

## **REPOSITIONING TRADITIONAL HAND EMBROIDERY FOR CONTEMPORARY FASHION IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

Embroidery art is one of the significant attributes of Nigerian dress culture that has offered a means of livelihood to its practitioners. However, it has been observed that the current hand embroiders are mostly people from the older generation who learnt the skill through the apprenticeship system. Consequently, the loss of interest in this traditional art by contemporary textile artists in preference for machine embroidery might eventually lead to the extinction of this aspect of our cultural heritage. Therefore, there is a need to reinvent this Nigerian traditional textile art by employing hand embroidery beyond using it for apparel design. This study employs a qualitative research method. Data for the study were sourced from textbooks, journals and articles relevant to the topic. Observations from personal experiences were also used. The study highlighted embroidery stitches that are not commonly used by traditional embroiders which the contemporary embroiders could adopt to create works that will follow the current embroidery trend. The study also suggested areas where hand embroidery could be applied outside its traditional usage, to make it a viable venture for the contemporary textile artist. Therefore this study is advocating that hand embroidery should not be allowed to fade away because it enables the artist to implore creativity in producing unique pieces, unlike mass-produced machine embroidery.

**Keywords:** Hand embroidery, stitch, creative skill, contemporary, textile art

### **Introduction**

The majority of fabrics used in textile production are made in a plain state, and various types of ornamentation are utilized to improve their aesthetic appeal. One of the creative textile finishing methods is embroidery, which is used to add patterns or designs to cloth to improve its beauty and increase customer appeal. Fabric can also be decorated using a variety of methods, including dyeing, printing, tie-dying, batik and applique. Embroidery is simply the art of using a needle to apply motifs and patterns to fabric with colourful threads or yarns and this practice has been used as a textile finishing technique for decades. Pearls, beads, feathers, rhinestones, and other materials can also be integrated into embroidery. It is one of the oldest forms of fabric decoration. A variety of stitching techniques are used to replicate these motifs and patterns on fabric; the most common examples are chain, satin, buttonhole or blanket stitch and Coaching.

Embroidery patterns can be applied to fabric using manual or automated techniques. For the manual technique, the designs are created by hand but for the automated technique, the design is created with the aid of a machine. Morris (2009) observes that the invention of the

embroidery machine in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a decline in the number of hand embroiders. Despite not being indigenous to Nigeria, embroidery art has developed into a significant aspect of Nigerian dress culture. Indigenous textile makers in Nigeria were skilled in the techniques of appliqué, embroidery, and other artistic techniques. Although embroidered art is mostly practised in the north and west regions of Nigeria, secondary school students from other regions of the nation are introduced to the fundamentals of embroidery art through their needlework classes at manual art workshops. This allowed them to develop decorative patterns for items like aprons, tablecloths, headrests, and handkerchiefs, among others (Alaezi, 1988).

However, it seems that with the growing preference for embroidery machines by contemporary embroiders in Nigeria, interest in learning this skill has decreased. This shouldn't be the case since hand stitching is still performed and valued even more than machine embroidery in the Western world, where the embroidery machine was invented. Arasalem, referenced in Jimoh, Odejebi, Folaranmi & Aina (2020), claims that people favour hand embroidery patterns because they encourage creativity and make the wearer stand out. According to Sunbare (2022), the hand-embroidered, exquisite raw silk Indian George enjoys significant consumer acceptance. Hand embroidery art has received minimal consideration from researchers who support the revival of traditional crafts practices in Nigeria.

It has been observed that interest in hand embroidery stitches has grown around the world over the past ten years. The accessibility of information on visual media like Pinterest and Instagram made it possible for an artist with thread and needles to showcase their works to a wide range of viewers. And this has encouraged the younger generation to develop an interest in hand embroidery art (Charles and Elin, 2019). Nigerian contemporary textile artists must take advantage of this opportunity to resuscitate their ancient embroidery art which is being swiftly replaced by computerized and machine embroidery. The fact that not everyone would have access to an embroidery machine will help to stop the younger generation of Nigerian fibre artists from losing this creative ability.

