

# TIMELESS TALES

## *Folk art embroideries from the south of Sweden*

**In the south of Sweden** there is a rare richness in the textile folk art. One particularly eye catching technique is wool embroidery. Pick an example at random and see what you can spot. It might be a small friendly bird, or one that fixes you with a glare. It could be roses, tulips and peonies that thrive and spill forth from tiny pots or urns. Angels that smile and flap their chequered wings, or Adam and Eve fighting their eternal battle with the serpent. Vibrant in both colour and design, this is folk art painting in wool.

From 1750 until the early 20th century a great number of embroidered cushions and bedcovers were produced. Many of them remain in museums or private collections. These free embroideries often incorporate a storytelling element that is amusing or surprising, and enabled makers to express themselves with needle and thread. The vast majority of cushions were embroidered by young women for their dowry. But women without property, who were particularly skilled with needle and thread, could make a living stitching in exchange for food and shelter.

These small cushions offered some comfort on social occasions – Swedish parties could last days! Longer cushions could be found on carriage seats on the way to church. Outings by horse and carriage were great opportunities to flaunt and display beautiful textiles before a crowd. A soft stack of eight or ten cushions was not unusual.

The cushions and the covers were highly valued by both men and women. Everyone understood the

investment in material and time they represented. They were also a clear sign of the skill of the woman which increased the status of the whole family. When not in use, textiles were kept in chests where they stayed until the next party or feast. This care is the reason so many are well preserved, with vibrant colours that look almost new.

Wool embroideries on cushions and covers can be found in those regions that once belonged to Denmark – the south of Sweden, the regions of Jämtland and Härjedalen in the middle of Sweden and in Norway. In Sweden, Denmark and Norway textiles have always been important markers for the class of rich farmers who wanted to decorate their homes. You will also find weavings and other types of embroidery, but it's on wool cushions and covers that you see distinctive narrative designs – it's here that the embroideries blossom.

If you look closely at the cushions you'll discover a thrifty approach – materials are often recycled making them even more interesting today. The fabric could have come from a worn-out skirt, and quite often a cushion was made of small pieces of fabric stitched and patched together. The seams were then hidden under embroidered flowers and leaves. The backs are made of even older textiles, leather or rough homespun.

The cushions were filled with appropriate local material. If chickens, ducks or geese were kept on the farm, feathers and down were the best to ensure cushions were soft and comfortable to ▶



















page 47: Detail, embroidered cushion for a carriage seat,1792, 100 x 50 cm.

page 48: Detail, long cushion, with "Madonna and child",1787, 100 x 50 cm.

page 49: Detail, cushion, with a horseman playing a fiddle,1796, 50 x 50 cm

page 50: Detail, wedding bedcover, the groom is wedged between the horses and the bride symbolized by a deer with the golden hart around the neck,1820, 130 x 170 cm

sit on. But in extremis grass seeds, straw, seeds from bulrush and cotton-grass, or strips of fabric were all used.

Each corner of the cushion would have a small tassel made of strips of fabric. They could be cotton prints, coloured woollen cloth, leather strips, a scrap of lace, silk ribbon, bobbinet or flax bobbin-laces. These tassels were decorative and reinforced the corners, offering added protection from wear and tear.

The yarns used in the embroideries were hand-spun and often naturally dyed at home. Strong red colours and indigo blue were especially popular, and these dyes were either bought or yarn was given to specialist dyers.

The country people of Skåne started to make wool embroideries in the mid 1700s and many were inspired by silk embroideries owned by the nobility. Covers, cushions, firescreens, covered furniture and samplers were all found in grand houses. While working in kitchens or as maids in manor houses, young girls were influenced by the textiles they glimpsed. A desire to own something similar prompted the production of replicas in wool.

The church was another source of inspiration – akin to a local art gallery – where the village congregation would be exposed to biblical frescos on walls and ceilings and colourful altar-screens with powerful carvings. After long hours spent at high mass, worshippers probably went home with their head full of cherubim, acanthus leaves and roses.

The so called "chest-letters" were a final source of inspiration. From mid the 1700s they could be found in almost every home. Framed and hung on a wall, or glued inside the lid of the chest, they were influential printed pictures with biblical, royal or everyday scenes. Their messages were clear and emphasized respect for authority and a moral code of conduct.

When we consider the workload of the farming community, the detail and fine execution found in these embroideries, which have survived in significant numbers, is surprising. Yet perhaps making these embroideries was a welcome, creative change from monotonous daily toil.

Maybe they offered embroiderers the chance to withdraw into the privacy of their thoughts while still doing something useful in the eyes of others. Maybe it is this moment of peace combined with the freedom of the embroidery that continues to attract people. For the last twenty years Hemslöjden in Skåne have arranged classes in wool embroidery, and today interest is greater than ever. Groups meet every month making their own embroideries and it has become a popular movement of hundreds of women and even some men. ●●● **Annelén Olsson**

**Yllebroderier. Berättande folkkonst från Norden (free wool embroidery), Annelén Olsson, Barbro Nyberg, Håkan Nilsson and Eva Berg, Hemslöjdens förlag, ISBN-10: 9197753939, [www.hemslojdenskane.se](http://www.hemslojdenskane.se)**