

Elizabethan Blackwork a.k.a. Spanish Work a.k.a. Reversible Embroidery

Taught by Baron K. Braden von Sobernheim, OL, OP, &c.

Thanks and acknowledgement to those who did all the work in compiling this important data, I just am the one to present it to you: Paula Kate Marmor, wonder of the Blackwork Embroidery Archives, www.blackworkarchives.com and Meister Tor von Bütterberg who compiled most of the information below. Information and designs reprinted with permission.

Background

Blackwork is black on white embroidery, sometimes called “Spanish work” due to the popularity of this embroidery perpetuated by Catherine of Aragon in the early 16th century. Her 1501 wedding trousseau included several pieces of black-on-white decorated outfits. It is said that Catherine did this herself, having learned her craft from her mother Queen Isabella, and taught it to her daughter Mary. In this way it was made popular in England. So popular, in fact, that at its height a master of blackwork was paid four pieces of gold per day for his work.



Hans Holbein painting closeup of Jane Seymour's cuffs, 1537



Elizabeth I with blackwork chemise, collar, 1590

While Catherine made it popular, the origins of this type of embroidery come from much farther back. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1390-1400), he mentions in the Mylles Tale

“Whit was hir smok and browdid al byfore and
eek bybyhyade on hir coler aboute of cole-blak
silk, withinne and eeke withoute”

“What was her smock and embroidered all in
front and behind on her collar about of coal-
black silk, both in and out.”

The idea that the collar embroidery could be seen on both sides suggests an example of reversible embroidery...blackwork.

There are two theories on the actual start of this type of embroidery:

Theory #1 - A style of embroidery known as “Moresque” or “Arabesque” was typified by exactly proportioned floral fluting and interlacing. These patterns were popular around 1100. Also the tiling and carving of Moorish floors looks similar to blackwork patterning merely transposed onto fabric.

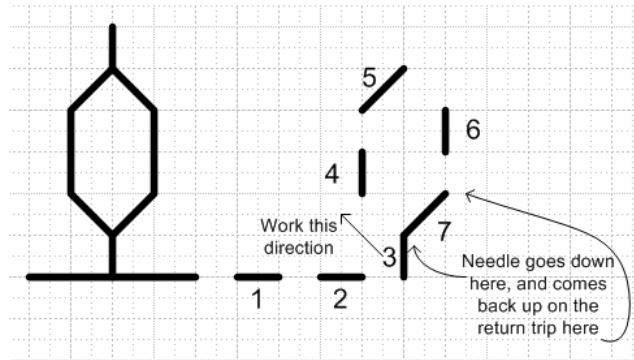
Theory #2 - Linear embroideries had long been worked in a Holbein or “double running” stitch for many years in Europe. The oldest piece of blackwork becomes a monochromatic piece that dates to the 12th c. However, the piece was destroyed during WWII and cannot be further studied.

Materials

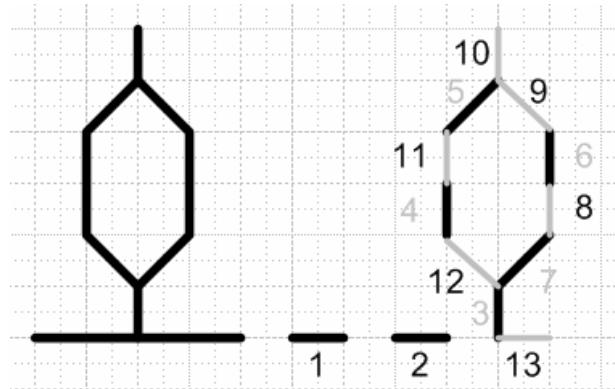
Standard blackwork materials were bleached linen and silk thread.

Linen was difficult to dye, but bleached nicely. High-quality linen did (and still does) become whiter, smoother, and more luxurious to the touch with age. The highest quality linen came from the French towns of Laon and Cambrai (cambric shirt from “Scarborough Fair” ring a bell?) and was very fine and diaphanous; very similar to

What we have is a main journey (the straight line) embellished with 2 side trips, a leaf and a curled stem. Let's start with the leaf:

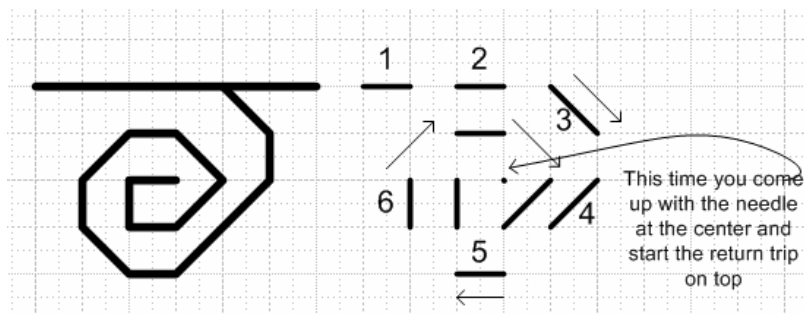


On the way back, remember to put the “out and back” on the end of the leaf, 10 as seen below.

