

► Silk and velvet pouffe, sold for £1,200, lougardiner.co.uk



Sewn into the fabric of time

Interiors | English embroidery is a centuries-old art. By *Harriet Baker*

English embroidery has a long history as a storytelling medium. During the medieval period, needlework was used to create highly prized personal documents, with heraldic imagery declaring pedigree through ancestry and marriage. Bed hangings and upholstery enlivened courtly interiors, expressing wealth and taste with exquisite craftsmanship.

A term was coined in the 13th century to describe this lavish tradition: *Opus Anglicanum*, now the title of a major exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Subtitled *Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery*, the show features more than 100 examples, both ecclesiastical and secular, from this celebrated period in England's textile history.

"Embroidery is special because it's freehand, almost like painting with a needle," says Clare Browne, co-curator of the V&A exhibition. "Patrons were able to commission very personal elements, their own coats of arms within vivid colours and imagery. Embroidery

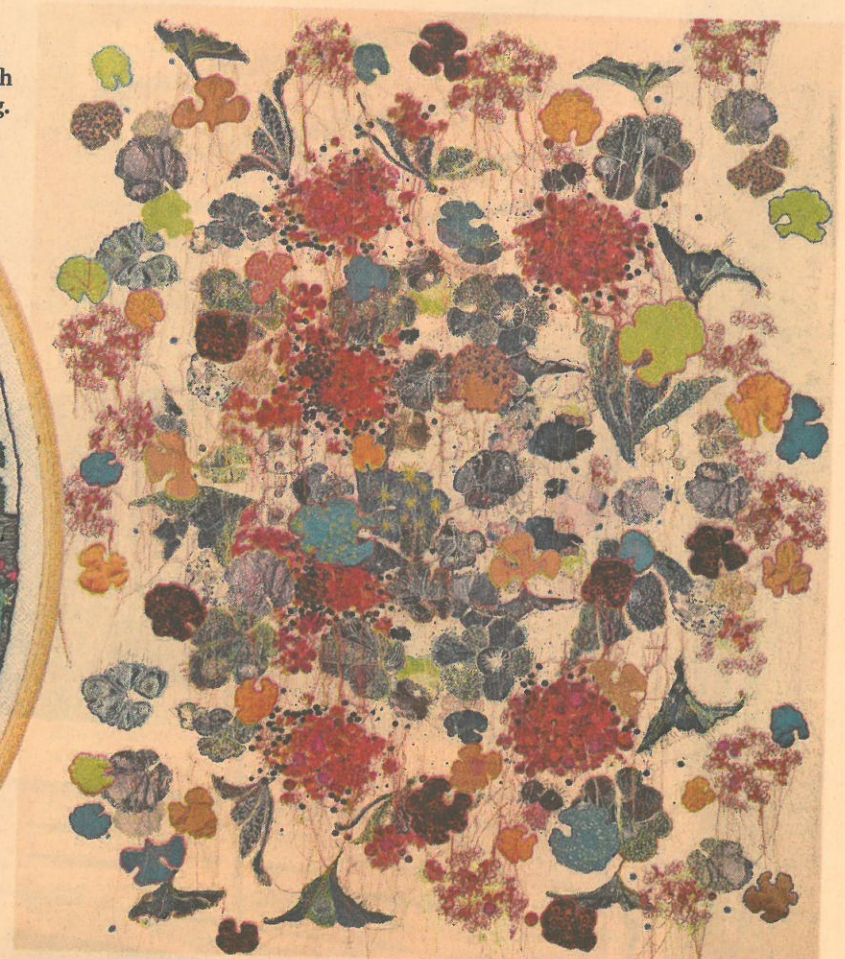
had a great capacity to be customised."

The tradition of fine English needlework persisted, and peaked again in the 17th century. Also in the V&A collection (though not the exhibition) is work by Abigail Pett, a middle-class woman who embellished bed hangings for her marital home using an English wool called crewel. Against a background of motifs, such as dragons and deer prancing among foliage (a remnant of the medieval tradition), Pett sewed her name into her design. "English embroidery has always been singled out for its high quality and sophistication," Browne says. The craftsmanship of Pett's hangings attests to this.

