Hand embroidery can be defined quite simply as “cloth decorated by sewing”. Even “the art or process of forming decorative designs with hand needlework” sounds pretty simple, right? Simple enough for a child to do. And it certainly is. Here is an example of a motif from a tablecloth that I embroidered at age 10.
Here is an example of a simple, yet elegant design from a Madeira handkerchief. Its tag indicates that it has passed the highest level of quality control for hand embroidery in Madeira.

And here is an extremely complex design that is an example of fine whitework from my collection. It is from a handkerchief most likely embroidered in Switzerland in the early 20th century.
Hand embroidery also encompasses everything in between and more. So I invite you to stitch along with me for the next few weeks as we explore hand embroidery.

For the first lesson we will begin with the simplest stitches – the ones I used on the tablecloth above. I consider the stem stitch, lazy daisy, and French knot to be the backbone of hand embroidery. If you can do these stitches, you can embroider almost any design. For those of you that don’t know how to do these stitches, I will show you. For those of you already comfortable with these stitches, my challenge to you is to use them in a new or different way.

Traditionally you might think of a bit of hand embroidery on a day gown, preemie gown, or handkerchief. Materials would include batiste and DMC floss. The motif would most likely be a floral design. However, you can vary the look greatly just by using different materials. One strand of DMC floss on fine batiste is perfect for a daygown. Silk floss on silk fabric is very elegant. Three strands of DMC on a quilting weight cotton fabric is a good choice for a more casual look. Other fibers often used for hand embroidery include Floche, silk ribbon, metallic threads and tapestry wool – all good choices. You can vary the number of strands you use, combine different fibers in the same design, or combine strands of different colors in your needle. There are sew many choices!

My sample is a floral design on a baby pillow case finished to 12” x 9”. If you want to do the same, you will need a piece of batiste or linen about 15” by 10” to embroider and another the same size for the back. My colors are DMC 369 green for the leaves, 818 pink for the petals and 745 yellow for the centers. Of course you may choose your own colors for leaves, petals, and centers. Note that we will be working with only one design throughout the lessons. If you are making the pillow case, you may wish to experiment on a piece of doodle cloth before deciding which stitches to use on your pillow.
You can also just doodle or make a baby bib, bonnet brim, handkerchief, pin cushion, or embroider on purchased items such as embroidery blanks. If you want to incorporate your embroidery into a preemie gown there is an appropriate pattern in the August 2015 issue of SAGANEWS or available at smocking.org.

For this design I would not use a hoop although you may if you wish. The general rule is to use a hoop for “stick and stab” stitches and to stitch “in hand” (without a hoop) for “scoop” stitches. “Stick and stab” refers to stitches where you take your needle to the back of your fabric in one motion and bring it to the front in a second motion. A “scoop” stitch is when you scoop up a bit of fabric, front to back to front all in one motion. Of course rules are made to be broken, so do what works best for you.

My favorite needle is a #8 crewel (also called an embroidery needle). That is what I would use for this design with one strand of DMC floss on batiste. Many experts would suggest a #10 sharp and that is certainly fine too. The number one rule is to use a needle that you can thread! After that you want to use the needle that makes the smallest possible hole in the fabric while putting the least amount of stress on your thread. Since these requirements are exact opposites, compromise is necessary.

You will also need something with which to trace your design. I suggest a Frixon pen in blue or a color that will show up on your fabric. You can also use a blue wash out marker, a purple disappearing pen, or a #2 pencil. There is no perfect marker, to my knowledge, and there have been volumes written about the pros and cons of each. However the Frixon pen gives a nice, thin line and erases with the touch of an iron. While a light box is the ideal tool for tracing, if you don’t have one, a glass top table with a light underneath, a window, or just putting a sheet of white paper under your design are all acceptable alternatives.

For those of you wishing a little more adventure in your lives, put on your thinking caps and gather together fabric and fibers to stitch either my floral design or a design of your own using only the stem stitch, lazy daisy, and French knot. Use the needle most appropriate for your choice of materials. Think outside the box and post pictures!

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Materials List to make a baby pillow case

Fabric – 2 pieces 15” x 10” of either linen or batiste
Doodle cloth - optional
DMC Floss colors 369 green, 818 pink, 745 yellow
Needle - #8 Crewel or #10 Sharps
Frixon Pen
Painter’s tape or other removable tape
Lesson 2 – Let’s begin.

Step 1 – Transferring the design to your fabric.