The renewed interest in the use of hand embroidery in recent times is not restricted to its use as a textile finishing technique. But has extended to its use as a medium of artistic expression outside its conventional usage. For example, Stace (2022) mentioned contemporary hand embroiderers Meredith Woolnough, Cayce Zavaglia, George Bolster, and Kyugah Ham, among others, who employed the needlework method for artistic expression on canvas in place of brush strokes. This paper tried to look at the background of embroidery art in Nigeria, focusing on hand embroidery and the type of embroidery works produced by traditional hand embroiders

Hand embroiders in Nigeria make use of three stitches such as chain stitch, button-hole stitch and rosette button-hole stitch (Renne, 2002). The aim of the study is to revive interest in the use of hand embroidery by highlighting other decorative stitches that are not commonly used by the traditional hand embroidery artists in Nigeria such as herringbone, guilloche, stem, torocko, trellis-couching and satin stitch. Unlike machine embroidery which is based on restricted stitches, hand embroidery gives the artist freedom to combine various decorative stitches to express their creative ideas in a single work. Awuyah, cited in Jimoh et al. (2020) attested to this by stating that hand embroidery allows for a variety of stitches in varying thicknesses of thread in such a way as to make every work unique. Unlike machine

embroidery is regular and completely uniform; with every piece being virtually identical. The study concluded by suggesting ways contemporary embroidery artists can take advantage of the rising popularity of hand-woven embroidery and apply it as a medium of art expression outside its traditional use in Nigeria.

There are diverse opinions as to the exact origin of embroidery. In an earlier study, Morris (2009), suggested that the Middle East and Orient were the origins of hand embroidery. There is a Chinese chain stitch embroidery piece that has survived and is made of silk thread and dates to (5th-3rd century BC) was cited to support this assertion. (Charles and Elin 2019) claimed that it dates back to 30,000 B.C. when researchers discovered fossilized examples of intricately hand-stitched clothing and boots. But Adiji, et al. (2016) believe that the practice of embroidery dates back to about 200 and 500 AD and was first described as the decoratively sewn borders on medieval church vestments.

Needlework served as a vehicle for the early spread of Christianity in Europe. Because a sizable percentage of the church lacked literacy, the easiest way to explain biblical concepts was to use artwork like embroideries and other visual representations of certain events. In Europe in the 16th century, the ornamentation of the edges of church garments rose to prominence after first appearing in Egypt around 500 A.D. Early Egyptian garments were described as having exquisite embroidered borders adorning the plain sheaths (Rayan, 1979).

Nevertheless, archaeological evidence submits that between 618 and 906 AD, China had a boom in the decoration of textile materials because according to Wheeler cited in Adiji, et al. (2016), the needlework arts travelled from China through India and Egypt to Greece, Rome, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Later, the art extended to other regions of the globe. From ancient to contemporary history, needlework applications can be found everywhere. Embroidery art is now practised across cultures and social groups, either for ornamental or functional purposes.

The craft was introduced in Northern Nigeria through their earlier contacts with Arab traders. According to Negri, (1976), embroidery was already being practised in Hausa land by the 15<sup>th</sup> century in and around the city of Kano. The typical garments worn by the Emirs are richly adorned with brilliant embroideries. However, because the Fulani who merged with them within that period discouraged such ostentatious display, there was a decline in embroidery art by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But with the advent of modernization, embroidery made a progressive comeback as a decorative art in Northern Nigeria and has remained to this day. Currently embroidery patterns are used widely among the Hausa, apart from their dresses, their caps are also heavily embroidered and their designs are mostly linear and geometrical in form. Previously, the embroidery was done with cotton or natural silk thread that was either left in its original tone or dyed with indigo or vegetable dyes. The availability of artificial silk threads now makes the embroidery work more colourful.

Embroidery art in Western Nigeria must have been influenced by their contacts with the north on conversion to Islam. This is because according to Negri, (1976) during the years before the importation of fancy clothes from Europe, an Oba wore a wrapper or kilt-like garment falling from his waist. It was later changed to a large white cloth of fine quality which was draped over the shoulder with an undergarment of silk worn beneath the large white wrapper. However, by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Oba's costume changed to gbaryes (gowns) and trousers as a result of infiltrating influence from the North; especially by converts to Islam who made use of the large gowns worn in the Northern part. The spread

of Islam to Nupe and Yoruba land of western Nigeria popularized the use of embroidery garments in this region.

This notwithstanding, there is a difference between the embroidery designs used in southwestern Nigeria and the designs used in the northern part of Nigeria. Adiji, et al. (2016) affirmed this by stating that a peculiar hand-embroidered design may not be acceptable in South-Western Nigeria if it has some elements of Northern culture. A typical Yoruba man may not wear cloth embroidered with Hausa motifs because of social discrimination. It was further observed that previously hand embroidery among the Yoruba people was mostly carried out on male clothing, especially trousers known as (Sokoto) and blouse known as (buba) along with a big gown (agbada) and not on female clothing. Unlike their counterpart in Northern Nigeria where embroidery design is not restricted to male clothing alone.

