Stalking the Wild Assisi

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This article was originally written in 1995, and submitted to Tournaments Illuminated, the journal of the Society for Creative Anachronism. It was eventually rejected. The West Kingdom Needleworker’s Guild kindly printed it in their newsletter in 1998, for which I am grateful.

I fell in love with Assisi work many years ago but researching and collecting patterns of it has proved an elusive task. At times I have felt like a detective, and so I decided to share some of my frustrations and experiences with you. My interest in the subject started when I was researching SCA period needlework, just over 20 years ago. I would occasionally see some fascinating designs pushed to the back or side of a page or an article. The technique was the opposite of regular counted cross-stitch, as the design was outlined, then the background filled in densely with cross stitch. The actual pattern was made by the unworked ground fabric. This "negative" effect gave the Assisi work a woodcut quality that I found very rich and unique (Figure 1.)

![Figure 1. In the style of 16th-17th century Italian work. Chart © 2001, C.K. Newell](image_url)

The zoomorphic chart of beasties is one I found in a Dover book (no longer in my possession) on the subject of historic Italian lace. To my informed eye the style resembled Italian designs of the 16th or 17th centuries. I have subsequently seen a runner embroidered with this exact pattern, appearing as a photo in the book Old Italian Lace by Elisa Ricci. This object was part of the Chieti Exhibition of 1905 - an exhibition composed of artifacts from the past. No official attribution of date has been given for this particular object.

Full size chart appears at the end of this article.


http://www.flowersoftheneedle.com
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In 1977 I started doing counted cross stitch. I remembered those wonderful designs and decided I would just find a few and at some point try my hand at this interesting way of doing cross stitch. I have a Fear of Double Running. The patterns I found seemed to rely heavily on double running not only for outlining patterns, but for some lacy edging on top and bottom. Despite this fear I did what I could do, in my small way, to collect booklets or patterns.

I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts and had the advantage of using their wonderful libraries, including Harvard’s. Digging and burrowing during my lunch hours at the Fine Arts Library turned up one (count it, one!) book on Assisi book. It was called Punto D’Assisi, Insegnamento Pratico Illustrato, by Adele Della Porta (Milan, Italy, 1919 -- Fogg Library call Number 1098.P84). Mrs. Della Porta’s patterns and photos show all sorts of basic household uses for Assisi work.

Ten years later an Italian acquaintance skimmed the text for me and gave me a rough translation. Her text extols the virtues of using the patterns to beautify your home, but there was no historical information.

The patterns in Della Porta show an interesting variant on what I had come to regard as Assisi work -- the figures are drawn freehand (not counted), outlined in stem or outline stitch. The background in most of the photos appears to be regular cross stitch done on a design which is stamped on the fabric - no countwork. I have never seen Assisi work done this way other than in Mrs. Della Porte's book, and cannot judge how wide-spread it was.

In 1978 I added to my resources a private press volume by Jane Zimmerman, titled Assisi Embroidery. Ms. Zimmerman’s book unfortunately has mostly modern patterns but gives good working directions. I made several attempts to contact her, especially since her bibliography included a book called Exploring Assisi, by Rosemary Cornelius and Peg and Hardy Doffek (self-published, 1976). I did not succeed, nor have I found the above mentioned book.

Continuing on my personal quest during the years, I went through the various libraries available to me. In 1985 I bought the Pamela Miller Ness book Assisi Embroidery and decided to try one design. I did not do double-running -- I used backstitch instead to outline the motifs. Although the front looked nice it did not look particularly attractive on the wrong side of the lacy top and bottom borders. As all I had read on the subject said that Assisi work was reversible, I was again discouraged. Interlibrary Loan searches resulted in pamphlets published by DMC or Anchor showing simple and very modern patterns.

While practicing this inefficient and random method of research I began to be motivated by another interest. I started to look more thoroughly at plates in historical needlework books. I found something very interesting -- not all of those extant pieces used double running. Most did but some captions described backstitch. Now this was delightful! Another fact caught my eye -- the historical pieces did not have those very lacy top and bottom borders of double running.

These two facts really focused my search and revived my interest in finding patterns and historical information on how SCA period Assisi work was really done. In 1986 I made a real breakthrough when I discovered Maria Schuette’s masterpiece, A Pictorial History of Western Embroidery. There were plates that showed Assisi work, but they were done without the double running decorative lacy borders, and with classical figures instead of the animals, which I had
been expecting. This was a real revelation to me and I found this intriguing, as was the lack of the term "Assisi".

