

A&S Documentation: What Do They Want?

By Mistress Ealasaid nic Suibhne

There have been many a discussion about what makes good documentation and whether creativity is better/worse than authenticity. I always need a nice clear example for things to really make sense to me. So in case there are others out there who also need examples, I've created a progression of Very Bad A&S Entry all the way through Very Good A&S Entry, at least in this Laurel's opinion. I hope it helps.

I'm going to use Embroidery as the category because that's what I know the most about. I promise on my honor that I am not using anything that I have judged. I'll be using my own progress as an artist and student of history as a basis for the examples, with a little imagination and some exaggeration.

The Worst:

The Entry:

A cross stitch worked in acrylic craft yarn on 5 count plastic canvas of a fairy dressed in cobwebs and leaves.

The Documentation:

none

Why it's bad:

No documentation at all is the worst. The judge doesn't know what you were trying to achieve. The judge doesn't know whether this is your very first embroidery or not. The judge doesn't know if you think this is what Medieval Embroidery looks like. The entry is not good because there is nothing medieval about it. The materials are man made and the subject matter and style are modern.

This doesn't mean it is a bad embroidery. It just means that it doesn't further the study of Medieval Embroidery. Medieval Studies is what we are supposed to be about. It doesn't mean you can't hang this embroidery in your camp, or use it as a cushion cover or a favor for your consort. It just won't get high points in competition.

Better, but still not good:

The Entry:

A cross stitch worked in cotton floss on 14 count Aida cloth, of a fairy in Fairy Tale Gothic garb sitting on the back of a unicorn.

The Documentation:

"In the middle ages embroidery was used a lot to decorate clothing, furnishing and church garments. Medieval people believed in fairies and unicorns because there is lots of mention of fairies in the folktales and there is that Unicorn Tapestry. Cross stitch is period. I saw a note on the Aten Arts list where Mistress StitchesALot said it was."

Why it's still not good:

While we have graduated away from man-made fibers in the fabric and thread, we are still not using the types of fabric and thread that were available during the middle ages. Linen, wool or silk fabric and gold, silver, silk, or wool threads were the most commonly used in Western Europe. Although the fairy now wears medievaloid clothing, it is still a modern looking design.

The documentation has some problems. The first sentence is correct, but it is not backed up by a legitimate source, such as a book on the history of embroidery. The fact that people believed in fairies does not mean they would have embroidered them. And there's no source stated for the fact that people believed in fairies, other than vague mention of "folktales" that could very well be Victorian in origin.

An example of a medieval embroidery of fairies would be good to include. The Unicorn Tapestries are mentioned, which is good documentation for the use of unicorns as a design element. A picture of the Unicorn Tapestry would be great to include.

Using a Laurel as an expert is not really a good idea, unless that Laurel really is a published expert in their field. That is, they have a Master's Degree in Medieval Studies. I can only speak for myself, but I am NOT an expert in the field of embroidery. The authors of the books in my library are the experts. Donald King or Santina Levey would laugh me out of the room if I made such a claim (both medieval textile experts and former curators of the Victoria & Albert Museum's Textiles Collection). You can, if you have to, reference that you got the information from Mistress StitchesALot's class handout, which references the "Big Uppity Book of 14th Century Embroidery in the West Side of London". That is: you mention the bibliography on the class handout you are quoting from. Better yet, if you can, ask Mistress StitchesALot if you can see her copy of the "Big Uppity Book of 14th Century Embroidery in the West Side of London" to do a bit of research.

Getting Better:

The Entry:

A cross stitch worked in cotton threads on linen fabric, of a lion rampant incased in a roundel.

The Documentation:

Mentions the Oxburgh Embroideries as support for the use of cross stitch. Includes a picture of the cross stitch of a camel that is part of the Oxburgh Hangings (dated 1570). Mentions the 13th century tiles in the Victoria & Albert Museum that have a variety of rampant beasties incased in roundels and includes a picture of one them. Mentions that this is going to appliquéd to a banner. Gives examples of embroidery being appliquéd to other fabrics during the middle ages and gives examples of embroidered and appliquéd banners.

Explains why the linen fabric is authentic, using examples of medieval embroideries worked on linen fabric. Explains that silk thread would be more authentic, but the artist chose to use cotton floss because of the expense of silk and because the banner is going to take a beating and will need frequent washing.

Includes a bibliography of two books on the History of Embroidery, a book about the Hardwick Textiles, the book on the V&A Textiles Collection and an article about Heraldic Display

Why it isn't perfect:

The style of embroidery is late 16th century. The style of the design is 13th century. I personally won't count off for using cotton floss, since you can't tell the difference by looking at it unless you are comparing it to very expensive single ply reeled silk thread. I might mention a source of affordable silk floss in case the artist wants to give it try. I will give brownie points to you if you do use silk floss. I'll be extremely impressed if you use reeled silk.

