



A Stitch in Time

Claire Saul picks up the threads of 150 years of the Royal School of Needlework

This year's platinum jubilee celebrations provide the chance to see various special artefacts associated with the Queen's accession and coronation. Among them, her coronation robe of estate and coronation dress will be displayed at Windsor Castle but from next month, we can see the robe's intricate embroidery at the Fashion and Textile Museum in Bermondsey, south-east London.

The exhibition 150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework: Crown to Catwalk celebrates this international centre of excellence for the art of hand embroidery, which happens to be marking its own very special milestone.

The goldwork sampler for the 1953 coronation robe was originally produced for a Royal School of Needlework (RSN) 1953 touring exhibition to show the 18 different types of gold thread used for the robe's EIIR cypher and its wheat and olive branch design, symbolising prosperity and peace.

A team of 12 skilled embroiderers worked in shifts, clocking up 3,500 hours to complete the embroidery for the 6.5m robe. They used huge wooden

embroidery frames, which are still used at the school's embroidery studio at Hampton Court Palace today.

Royal commissions have been a mainstay of the RSN since its earliest days located above a London bonnet shop, back in 1872. Lady Victoria Welby established the School of Art Needlework with the aim of reviving a beautiful form of art which had fallen into disuse and, in this way, to provide employment for

educated women who, in the absence of a livelihood, would face poverty.

It became the Royal School of Needlework in 1875, after Princess Helena persuaded her mother, Queen Victoria, to become its patron. The RSN moved several times to accommodate its growing number of students over the next century, eventually relocating to Hampton Court Palace in the 1980s.

The RSN's most high-profile work includes bespoke lace for the wedding outfit of the Duchess of Cambridge and 20th century coronation garments, some of which will be displayed at this year's exhibition.

"Included is Edward VII's mantle, a special garment like a cope," says RSN chief executive Dr Susan Kay-Williams. "We know that Princess Helena said to her brother: 'Just get them to do cloth of gold and I will get my school to embroider it for you.' It probably hasn't been seen since the RSN exhibition of the coronation materials in 1902."

The exhibition also features some less well-known royal pieces, including the order of the garter banner created for Queen Mary. "The Queen has given us permission to display this," explains Dr



Top: An example of Jacobean crewelwork. **Above:** Silk shading and laid work featuring a lapwing produced by a diploma student of the Royal School of Needlework in the 1950s.



Clockwise from above: Royal School of Needlework patron the Duchess of Cornwall at the embroidery studio with chief executive Dr Susan Kay-Williams. The goldwork sampler for the Queen's 1953 coronation robe. A panel from the Litany of Loreto series from the RSN collection which is on display at Ely Cathedral until 13 March.

Kay-Williams. "I wanted Queen Mary's particularly, because not only is it really interesting and incredibly complicated, but she was also the most avid royal stitcher. Her first recorded visit is when she came with her mother to an RSN exhibition, aged just 13.

"She was our patron as Princess of Wales, and continued to be a very active and supportive patron all the way through to her death in 1953. We are also showing the Queen Mother's coronation robe of estate which we embroidered in 1937. In addition to motifs such as the thistle and the rose it also includes motifs such as the lotus flower from India, the protea from South Africa and the Canadian maple leaf."


150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework: Crown to Catwalk also showcases examples of the school's many collaborations and achievements over the decades. There is much to choose from, including works created with some of the stars of the arts and crafts movement, contemporary items, pieces for top designers and those by the school's own highly talented students.

The RSN offers instruction ranging from day courses and private lessons to a BA (Hons) in hand embroidery and a future tutors programme, the RSN's own professional qualification. In addition to courses available in person and online, embroiderers can also visit the RSN



Stitch Bank (rsnstitchbank.org), an online resource comprising 200 different embroidery stitches and techniques.

This year, an eight-week international summer school will also offer five-day classes with the school's tutors, and a series of exclusive coronation-themed, live online classes.

The Royal School of Needlework is a continuing thread of excellence in the art of hand embroidery. Sew far, one might say, sew good. 

150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework: Crown to Catwalk runs from 1 April-4 September at the Fashion and Textile Museum (020 7407 8664, fashiontextilemuseum.org)
Dr Susan Kay-Williams' book An Unbroken Thread: Celebrating 150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework (ACC Art Books, RRP £35) is available from late March.

Pin These Dates

For Worship & Glory II. Exhibition at Cambridgeshire's Ely Cathedral, which includes some of the RSN's historic ecclesiastical works alongside contemporary pieces created by today's students. Ends 13 March. elycathedral.org

An Anniversary Celebration. After the 1953 coronation, the RSN curated a special exhibition at St James's Palace, London which featured the robe of estate. The front page of the event's souvenir catalogue is the design inspiration for this class (royal-needlework.org.uk), 31 March (3-9pm).

150 Years of the RSN – Crown to Catwalk. Online talk (being held on 6 April (7-8.30pm). Learn about the stories behind some of the objects at the exhibition.

Peace and Plenty. An online embroidery class on the coronation goldwork technique used to create the wheat and olive design featured on the Queen's coronation robe. 11, 18 & 25 May and 8 June (6.30-9pm).

Her Majesty. An online embroidery class inspired by the 1967 British postal stamp, featuring the Queen's profile against a Union Flag. 11, 18 & 25 June (10am-4pm).