A wonderful find in 1987 was a copy of a DMC book on Assisi needlework. I photocopied it, even though the text was in German. Countess Marieke Van der Daal very kindly translated some parts of it for me a few years later and I eventually found an English version through Inter Library Loan.

The Lipperheide Books

At the same time that I discovered the DMC Assisi book I made an even more exciting find. I was in a research library and the title Leinen Stickerie caught my attention. I knew that this meant "Linen Embroidery" so I pulled down two volumes. It is hard to put into words what a treasure trove these two volumes are. I photocopied a few patterns for personal use days before I moved to Philadelphia, and didn’t think much more about the book because I didn’t think I would need the documentation. Three years later I decided to do a book. I made inquiries, then a special trip to Boston to photocopy the books in their entirety.

The Lipperheide books were written in 1881 and 1883 by Franz and Frieda Lipperheide. These books contain handsome designs -- many of them Assisi work. All of them appear to be recharted from extant historical examples-- I have seen photographs of similar extant work here and there in various survey books.

I made myself a learning sampler from some of these patterns, and most of these appear with this article (Figure 4, Figure 3). The serpent-like beasties can be found in another arrangement in the Maria Foris book (see below). The other two borders are from Lipperheide, although I have seen the interlace border in an Italian needlework book of the 16th century: Domenico Da Sera, Opera Nova Composta per Domenico..., 1546. There is one band of a leafy design (Figure 4) that I found in "Needlework Alphabets and Designs", edited by Blanche Cirker, Dover Books, Inc. NY,

Figure 2. a.17th century Italian. Source: F. Lipperheide, 1881. Chart ©1997, C.K. Newell
Full size chart appears at the end of this article
1975. I have no proof which century this design dates to (plate 69) but it is very similar to other patterns I have seen from the 16th century. I have recharted this design and it appears with the other patterns from this sampler.

I recently found out that there is a modern edition of the Lipperheide patterns available, with German text translated by Kathy Epstein, a noted needlework historian. Please see the bibliography, below.
In 1988 I wrote to the Victoria and Albert Museum (hereinafter V&A) in London. The Curator of Textiles at that time, Miss Santina Levey, wrote back to answer my questions, and helped my understanding of what SCA period style Assisi work is. The term "Assisi" is a modern one, dating from the revival movement in Italy in the late 19th century. It is still convenient to use that term, however and I shall do so, lacking definite knowledge of what a 16th century needleworker might have called the technique -- although "voided work" or "reverse work" are likely candidates.

In 1988 I purchased a modern book on Assisi work by Eva Marie Leszner-- but it is highly disappointing. The text on the history of Assisi work not only shows contradictions but ignorance of Italian and German needlework pattern books of the 16th century -- leading her to declare that all Assisi work was done by drawing the design first on the linen. She says that charts for such work were not used until the 19th century revival of Assisi work. This is a statement easily disproved by direct examination of 16th century needlework pattern books.

The most tantalizing aspect of Ms. Leszner's book was her personal experience of viewing what she said was medieval Assisi work. I wrote to the publishers, only to find she had died shortly after the book was published. I was given her daughter's address and wrote her a letter. I never received an answer -- possibly due to the fact that my letter was too technical. I doubt Ms. Leszner actually viewed medieval Assisi done in a countwork technique. I have not seen any extant examples of such work that seem to date prior to the 16th century. Since many people use the term "medieval" to really mean "Renaissance", this could have been a technical error in translation.

Ms. Leszner correctly points out that virtually any regular cross stitch pattern can be adapted to Assisi work. However, looking at 16th century Italian needlework pattern books it becomes very clear that many patterns were intended for dual use as either "positive" or "negative". For example, a pattern from Nicolo Zoppino, Esemplario di lavori..... (1530) (Figure 5) shows a fleur-de-lys charted on the left as a positive design, then on the right as a negative. I have included two border designs (Figure 6) which I have recharted for the ease of modern eyes. They are from Domenico da Sera, Opera nova ... (1546). If you follow the white spaces you can do cross stitch, and if you follow the dark areas you can do Assisi work.

I did not take advantage of several visits to the V&A to research Assisi work, as I was pursuing other research at that time. In 1988 I took a brief look at their study trays with Assisi work and was awestruck at how small the stitching was. In 1991 I planned a few hours out of my honeymoon to photograph and study those trays, but forgot that...
I arrived at 12:15 to find the trays locked. We left on Sunday and have not been able to return. The V&A photographic department does have negatives and slides available of most of its collection, but this is an expensive venture.