However, this custom has evolved in recent years due to the appearance of embroidery designs on Yoruba women's headpieces, wrappers, and blouses (called iro and buba). Men used to perform hand needlework in the north, but Heathcote cited in Renne (2002) argues that women have since taken over the craft while the men switched to machine embroidery. Renne added that because it allows Muslim women who practice seclusion to work from home, this art is most suited for them. Hand embroidery is typically done on caps in addition to embellishing clothing.

Every embroidery pattern utilized in both the north and the west of Nigeria has a name. Negri (1976) noted that the type of design that would be embroidered on the robes depends on the wearer's rank and social status as well as the cost of the fabric and arabesque motifs served as the basis for the designs. Adiji, et al. (2016) stated that both Quranic motifs and folk designs served as inspiration for the designs. It was also suggested that motifs and patterns were formed as a result of interaction between Yoruba, Nupe, and Hausa embroiderers.

In research, Renne (2002) examined the effects of women's hand embroidery on financing from government initiatives such as the Federal Economic Advancement Program (FEAP), the Nigeria Agricultural and Co-operative and Rural Development Bank Limited (NACRDB), as well as various non-governmental initiatives. Although hand embroidery was mentioned as a possible source of income, Muslim women who observed seclusion were the main subject of attention. Anyone other than the women who practice seclusion might make money from hand embroidery. The result of the research conducted by Adiji, B. E., Ogunduyile, S. R. & Ojo, E.B. (2016) showed that 78.7% out of the sample embroiders used in their study are machine embroiders while only 21.3% are hand embroiders who are mostly not literate. This indicates that machine embroidery is gradually displacing hand embroidery and if nothing is done about it, at the demise of this older generation of hand embroiders there will not be others to take over from them. Which will likely lead to the extinction of this creative skill in Nigeria. Therefore there is a need to revive interest in hand embroidery by extending its use beyond the conventional. Researchers such as Jimoh et al. (2020) created a database of 315 different handmade embroidered patterns in recognition of the necessity to conserve traditional embroidery motifs. However, the focus was on offering a source of inspiration for machine applications that imitated hand-made designs. While this option is good, machine-mass-produced pieces can never share the uniqueness and personal creative touch of hand-embroidered work.

## **Hand Embroidery Tools and Materials**

### **Tools**

The primary embroidery devices are the needle and thimble. A needle is used to sew the patterns or designs into the fabric. To accommodate the passage of thicker threads, there are embroidery needles, which are available in several sizes and have wider eyes than regular sewing needles. It's crucial to use a tapestry blunt-edged needle and a sharp long-eyed needle for even weave textiles and canvas to prevent warping the fabric's surface (Callery, 1995). Thimbles are a kind of metal or plastic cover worn to protect the finger when sewing. A thimble protects the middle finger when pushing the needle through the fabric.

**Embroidery Hoops and Frames:** There are various shapes and sizes of embroidery hoops and frames. The hand-held and free-standing varieties are the two primary categories. Both are utilized to stretch the fabric being embroidered to generate consistent thread tension that prevents pattern or design distortion. The majority of canvas work is done on freestanding frames that are rectangular in shape and the canvas or fabric is typically sewn or laced tightly to the frame. To accomplish this using the hand-held hoop, the fabric is securely stretched between two rings that are stacked on top of one another and may be adjusted with a tension screw.

The use of an embroidery hoop or frame has the benefit of preserving the weave and structure of the embroidery fabric while also guaranteeing clean, precise stitching. Normally, strain causes the fabric to gather, but hoops help to maintain it tight so that the cloth doesn't crease and stays smooth after the work. Additionally, it makes it easier for the needle artist to focus on the stitching task rather than using one hand to stabilize the fabric while using the other to complete the task. Furthermore, the two hands can move around freely owing to freestanding frames or hoops. Locally manufactured, improvised embroidery hoops are used to create the embroidery caps of the north. Work done with an embroidered hoop produces precise designs and superior outcomes.

For cutting and trimming off threads, there is additional equipment like embroidery scissors. When preparing fabric for embroidery, two sets of scissors are required. A small pair is used for snipping fine thread; typically smaller than a conventional pair of sewing scissors to prevent cutting into unintended regions; and a larger pair is used for cutting cloth and coarse threads. Dressmaker's carbon paper is used for tracing designs onto fabric, and a pencil is used to transfer designs to the cloth.