Embroidery is still used to tell stories, with contemporary designers exploiting its potential for customisation. Zara Day, who works from her studio, Rosemaryrose, in Leamington Spa in the Midlands, offers clients a personal service. She was inspired by a chance encounter at a craft fair, when she met a



▼ 'Girl and Potted Jungle' artwork, \$1,200, sarahkbenning.com



▲ 'Spontaneous Geraniums' bespoke quilt or wall hanging, lougardiner.co.uk



▲ Chair from Zara Day's Memories collection, rosemary-rose.co.uk
Fiona Murray



▲ Fragment depicting a knight, c1320-40
Stonyhurst College, Lancs

customer looking for fabric to cover a chair that had been passed through the generations of her family. Day restores heirloom furniture by making bespoke designs exclusive to individual clients.

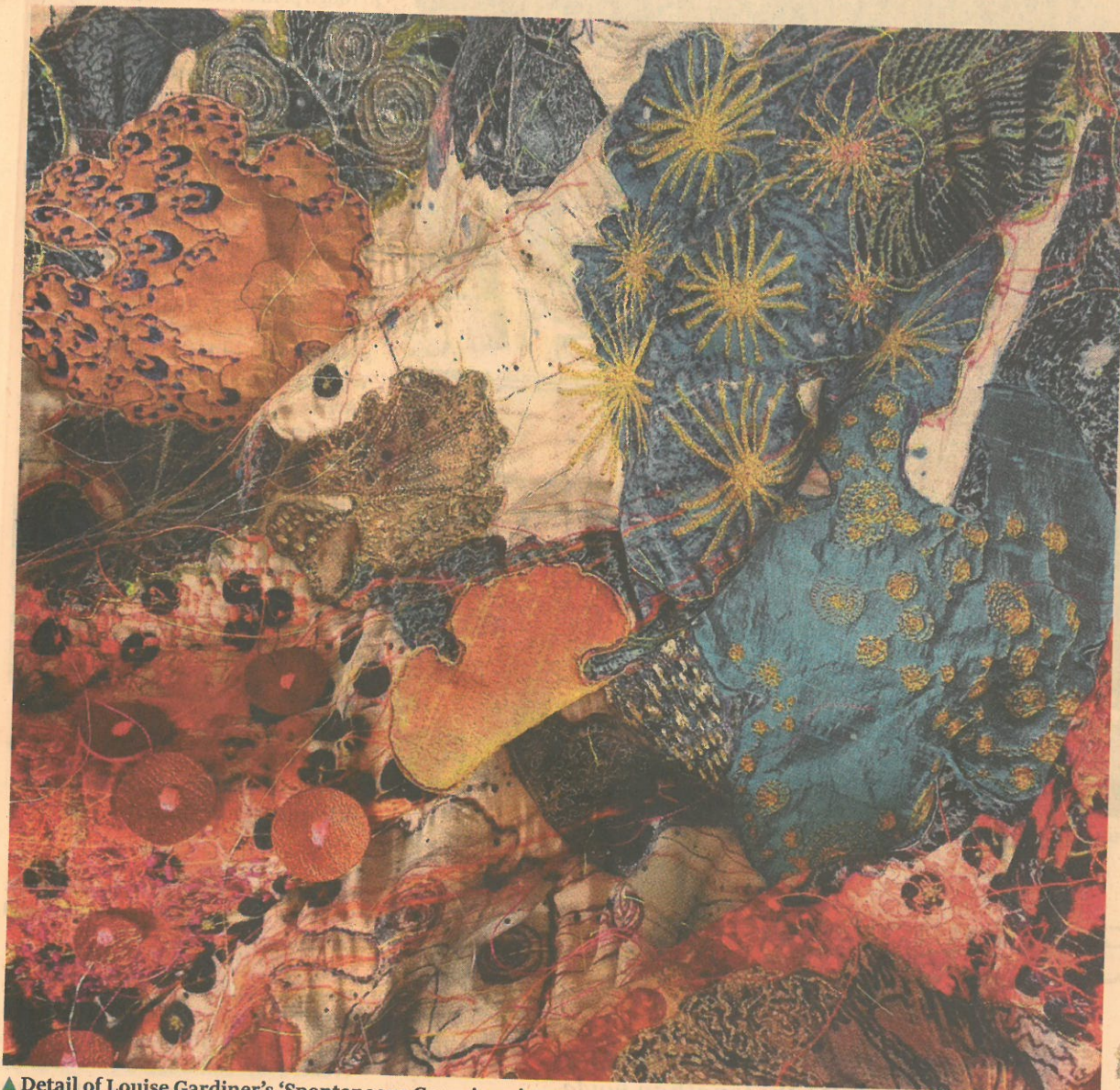
"Older pieces of furniture are well made but often get thrown away," she

'I'm not sitting around with a needle, listening to classical music and drinking sherry. It's hardcore'

says. "The project is about bringing to life old furniture and family stories." Each chair covering is personalised with memories, photographs and even fragments of handwriting.

