

ETCHED *in* FROST

Caroline Zoob writes about her fascination with the breathtakingly intricate, painterly machine embroidery art of Alison Holt.



I have never been drawn to machine embroidery, but discovering the work of textile artist Alison Holt earlier this year (her Bluebell Woods featured in the opening pages of Issue No 2) has inspired me to reconsider my views. Holt is essentially a fine artist who uses thread instead of paint, so effectively you can smell the bluebells and feel the crunch of frost beneath your feet. Some machine embroidery loses the 'stitchiness' of embroidery – everything is filled in, a bit too smooth, and the colours are often too uniform. What I love about Holt's work is the painterly way she blends and breaks colours and stitches in a way that a hand-embroiderer could attempt – if she had ➤➤

Opposite: Frosted Yarrow, 7" x 5"
This page: Details of sketch for One Frosty Morning, see page 38.



several lifetimes. It takes Holt several days to create one of her postcard-size works.

After a long and charming telephone conversation with Holt, I could not forget her description of herself as a small girl of about eight years old, discovering with great excitement that she could 'look at something three-dimensional and represent it in two-dimensional form'. It was a pivotal moment for Holt, who remembers discovering her skill at drawing and that it was 'not something everyone could do'. She became fascinated by drawing and filled sketchbook after sketchbook from that early age, drawing nearly every day. Sadly, at her school – and this is the experience of so many women who were educated in the 1970s – textiles and art were not really taken seriously and so it was not until she attended Shrewsbury Art College that her evident talents started to be recognised.

At the end of her foundation year, Holt was still uncertain about the direction she wanted to follow and so, unusually, she stayed on to do a second foundation year. An inspirational textiles tutor, Cameron Scott, encouraged her to work her detailed sketches into stitch and to apply to Goldsmiths to train as a fine artist, working with stitch rather than a paint brush.

After Goldsmiths, Holt taught textiles part-time at Wrexham Art College, while continuing to develop and exhibit her own work, which was eventually spotted by a ➤



THE HOAR FROST 6" x 11"

Having started with a photograph, the image is set down with silk paints (above), and threads are chosen with which to add the details (above right). Each section is worked in painstaking detail, blending tones and textures by varying the top and bottom threads, and adjusting the tension in the bobbin.



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EVOLUTION OF ONE FROSTY MORNING, FINISHED SIZE 9" X 21.5"

Above far left: An original sketch showing the scale of the composition. The basic outline will then be drawn with gutta onto white silk. Below left: The silk painted background is now complete, ready for stitching. Above centre: With reference to the original photograph, threads are selected, using muted soft shades in the distance and stronger shades in the foreground. Above right: The first section is stretched tightly into the embroidery hoop, and the trees and undergrowth in the distance are stitched. Below: The finished piece. Note how the juxtaposition of the stitched line of trees emphasises the misty sky.



book editor. Holt's five books are still in print worldwide. Opportunities to exhibit and teach internationally followed, particularly in Australia where she has taught for several weeks a year for the past seven years. Her work is collected internationally, and she has exhibited at Chelsea Flower show for the past twenty-six years. At one point she was a member of the Royal Society of Botanical Artists, in recognition of the precision and detail of her flower portraits.

As a hand-embroiderer Holt was never interested in decorative stitches, only in using the thread like brushstrokes, working mostly with straight stitches. When she started to work with a sewing machine at Goldsmiths, she was excited by the textures and colours she could create with only two stitches, straight and zig-zag. Increasingly, she wanted to draw and paint onto the material direct, without creating detailed sketches first. Choosing a smooth 8mm Habutai silk for her fabric, Holt's skills as an artist enabled her, in her earlier work, to leave large areas of the work simply painted with silk paints. Over the years, she has chosen to have more and more of her canvas 'painted' with the thread, constantly refining a technique of blending colours, requiring infinite patience to thread and re-thread the machine two or three times to apply different tones in one small area. It is painstaking but as effective as an artist using layers of oil paint and glazes. She has invented different ways of manipulating the bobbin so that the bobbin thread, sometimes a different colour, is pulled up to

Right: The ethereal tracery of frosted bare tree branches and grasses is captured in *With Branches Etched in Frost* 8" x 5"



the surface, creating stitches which are not only textural but give the effect of broken colour, such as spiky frost on a mossy tree trunk. This requires not only a painter's eye but a degree of confidence with a small screwdriver to adjust and re-adjust the tension on the bobbin. She still leaves small areas of her work painted – skies, and awe-inspiring mists hanging over the landscape on a frosty morning.

Holt now focuses on landscapes, continually exploring ways in which to interpret them in stitches.

'I am inspired by the detail in nature, the patterns, rhythms and textures. I want to create an emotional response to the landscape...'

Living in Shropshire on the Welsh borders, she is surrounded by inspirational ➤

scenes, which she now captures with photographs. Holt always carries her camera with her, but as well as ad hoc images captured on daily walks, she sets time aside to photograph the views she wants to capture in stitch. It is a considered process.

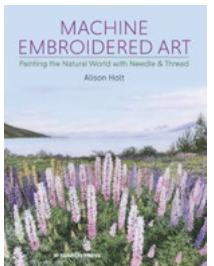
'Photographs are invaluable to me as a record of composition, colour and detail, supported by simple sketches. With a sewing machine as my drawing tool now, I cannot work from life as I used to with my sketchbook, so photography has become my starting point.'

She keeps an eye on the weather forecast, particularly in the winter, so she can set her alarm to capture a frost or fall of snow.

'If there's a hoar frost or fall of snow overnight, the wellies go on, I jump in the car and off I go...'

Although Alison has travelled widely for her work, she always returns to her Shropshire countryside. 'I see colour, detail and texture everywhere I look. The Shropshire plain stretches for miles with its patchwork of fields, rolling hills, woodland and, further into Wales, the drama of mountains and waterfalls - the inspiration for me is endless.' ♦

For details of
Alison Holt's work
and workshops see
www.alisonholt.co.uk



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Right:
Detail from
'Transformed
Overnight'
5" x 5"



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