I would suggest that anyone interested in this topic be curious -- whenever you are in a new library, hunt up their needlework section. Look for card catalog entries written in Italian -- the word for needlework is *ricami*. Don't ignore other foreign language titles -- key German words are *leinen* and *stickerei*. Go browsing through the needlework section, pull down the big survey books and never stop looking. I found a plate of Assisi work in a book about an American museum and its collection. I also found some lovely photos of some pieces in a Russian book which thankfully had the captions translated into French and English.

**Types of Assisi Work**

I have formulated two styles of Assisi work based on extant examples:

**Narrative**: a design which shows fairly complicated scenes of people, places and things which are outlined, then the background is worked using:

1. simple cross stitch (rare)
2. long-arm ed cross
3. Italian 2-sided cross stitch
4. Montenegrin stitch
5. pulled work (using quadra or 4-sided stitch, which pulls the background tight enough to give a net effect)
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**Floral:** designs which do not appear to be outlined first, and are of flowers, foliage, pillars, etc. Some exceptions exist—Miss Levey sent me a photocopy of a sampler whose Assisi band showed some stitching outlining the motif first. The fillings appear to be long-armed cross stitch. The designs for these are virtually all with squared designs with few (if any) diagonals, which makes filling in the background easier. Too many diagonal lines leave "white space" which must be filled with compensating stitches (half cross). This style is difficult to do with a neat back, as it isn’t outlined first and it’s difficult to gauge where your thread will run out. If you outline your pattern with a thin thread you can then use a thicker thread to cover the background.

**Some Basic Home Truths About SCA Period Assisi Work**

1. It was not called Assisi work (outside of Assisi) during SCA period, nor was it limited to Assisi, Italy.

2. The designs were carried out in one color -- red seemed to be the most popular. Blue and green are mentioned as popular second choices. They did not outline the pattern design with black or a contrasting thread. Lady Mathilde has recently informed me of an SCA period extant piece exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The design is outlined in blue thread, and the background is done in yellow. This is an astonishing find, and very unique.

3. The background is seldom worked in simple cross stitch. Long-armed cross was the most popular, with two-sided Italian cross stitch being a close second.

4. The outlining can be done in double running OR in backstitch.

5. Neo-classical nymphs, satyrs, mermaid and beasts seem to have been more popular than just fantastical animals that dominate modern Assisi. Flora and fauna seem to have been more popular than either.

6. Some extant examples of partly done pieces indicate that the pattern was simply drawn on the linen first. When outlining the pattern, the needleworker would "square" the pattern by making sure she counted threads. This would be analogous to the modern needlepointer doing a modern design painted onto her canvas. When she faces a curved area she "translates" that into diagonals or squares to create the illusion of a curve.

7. Historical works do not have the lacy top and bottom borders of double running that modern designs have. When they had borders at all they were worked the same way as the main design.

In 1990 I felt that my notes and historical patterns might warrant writing a book for SCA publication. Various problems in my personal life have caused the book be put aside. I hope to bring forth my volume in the not too distant future, so that I may share some of the wonderful patterns I have found. I am re-charting some of these designs with special charting software, and I hope to find new patterns with my continued research.
Figure 7. My sampler, worked in 1992, front.
Photo by Chris Laning, reproduced with permission and gratitude
Figure 8. My sampler, reverse.
Photo by Chris Laning, reproduced with permission and gratitude
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

I have suggested a few helpful books which are often available on shelf or in the research stacks at various public and university libraries.

  This book contains a good photograph and diagram of a pattern from an extant piece showing Noah's Ark (Italian 16th-17th century.) It's an example of what I call Narrative Style, and the pattern was not squared off when it was transferred to the linen. It is worked in green silk and the background is long-armed cross.

  A general survey book which contains some lovely photos of a modern style piece done as a tablecloth and napkin project. It has very good diagrams of working double sided cross stitch, montenegrin cross stitch, and long-armed cross. There is also a wonderful photo of two cushions -- one is a hunt scene, showing Elizabethan style gentlemen on horseback hunting a boar. The other cushion is a magnificent pattern of Islamic-style griffins, surrounded by other beasties.

  There are some truly spectacular patterns here, closer in style to period extant pieces than most modern designs. They are Victorian in origin, but well worth seeing and using. What is difficult is the use of photographs of finished pieces instead of charted patterns. Working the outlines for the pattern is challenging, especially on diagonal lines. I tried working a pattern directly from the picture and ran into problems. I redid the pattern on graph paper to make it work, and I would recommend anyone using this book to do the same.
  Assistance from Countess Marieke van der Daal helped me locate copies of the 1974 edition in the following states: California, Iowa, Illinois, Mississippi, Michigan, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon and Texas.

