

Zeitschrift: Swiss textiles [English edition]
Herausgeber: Swiss office for the development of trade
Band: - (1949)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Fifty year of swiss embroidery in Paris
Autor: Lorris, François
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-799281>

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(SWISS TEXTILES)

Special publication of the

Swiss Office for the Development of Trade, Zurich and Lausanne

EDITOR AND PUBLISHER: SWISS OFFICE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE, POST BOX 4, LAUSANNE

Managing Director: ALBERT MASNATA — Chief Editor: CHARLES BLASER

«Textiles Suisses» is issued four times a year

Annual subscription — Abroad: Swiss Fr. 20.—. Price per copy: Swiss Fr. 6.50

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Fifty years of Swiss embroidery in Paris

The Editor wishes to dedicate this article to the Paris correspondent of «Textiles Suisses», Mr. M. O. Zurcher (see page 36).

There are still, in this modern age, arts and crafts as old as the story of Man.

It is not incorrect to say, for instance, that the art of fine needlework has always existed, because it answers to a very real human need. Like any other art, it is a kind of language, an expression of the self; we are born with the power to create beauty and to understand it.

The most humble of us feel instinctively the desire for what may appear superfluous, but which is — in reality — as vital to us as our daily bread and, indeed, for some people, even more vital! How many human beings have sacrificed material and financial ease just to enjoy something beautiful without which they could not live.

The story of needlework is ageless. It is enchanting by its variety — variety of shape, colour and purpose. For more than five thousand years, men, women and children have plied their needles, inventing new designs, new techniques, according



to the dictates of their times, but always to satisfy the same human craving : to adorn, to embellish, to pay homage, to please.

Nature has always been the industrious artist's finest stimulant and inspiration. Snow-laden trees, flower-sprigged Alpine meadows, the brilliant flight of birds and butterflies, the billowing ocean wave or the mountain torrent — all these are an inexhaustible fount of inspiration.

Embroidery is a recurrent theme in old manuscripts and it was certainly a predecessor of lace. The Bible itself abounds in passages alluding to this art and, sometimes, fairly lengthy descriptions of needlework :

« Them hath he filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the cunning workman, and of the embroiderer in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen. » (Exodus XXXV, 35.)

« And he made a vail of blue and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen ; with cherubims made he it of cunning work. » (Exodus XXXVI, 35.)

Pliny attributes the invention of gold thread used in his day in weaving and embroidery, to Attila, King of the Huns, but Exodus tells us that, to adorn the Tabernacle, Moses and his followers « did beat the gold into thin plates and cut it into wires, to work it in the blue, and in the purple, and in the scarlet, and in the fine linen, with cunning work. »

At Athens, the statue of Pallas Antene created by the sculptor Phidias for the Parthenon, stood out against a background of embroidered cloth hung against the columns of the temple.

To Minerva the Greeks attributed great dexterity in weaving and needlework ; Arachne herself was metamorphosed into a spider for having sought to rival the great goddess' skill.

The Greeks of Alexander's day admired not only heavy cloth embroidered with gold and set with gems, but also fine muslins embroidered with floral designs. Here is Helen who, as Homer tells us « sat in her palace, tracing an embroidery on a great cloth as white as alabaster ; she showed thereon the many battles that the Trojans — skilled horsemen — and the Greeks — armoured in bronze — had fought for love of her. »

India has given the world muslins so transparent that they were said to be woven of air, of the evening mist. Weavers of St. Gall sought inspiration there for their fine cotton fabrics.

In Africa, embroidery seems to have preceded the use of woven cloth and picturesque customs of certain primitive tribes are quoted to bear out this theory : dark-skinned belles, whose only clothing were necklaces or feather girdles, would embroider gaily-hued floral or animal motifs on their own skin, when the time came for them to marry.

In remote antiquity, fine needlework was practised in China, Persia, India, Assyria, Egypt (remember the Tutankhamen treasures), Chaldea, Babylon, Phenicia and Greece.

For the past 600 years, Europe has garnered from the inspired works of the East, now a universal heritage.

Apart from her very beautiful native work, Switzerland has succeeded in creating new techniques and in adapting others to her requirements.



Longchamp 1912



Deauville 1912



Dinard 1912





Chantilly 1913



Vichy 1914



Longchamps 1913



Deauville 1912

This country can now boast of an industry which places her at the forefront of international producers of laces and embroideries.

The town of St. Gall especially owes its rise and prosperity to the textile industry which has flourished there since the XIIIth century. For almost one hundred years now, this centre has specialized in most beautiful products, of a variety and quality which even trade rivals do not question. From the outset, this production was destined for a world-wide clientele.