### **Materials**

Fabric with a regular, tightly woven structure, such as canvas and plain weave, are examples of materials that can be used for embroidery. The traditional material for stitching was linen, but at the beginning of the 19th century, linen and cotton canvas were introduced. Wool and other alternative fabrics, such as cotton Aida clothing, are also acceptable nowadays. Another significant material utilized in needlework art is yarn or thread (Callery, 1995). In the past, cotton and naturally dyed or uncoloured silk were used to make embroidery thread in Nigeria (Negri, 1976). Fortunately, there are now a variety of imported artificial silk embroidery threads available, like the Kreinik brand, which comes in a variety of vibrant colours. There are also various embroidery threads made of cotton, linen, or rayon, the selection of thread depends on the type of embroidery and where it is to be placed.

Additionally, because of modern technology, floral motifs can be embroidered using narrow silk ribbons or ribbons made of organza and silk.

### Common Embroidery stitches and techniques

Chain stitch, satin stitch, buttonhole or blanket stitch, and couching are some of the typical embroidery stitches used by Nigeria's traditional hand embroiderers. However, many embroidery stitches can still be used as decorative stitches to enhance the appearance of fabric. Several stitches appear to perceive some design components in a more powerful way than others. Contemporary hand embroidery stands out due to its more "liberal" method, in which threads are linked more haphazardly and freely to create a range of textures and designs. Therefore, Contemporary Nigerian hand embroiderers must consider using decorative stitches other than the well-known ones that are historically utilized so that they can design beautiful pieces that follow the current embroidery trend.

### Production Processes: Illustrations of basic embroidery stitches with name

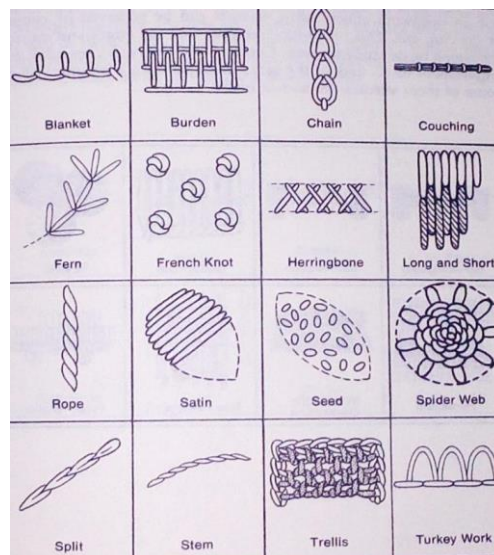


Fig. 1: Different Embroidery stitches source: Rayan, (1979)

