter, Princess Helena (officially Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein), who was instrumental in building up the institution and gaining the school its royal prefix in 1875. By 1903, with its workforce having grown to around 150, the RSN relocated to a new purpose-built premises on Exhibition Road, near the Victoria and Albert Museum.

One of the founding principles of the RSN was to support women to become financially independent. The school provided employment for women who, without any other means of earning money, would otherwise have found themselves living in poverty. Over its 150-year history, the institution has been led by a succession of royals – from Princess Helena, who was also a founding member of the British Red Cross; to the Duchess of York, who later became Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother; to the current patron, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cornwall. During this time the RSN has built up an equally illustrious portfolio of work: in 1901, its workers embroidered Queen Victoria's funeral pall, and later worked on the coronation robes of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. 80 years on, the school produced a pair of embroidered slippers for His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, and a monogrammed lace pillow for Lady Diana Spencer, on the occasion of their wedding. In 2011, the RSN worked with Sarah Burton of Alexander McQueen on Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge's wedding dress.

THE ROYAL SCHOOL OF NEEDLEWORK



Above: Late 19th century design by RSN Paint Room

RSN degree students at Hampton Court Palace



Despite these connections, the school is not only devoted to high-class luxury. During the First World War, workers at the RSN taught returning soldiers the craft of embroidery, as a means of therapy. In the Second World War, Lady Smith-Dorrien, president of the RSN at the time, collected lace to be sold for the war effort and at the request of the War Office, the RSN translated the badges of all UK and later Allied forces regiments into patterns for transfers that could be stitched.

Moving into the 21st century, the RSN has managed to inspire a new generation with its modern take on embroidery. In 2002, the school was commissioned to embroider the official logo for the FIFA World Cup in Japan and Korea. In 2006, employees at the RSN produced a piece of embroidery for Sir Paul McCartney's *Ecce Cor Meum* album cover. In 2016, the RSN received one of its largest commissions to date: a six- by eight-metre embroidered artwork for the series *Game of Thrones*. Around 50 embroiderers – from the RSN as well as the Embroiderer's Guild, Fine Cell Work (a social enterprise that trains prisoners in needlework) and Hand & Lock Embroidery – worked on the piece, which took around 30,000 hours to complete.

RSN degree students working on *Game of Thrones* project



THE STITCH BANK

"I joined the RSN's Apprenticeship Scheme in 2002," says Jacqui McDonald, now a tutor at the school. "My background was in conservation and restoration, and I spent seven years with the National Trust restoring textiles in their collection. On my very first day at the RSN, I was introduced to the wooden slate frames and taught how to 'frame up'. The frame is the one key tool that no hand embroiderer could live without; it holds your fabric tight so that you can be more precise and accurate with your needle. Many of our frames date back to when the school was founded in 1872. I love their wonderful history – if only they could talk, imagine the stories they could tell!"



Jacqui McDonald

"After completing my apprenticeship, I started teaching. I now teach a number of courses at the RSN, including the Certificate and Diploma in Technical Hand Embroidery and the Future Tutors Programme, which trains tutors for the next generation. I also produce my own embroidery designs and kits, and I wrote one of the popular RSN Essential Stitch Guides on the technique of Crewelwork – an early form of surface stitching, using crewel wool on linen.

"One of my main projects at the moment is the RSN Stitch Bank – an online repository of stitches from around the world," Jacqui explains. "It features videos, written instructions, illustrations and photographs for each stitch, as well as the history of its use and images of the stitch on items from the RSN Textile Collection." The aim is not only to celebrate the beauty of embroidery and the skill involved, but to protect stitches which have fallen out of style from disappearing completely. The Stitch Bank launched with its first 150 stitches, to align with the 150th birthday of the RSN, and more will continue to be added as the collection grows.

The RSN's chief executive Dr Susan Kay-Williams says: "The Stitch Bank goes to the heart of the Royal School of Needlework's core purpose. We will be celebrating our 150th anniversary in 2022 and were founded to keep the techniques of hand embroidery alive and, implicitly, all their stitches. We believe it is our responsibility to conserve every stitch digitally so they will be recorded for future generations." The stitches range from the basics (Back Stitch and French Knots) to the more challenging (Queen Stitch and Turkey Rug). Rare stitches such as 'Underside Couching' and 'Battlement Couching Trellis' will also be included. It will be an invaluable resource for educators and historians, as well as artists and enthusiasts.

Visit the Stitch Bank at rsnstitchbank.org, where you can browse stitches by technique, use or structure, and save your favourites to your own list to come back to later.

Livia Papiernik, RSN degree graduate 2018