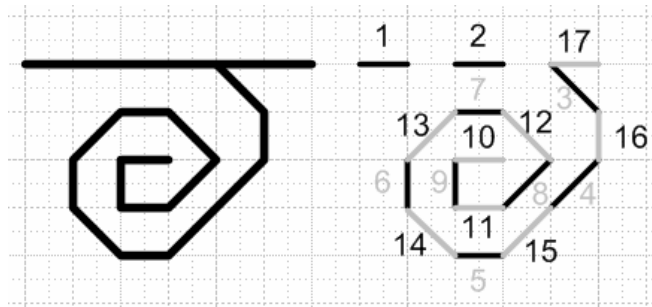


If you had more pattern to put inside the leaf, you would start after stitch 12, work it in and come back, then move on under and out into stitch 13.

Confused yet? Let's try the curled stem:



Wow, that looks horrific. Count your steps and work them one at a time. It helps that stitch 7 is even with stitch 2, stitch 8 even with stitch 4, stitch 9 even with stitch 6. You come to the “end” of the pattern coming up through the fabric, so you then start on top coming back.



So... how do you get the stitching along the main journey complete? By heading back the way you came along the straight line.

Help! I've reached the end of my thread!

The key in making good reversible embroidery is to make those knots as inconspicuous as possible, tie them off snug against the end of the stitch, cut the tail off of the knot, then start the next thread with the knot on the *opposite side* of the end knot. This does 2 things: 1) it allows you to continue the stitch where you left off, not falling out of sync, and 2) it adds an identical knot on both sides so neither side is the back.

OR you can just leave the tail within the embroidery with no knot just trim it close. There is enough tension with the thread in the fabric that it shouldn't pull out. If you plan to wash the piece a lot over its life, I tend to feel safer (personally) with the little knots).

What can I put blackwork on?

The most ideal items are those where both sides are visible, such as collars, cuffs, dags, coifs, or veils. Of course, you don't *have* to ensure both sides are visible, but it makes it much cooler to show both sides off. Shirts, hats, cloaks, mantles, pants, anything!

Where do I get some patterns?

www.blackworkarchives.com has some great pattern pieces to start from, attached to these notes are several to get you on your way. In the Janet Arnold books (especially the newest one) there are some very good close up pictures of the embroidery on the garments. And... you can design patterns yourself. That's for another class.

Helpful tips

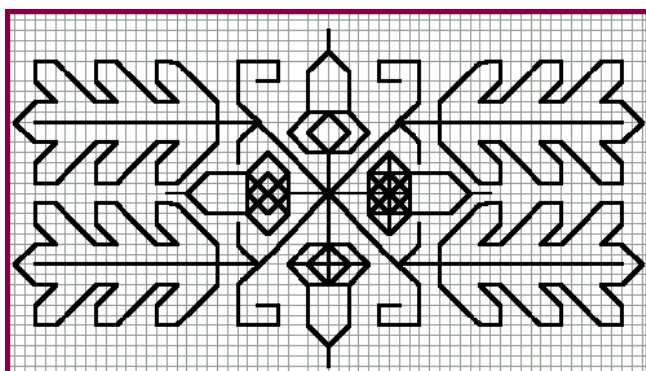
I would strongly recommend picking up an embroidery hoop for your blackwork projects, the embroidery is much easier when the fabric has tension.

It is authentic to use silk thread for your embroidery, indeed you get a finer resolution in your embroidery, but consider the long-term wear of the garment and if the wear rates of the silk and linen will be different enough to cause the pattern to shrink on the linen over time. Don't use floss, the synthetic doesn't seem to work well over time with the linen.

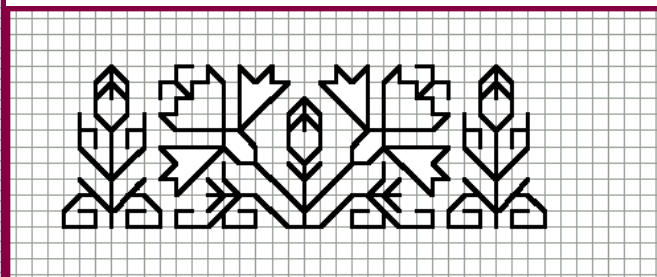
DO use real linen. Other fabrics have a much denser weave and it makes it very difficult to keep a steady pattern. If you don't have the means to make an entire garment out of linen, use linen for just the cuffs, collar, &c.

Patterns from www.Blackworkarchives.com (thanks Paula!)

