

The History of Redwork, Bluework & Blackwork

As you browse through the designs at [Embroidery Library](#), and look at different projects in the [Stitchers Showcase](#), you'll likely notice references to styles such as "Redwork," "Bluework," or "Blackwork."

These words have come to identify a design as being quick to stitch, light, and simple. And, each style has a unique and interesting history. In this article I'll talk about the history, the unique characteristics of this particular style, and special things to watch for when stitching designs in this style.

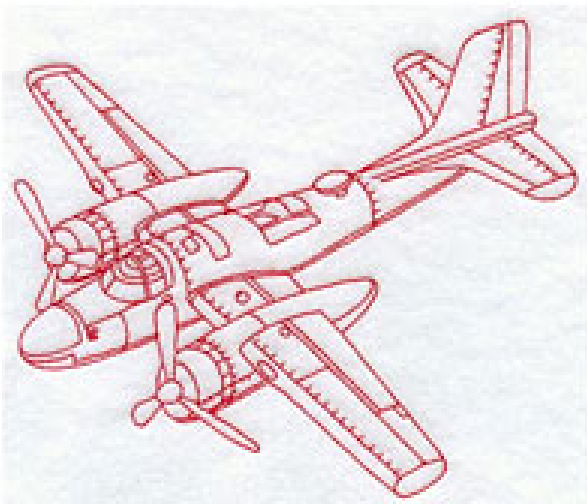
Steps To Complete

"Redwork" gets its name from a special type of red thread developed in Turkey more than 200 years ago. Prior to this "Turkish red," thread wasn't colorfast. Colors would bleed in the wash, so colored thread couldn't be used on quilts or garments.



With the introduction of a colorfast red thread, quilters and embroiderers could adorn everyday items such as quilts, blankets, dishtowels, and clothing, and the color wouldn't wash away. Presto! Redwork was born.

Redwork patterns came to the United States sometime before the Civil War. Prior to the war, cotton was plentiful and affordable. General stores sold 6 inch muslin squares that were printed with patterns in red ink. The patterns called for simple stitches, so they were easy for everyone to complete and use.



Children used these "penny squares" to practice their sewing and embroidery skills, and the completed squares were often made into Redwork bedspreads and linens.

Many of today's Redwork designs pay homage to the original "penny squares" with their simple running stitches. But some Redwork designs incorporate satin stitches to add a hearty and robust look to the piece.



For example, look at the designs to the right. These designs include a combination of traditional running stitches (the mark of a classic Redwork design), and also satin stitches (the heavier and brighter parts).

The designs to the right include text for day of the week towels. For most designs that have text, the text is included on a separate color stop. That means that you can either delete the stop, or simply skip that stop when stitching, to have the design without the word.

As you browse through the Redwork designs, you'll come across a few that say "Redwork," but they aren't stitched with red thread.



As you read above, the term "Redwork" came from the "penny squares" that were printed in red ink. And, folks used red thread so that if the ink showed through the stitching, it would blend nicely.

Some of the Redwork designs at Embroidery Library use multiple colors, like the one to the right. With these, you can choose to use red thread if you wish, and stitch the design in one color.

Or, you can choose your own colors (or use the ones that we used by following a design's color change sheet) to retain that light and open stitching that's part of Redwork, and still add a polychromatic design to your project.

Redwork designs work best on a flat-nap fabric. The open areas and light stitching will sink into a lofty fabric, like terrycloth, or disappear in a hearty sweater knit. Choose smooth cotton, denim, satin, or other flat-nap fabrics for the best results.



The style known as "Bluework" shares the same history as Redwork. A few decades after Turkey changed the stitching world with its colorfast red thread, a colorfast indigo thread became available.

In 1910 synthetic dyes became even more colorfast and stable. The "penny squares" that were available in red were suddenly available in a beautiful indigo blue.



Redwork and Bluework designs share the same qualities -- light, open, one color thread -- but it's done in blue thread. Do you love a Bluework design, but see it in green, or purple, or pink? Thread your machine with the color of your choice, and let your imagination spring to life!



Bluework and Redwork designs have a lot of appeal for two main reasons: First, they blend the beauty and classic look of traditional hand embroidery stitches with the speed and precision of machine embroidery. In a way, stitching a Redwork design is like stitching a part of the past.

The second reason that stitchers love Redwork and Bluework is because they're fast designs. You'll find that the stitch count in these designs is much lower than other realistic or "filled" designs. And, because the designs can be stitched with one color, there's no need to stop to change the thread. Even the multi-color Redwork designs have so few color changes that you can embellish a towel or table linens in a matter of minutes!