The documentation is very good. It would solve the 16th century vs 13th century issue if it included an example of a 16th century embroidery that mimicked 13th century style.

Almost There:

The Entry:

A cross stitch worked in silk thread on linen fabric, an exact copy of Bess of Hardwick's cross stitched Camel.

The Documentation:

Mentions the Oxburgh Hangings as support for the use of cross stitch. Includes a picture of the cross stitch of a camel in the Hardwick Textile Collection (1570 or so). References the book about the Hardwick Textiles and the book about the V&A Museum's Textile Collection. Mentions other medieval examples of the use of Cross Stitch and the use of animals as a motif. Mentions the choice of colors and what natural dyes would produce them. Mentions that this is going to be appliquéd to a banner. Gives examples of embroidery being appliquéd to other fabrics during the middle ages and gives examples of embroidered and appliquéd banners.

Explains why the linen fabric and silk thread are authentic, using examples of medieval embroideries worked on linen fabric with silk thread. Gives the stitches per inch of the Oxburgh camel embroidery and mentions that the entry has the same number of stitches per inch.

Includes a bibliography of two books on the History of Embroidery, the book on the Hardwick Textiles, the V&A Museum's Textile Collection, an article about dyeing with natural dyes and an article about Heraldic Display

Why it's good:

The design and the stitching technique come from the same century and culture. The entrant gives examples of the design, the stitches, and even goes the extra step to research the colors to use.

Why it's not perfect:

It's an exact copy of an extant embroidery. That extra step of taking what you've learned and creating something that is uniquely yours and yet would not look out of place in a museum or in a real medieval setting has not been taken yet.

The BEST:

The Entry:

A cross stitch, worked in silk threads on linen fabric, of the entrant's dog, sitting in profile and sniffing a violet, which happens to be an element of the entrant's heraldry.

The Documentation:

Mentions the Oxburgh Hangings as support for the use of cross stitch embroidery in the 16th century. Includes a picture of the cross stitch of a camel from the Hardwick Textiles Collection and a picture of the dogs in the Unicorn Tapestry's hunting scenes. References the book about the Hardwick Textiles and the V&A Museum's Textile Collection.

Mentions other medieval examples of the use of Cross Stitch and the use of animals as a motif. Mentions illuminations of the 16th century that have dogs and/or flowers as a motif. Includes a picture of one or two. Discusses the symbolism of dogs and flowers, especially violets, in medieval art. Discusses the prevalence of animals displayed in profile in medieval art.

Mentions the choice of colors and what natural dyes would produce them. Mentions that this is going to be appliquéd to a banner. Gives examples of embroidery being appliquéd to other fabrics during the middle ages and gives examples of embroidered and appliquéd banners.

Explains why the linen fabric and silk thread are authentic, using examples of medieval embroideries worked on linen fabric with silk thread.

Includes a bibliography of two books on the History of Embroidery, the book on the Hardwick Textiles, the V&A Museum's Textile Collection, an article about dyeing with natural dyes, an article about Heraldic Display and an article of breeds of dogs popular in Britain in the 16th Century.

Why it's the best:

It is worked in as authentic a fabric and thread as can be managed today. The style of the design and the stitches are of the same time period and culture and they have the same look and feel as real medieval embroideries and illumination. The design includes motifs that are found in medieval art, yet the design is totally original. It's the perfect marriage of creativity and authenticity.

The documentation gives medieval examples of each element in the design and each choice of fabric, thread, color and stitch.

You will note that the entrant did not spin their own thread, weave their own fabric, dye their own floss or make their own needles. A medieval embroiderer wouldn't have done those things either. But you'll get extra brownie points if you do any of those things.

Random Thoughts:

Everyone who sets out to learn and practice medieval art walks this path. Everyone takes their own time on the path. Some linger longer at each step, savoring the creative process, some rush headlong towards the goal of authenticity and/or perfection. Neither choice is wrong. At first we do our art and then attempt to research to justify it. Later, we do the research first in order to do a

more authentic piece. Eventually, we research just for the sheer joy of finding something new. And then we just have to make one of those cool things, with our own touch of creativity making it uniquely ours. It doesn't matter how long you take on the path. You have a lifetime.

Learning what makes a medieval design takes time and requires that you look at a lot of medieval art. Copying one or two along the way helps develop the "medieval eye."

(and yes, I've embroidered my share of fairies and unicorns and ladies in Fairy Tale Gothic dresses and done cross stitch on aida cloth – I just don't enter them in competition.)