St. Gall leads in the field of fashion wear especially, thanks to the unsurpassed perfection of its manufacturing methods and technique. St. Gall's fifty years of close co-operation with French fashion circles and particularly with Parisian haute couture, have enabled this centre to manufacture with infinite skill all the products used in Paris for unusual and striking lingerie and informal wear, gowns, coats and millinery and, also, the thousand and one charming accessories of femininity.

It has been this harmonious interchange of the creative gifts particular to the two nations, the French and the Swiss both working in their own fields, which has made possible the increasing prosperity of the past half-century.

Swiss looms have supplied a very characteristic clientele not only with exquisite specimens of classical designs in laces and embroideries, inspired from the finest French needlework of the Middle Ages, but also bold and novel creations for those whom the «new and unusual» enchant.

There is here an infinite diversity of production and our hearts are gladdened at the sight of flights

of butterflies poised on airy-light opalines, of posies new culled «on the loom» and seemingly rosy with dew; they bring into the picture of daily life the fancifulness of eternal nature allied to a hint of novelty bespeaking the «height of fashion». The crisp freshness of inspiration and realization of modern Swiss embroiderers is remarkable; therein lies much of the charm of their work.

Early in the present century, following years sterile and difficult for the designer, came a period of great flowering. Novelty succeeded novelty in apparently unexhaustible wealth — a little overwhelming at times, but always charming.

Some couturiers of the period designed real masterpieces, far surpassing the realm of mere «fashion» and entering the domain of «style», by their permanent beauty, enchantingly measured grace and delightful ornament.

Fashion-plates of the early years of the present century present, amongst other modes, splendid casino and afternoon gowns; the women depicted have something of the Reynolds or Gainsborough types. Wide embroidered veils, lace encrusted, collars, cravates, fichus jabots and handkerchiefs abound in richness and variety.

Embroidered muslin fichus, scarves of inexhaustible variety, frame their lovely faces.

Lingerie, too diverse for description here, strikes the same note of dazzling daintiness: chemises for day wear, nightgowns, wide ruffled knickers, voluminous petticoats, deshabillés — every item of the feminine wardrobe was a pretext for delicate and variegated decorative art. To devise and give form to this seemingly improvised and charming orna-





mentation certainly demanded great technical skill.

There were laces and embroideries on millinery too, in keeping with opulent capes and mantles.

This luxuriant flowering lasted until 1914. After this, embroidery became more discreet; the war years somewhat veiled this exuberant love of ornament. The taste for decoration flourished again in the years that followed; it never died, but sometimes lay dormant.

From 1918 to 1930, a new orientation became apparent: new lines, geometrical shapes, severity — not without beauty and grace. But fashion lost its femininity. For evening wear, gold and silver lamés, hand embroideries, prevailed in Parisian styles. Beads, strass, bugles, jet and crystal intermingled luxuriantly in gold and silver laces and embroideries.

Notwithstanding a few brief periods of eclipse, the cult of embroidery has prospered steadily. At one time, it did seem as though the modern industry might linger on, merely as a reflection of the past. There were many causes for this temporary artistic sterility. For instance, the complete reversal in masculine fashions operated after the first decade of the XIXth century: men's new disregard for fine underwear, cravates, ruffles and jabots. Later came women's adoption of masculine, tailored suits and heavy suitings. The provocative «deshabillé» gave way to pyjamas. For lingerie, once so deliciously feminine, were substituted sporty, knitted undergarments.

And yet, since the end of the second World War, femininity has flowered once again. Embroidery has come into its own, offering us its wealth of novelty. St. Gall has proved capable of preparing and rea-

lizing magnificent collections, whose fresh newness and infinite variety dazzle even the connoisseur: to enumerate them all would be a wearisome task.

Charm and delicacy — these delicious designs worked in the finest of materials are beyond description. They come from a bright, new world of their very own.

In olden days, courtly lovers paid their respects to their mistresses in verse and by showering upon them luxurious gifts. Today, it is to Parisian couturiers and St. Gall manufacturers, designers, weavers, artisans and operatives, that a little of this heritage has passed, and they place it at the feet of the lovely women who have always inspired the masterpieces created expressly for them.

*«A laron about the shoulders throron
Into a fine distraction :*

*An erring lace, which here and there
Enthralls the crimson stomacher :*

*A cuff neglectful, and thereby
Ribbands to flow confusedly :*

A winning wave (deserving note)

In the tempestuous petticoat :

A careless shoe-string, in whose tie

I see a wild civility :

Do more bewitch me, than when Art

Is too precise in every part.»

Robert Herrick wrote these lines for the fine ladies of the Court of King Charles I, and modern St. Gall has made their truth and charm eternally fresh and new.

François Lorris.

*These photographs are by courtesy of the
St. Gall Museum of Industrial Art, whom
we take the opportunity of thanking here.
We regret that we are unable to give the
names of the photographers and couturiers
as they are unfortunately unknown to us.*



autumn 1924



PARIS 1930



Lenochamp 1939