Elisabeth Geddes
and Moyra McNeill

BLACKWORK EMBROIDERY

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DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC., NEW YORK

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A portrait of Mary Cornwallis ascribed to George Gower, and probably painted *circa* 1590. She is seen wearing a cartwheel ruff, blackwork-embroidered sleeves with gauze oversleeves, and a forepart, or decorative panel filling in the open front of her gown, embroidered in a strapwork pattern.

(*Courtesy of the City Art Gallery, Manchester*)

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Publisher's Note

MANY of the materials listed in section five are no longer available, and some of the suppliers are no longer in business. Readers are urged first to contact their local art needlework shop or department. Many shops now stock even-weave fabrics and special threads and needles. If you have trouble locating materials, the following wholesale suppliers will be glad to refer you to specific retail outlets.

American Crewel and Canvas Studio
164 Canal Street
Canastota, New York 13032

Brunswick Worsted Mills, Inc
230 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10001

The DMC Corporation
107 Trumbull Street
Elizabeth, New Jersey 07206

Kreinik Mfg. Company
P.O. Box 1966
Parkersburg, West Virginia 26102

Joan Toggitt, Ltd.
150 Meadowlands Parkway
Secaucus, New Jersey 07094

Bernhard Ulmann
35 Fairfield Place
West Caldwell, New Jersey 07006

United Stamped Linen
319 Grand Street
New York, New York 10002

Acknowledgments

THANKS are due to the National Portrait Gallery, London, for permission to reproduce the portraits of Sir Christopher Hatton and Catherine Howard, and to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, for supplying a photograph of the portrait of Jane Seymour from which the sleeve detail has been reproduced. Also to The City Art Gallery, Manchester, for permission to reproduce the painting of Mary Cornwallis. The Victoria and Albert Museum and Library, and the British Museum Library, for much invaluable reference material. Messrs. Chapman & Hall, Ltd for permission to quote in the Introduction an extract from *The Craftsman's Plant Book* by Richard Hatton. Messrs. Bernard Quaritch, Ltd and University College, London, for permitting the use of various figures from *Decorative Patterns from the Ancient World* by Sir Flinders Petrie on pages 21 to 23. Messrs. Penguin Books, Ltd for permission to quote some lines from the Penguin *Canterbury Tales* translated by Nevill Coghill.

Thanks also to the following for kindly allowing the reproduction of their privately owned works. Group-Captain Loel Guinness, O.B.E., for permission to reproduce the portrait of *Captain Thomas Lee* on loan to the Tate Gallery (who kindly provided the print). The Governors of St Olave's Grammar School, S.E.1, for permission to reproduce the *Portrait of an Unknown Lady*. The Head of School, Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen, for permitting the inclusion of a photograph of the Dorothy Haegar panel from the school's permanent collection.

Grateful acknowledgments, too, to the various individuals and firms who have generously supplied information, or practical help, or both. They include *Ambassador* magazine; Mr E. A. Entwisle of Wall Paper Manufacturers, Ltd; Dr Strong of the National Portrait Gallery; Mr R. C. Carrington, Headmaster of St Olave's Grammar School; Mr P. du Sautoy and Messrs. Faber & Faber, Ltd; Mr John Pinder-Wilson; The Embroiderers' Guild; Mr H. Phelps of the Wray Park Studio, Reigate; Mr Brian McNeill; Mr J. R. Pilcher; and embroidery students at Hammersmith College of Art and Building.

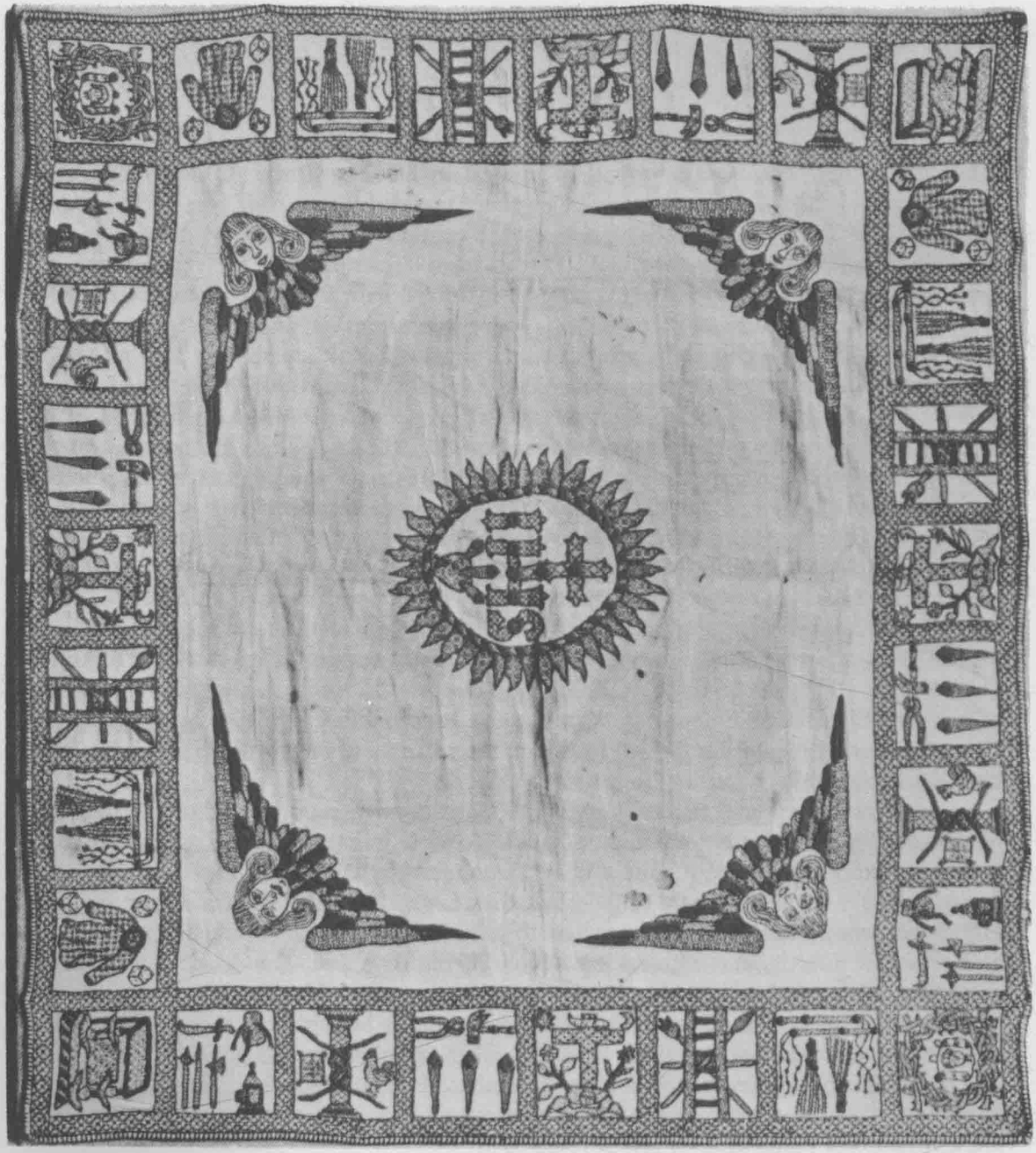
Finally, but not least in importance, we must thank our Editor and Publishers for their monumental patience during the preparation of this book.