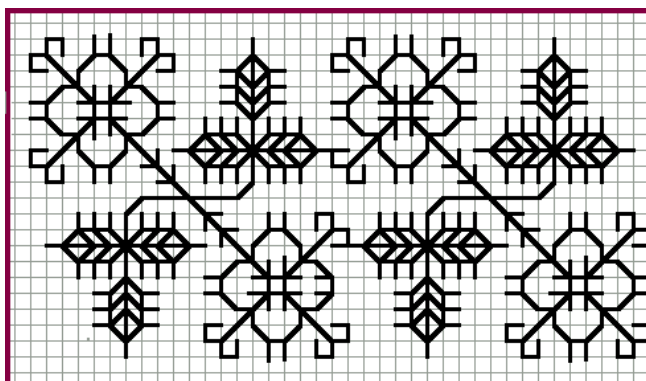
Acorns



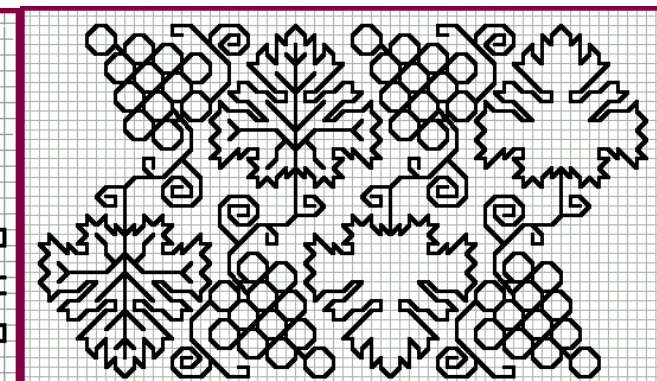
Gillyflowers



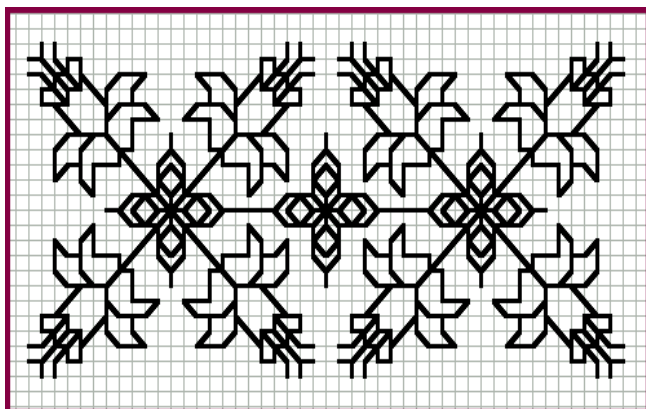
Row of Roses



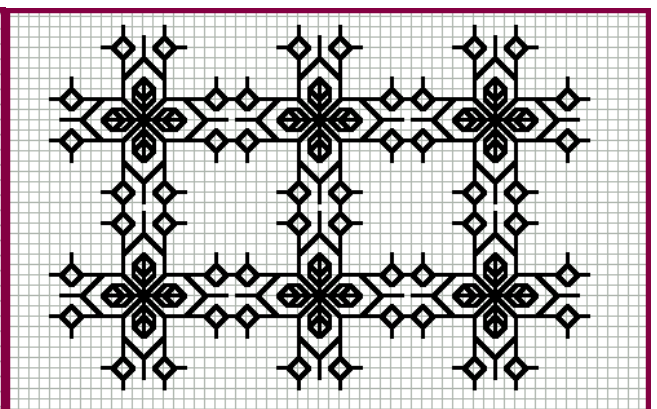
Grapes



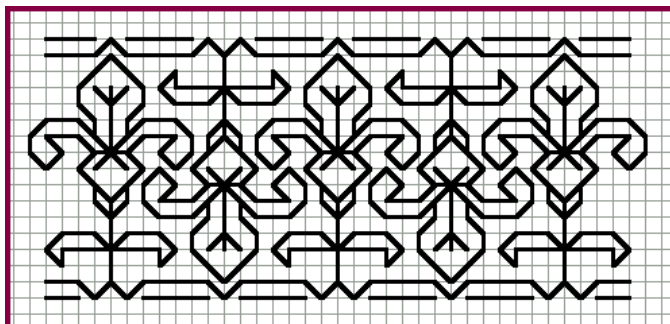
Daffodils



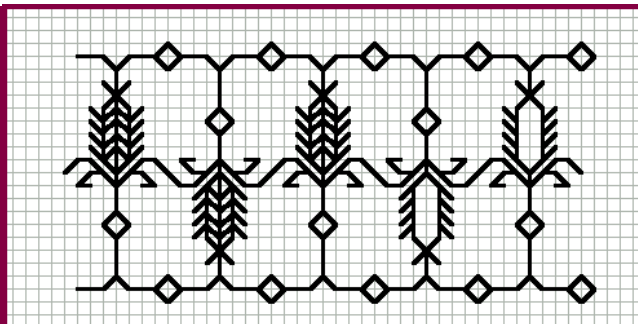
A Fancy Border



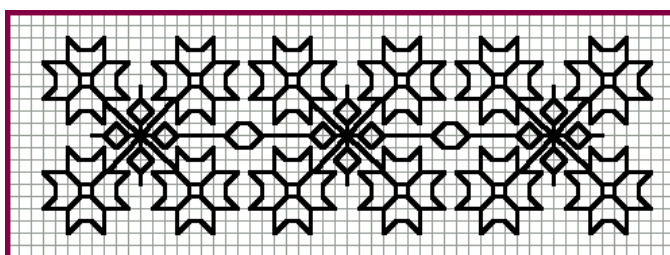
