

#205: HARDANGER EMBROIDERY

IN THIS INFORMATION BANK

Introduction | 01

Origins | 01

The Development of a Tradition | 01

Today | 02

Learning More | 02

INTRODUCTION

Hardanger embroidery or *hardangersøm* is a traditional form of decorative Norwegian needlework. Named for the Hardanger district of Norway where it was developed, *hardangersøm* has become so popular over the years that it has been adopted by craftspeople from all over the country and beyond. What sets *hardangersøm* apart is the sheer variety of stitches and techniques it encompasses. The vast range of techniques one must master make it a demanding skill to learn, but also empower artisans to continue creating an infinite array of new designs. Perhaps that's why after more than three centuries, *hardangersøm* continues to inspire stitchers all over the world.

ORIGINS

Although *hardangersøm* is distinctively Norwegian, its origins can be traced through many other countries. The type of embroidery that would eventually develop into *hardangersøm* is thought to have come to Europe from the Middle East or Persia during the Renaissance. By the 1600s the Italians had developed their own style of embroidery called *reticella* that soon became popular and spread throughout the continent and eventually to Norway. The earliest recognizable *hardangersøm* pieces date from the 1700s.

Around the same time, many other regions of Norway began to develop their own distinctive styles of embroidery and other textile crafts. During the 1800s, when Norway was stirred by a great national romantic movement, people from all over the country were united in a new enthusiasm for traditional folk culture. The style from the western district of Hardanger soon became popular all over the country and was embraced as the national style.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRADITION

Hardangersøm has always been done with white linen thread on even-count white linen cloth or with white pearl cotton thread on even-count white cotton cloth. The latter is often referred to as Hardanger cloth. *Hardangersøm* often incorporates cutwork, meaning that designs are stitched into a piece of fabric and then some pieces are strategically cut out to make geometric patterns.



At first hardangersøm was used mainly on apron borders and shirt collars. Soon it was used to decorate everyday household items like table cloths and napkins, mostly likely as a means of personalizing them and displaying a craftswoman's skills. It then became a logical addition to the headdresses, hand covers, and breast cloths of *bunads* (Norwegian folk costumes).

Like most other folk arts, hardangersøm traveled across the Atlantic during Norwegian emigration to America in the 1800s and early 1900s. The descendants of the immigrants were responsible for resurrecting the style after it fell into disfavor in Norway for a generation or more. The literature on hardangersøm found in the Norwegian craft and needlework shops of America exists largely because of second and third generation interest in and promotion of the folk art.



TODAY

Just as the early needlework artists of the Hardanger region turned Italian *reticella* into hardangersøm, artisans in North America and Norway modified traditional designs in a variety of ways. Colored threads on contrasting colored cloth is one contemporary creation.

In addition to clothing, tablecloths and napkins, today's artists apply hardangersøm to a wide variety of items—pillows, curtains, holiday decorations, bookmarks and wall hangings. Traditional geometric cutwork designs are square, rectangular, triangular, diamond, diagonal, zig-zag and cross. These cut holes are sometimes worked into diamond, triangular or square motifs. Satin stitching is used in rectangular blocks and other shapes.

Cultural preservation of hardangersøm in America and Norway continues today. Design books dating from the early 1900s can still be found. People on both sides of the Atlantic are producing new pieces and supporting museums and shows to create public interest in the art. They now communicate with each other through Internet blogs. The Annual Hardanger Embroidery Design Contest sponsored by Nordic Needle, a needlework shop in Fargo, North Dakota, encourages design innovation and has been popular for more than two decades.

LEARNING MORE

You can learn more about hardanger embroidery and try it yourself through Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program. To learn more, check out www.sonsofnorway.com.