

Suzhou Embroidery

苏州刺绣



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China is the first country in the world to develop silkworm breeding and perfect the arts of silk reeling and weaving. The technique of using colored silk threads to embroider patterns on silk fabrics appeared in the Shang Dynasty (1,500 B.C.). The earliest pieces of embroidery were mostly used on clothing. Embroidery developed gradually as a decorative art in the Song Dynasty (10th century). Notable achievements were made in the art of embroidery in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), and different schools of embroidery were formed. The four major schools of embroidery, from Suzhou, Guangdong, Sichuan and Hunan, have vied with each other through the centuries.

Suzhou is located by the Taihu Lake, and is famous for silkworm breeding and silk embroidery. China's economic and cultural center shifted to the regions south of the Yangtze River in the Five Dynasties (907-960), and it was in this period that the saying "there is paradise above and Suzhou and Hangzhou below" began to spread. The cultural and economic boom in the Yangtze River regions led to the marked progress in Suzhou embroidery skills. The art of Suzhou embroidery is highly regarded and has a far-reaching influence.

Suzhou embroidery continues to develop. The Suzhou embroidery artists have improved and refined their techniques, carefully combining traditional skills with a modern-day sensibility. As a result, Suzhou embroidery continues to be one of the most appealing forms of Chinese arts and crafts.

中国是世界上最早发明养蚕、缫丝、织绸的国家。而用彩色丝线在丝织物上绣成图案的刺绣工艺，大约在公元前15世纪的商代就已出现。最早的刺绣工艺主要用于服饰，大约在公元10世纪的宋代，刺绣工艺逐渐向具有观赏性的艺术品方向发展，到明、清（1368—1911年）刺绣艺术成就显著，刺绣工艺形成了不同的艺术流派，苏绣、粤绣、蜀绣、湘绣四大名绣争奇斗艳。

苏州地处太湖之滨，盛产蚕桑。中国经济文化重心从五代（907—960年）朝江南转移，“上有天堂，下有苏杭”的说法亦就是五代时期开始流传的。江南文化经济的繁荣促使苏绣技艺有了长足的进步，苏绣艺术独领风骚，影响深远。

今天的苏绣艺术又开创了一个大有作为的新天地。苏绣艺人对传统技艺进行挖掘，加以总结，提高，发展，使苏绣艺术既有优秀传统文化的内涵，又有新时期的时代风貌。苏绣艺术已成为中国工艺美术园地中最富有魅力的工艺品之一。

建议上架：民俗、民间工艺

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Suzhou Embroidery

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學積工夫代綠章
絲綸髣髴挽韶光
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Suzhou Embroidery

by Sun Peilan

Chinese embroidery originated from the painted cloth art of ancient times. In primitive society, it was customary among Chinese to wear tattoos, which were said to be both for decoration and to help ward off attacks from aquatic animals and beasts during fishing and hunting excursions. In the New Stone Age, people learned to make clothes from fabric to cover their bodies, and began to paint the tattoo designs on their clothes instead. After discovering the painted patterns on the fabrics could not be preserved due to everyday wear and tear, the weather and water, people began to use needles to stitch their clothes with flowery patterns that would last longer. Thus, embroidery was born.

In the embroidery of 4,000 years ago, colored silk threads were used to outline patterns, which were then filled in with paint. By the fifth century B.C., colorfully embroidered clothes, quilts, and decorations became part of the fashionable social life of the upper classes.

Embroidery is the oldest traditional art involving silk processing, another famed art in China. The silk and silk fabrics which were produced before embroidery became popular provided the base materials and colorful silk threads for the embroidery art. And the silk fabrics embroidered with patterns became even more attractive. It is precisely because of this that the Chinese have referred to

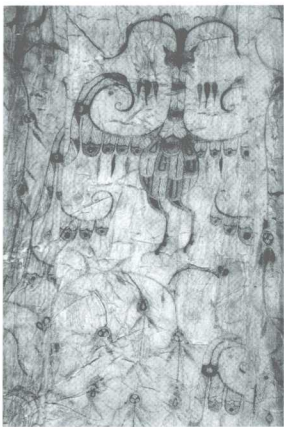
Fragment of an embroidered work with patterns of dragon, phoenix and tiger made during the mid-Warring States period

战国中期龙凤虎纹残片局部



◀ *Keep Wealth and Power Until You Die*, a work from the mid-Qing Dynasty, embroidered by Shen Guanguan, a famous embroiderer in Wujiang, Suzhou, 73.2x41.5cm

清中期苏州吴江名绣沈关关刺绣作品《富贵白头图》73.2 × 41.5cm



Embroidery of phoenix and flowers made during the mid-Warring States period
战国中期凤鸟花卉纹绣



Embroidery of coiled dragon and flying phoenix made during the mid-Warring States period
战国中期蟠龙飞凤纹绣

Silk quilt designed with pairs of phoenixes and dragons, an exquisite embroidery of the Warring States period unearthed in the No. 1 tomb at Mashan, Jiangling
江陵马山一号墓出土的战国时期精美绣品“对凤对龙纹绢面衾”

锦 *jin* (brocades with raised patterns) and 绣 *xiu* (embroidery) as “splendor and beauty”, and used them to describe all beautiful things, such as 锦绣河山 *jin xiu he shan* (land of splendor and beauty), 锦绣文章 *jin xiu wen zhang* (beautiful article), 锦衣绣服 *jin yi xiu fu* (beautiful clothes), and 锦绣前程 *jin xiu qian cheng* (bright future). Although brocade and embroidery are mentioned together with equal importance, the artistic value of embroidery is much higher than that of brocade because brocade is limited by the structure of the weaving machines and skills, while embroidery can freely incorporate a variety of patterns and reveal the skill and individuality of the craftsmen.