A Band of Lillies



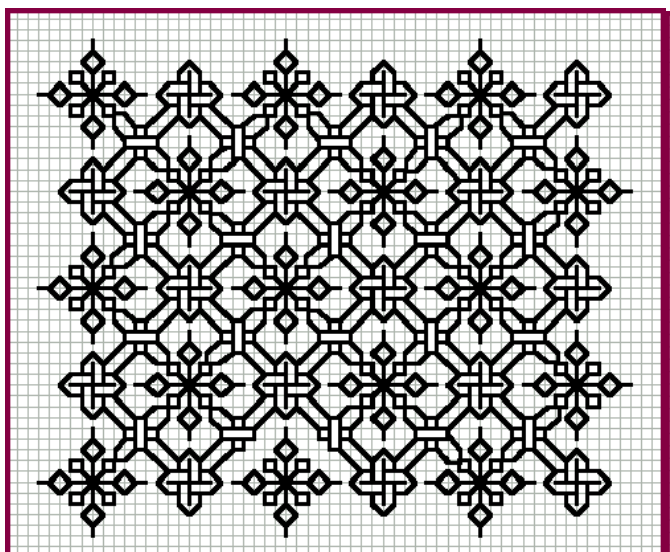
Barley Row



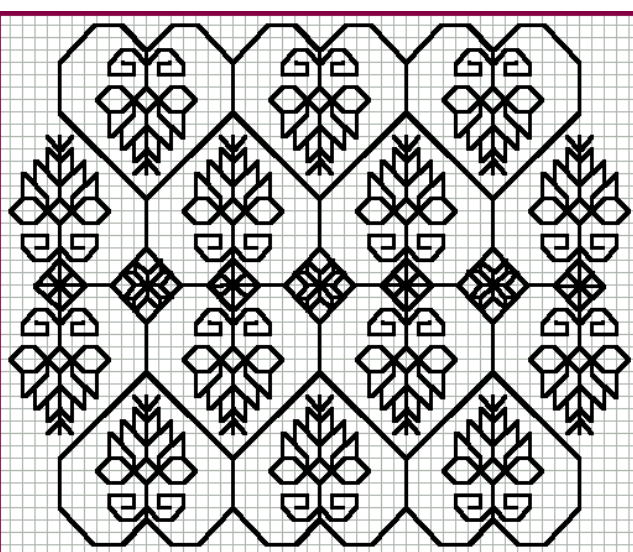
Quatrefoils



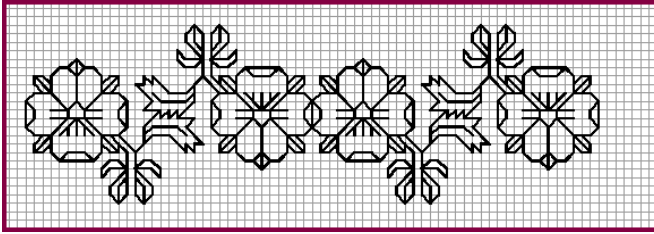
A Lattice of Knotwork



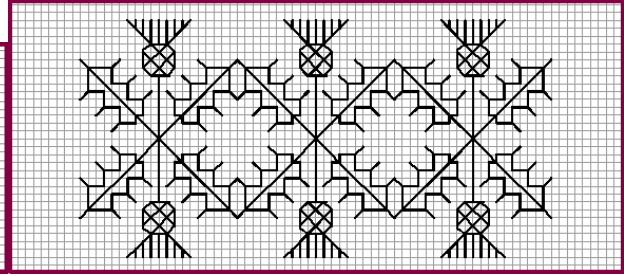
Arabesque



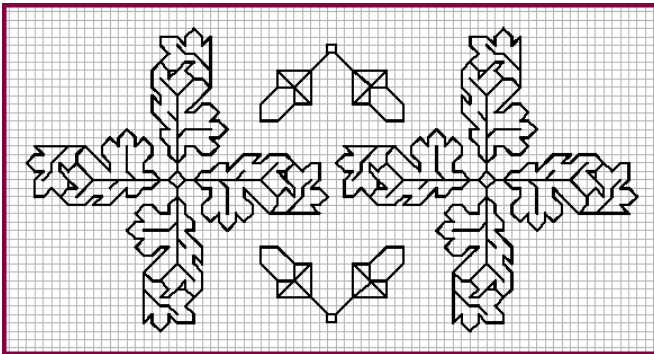
Spring: Love-in-Idleness
(Elizabethan name for the Pansy)