Introduction

RECENTLY there has been a revival of interest in blackwork and its possibilities in modern embroidery. Unlike so many of our traditional methods, this type of black on white needlework, if approached in a twentieth-century manner, can be given a most satisfyingly crisp and up-to-date look. Historically, blackwork was first and foremost associated with dress, and its study is necessarily linked with the study of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century costume styles, where alterations in fashion played an important part in influencing its development, although this, of course, was also affected by the trend in Elizabethan domestic embroidery which occurred within the same period.

It is really only possible to appreciate blackwork properly in conjunction with the social and domestic scene in which it flourished. Consequently, the first part of this book consists of a brief historical survey, "for the most part gathered out of sundrie writers" to whom grateful acknowledgment is due, and this attempts to present blackwork not merely as a charming Olde Worlde survival, but as the product of a most interesting way of life and environment which it helps to reflect. Many of the motifs and pattern arrangements used in blackwork and other Tudor embroidery were not restricted to needlework, but were also commonly employed in interior and exterior architectural decoration, such as plaster ceilings, wall-paintings, wood- and stone-carvings and so on, producing a certain unity among all the decorative arts, and giving the period its especial flavour. Numbers of surviving Elizabethan timber-framed houses can be seen today, particularly in Cheshire, Lancashire, and Lincolnshire, which feature in their structural members the same style of bold black-and-white patterning found in blackwork.

Embroidery in the Tudor and early Stuart periods was an inseparable part of the routine of everyday life for the upper and middle classes. To try to imitate it today is wrong, simply because it expresses a society quite different from ours in its surroundings and ways of thought. Hence the second part of the book tries to show some of the decorative possibilities blackwork can have *today*, suited to a twentieth-century setting, with modern materials and threads, and with an inevitably different function. The designs and interpretations are inevitably limited in scope, but what matters is for the designer to realise that in embroidery, as in all art, the last word can never be said. For those sufficiently interested, there exist opportunities for still further experiment, especially in the use of blackwork for abstract design and collage. As Richard Hatton observes in *The Craftsman's Plant Book*: "To reject skilful methods, to neglect tradition, is not necessarily to be either less civilised, less thoughtful, or less devoted to art. . . ."



A late sixteenth- early seventeenth-century Chalice Veil embroidered in red silk, with a border representing symbols of the Passion. Diaper fillings, with plaited braid and outline stitches.
(*Courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Crown copyright*)

One

HISTORICAL SURVEY

"Tell me Dorinda, why so gay?
Why such embroidery, fringe, and lace?
Can any dresses find a way
To stop the approaches of decay,
And mend a ruin'd face?"

Lord Dorset

BLACKWORK, as an embroidery method, must be so well known as to require only the briefest definition. In its widest sense, it is the embroidery in black silk on white linen which became fashionable during the reign of Henry VIII, continuing in use throughout the sixteenth century, and dying out some time between 1600 and 1630. In its initial phase, it was known as "Spanish work", and for the first fifty years of its popularity seems to have been used principally for dress embroidery. During the reign of Elizabeth I, blackwork was utilised for different styles of design, which produced variations in working technique within the method. In this half of the century its scope as a method of decoration increased, and it was worked not only on dress and dress accessories, but on a variety of household articles such as bed-hangings, and other soft furnishings not strictly in general use before the Elizabethan period.

Katharine of Aragon is reputed to have been responsible for introducing blackwork into this country as an innovation from Spain, when she came over in 1501 to marry Arthur Tudor, but there can be little doubt that counted-thread embroidery in black-and-white was known in England well before this. In their book *Needlework through the Ages*, Symonds and Preece remark: ". . . The Spanish people . . . also had the Moorish tradition of white linen embroidered in black, which either in wool or silk they sometimes enriched with metal threads. When Katharine of Aragon came to England . . . she encouraged the Spanish style of embroidery, which in an increasingly rich form became a marked characteristic of Tudor England, but the black embroidery of Katharine was probably not altogether unknown in England before her day. . . ."