

Blackwork Embroidered Camicia



Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, c1565: "The Concert" (fresco detail) Vicenza, Villa Campiglia Negri de' Salvi

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Engraving by Cesare Vecellio depicting a Venetian woman in her camicia bleaching her hair, 1598. Camicia is likely decorated with embroidery or cutwork.

Introduction

This project has grown out of a larger project to reproduce the clothing in Giovanni Antonio Fasolo's fresco known as *The Concert* or *The Musicians* (see cover image). The embroidery on this *camicia*, an undergarment similar to a chemise, has been both the most time consuming and rewarding aspect of this process. I was not able to finish the embroidery before the portrait was presented at Chocolate Revel, but I still needed the garment. This garment was sewn together using a mixture of machine and hand sewing for the event, and now has been taken partially apart so I can complete the extensive embroidery required.



Left: Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, *Games*, detail 1565. Vicenza, Villa Campiglia Negri de' Salvi Notice the contrast between the embroidered and plain *camiaici*.

Right: Italian. *Boarder # 79.1.59*. 16th Century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

About Blackwork Embroidery

Blackwork or Spanish stitch, was one of the most popular forms of embellishment in the sixteenth century. Its name is derived from the black silk which is used to embroider white linen, but it could also use red, purple, or blue silk. Sometimes its called Spanish stitch by those following the idea that Spain spread its popularity. By the 1530's, this technique could be found from London to Florence, and countless places in between. Scholars are still in disagreement about where the technique started, but some of the earliest examples have come out of North Africa. The geometric style of some early blackwork resembles Islamic art.

Typically blackwork is divided into counted and uncounted forms. Uncounted blackwork is when an outlining stitch and shading stitches are used to create organic looking vines and motifs as is seen below. This grew in popularity in the mid sixteenth century, and began influencing other forms of embroidery toward the end of the century. Counted black work, or "traditional" blackwork, strictly uses a double running stitch and a counted pattern to produce a pattern. It is not uncommon is surviving examples to find gold and silver gilt thread couched into the designs, but it has been difficult to find metal thread consistently depicted in period portraits. It should be noted that surviving examples also suggest the Italian States generally preferred floral motifs in their blackwork over geometric motifs.

Blackwork is normally used to embellish necklines, and cuffs of undergarments. It may be that the large camaici were gathered into, or smock underneath blackwork bands. Both forms of embroidery are seen on extant camaici, but I have chosen to use counted black work for this project.



Left: Paris Bordone. *Balia di Medici*, detail. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. 1545-1550
The detail shows red blackwork on her



Top: Camaica detail with counted Italian Blackwork. 1550-1600 Museo del Tessuto, Prato.

Bottom Left: *Blouse # 41.64*, detail. Late 16th Century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. These motifs and borders do not use a counted running stitch primarily, and they create floral motifs.



Materials and the Patterns

There is actually a limited number of materials for this project compared to some of my other projects. The body of the garment is made from handkerchief linen which is semi translucent but strong. The camicia was sewn together with a mixture of cotton and linen thread depending on how each section was sewn. The embroidery should be done with silk thread, but because this is part of a portrait I needed a specific color which was not available locally in silk. The matching colors needed were available in DMC mercerized embroidery floss. Waxing the DMC floss with bees' wax made the DMC behave more like silk thread.

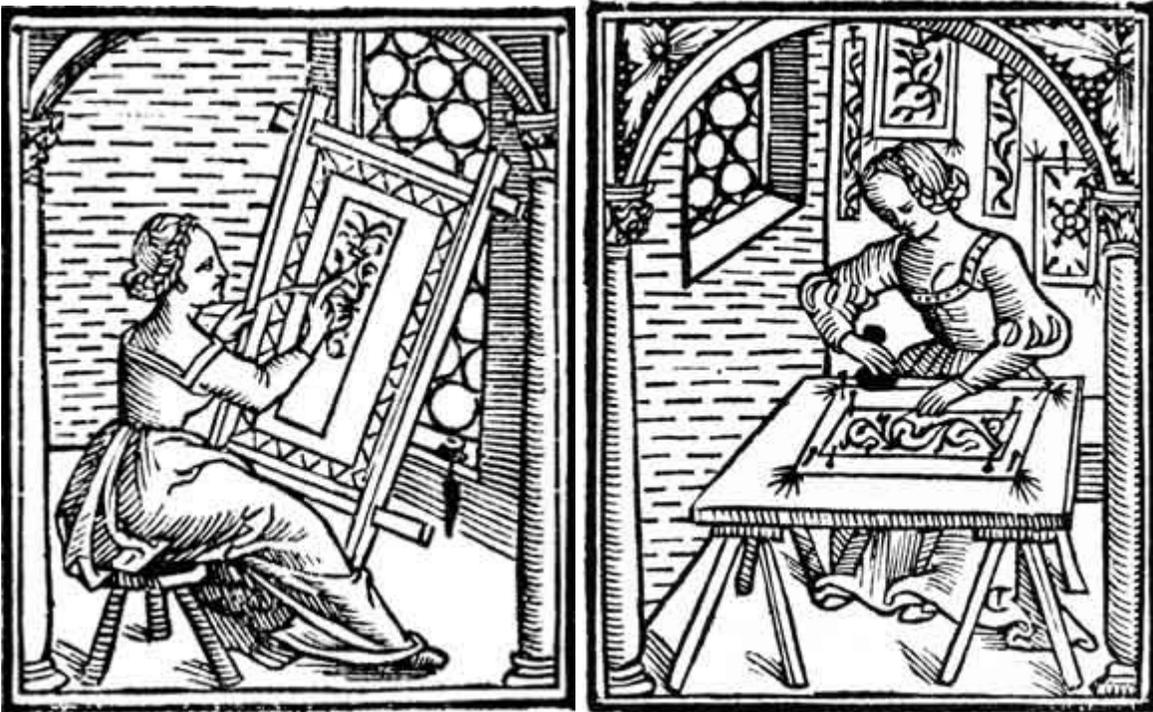
The all of the patterns for the embroidery and camicia were found online. Darbie Marlin has studies an Italian embroidery sampler from the sixteenth century and graphed out several patterns from the sampler and has published them online for personal use. Marlin's analysis of the sampler suggests that the embroidery was not done using a double running stitch but with back stitching. This should not be seen as a hindrance to the patterns being done in black work. Period pattern books did not specifically tell ladies what stitches to do, making the individual's taste and economy the best guide to technique. To see Marlin's graphs please see Appendix I.