In the 19th century, after 4,000 years of development, four famous forms of embroidery each with their own unique characteristics emerged in Suzhou, Guangdong, Sichuan and Hunan.

Suzhou embroidery, from Jiangsu Province, was handmade and noted for its elaborate designs, rich colors, and fine needlework. Suzhou embroidery has a long history. In ancient times, people living south of the Yangtze River, in the areas where many rivers crisscrossed, relied on fishing as a food source. In order to work in the water, people



in the Wu State (which covered parts of what are now the provinces of Jiangsu, Anhui and Zhejiang) cut their hair short and tattooed their bodies with dragons. As their society progressed they began to wear clothes, but some still liked to sport tattoos.

Legend has it that a lovely young girl embroidered tattoo designs on clothes for her fellow villagers so that they could avoid the painful process of skin tattoos. This not only helped the local tribes preserve their custom of worshipping primitive totems, but also added richness to the tattoo colors. According to a book written by Liu Xiang in the Han Dynasty, people in the Wu State wore embroidered clothes in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) when welcoming or seeing off visitors. Thus the customs of incorporating designs into haircutting and tattooing in the Wu area 2,500 years ago were replaced by adding artistic designs to brocade and embroidery.

In the 1970s, ancient handwoven cloth, thin silk, silk threads and pieces of yarn were unearthed in the ruins of the Liangzhu Culture (dating back to 3300-2000 B.C.) surrounding Taihu Lake. The silk used to make these fabrics all came from silkworms. People living around the lake raised silkworms and wove thin silk fabrics during that period, and so had the materials to produce embroidery.

It can be seen from the unearthed embroidery pieces of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) that the embroidery skills and patterns prevalent in the Jiangsu region were by no means inferior to those in the Central Plains, Hunan, Hubei and Sichuan. Fragments of embroidered quilts were unearthed from the No. 2 tomb of Prince Guangling of the Han Dynasty at Tianshan in Gaoyou, Jiangsu Province, and at another tomb of the Han Dynasty in Donghai County. The designs found on the embroidered pieces unearthed from the Han tomb at Tianshan include cloud patterns in the shape of grain husks, patterns of peapods and *Forsythia viridissima* Lindl, with bird-shaped



Mulberry leaf-picking pattern on a bronze pot made in the Warring States period
战国时期铜壶上的采桑纹饰



A copy of the *Longevity Embroidery* made during the Western Han Dynasty, unearthed in the No. 1 tomb at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan

湖南长沙马王堆一号墓出土的西汉《长寿绣》(复制品)



Embroidery of cornel on a piece of silk made during the Western Han Dynasty
西汉时期茱萸纹绣绢





Embroidered cloth cover for a Buddhist scripture book of the Northern Song Dynasty, unearthed at Yunyan Temple on Huqiu Hill, Suzhou

苏州虎丘山云岩寺出土的北宋刺绣经帙

designs among these patterns, similar to the embroidered designs of longevity unearthed from the Han tombs at Mawangdui in Changsha. The embroidered quilts unearthed in Donghai County include floating clouds in the shape of grain husks, flying beasts, witches, abstract phoenix patterns and peacocks. The free expression of ideas combined with abstraction and the use of figures, flying birds and beasts in the clouds were the distinctive features of the embroidered and woven fabrics made during the Han Dynasty. The stitch used was the plaiting stitch, the earliest example of stitching used in Chinese embroidery.

Skilled embroiderers in the Suzhou region during the period of the Three Kingdoms, following the Han Dynasty, were mentioned in historical records. According to the *Book of Appropriating Lost Articles* by Wang Jia of the Jin Dynasty (265-420), the younger sister of Zhao Da, a prime minister of the Wu Kingdom, “could embroider all the Warring States on a square piece of silk fabric with the five Famous Sacred Mountains, seas, rivers, cities, and military formations” and was thus regarded as a superb embroiderer of her time.

China’s economic and cultural focus moved southward



Double-faced embroidered scripture cover with phoenix design, made during the Northern Song Dynasty

北宋双面绣团鸾经袱



Fragment of an embroidered Buddha during the period of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534). The name of the worshipper was also embroidered on the fragment.

北魏时期的刺绣佛像残片，上同时绣有供养人姓名

◀ Part of *Excellence in Jasper Lake*, one of the twelve folk longevity screens embroidered in the Qing Dynasty

清代明间刺绣十二寿屏之一“瑶池仙品”局部

An embroidered waist bag (similar to a modern-day wallet) of the Southern Song Dynasty

南宋刺绣褙袋(古代系在腰间,类似今天的钱包)



The names of many places in Suzhou are related to silk-worm breeding and embroidery. The picture shows the No. 3 house, Gunxiufang.

苏州城里至今还保留着许多与养蚕刺绣有关的地名,图为“滚绣坊”3号的门牌

during the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960). The saying that “just as there is glory in heaven, there are Suzhou and Hangzhou on earth” began to spread during the Five Dynasties. The cultural and economic prosperity in the areas south of the Yangtze River helped to accelerate the development of the embroidery art in the Suzhou region during the Song dynasty (960-1279).

In 1956, five pieces of embroidered silk cloth used to cover Buddhist scriptures of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) were unearthed from the pagoda in the Lingyan Temple at Huqiu Hill in Suzhou. The patterns on the silk cloth include flowers such as the water caltrop and lotus, creeping vines, and the phoenix amidst peonies. The stitches include the plain stitch, the diagonal twining stitch, the connecting stitch, the back stitch, and the braiding stitch. Tri-color threads were used. Based on when the pagoda was built, these pieces of embroidery should be from the later years of the Five Dynasties or early years of the Northern Song Dynasty and were the earliest pieces of embroidery ever found in Suzhou. A