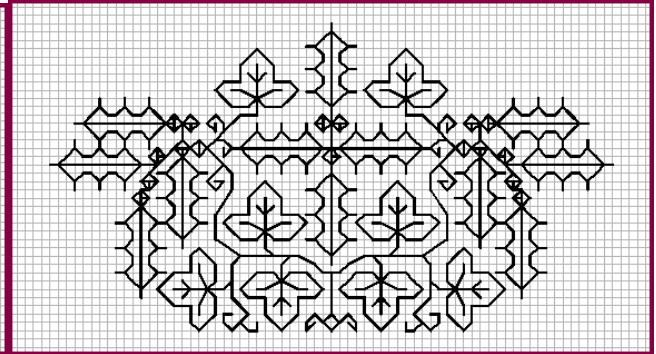
Summer: A Fret (lattice) of Thistles



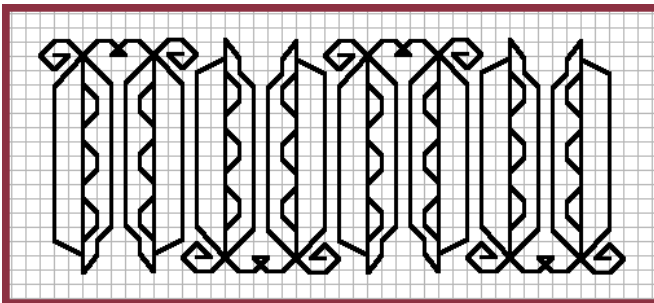
Autumn: Leaves and Acorns



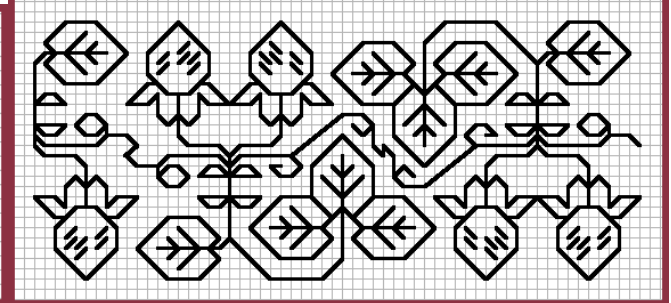
Winter: Holly and Ivy



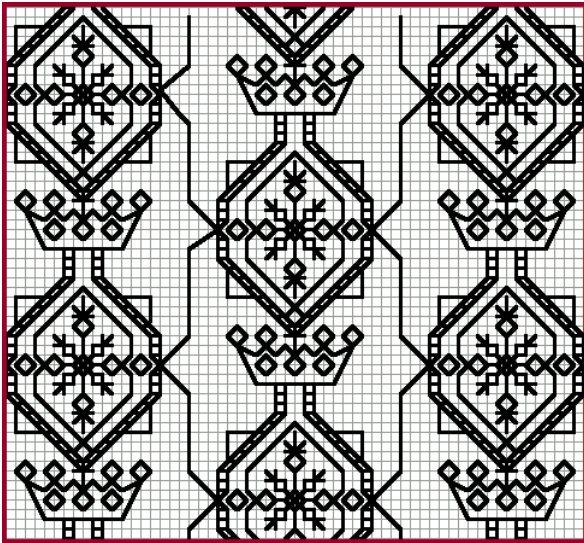
Peascods



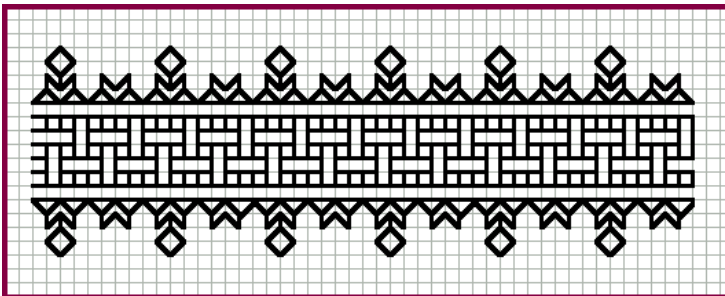
Strawberries



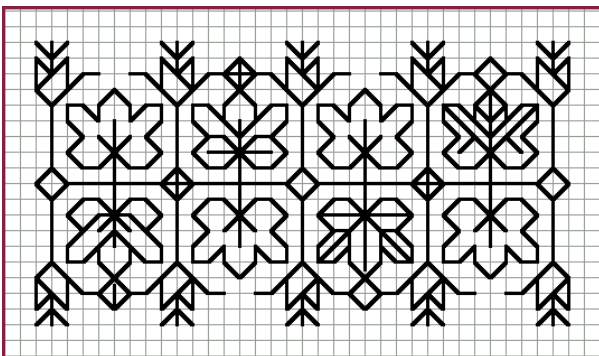
Coronets



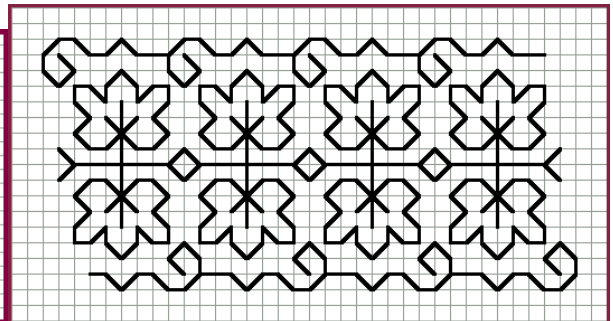
A Lace Border



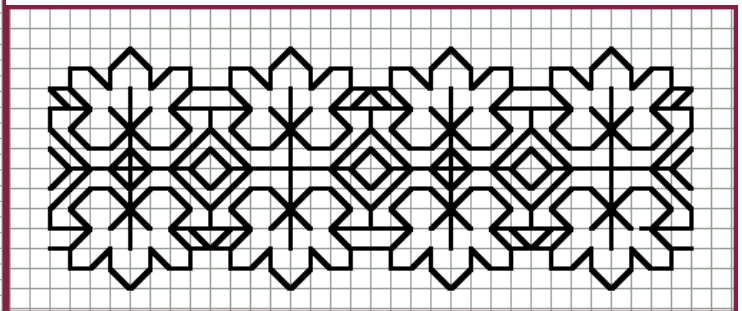
Leaf Border 2



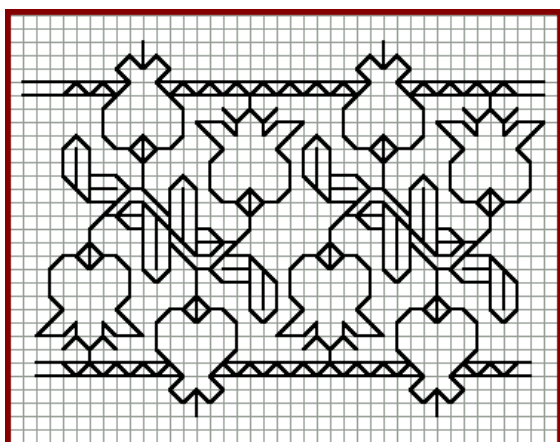
Leaf Border 1



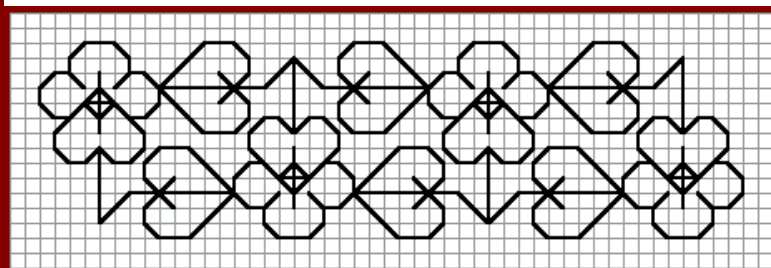
Leaf Border 3



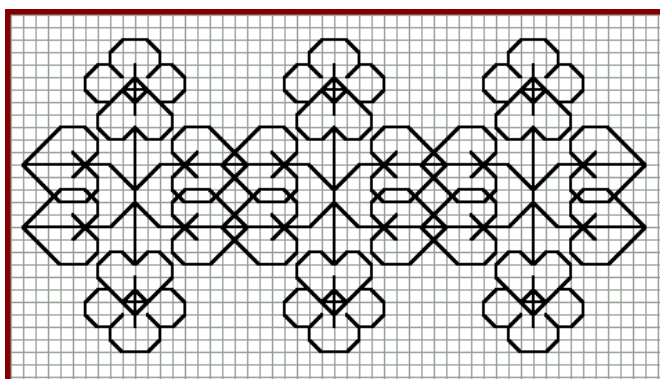
A Band of Blossoms



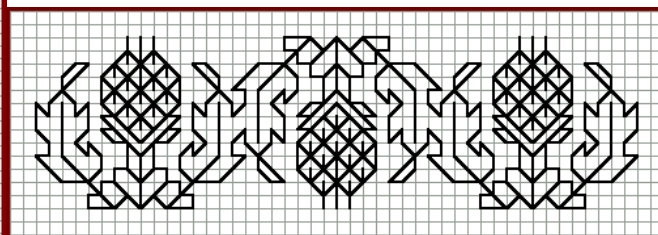
A Small Row of Violets