### Illustrations of Common Decorative Stitches with Embroidery Thread on Fabric

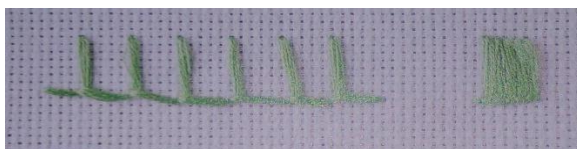


Plate: 1 Blanket or buttonhole Stitch

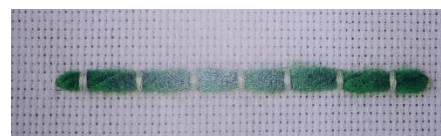


Plate: 2 Couching Stitch



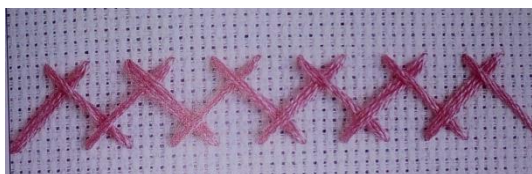


Plate: 3 Herringbone stitch

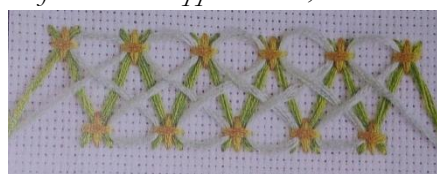


Plate: 4 Fancy Herringbone stitch

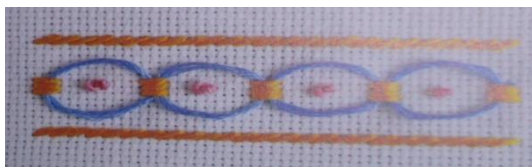


Plate: 5 Guilloche Stitch



Plate: 6 Stem Stitch



Plate: 7 Torocko Stitch

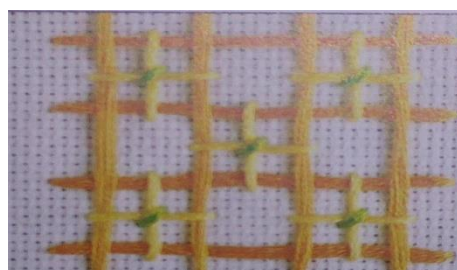


Plate: 8 Trellis Couching Stitch

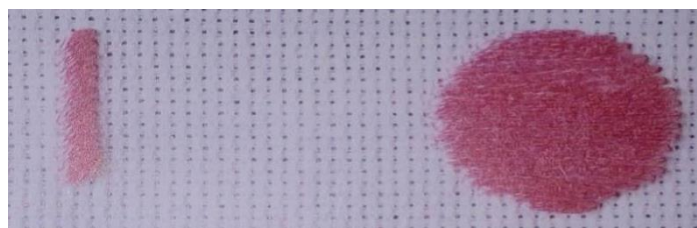


Plate: 9 Satin Stitch, source: Gallery, (1995)

### **Techniques for creating embroidery design**

After sketching out the outlines with a pencil, embroidery designs can either be sewn directly on the fabric surface or be created using cutwork. To create patterns with elevated effects in cutwork embroidery, designs are imaginatively cut away before or after the motif has been stitched. On fabrics that wear down easily, the outlines are worked with a buttonhole stitch before cutting. Some consumers continue to maintain that hand embroidery's beauty cannot be matched by embroidery machines, even though embroidery designs may be produced in bulk using embroidery machines and, more recently, computerized embroidery machines. This is due to the freedom it affords the artists to employ

their creativity and technical prowess to create more gratifying original work. (Rayan, 1979) There are instances when handcrafted needlework seems more appropriate, such as when adding a decorative finish to a pair of trousers. It can also be used to conceal torn clothes.

**Some Nigerian Traditional (Hand Embroidered Garments and Caps)**



Plate: 2 (a)



Plate: 2 (b)

Hand-embroidered necklines for men's Kaftans made by Idi Adamawa 2006

Source: (NCAC, 2009)



Plate: 3(a)



Plate: 3 (b)



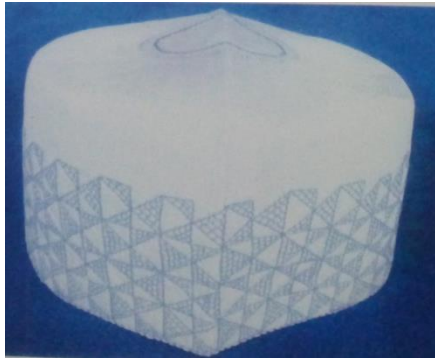


Plate: 3(c)



Plate: 3 (d)



Plate: 3(e)

Hand-embroidered caps in various geometric and linear designs from Abuja Crafts, Village, 2008 Source: (NCAC, 2009)

### **Other Applications of Embroidery Art**

The application of embroidery patterns is seen mostly on fabrics; however, it can also be applied as an embellishment on leather or canvas. Embroidery patterns could be applied to decorative pieces as well as functional pieces. For instance on wearable apparel, leather shoes or bags. It could also be applied as a decorative band or design on bed linens, pillowcases, table cloths, headrests, and to applique designs on throw pillowcases see Plate 5(b). Hand embroidery can elevate a simple cloth repair and add intricacies to appliques see Plate 4 and Plate 5 (a). Additionally, a bath towel or T-shirt monogram can be made with it, and could also be used to create pictorial decorative wall hangings, among others. Southeastern women in Nigeria are among the biggest buyers of the hand-embroidered Indian George, even though embroidery art is not well known there. Therefore, using hand embroidery, Nigerian versions of similar garments might be made with local themes that would showcase her cultural history to the rest of the world.

In recent times, some contemporary hand embroiderers have resorted to using embroidery stitches to replace brush strokes in painting (Stace, 2022). This has demonstrated

that textiles, which are traditionally only considered to be a women's craft or a straightforward seasonal hobby, can no longer be classified as such in the field of visual expression. The realm of visual expression is typically dominated by works of fine art like sculptures and paintings. This is untrue, though, as embroidery may be used just as successfully as paintings and sculptures to capture the history, culture, interests, and personalities of a community see Plate 6.