- **Epstein, Kathy (editor), *Old Italian Patterns*, *Curious Works Press***
  Ms. Epstein has done a superlative job of reproducing this book. The patterns are photographed (not photocopied) so one retains the look of the original book. These patterns are printed in several folios to pull out, which is handy for the worker. She has translated a great deal of useful text, much of which shows working directions. Imagine my surprise to find that my method of working cross stitch is referred to as having a "figured back".
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This is not a cheap book, costing roughly $45.00, but it is a gorgeous addition to any library. I would not suggest ordering it, as I did, through Barnes and Nobles, as it took over two months. I would suggest, instead, that you order it through Hedgehog Handworks, PO Box 45384, Westchester, CA 90045. Toll free (888) 670-6040. Proprieter Joady Gorelick is SCA, and founded her business to meet the special needs of SCA needleworkers. She carries all the Kathleen Epstein books, and she charges $40.00 for this book. This is $5 less than Barnes and Nobles and it didn't take two months to receive.

- **Fairfield, Helen, *Counted Thread Embroidery*, St. Martin's Press, NY, still in print.**
  Ms. Fairfield shows mostly modern designs, but she does have one simplified adaptation of a dragon beastie design she saw at the V&A.

- **Foris, Maria, *Charted Folk Designs for Cross Stitch Embroidery, (278 Charts of Ancient Folk Embroideries from The Countries Along the Danube)*, Dover Publications, Inc., NY, 1975.**
  Patterns can come from delightfully unexpected sources. When I started my notes for the Assisi book I methodically went through every needlework book in my library. I found here a handful of patterns from 16th century Italian needlework pattern books. A version of the snakey beastly pattern is shown here, in a version that turns a corner, for use on a tablecloth or hankie. Sixteenth author used are: Vinciolo, Vavassore, Paganino, and Ostano.

  Ms. Gostelow has a small section on how to do Assisi work, which includes a photograph of an extent 17th century Italian piece.

  Figure 5 in this edition shows a mid-17th century sampler with two bands of Assisi-style work. The first band shows a design of an angel sitting next to a tree or shrub. The second band shows a pattern of interlinking “S” type motifs. The author does not state the source of the sampler, but the V&A owns a similar sampler showing the band of S-motifs, and a band showing cupids and flowers in Assissi work. There is a negative available of this sampler from the Photographic department at the V&A. The negative number is: Neg.53212, Museum No.516-1877

  I'm afraid that I have to disagree with Ms. Leszner's title of these patterns being "old"-- they are very modern. The double running borders are quite lovely, but they have totally taken over the design. The Assisi part has become debased to tokenism and the figures are quite crude even compared to patterns of 40 years ago.

  This book is from the late 1970's, and it's reflected in the patterns. The seahorse border and rabbit border are of possible interest to SCA folk.
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- **Salazar, Kim (Countess Ianthé d'Averoigne), *The New Carolingian Modelbook, Outlaw Press, NM 1995***

  This book is a wonderful collection of pre-1600 countwork patterns, all clearly charted for ease in use. Countess Ianthé has included some patterns not usually seen, and worked several designs from examining photos of extant historical works. There are some Assisi patterns, including a spectacular mermaid with putti, cornucopia and attendant beasties.

- **Schuette, Maria, *A Pictorial History of Embroidery***,

  This is one of the "Bibles" of historical needlework, and a book which every serious SCA needleworker absolutely must see at least once. Plates 327, 328, and 329 show Assisi work which she dates to approximately mid-16th century. Plates 327 and 328 are done in red silk, and plate 329 in green silk. Plate 329 has a design which was not squared off in transfer.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- Countess Marieke van der Daal, O.L., O.P. for the thankless chore of translating German for me.
- Lady Mathilde Eschenbach, for being my cheerleader, nudge, and for vetting the manuscript.
- Charting software used to rechart the 16th century designs was Cross Stitch Designer, Version 4.2.

**CHARTS**

For ease of use, the charts illustrating this article are presented in larger format following this page.
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Chart © 2001. C. Kathryn Newell

In the style of 16th-17th century Italian work.
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Chart © 1997, C. Kathryn Newell

Italian, 16th-17th Century. From Freida Lipperheide, 1881.
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1546 pattern from Domenico da Sera, as pictured in F. Lipperheide, 1883.
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Chart © 1997. C. Kathryn Newell

Assisi style leaves. Source: Cirkert, Needlework Alphabets and Designs.

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Chart © 1997. C. Kathryn Newell

Fleur de lys border. Source: N. Zoppino, *Esemplario*...
1546. Two charts from Domenico da Sera, *Opera Nova...*