

Royal School of Needlework

**Blackwork** - Diploma

Academic year 2025/26

**Blackwork is a form of monochrome embroidery traditionally used as decoration on caps, collars and cuffs. It usually featured a repeated design of small floral motifs. Both sides of the embroidery were to be seen so it was worked in a double running stitch (also known as Holbein stitch), making the front and back identical. It is thought to have been introduced to England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Blackwork developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now uses a combination of thread thicknesses and stitch density to produce tonally shaded, realistic images.**

### **Aim**

To design, work and mount a blackwork embroidery which demonstrates effective use of both a range of thread thicknesses and construction / deconstruction of patterns, to replicate the tonal values of the design. A contemporary blackwork embroidery combines technical accuracy (e.g. counting stitches correctly) with a detailed understanding of shading.

### **Materials and equipment**

There is a starter kit for this module purchased at the time of booking the first class which contains all the necessary blackwork threads, needles and blue Gutermann sewing thread. Zweigart fabric can be purchased from the RSN.

Fabric: Zweigart white evenweave linen Edinburgh 36 count.

Threads: Black coton a broder size 16, stranded cotton, machine thread and fine silk. Blue Gutermann sewing thread for tacking on the design lines.

Needles: 24 and 26 Tapestry.

### **Reasonable adjustments**

If there is a reason you may have difficulty completing the module e.g. visual impairment, allergy to some materials, please discuss this with the tutor and the C and D team before starting. Adjustments are possible.

### **Essential requirements**

#### **Sampling**

- It is essential to sample patterns to better understand the technique before making design decisions and before making a final selection for use on your piece. Sampling should include,
  - ⊖ patterns of different stitch density / texture
  - ⊖ shading through pattern deconstruction
  - ⊖ shading through use of different thread weights.

## Design Area

- The final design must be no more than A4 size 21 x 30 cm (11 x 8 inches) or equivalent. It may be portrait or landscape in orientation.
- Tonal interpretation and shading The chosen image must have a wide tonal range – white to black and several stages in between.
- Tonal parity should be achieved across the piece i.e. areas of the same tone should match across the design, even though they are worked in different patterns.
- there should be accurate tonal variation within each area/pattern achieved by both
  - use of different thread thicknesses
  - changes in stitch density

## Patterns

- There should be at least **five** different counted patterns, which may include a darning stitch. The emphasis is on shading and the appropriate use of patterns, not on the number of different patterns used. Visit the RSN Stitch Bank [www.rsnstitchbank.org](http://www.rsnstitchbank.org) and/or use stitch books to find suitable patterns. The RSN Stitch Bank is free to use.
- Pattern choices should reflect the varying scales and the textures of the chosen image.

## Patterns should be counted correctly.

- At a boundary where a pattern finishes, or two patterns meet, partial stitches should be used to create clean edges or clear boundaries. Sometimes it is necessary to include a surface stitch to define an edge that cannot be made clear through stitching or to enhance the design. However, outlines should be used sparingly and ideally avoided.
- At a boundary where a pattern finishes, or two patterns meet, partial stitches should be used to create clean edges or clear boundaries. Sometimes it is necessary to include a surface stitch to define an edge that cannot be made clear through stitching or to enhance the design. However, outlines should be used sparingly and ideally avoided altogether.

In at least **one** area there must be a gradual transition from one pattern to another, worked so that there is no obvious change between the two.

- At least **one** pattern must be deconstructed to replicate a tonally light area.
- Small amounts of metallic or coloured thread can be used to add a highlight, this should be discussed with the tutor. Optional elements are not assessed.

## Finishing

- The finished work will be mounted on card covered with white cotton and backed with sateen. Grey cotton can be substituted if there is a need to hide threads trailed behind the work.

### **Getting started – before class**

It is not necessary to arrive at the first class with a finalised design, but you should come with some ideas. For examples of work by other C and D students look at the C and D gallery on the website. <https://royal-needlework.org.uk/courses/certificate-diploma/canddgallery/>.

### **Getting started – in class**

#### **Preparatory work**

Preparation prior to stitching is an important part of the learning process. Your tutor will give you guidance on how to prepare the following:

- A line drawing on tracing paper. The tracing will be photocopied several times and used to create:
- A black and white tonal drawing to help with identifying the tones and achieving consistency across areas with comparable tones.
- A stitch plan to ensure an appropriate range of patterns and to identify the areas for the pattern transition and the deconstructed pattern.

The tracing will be transferred to tissue paper so the design can be tacked onto the fabric.

Sampling of patterns and their tonal ranges are a key part of preparation for this module. They provide an opportunity to become familiar with the patterns (counting and best order to stitch it) as well as practice in developing shading (through thread changes and pattern deconstruction).

Initial plans can be amended as the embroidery progresses. If you choose to have your work formally assessed, you should submit the preparatory work listed above together with your source material. All this paperwork will form part of the assessment.

#### **What to think about when planning the embroidery**

- A full tonal range should include shadows, areas of highlight, along with graduation through the tonal range.
- The emphasis is on shading and the appropriate use of a limited number of patterns.
- Photographs are a very good source material for blackwork. They must have a good balance of light and shadow and be very clear and crisp.
- Faces, animals, landscapes and architecture can make very effective designs.
- Designs with a clear light source translate most effectively.
- Open and broken areas can create a harmony and balance within a composition.
- Choose patterns carefully.
  - The size of the pattern repeat will vary, so consider the size and level of shading detail required for each area when making a selection.
  - The direction of stitches within a pattern can be used to create textures and help with prominent markings or shadows.

- Blackwork is a slow technique, and darning stitch is even slower. You might, for example, wish to avoid large areas of solid background stitching.

### **Intellectual property**

The final design must be original to you. Use of your own visual media (photographs, drawings) is encouraged. Referencing and interpreting other visual media is acceptable. Copying is not. The intellectual property of others must be respected.

### **Additional information**

Additional information can be downloaded from the website.

- Resources - Websites, Books, Suppliers for C&D