Her method of working lends itself to this confluence of past and present, as she uses both a traditional sewing machine for free embroidery and a Brother digitally controlled multi-head. With 11 needles, the digital machine allows her to build different techniques and layers, while retaining the hand-drawn quality of her work. Each commission incorporates a multitude of embroidery skills, including appliqué, felting and cutwork.

"I don't want the final result to look manufactured," Day says. "This way, I



▲ Detail of Louise Gardiner's 'Spontaneous Geraniums'

can combine all three processes — hand embroidery, free-machine embroidery and digital-machine embroidery — into one piece. I like the fusion of the different qualities."

For Louise Gardiner, embroidery is about pushing boundaries and defying preconceptions. "It's impossible to communicate to people how intense embroidery is," she says. "It's incredibly labour intensive. I'm not sitting around with a needle, listening to classical music and drinking sherry. It's hardcore."

The textile artist, whose studio is in Cheshire, often comes to London to explore the fabric shops of Soho. There, she might light on, for example, high-visibility fabric and black PVC, which is "lovely because it looks like oil".

Her designs are rambunctious and iridescent, revealing exceptional craftsmanship and a complex process of layering techniques, fabrics and colours.

Gardiner is alert to the creative possibilities of embroidery, intent on "displaying it as an exciting medium, showing that it can be spontaneous and intuitive". In 2015, she was commissioned by Liberty to create quilts commemorating the store's birthday, and she has exhibited at Anthropologie's King's Road gallery and the Saatchi Gallery in London. She also creates bespoke pieces for private clients, such as velvet floor cushions with silk piping, quilts and embellished pouffes.

"People commission embroidery because they want something unusual



▲ Detail of the Butler-Bowdon cope, 1335-45 — Victoria and Albert Museum



▲ Detail of the Tree of Jesse cope, 1310-25 — Victoria and Albert Museum



▲ Coral treasure chest, price on application, lougardiner.co.uk



▲ Seal bag with royal arms of Edward I, 1280
Westminster Abbey



▲ Chair with embroidery by Zara Day, rosemary-rose.co.uk
Fiona Murray

and precious," Gardiner says. "Thread and fabric respond to the changing light of the day, to the mood of a room. There's always something new for the eye to find."

Embroidery is loaded with misconceptions. Despite its upmarket status, it is versatile and comfortable. "There's a fear that if a piece of fabric is beaded, you can't touch it," says Geraldine Larkin, an embroiderer whose work spans fashion and interiors. "But the beautiful thing about embroidery is that it's tactile. If it's an embellished sofa cushion or bedspread, you can really snuggle into it, which may come as a surprise."

Larkin's initial training as an architect

and her years in fashion textiles have helped her to think about surface decoration in relation to space. She works closely with architects, "gaining an understanding of the space, because knowing its functionality and how it will be lit is instrumental to the final design", to produce embroidered curtains, wardrobe doors and bedheads for clients.

Like other embroiderers, Larkin feeds off the form's history. "I like looking at ancient and traditional techniques with a contemporary eye," she says. "Using historical elements in contemporary designs can be stimulating. It could be a stitch — like the English medieval split stitch — which I might sew using metallic thread to highlight an aspect of the design. By playing with colour, you can change an interior."

Though embroidery can offer a room an unusual, handcrafted point of focus, approaching the medium can be intimidating. Soho-based atelier Hand & Lock offers a bespoke service for anyone with a commission in mind. "Embroidery is a very personal thing," says Scott Heron, head of design.

As well as the personal, there is the practical to think about. "We have to work out what type of embroidery is appropriate for the project,"

he adds. "If we're designing cushion covers, there are things to consider. Are they ornamental or will they be sat on? Will they need to be cleaned? As a designer you need to understand the after-life of a project."

Down the road in Soho is Claire Barrett, co-founder of atelier Hawthorne & Heaney, who

is keen for a wider audience to appreciate the craft, but also the subtlety, of embroidery. "Embroidery isn't to everyone's taste," she says, "but it doesn't have to be as outlandish as people might assume. It's a misconception that it has to be flashy." Hawthorne & Heaney has worked on interiors for restaurants and yachts, as well as smaller commissions for private interiors. "With embroidery," says Barrett, "it's all about the finest detail."

'Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery' will be at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, until February 5 2017