In this lesson, we will transfer our design to the fabric by tracing. Tape the paper design to your light box, window, or glass top table. If none of these is available, place a white piece of paper under the design paper and tape to any flat surface. Starch and press your fabric, then place on top of the design (starched side up). When it is positioned to your satisfaction, tape the fabric down. You can use painter’s tape, hair tape, or tape made for machine embroidery. Trace lightly using the pen of your choice.

I am using a blue Frixon pen. You could also use a blue wash out marker, a purple air erasable marker, a #2 pencil, or other marking tool of your choice. There is no perfect pen – all have pros and cons. The Frixon pen is my current favorite because of the fine line and the fact that it disappears with the touch of an iron or blow drier. I know some people have had a shadow reappear especially on dark fabric, but so far I have had good luck with it.
Whichever pen you use, trace lightly. Many times I only make a straight line for a petal or leaf. The fewer marks on the fabric, the better. Use the base of your hand as a pivot point when tracing the curved lines. Pick up your pen before you move your pivot point. Go slow and be precise. It is easier to stitch a smooth curve if you have drawn a smooth curve!

For a pillow case you will need to leave about 3” below the design for the hem.

Note that there is only the one design on the pillow case. You will use the stitches from Lesson 1, the stitches from Lesson 2, or as described in Lesson 3 a combination of the two. So if you are making the pillow case, you may wish to try the stitches on a doodle cloth to see which ones you prefer before beginning your pillow case project. Or you could make multiple pillow cases.

**Step 2 – To hoop or not to hoop**

I would not use a hoop for this type of embroidery. The general rule is that a hoop is used for “stick and stab” stitching. This is when you take the thread to the back of the work in one motion and bring it to the front in a separate motion. When working “in hand” (without a hoop), you can “scoop” the fabric by taking the needle in and out all in one motion. If you prefer a hoop, you can certainly use one and stitch with the “stick and stab” method. If you want to use the hoop and still “scoop” your stitches, you will need to be sure that the fabric is not taut in the hoop. If I were to use a hoop for this project, I would choose a Susan Bates oval hoop.

**Step 3 – Tying on**

For your very first length of thread, I use an away waste knot. I always think of Scarlett O’Hara when I do this – I will worry about that tomorrow! There are other methods and, of course, use the one you prefer. However, when starting out, I feel this is the easiest. An away waste knot is simply an overhand knot in the thread placed on the RIGHT side of the fabric several inches away from the starting point (and out of the way of your embroidery). You will later cut the knot off, and thread the tail in your needle to weave under existing stitches. Be sure there is enough thread to do this – think “faraway” waste knot.
For subsequent threads, you can begin by weaving the end of the thread under your existing stitches. This is also the method for ending threads. In general, the rule is no knots. (The waste knot doesn’t count since it is cut away). But remember rules are made to be broken, so you might choose to use a knot on something that will see heavy use or laundering.

**Step 4 – Order of work**

I suggest stitching the stems, petals, centers, and leaves in that order. When stitching the leaves last, you can add or omit if you think you need more or less. I like to keep my paper copy of the design nearby while I am stitching so I can refer to it. It is easy to miss a leaf or two when tracing. And sometimes it is easier to tell the leaves from the petals on the paper.

My least favorite part of embroidery is starting and stopping. Therefore I carry my thread from motif to motif whenever possible. You may prefer to end and start again. If you do carry, be sure that the threads on the back follow the design. You may want to go under a few threads on the back to insure that the carrying thread is anchored behind the design. If it goes across a blank space, it will show from the front on light colored fabric. You also don’t want long loose threads on the back.

Use the stem stitch for stems, the lazy daisy for petals and leaves, and the French knot for flower centers.

**Step 5 – Remove Marks**

Remove your pen marks and voila! You won’t believe how much better it looks once those blue lines are gone. If you use a water soluble marker, be sure to submerge the entire piece in water and rinse well. DO NOT USE SOAP OR DETERGENT. DO NOT SIMPLY SPRITZ THE MARKS AWAY. Instructions to finish the pillow case will be provided in Lesson 4.

**Additional Information**

For additional information refer to these excellent references.

A-Z of Embroidery Stitches published by Country Bumpkin
Mary Corbett’s web site www.needlenthread.com

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Conclusion

Thank you so much for participating in this stitch along. Keep in mind that this is your project and you can do things any way you want. The embroidery police will not come get you if you use knots on the back of your work or wrap your French knots three times!!

