

## RENAISSANCE STITCHERY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The art of embroidery has been a popular craft for centuries. As far back as the 16th century, embroidered clothing was the mark of an affluent household. Knowledge of the art was expected of a noblewoman and this knowledge was passed down through generations of women. Young girls learned to embroider at their mother's knee. Worked in strands of silk or cotton, embroidery decorated necklines, cuffs, hems and bodices. Designs were elaborate and a variety of stitches were developed to create texture and illusions of light, contributing to the beauty and distinction of the finished garment. A single garment might require many weeks, or even months to complete.

Although hand embroidery is still practiced, today you can create complicated designs in minutes. Machine embroidery makes this traditional art quick and easy, requiring no specialized knowledge. Newer sewing machines come equipped with several embroidery stitches. You simply turn the dial to the stitch of your choice and sew away. There are also embroidery machines, with an astounding selection of stitches and capabilities that the 16th century woman would never have imagined possible.

Machine embroidery is easy to learn. All of the stitches are calculated by a computer chip. Stitch length, zigzag effects and curves are done automatically, applied to the cloth with absolute precision. Thus, machine embroidery allows you to effortlessly turn out a perfectly symmetrical design. Hand embroidery cannot replicate this absolute symmetry, even by the most practiced hand. Another advantage to machine embroidery is speed. You can turn out a shirt or dress, embellished with the most ornate designs, in a day. Metallic threads, available in several shades of gold, silver and bronze, can be used in machine embroidery with stunning effects.

When you're making a garment you plan to decorate with complex designs, it's best to choose a garment pattern of simple design. This strategy allows the beginner to concentrate on the stitchery, while showing off the embroidery to best effect. A peasant blouse made with plain cotton is a good choice. Once you've mastered the techniques of machine embroidery, you'll be ready to tackle a fancy Renaissance-style dress.

If you already have a sewing machine, try creating a sampler of a mix of your available stitches. When you see what can be done with machine embroidery, your enthusiasm may prompt an immediate trip to the fabric store for a demonstration of the embroidery machine. That's when the real fun begins!