Process

This project began by doing research into embroidery patterns and attempting to draw out the exact designs in the fresco being reproduced. Eventually redrawing the pattern from the fresco failed because, as a medium, fresco does not hold hard lines and detail well over centuries. What was certain from the redrawing tries is that the designs were curving and floral in nature. With more research, Marlin's patterns were located and a few designs were selected that would be in my intermediate skill range.

The next step was cutting and hemming the camicia pieces, starting with the main front and back

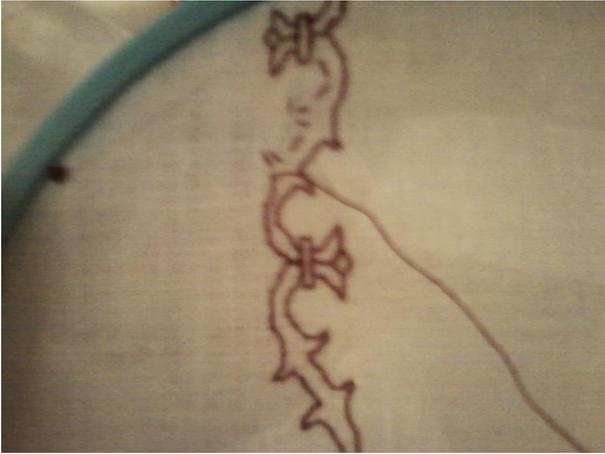
sections. Based on woodcuts and engravings, one way of stretching the linen to count the threads was on large square frames. I could not find one large enough to do the front panel of the camicia and instead decided to use a modern hoop for ease of use and portability.



Left: 16th century woodcut with a woman embroidering on large square frame against a window for light.

Right: 16th century woodcut with a woman transferring complex designs for embroidery.

Because of the lack of a large frame I chose not to do the “pouncing” method of pattern transfer for embroidery. The period technique, “...involved pricking the outline of the pattern with a pin, attaching the page to a piece of fabric then rubbing soot or charcoal through the pin holes so that when the page was removed the pigment would be left in place (Victoria).” I also worried this would not be completely covered by my red stitches. Instead I counted threads, and occasionally added one thread too many. I picked out and widened the weave with my needle a few stitches a head of the completed embroidery as I worked. On average the strips of black work down the front panel took sixteen hours using this method of work. As the process continues the sleeves and side panels will be taken apart and worked in the same way.



Embroidery in progress stretched on hoop



Completed front panel before assembly.

This is an ongoing project. A small blanket stitched edge has been done around the hemmed neckline to create the red edge visible in the fresco and another curved pattern has been started next to the hem to create a pattern which is not distinguishable in the fresco. The next step will be to continue this floral pattern on the sleeves. I will probably try one more time to discern the pattern for the band around the neckline. If this truly fails I may alter an existing pattern from Marlin's examples and the V&A sampler to suit my needs. If I use a cuff on the sleeves I will repeat neckband pattern there as well.

Conclusions

To have this embroidery completed I would have needed at least six months of dedicated work, not the two it has received so far. In the future I may buy a lot of white silk thread and dye it to match the color I need rather than resorting to DMC floss, but the floss was not terrible to work with. Large projects like this require time and good pacing, an excellent lesson for future endeavors. Camaici are extremely comfortable garments in Italian sixteenth century clothing, and they can be just as elaborate as any other aspect of the ensemble.

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