I realize that these are very basic stitches and many of you already know them well. If you want to stitch along, I suggest you try an unusual fabric or thread or a very different design. They have been common embellishments on baby clothes and household linens for many, many years. What else can you think of to embellish with these stitches? I can’t wait to see what you create to inspire us.

Please visit the Facebook group SAGA Smock-Along to post pictures, ask questions, and be inspired by others. Feel free to post pictures of embroidery that you may have done in the past using these stitches.

In the next lesson, I will describe three different stitches that can be used to stitch the same design. There are sew many choices!
Stem Stitch for right handed stitchers

Come up at the beginning of the design line (A) working from left to right. I am using one strand of DMC floss and a #10 Crewel (embroidery) needle. As you stitch, keep the thread below your needle. Go down at C and back up at B keeping your thread below the needle. Continue across the line D to C, E to D, etc. End with a tiny stitch to the back. Note that when going down at C for the first stitch, the distance A to C is twice the distance of subsequent stitches – D to C, etc.

Stem Stitch for left handed stitchers
Come up at the beginning of the design line working from right to left. As you stitch, keep the thread above your needle. Stitch sequence is the same.

Stem Stitch for right or left handed stitchers
If you use the “stick and stab” method, both right and left handed stitchers can stitch in either direction. (left to right or right to left). In this case, when stitching left to right, keep the thread below the needle. When stitching right to left, keep the thread above the needle. In other words, it doesn’t matter which hand you use, it matters which direction you are traveling.

Stem Stitch vs Outline Stitch
The outline stitch is executed in the same manner as the stem stitch, however the thread is above the needle when stitching left to right. (Below the needle traveling right to left.) Because of the way the thread is twisted, you will get a very different look. The individual stitches show up more clearly when doing the stem stitch and blend together when doing the
outline stitch. Obviously you can use either for this project. Just be consistent.

**Lazy Daisy**

Come up at base petal.  
Go down in same hole and up at tip. Be sure thread is behind the needle. 
Stitch down over the tip securing the loop. Don’t pull too tightly. 
This is what happens if you pull too tightly.

Stitch the petals and leaves using the Lazy Daisy stitch. Be careful not to pull too tightly as that will turn your petals into straight lines.

**French Knot**

Bring your thread up and wrap it around the needle. You may also wrap twice if you want a larger knot. Take the needle to the back a few threads away. While the needle is half way through the fabric, slide the knot in place and tighten. Holding the knot in place, pull the needle through. If you go back in the same hole, your knot will pull through to the back. For larger knots some authorities suggest additional wraps, while others insist you must use additional strands of thread. The choice is yours.

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This design was taken from a vintage sheet of iron-on transfers. The original stem stopped before and after each flower. I modified the design to make the stem one continuous line for ease of stitching. I then stitched the flowers on top of the stem as if it was not there. I have included the original design as well as an enlarged portion of the original. Feel free to enlarge, reduce, cut, and paste as you choose.

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Lesson 3 – Let’s try more stitches.

Now let’s stitch the same design using different stitches. Substitute back stitch for stem stitch, satin stitch for lazy daisy, and Granito for French knot.

You will need to transfer your design to your fabric and decide whether or not to use a hoop as in Lesson 2.

With these stitches I would change the order and stitch the Granito centers, then the stems and satin stitch leaves and petals last.

**Tying on**

Both Granitos and satin stitch have enough thread on the front that you can tie on with a split backstitch behind the finished stitch. To do this go down from the top and take a tiny stitch (smaller than your Granito). Split the stitch as you go down and then proceed to stitch your Granito. You can do the same thing for satin stitch. To tie off, go through the threads on the back. I tie off between each Granito although I do carry the threads from petal to petal and leaf to leaf. Of course you could also use an away waste knot as in Lesson 2.
Tiny stitch inside Granito

Granitos

A Granito is a straight stitch – usually 5 to as many as 10 stitched in and out the same two holes in the fabric forming a small mound. It is important to stay in the same holes with your stitches. After the first few stitches, alternate pushing the stitches to the right and then left, finishing with a stitch over the center. Again you will need to experiment to see how many stitches it takes to make a Granito that you like given your thread choice and fabric.

First stitch in the middle

Backstitch

Back stitch is one of my favorite linear stitches. It makes a fine, smooth line and is quick and easy to stitch. It is my favorite for stitching a name and date on a Christening gown slip, quilt or any place you want to “sign” your work.
I am a big believer in “signing’ your work. Yesterday I saw some gorgeous quilts in a museum labeled “Maker Unknown”. How sad. I seriously doubt the ladies who made them ever dreamed their work would end up in a museum. So whether for museum viewers or your friends and family members who might inherit your work, please add a label or even better an embroidered signature – and a date is good as well. It’s always fun to see when you made something. I signed the hussif I stitched in 2001 (Yikes that is 15 years ago!) and the reticule I stitched in 2007 using backstitch.

