

Embroidery Plaster Print

Preserve and memorialize a piece of hand-stitched history.

art + creative writing

Historically, the embroidered or cross-stitched sampler was a way for women to show off their skills in needle work. Samplers were often dated, along with the artist's name, age, and family history. Looking back at these works, we are given a glimpse into everyday life, and they serve as a form of biography at a time when opportunities for formal education, reading, and writing were less available to women.

Over the ages there have been various revivals of embroidery and cross stitch. More contemporary needlework does not always tell us much about the maker or their intent.

As modern pieces are beginning to appear again, it is important not to forget the past. Embroidered pieces made by a great-grandmother or grandmother, can so often be discovered tucked away in a linen closet. It's time to take these pieces out of the closet, or rescue them from dry rot in a second-hand store, and document their individual beauty!

In this lesson, students will choose a hand-embroidered piece to document in plaster. Wet plaster is poured onto the fabric and, when dry, the fabric can be peeled off, leaving the original piece undamaged. Intricate stitch work is crisply transferred, in reverse and relief, to the plaster. The plaster can then be colored with watercolor, or left as a whitework (a specific type of embroidery, using white thread on white fabric).

Students can explore the history of their piece by conducting an interview with the maker, if possible, to document the origin of the piece. Why was it created?

Why was this motif or image chosen? Is it simply decorative, or did it serve a greater purpose? Was it specifically made for someone as a gift? If the maker is unknown (as would be the case if the piece were purchased from a second-hand store), then students may imagine its history and maker in a creative writing piece. All three pieces — the original needlework, the plaster print, and the essay — can be displayed together.

GRADES 3-12

Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.



Materials

Embroidered or cross-stitched pieces, one per student

Blick Pottery Plaster No. 1, 8 lb (33536-1008); share one bag across class

Creativity Street Craft Sticks, natural, bag of 150 (60401-1500); one per student

Richeson Plastic Painting Knives, trowel offset, 2-3/8" (03105-0000); one per student

Disposable plastic cups, one per student

Meat tray, one per student

Optional Materials

Blick Liquid Watercolors, assorted colors, 118 ml (00369-)

Jacquard Pearl-Ex Pigments, assorted colors, 0.75 oz (27103-)



Preparation

1. Gather embroidered or cross-stitched pieces. They may be donated or purchased at second-hand stores. Original embroidered pieces can be removed at the end of the process and should retain their original condition. Some dye may transfer from the embroidery thread to the plaster in the process.

Process

1. Select a piece of embroidered or cross-stitched fabric to use. If the embroidered area is large, define where the composition should be. Lay the fabric flat, embroidery side up, in a shallow disposable container, such as a meat tray.
2. Individual batches of plaster should be mixed by each student, as the plaster will be used at once and set quickly. Scoop about one cup of plaster into a plastic cup. The amount of plaster needed will vary depending on the size of the embroidery piece being used. For a piece approximately 4" x 6", use about one cup of plaster. Adjust as needed. Slowly add water to the plaster, stirring slowly at first, until it is the thickness of heavy cream. Plastic cups work well to mix the plaster in because they are flexible and can be reused many times. NOTE: Once the plaster has dried in the cup, simply crack it out and throw it away — never put plaster down the sink! The speed at which the plaster will set is affected by the temperature of the water. For a faster-setting plaster, use warm water.
3. Pour plaster over the desired embroidered composition. Use a plastic palette knife to gently smooth over the top, and guide the plaster over the area to be imprinted. Plaster should be at least half an inch thick, for stability and durability. If more plaster is needed to achieve this, simply mix another small batch of plaster and pour it over the area, smoothing over the top again.
4. Allow the plaster to dry completely. Drying times will vary depending on humidity levels and temperature. Under normal conditions, the plaster should set in approximately half an hour.
5. Gently lift the plaster and attached fabric from the tray. Holding the plaster block in one hand, slowly peel the fabric up and away from the plaster in one smooth motion. Some embroidery thread dyes will leave traces of color on the plaster; however, the embroidered piece will remain largely unaffected and can be washed by hand or machine-washed to return it to its original condition.
6. The piece may be left white to accentuate the impression of the embroidery and texture of the fabric, or it may be colored with watercolors or sealed with a gloss finish.
7. As an optional creative writing or research project, students can write a short essay about the history of the original embroidered piece. If the piece was brought from home and handmade by someone in the family, students should interview the maker. If the piece was purchased and its history, use, and maker are unknown, students can create their own story! The original piece, print, and essay can be displayed together in a classroom art show.

Options

- Try transferring other textiles such as lace, macramé, and crochet pieces to plaster.
- Use watercolor to add elements of color to accentuate the detail of the plaster print.



Step 1: Place a section of the embroidered cloth in a shallow container, such as a styrofoam meat tray.



Step 2: Mix the plaster and pour it over the desired area.



Step 3: When dry, slowly peel back the embroidery piece from the plaster.

National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Responding

Anchor Standard 8: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.