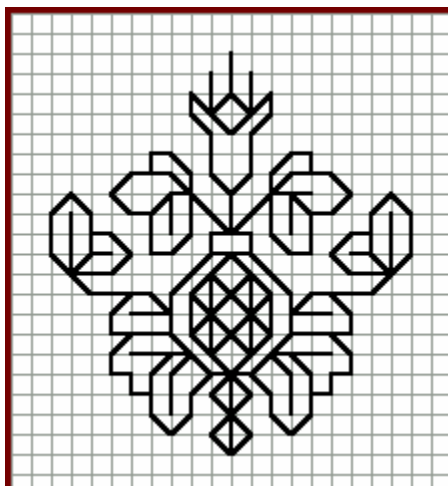
A Wide Row of Violets



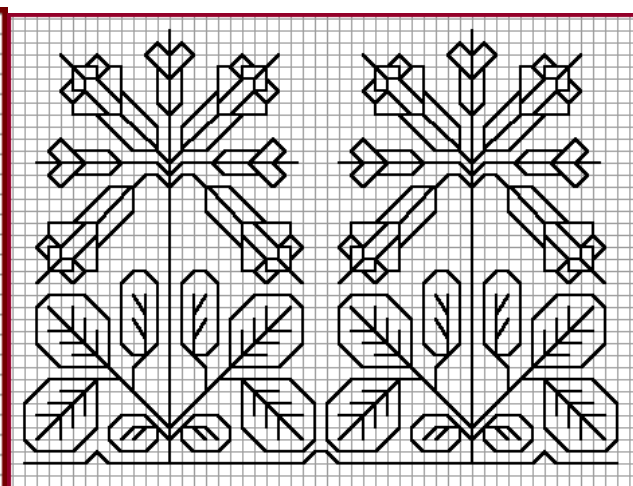
Artichoke Border



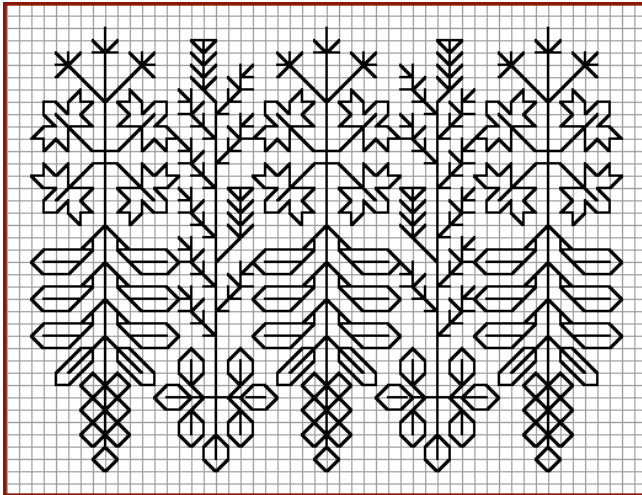
Pomegranate



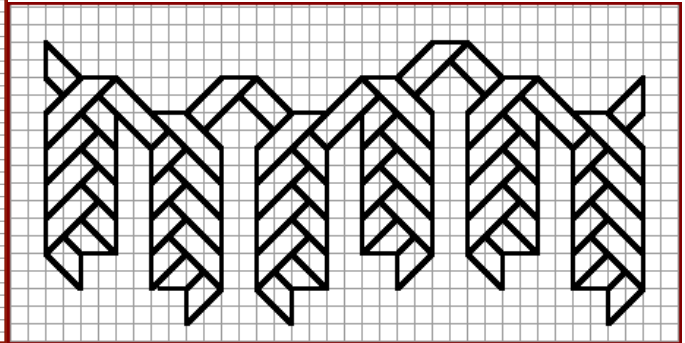
Cowslips



Parsley & Sage



A Ribbon Braid



Intermediate Blackwork

Complicated pattern analysis and creating your own designs

Taught by Baron K. Braden von Sobernheim, OL, OP, &c.

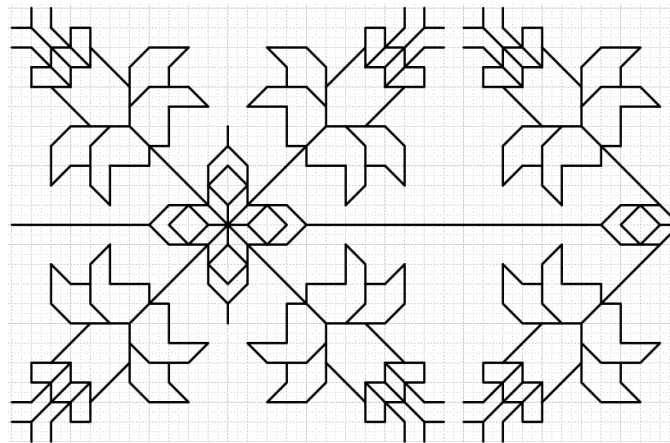
Background

This class is geared toward the embroiderer who has the basics of blackwork firmly in hand and is ready to launch into something much more ambitious. If you just came out of the Blackwork 101 class, this may be a bit more than you want to bite off. Our goal here is to