If contemporary textile artists from Nigeria decide to experiment with embroidery outside of the realm of clothing employing traditional themes, it will be another means of introducing the rest of the world to Nigerian cultural heritage. This will also assist in bringing textile art to its proper position within the realm of visual expression.



Plate: 4 Applique designs on throw pillowcase using hand embroidery  
Source: (N.K.Okeke, 2022)



Plate: 5 (a) Applique designs on throw pillowcase using hand embroidery  
Source: (N.K.Okeke, 2022)



Plate:5 (b) Hand embroidery designs on throw pillowcase  
Source: (N.K.Okeke, 2022)



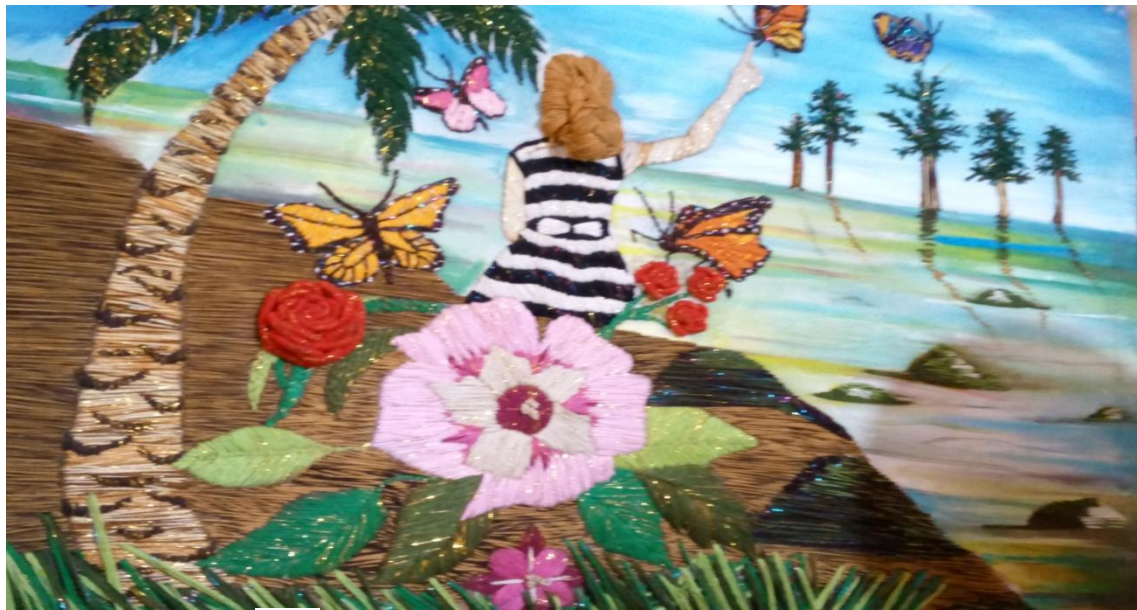


Plate: 6 Seascape painting using hand embroidery  
Source: (N.K.Okeke, 2022)

### **Conclusion**

Hand embroidery is an important aspect of Nigerian art and culture that should not be allowed to fade away. This is because, for needle and thread artists in Northern and South Western Nigeria, particularly women, hand embroidery is a significant source of revenue. In contrast to other enterprises, it requires little cash. Hand embroidery gives contemporary textile artists who are skilled in this art, the opportunity to use their creative talents in an income-generating enterprise, even while working from home. Unlike machine embroidery, which is more of a copy process with little creative input, hand stitching allows the artist the greatest freedom for creative expression. It is a crucial aspect of our dress culture that must be preserved. Even while machine embroidery is an option, not everyone can afford it. Hand embroidery should not be replaced by machine embroidery to prevent the loss of this component of our culture. Some individuals still favour original works above those that are created in bulk for commercial purposes. By utilizing hand embroidery for more than only clothing designs, hand embroiderers can expand the range of their business. It could be used as a decorative wall hanging or as soft furnishings such as tablecloths, bed sheets, pillowcases, headrests, armrests, and towels. Additionally, it could be used to create headgear and other fashion accessories like bags, purses, and wallets. Embroidery can be seen on a variety of items in the modern world, including handkerchiefs, caps, hats, leather belts, coats, overlays, blankets, dress shirts, denim, dresses, stockings, costumes, flags, shoes, tunics, and slippers. A wide range of products can use embroidery designs. Due to the current rebirth of interest in hand embroidery, customers who value originality and creativity may purchase items made by hand.

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