Your signature can be prominent...... or on the inside where only you know it is there.

You can use your own signature or print out your name and date from the computer. It is easier to stitch if you choose a script-style font with connected letters. I use Edwardian Script ITC. On these dark fabrics, I traced the computer-printed lettering onto tissue paper and actually stitched through the paper and then pulled it away when finished.

Back stitch is just what the name implies – a backward stitch. Just remember that a stitch from one point to another is by definition a straight line. So if you want a graceful curve, you need to use small stitches. I stitch from top to bottom.

Up at B. Stitch A to C. Stitch B to D. Continue across (or up) your line.
Satin Stitch

Don’t let satin stitch intimidate you. Although it is a stitch that usually improves with practice, its imperfections don’t really show from a distance, particularly on a small design. Satin stitch is just a series of straight parallel stitches placed side by side. When stitching larger shapes, the area is often outlined with a linear stitch and padded. For tiny leaves and petals, this is not necessary. If you do choose to pad your stitches, be sure that the finished stitches are perpendicular to the padding stitches. Before starting a large important project, you may want to experiment to see which method works best for your fabric and thread.

Begin at the widest part of the petal. Stitch to the tip. Stitch the other end.

Begin the petal by tying on as for the Granito. Take the first stitch horizontally across the widest part of the petal. Lay stitches side by side until you reach the tip. Go back to the middle and stitch the other end.

Conclusion

Please visit the Facebook group SAGA Smock-Along to post pictures, ask questions, and be inspired by others. I would love to see pictures of the methods you have used to “sign” your work or any other stitching you have done with backstitch, satin stitch and Granitos.

In the next lesson, I will discuss various combinations of the six stitches we are using and how I decide which ones to use on a given project. There are sew many choices!

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This is the middle portion of the larger design from Lesson 2.
Lesson 4 – More Choices

The six stitches described in Lesson 2 and 3 can be combined in many different ways to make not only flowers in the pillow case design, but many other kinds of flowers. You may choose to make realistic looking flowers or invent your own. Here are some examples from various projects that I have stitched.

Lots French knots in the center with lots of lazy daisy petals
Flowers made completely from French knots

Granito petals with French knot centers

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Granito petals and centers, lazy daisy leaves, French knot “spots” all done in a single color.

Here is the beginning of the design from Lesson 2 stitched in one strand of Floche. Stitches used are backstitch, Granito flowers and lazy daisy leaves. A totally different look.

So how do you decide which stitches to choose? There are several factors to take into consideration.

**Your purpose**

Wee care gowns are the perfect place to experiment with some new stitches thus learning something new while embellishing the gown. Sometimes you just need a little embroidery to make something special – maybe a little embroidery between the buttons on a day gown. Here you might prefer the subtle look of lazy daisies. Christening gowns usually call for a more intricate and prominent design and are probably not the time to experiment with something new. Satin stitches and Granitos stand out more than lazy daisies.
Time frame
Do you have plenty of time to finish the embroidery or does it need to be finished quickly? If you are in a hurry, choose the stitches you know best and can stitch most quickly. These won’t necessarily be the same for everyone.

Favorite stitches
If you are lucky, the stitches that you prefer to stitch will be the ones that you think look the best. If not, you will have to decide whether it is worth spending time on something you don’t particularly enjoy doing for the sake of the finished project. In the end we usually finish the things we enjoy most. Compare your UFO pile to your finished projects. Do you see a trend?

If you want to take your embroidery skills to the next level, the SAGA convention in Hampton, VA, in September offers a variety of hand embroidery classes. If you are unable to take advantage of those classes, look for a SAGA chapter or shop near you and check out their classes.

The SAGA artisan program also offers an embroidery field of study. My lessons have covered 6 of the 12 stitches that you will need to stitch the level one sampler. This is a great way to push yourself to do your very best on a small sampler and then get honest (anonymous) feedback on your work.

Thank you so much for joining me in this embroidery stitch along. Please visit the facebook group SAGA Smock-Along and post pictures of your work.

I hope you will consider adding a touch of hand embroidery to a project in the near future – whether the pattern calls for it or not. And if the pattern calls for a stitch you don’t know, either look it up and learn it, or substitute a stitch you do know. There are sew many choices.