figure out how to plan out some of those *ridiculous* embroidery patterns, going from “no way I can do that” to “it’ll be a pain, but it’ll be awesome.” After that we can look at designing our own custom patterns that reflect other things you can do with your blackwork surfaces.

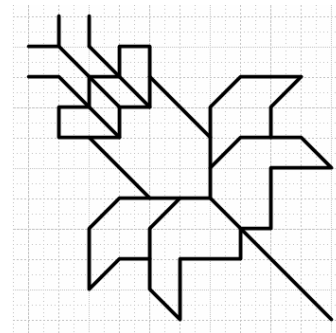
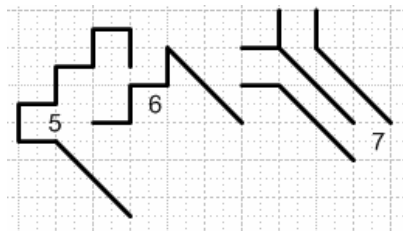
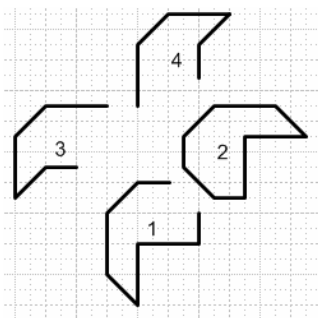
Complicated Patterns

You don’t have to look very far to get to the “holy @\$%” level of blackwork. Mistress Maire has her “Jupiter,” her multi-year (multi-decade now?) blackwork project that she carries with her from time to time and works on. She’ll have it at Kingdom A&S, and she’ll have it at Uprising, please ask to see her dress.

