

The Embroiderers' Guild of America

# NEEDLE ARTS

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# Embroidery

by Cheryl Christian



*Kashmir. A large shawl, the popular accessory of the Western mid-Victorian period. The shawls from Kashmir represented the finest in terms of design and workmanship and were highly sought after. Typically woven in sections and later joined, this rare shawl is entirely embroidered in a single piece. Mid 19th century.*

Images in this article courtesy of the Lacy Museum of Lace and Textiles

You would not normally see Chinese silks in the same space as schoolgirl samplers, but in the exhibition *Embroidery: The Extraordinary of Needle and Spirit* at the Lacy Museum of Lace and Textiles, Berkeley, California, such pieces are in close proximity to one another and participate in a dialogue. Every piece of embroidery has a story to tell, and the works exhibited by Lacy have many to relate. They communicate the very essence of what it means to be human and to create. The exhibition includes textiles spanning twenty centuries, representing many world cultures, and ranging from the familiar to the extraordinary.

The introduction to the exhibition asserts that the needle garners “an emotional appeal unique to embroidery.” Lacy itself has a unique appeal; it proves to be an unusual museum, allowing the viewer to get close to the textiles displayed throughout the space, making personal connections with them in an intimate setting. Lacy began as a retail store in 1965. To be sure, the museum still maintains a retail store, but Lacy is so much more.

Lacy was founded by Kaethe and Jules Kliot who were interested in learning how to make lace. They began collecting textiles in the 1970s. The first piece they purchased was Duchesse, a noncontinuous bobbin lace. “It was the first time I really looked at a piece of lace,” commented Jules Kliot. “I looked at it not as a fabric, but rather as a part of the human spirit. Someone had worked that piece by hand.” That theme is reflected in the collection. “The whole emphasis of the collection revolves around the human mind, hand, and spirit,” Kliot said. “We have one piece of lace that took forty years of work to create. It takes dedication to spend time to do that.” Kliot observed that many people and businesses, such as the purveyors of lace undergarments, look at lace as an object, not as the work of human endeavor. “Today, everything is just so quick.”

After his wife died in 2002, Kliot felt an urgency to attend to the collection and assure its rightful place. In 2004, Lacy became a nonprofit organization, and Kliot began fashioning a new concept in museums. “You don’t have sales in one corner and something else in another. It’s all integrated,” asserted Kliot.



*Peru. Pre-Columbian embroidered fragment, c. 600–800*

And indeed it is. Lacin is a wonderland. Once you pass through the front doors, you enter into a world full of surprises at every twist and turn. Past and present intermingle. A cozy corner with hundreds of books is off to the back. Another section features antique clothing for sale. Turn around, and you'll discover supplies for ribbon work. Look up, and you'll find undergarments hanging from the ceiling—hoops for skirts, looking like bells in a carillon. Indeed, the entire building is exhibit space. Textiles are mounted on the walls; antique needlework tools share display cases with modern tools.

*Embroidery* is an overview of Lacin's collection. "I keep thinking that we could do an exhibition on just Chinese embroidery," Kliot stated, "but we've got this mix. All cultures are involved." The exhibition reflects the Kliots' eclectic and wide-ranging collection. "There are no parameters with embroidery. It just goes anywhere." For Kliot, it has been this way since humans first figured out how to embroider. "Man was made not to be naked, but to be decorated. He started with tattoos. And a lot of these tattoos evolved into embroidery. Once he found needle and thread, he could create, and he just went crazy."

Leading into the exhibition is a large, but delicate, Chinese embroidery filled with hundreds of tiny Chinese birds, each one different. The birds in an ancient Peruvian work bear resemblance to the Chinese birds, inviting speculation about their relationship. Many embroideries feature birds and flowers, and are subjects for comparison. Ottoman towels connect with crewelwork. A rare, brilliant red Kashmir shawl, covered in tiny red chain stitches, shares the room with exquisite and delicate Asian embroideries, including sleeve bands, a sampler, and robes. Nearby hangs an unusual Mexican sampler. Close to it is the oldest piece in the collection, a pre-Columbian Peruvian fragment.

For Kliot, the highlight of the exhibition is the nineteenth-century Japanese export piece, *Fighting Birds*. "There is so much passion in this piece," Kliot observed. Brocades had spiritual significance to the Buddhists. To prevent these textiles from falling into the wrong hands during the forced separation from the Shinto State religion and resulting persecution, the Buddhists sold them in haste. Eventually, the cloth was used by others as background for embroidery.



*Fighting Birds. Japanese embroidery from the Meiji Period (1868–1912) when Japan opened itself to Western cultures, developing a unique style specifically for export. Emphasizing the emotional spirit of the embroiderer, this work represents a merging of the finest in technical skill with the passion of the embroiderer, threads conveying the textures of nature, while conveying the spirit of life itself.*

Lacin has begun to systematically catalogue the works. The museum welcomes anyone who can add information about the pieces. The exhibition will remain on view until February 1, 2011. An image gallery of the exhibition is posted on [lacismuseum.org](http://lacismuseum.org). ■



*China. A richly embroidered skirt panel incorporating the popular symbols of peonies and butterflies in a lush garden. Mid 19th century.*



*Turkey. A decorative band of stylized flowers in silk and gold plate embroidery. Mid 19th century.*