Blackwork is older than both Redwork and Bluework. It's a style that was practiced by Europeans as far back as the early 16th century. You may have heard Blackwork referred to as "Spanish work." Catherine of Aragon was the princess of Spain and the wife of King Henry VIII. When she traveled from Spain to England to be with her husband, she brought many Blackwork garments with her.

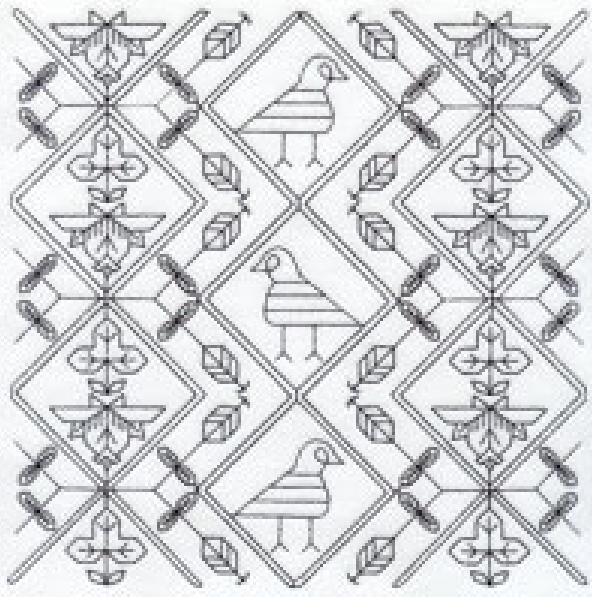
Her style caught on, and English people during the Renaissance decorated their clothing with Blackwork.



Interestingly, there were laws in England that prohibited lower social classes from wearing decorated (frivolous) clothing, especially lace. Blackwork, with its fancy and "lacy" patterns, was a way to get around this law.

During this era, embroidery was viewed as a sign of wealth. If a woman had embroidered clothing, it meant that she had a lot of leisure time, didn't have to perform hard labor, and could afford to purchase linen and silk thread.

As you browse through the Blackwork designs, you'll find both traditional and contemporary themes. The traditional themes may look geometric and "square." During the Renaissance, Blackwork embroidery was composed of horizontal and vertical stitches only; the hoop was turned by 45 degrees to go in a new direction. The classic designs that you see emulate this style.



Motifs that emerged during the Renaissance focused mainly on organic elements, such as geometric flowers, acorns, birds, berries, and leaves.



The contemporary Blackwork selection of designs pairs the interesting geometric fills with more modern design motifs. Take a look at this example to the right. Rounded and curving stitches are a departure from the classic Blackwork style, but yet the geometric fills in the basket weave and the butterfly bring the "spirit" of blackwork to the design.

Tips for stitching Redwork, Bluework, and Blackwork designs

All three styles - Redwork, Bluework, and Blackwork -- can be stitched in one color thread for quick embellishment to tea towels, aprons, table linens, and other flat-nap

projects.

The designs tend to be light and open, which means they'll work on the lightest of fabrics. Muslin, light linen, cotton tea towels, and flower sack towels are the perfect canvas for these historic and traditional styles. (And the designs can be stitched onto medium and heavy fabrics too, like denim, canvas, and duck cloth).

Stay away from lofty or high-nap fabrics, like terrycloth, velour, fur, etc., as the running stitches will become buried (and invisible) in the fabric.

Light and simple Redwork and Bluework designs can be stitched onto fabric backed with tear-away stabilizer. These designs are light enough so that only minimal support to the fabric is necessary. However, in my experience I've found that cutaway is the best stabilizer to give crisp definition to the stitches. If you see that your stitches are fuzzy or misaligned when using tear-away stabilizer, then switch to cutaway for better results.

Also, in some rare, rare instances, using tear-away stabilizer can cause looping. Yes, I had to scratch my head about that one for a while until I did some testing to replicate the issue. I found that thread tensions on embroidery machines are pre-set to account for two layers. Most often we stitch through fabric and stabilizer, and the thread tension settings account for that. When stitching a design onto fabric backed with tear-away stabilizer (even a design as light as the simplest of Redwork), the needle perforates the tear-away stabilizer, essentially "tearing" it away before it's meant to be torn away.

That means that you're essentially stitching through one layer, rather than two. And, then the thread settings are off, and you'll see looping. I mentioned earlier that this is rare -- and indeed, it's very rare. And if it happens, switch to cutaway stabilizer and that should resolve everything.

Redwork, Bluework, and Blackwork styles are a fast way to create a beautiful look on many light fabrics. One-color and quick-stitching, these styles emulate hand embroidery, and are a true connection to stitchers of the past. Embroidered clothing was seen as a sign of love and affection, a way to stay in a loved one's thoughts. What a lovely tradition to carry on!