I aim for projects that have a more finite timeline. My first ever project was a blackwork veil for Kingdom largess for Queen Esabell. The veil was 4 foot square linen, and I did a pattern around the edge of it... using 240 meters of black linen thread. Using most spare time, it took 3 months. It was given to the Queen of Northshield, so it may be out there somewhere. It’s a design of crowns, roses, and the Northshield star, with some vine work in between. Let’s look at a complicated pattern:

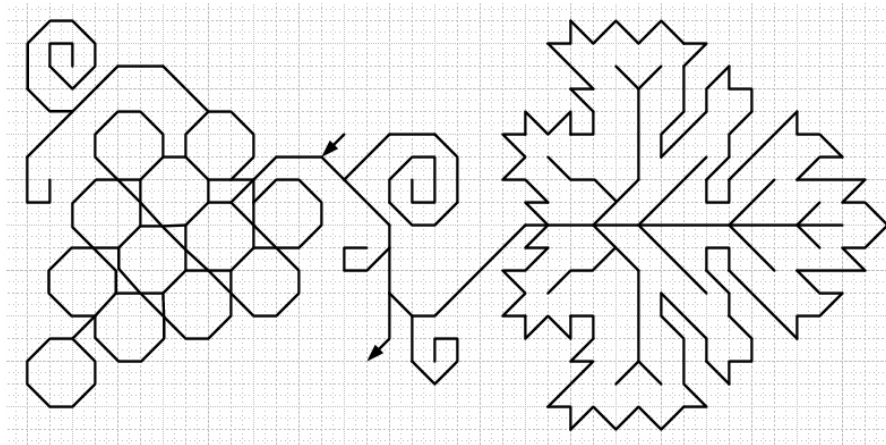


The key to any large pattern is to break it down into small pieces that you can complete one right after the other.



I started with 1 & 2, then 3 & 4. For 5, I did only the first half of, then did all of 6, and did 7 on my way back through 5.

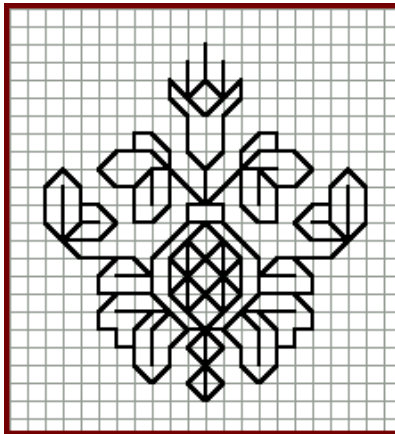
How would you break this down? (The arrows represent where you start and stop the pattern)



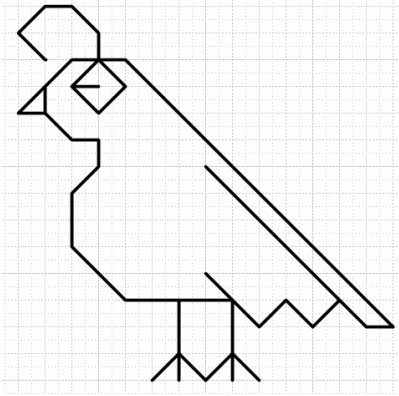
The key is to know where you are (don't get lost!) and see the big picture. Looking at the Blackwork Embroidery Archives, www.blackworkarchives.com (many, many thanks to Paula Kate Marmor), You can create strawberries with strawberry leaves for that duchy collar, thistle cuffs for that Doña who must have her thistles, or any number of ideas.

Drafting Blackwork Patterns

Some key equipment in creating your own patterns is some good graph paper and a good eraser (or Microsoft Visio). I recently completed a pair of cuffs using the daffodil pattern (above) mixed with some rapiers to space them out a bit. My next project is to put quail, *fleur de lis*, and pomegranate together on a collar. Soooo... let us look at the pieces of the design. First, we have a pomegranate (taken from the blackwork archives):

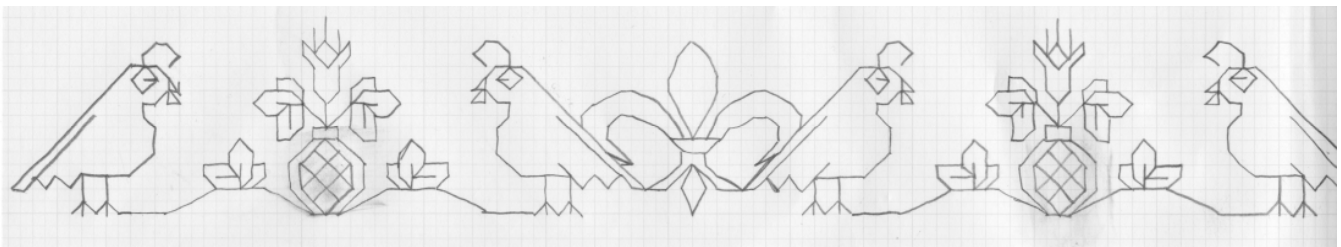


Now I need to invent a quail.



Not bad for a first sketch, you can clearly tell that it is, in fact, a quail. The key thing to note is that all of the lines are connected. You can do blackwork with disconnected pieces, but it is a lot more stop and start with knots and snipping, &c.

Next a fleur (which required a LOT of drawing and erasing), and I have my pattern as seen below (I did end up opening the beak on the quail):



After reviewing the pattern (3 elements gets complicated, and the recipient really wanted the quail and fleurs), I have decided to change it a bit, I will remove the pomegranate, but keep the mound for in between the quail with the tuft of leaves. So I end up not using the pomegranate after all, just a tuft of leaves from it.

Pick out a couple of elements that represent yourself (everything from weapons to officer badges) and let us see what we can create. Keep in mind, monochrome Holbein stitch embroidery started as early as the 10th-12th centuries, so while you may not have more modern elements on your Norse outfit, it doesn't keep you from having this type of embellishment.