

Life amongst the FLOWERS

Caroline Zoob enjoyed a long telephone conversation with Italian embroiderer Cristina Rebeccani about her love of flowers and passion for botanical embroidery.

When Cristina Rebeccani was a small child growing up in her native Italy, idle hands were frowned upon in a household in which all the women, her mother, aunties and *nonna*, stitched, knitted and crocheted. It was only natural that Cristina started to “mess around” with needle and thread. However, it was not until she was in her late twenties, now married and expecting her first child, that she took up embroidery seriously, choos-

ing cross stitch and working Shaker-style kits which were hugely popular at the time. As her two sons grew up, a daily retreat (often at dawn when the house was quiet) into some stitching became her refuge from the demands of running a busy home. Over time, she started to feel constrained by assiduous adherence to kit instructions and began to make small adaptations. Ditching the traditional Aida fabric with its counting holes, ➡

LEFT *Dianthus carthusianorum* **BELOW** One of Cristina's signature embroidered pendants, this one featuring a field of scabious at the end of summer. The rich texture of the grass is achieved by many long straight stitches, woven under and over each other, with a field of French knots. The slant of the grass lends the piece a contemporary feel.



“For me, there is something magical and therapeutic about embroidery... At times in my life it has given me serenity and inner peace.”



she sourced instead antique and vintage linens. With an artist's eye for colour, she became curious about natural dyes and experimented in her kitchen with different plants, hand dyeing the linens to use as base fabric for her cross stitch pieces. This more creative approach to cross stitch, working in a slightly looser way and using subtle colours, drew admiration from friends, who encouraged Cristina to start a business selling her work. However, while she took the occasional commission from friends, she enjoyed being able to stitch for the ➤



LEFT As well as having a stem or two of the actual plant in front of her as she works, Cristina spends many hours buried in her large collection of vintage reference books, researching her botanical embroideries. Gradually, she is making bookmarks for each of her favourites. Note here the way she has couched the three long stitches for the main stem, capturing so closely the look and dry, slightly ridged texture of yarrow stems. Also, the painterly colour variation in the feathery leaves.





RIGHT & LEFT A poem by Sanobar Khan from his collection *A Thousand Flamingoes* inspired this stitched meadow, in which intricately stitched grasses and wild flowers contrast with long, taut stitches of meadow grass to great effect. The base cloth is some coarse, stained linen belonging to her grandmother. Cristina uses different types of thread, varying the number of strands, to achieve the dense texture of a wild flower meadow.

sheer pleasure it brought, and to make beautiful things for her home and to give as gifts to loved ones, without having the pressure of ensuring the return on time and effort was commercially viable.

A challenging encounter with illness in her early forties left Cristina floored, physically and emotionally. Recovering, she once again turned to needle and thread and "found my peace", which perhaps explains the name of her beautifully curated Instagram page: @embroiderytherapy.

"For me, there is something magical and therapeutic about embroidery. It requires concentration, but also great energy. And in some difficult moments of my life it has given me serenity and an inner peace."

Eschewing cross stitch this time, she decided to try decorative hand embroidery instead. "I was very inspired. I sat on my ➡



“My eyes are forever amongst flowers! Whenever I’m in a garden, out walking in the woods, when I’m looking through my books or working on my embroidery...”



LEFT & RIGHT Stitched onto an Italian apron made of natural coloured linen, a wreath of dense ferny foliage and creamy French knots worked in DMC Perlé and stranded cotton. The rich, raised texture of this stitching is the result of layering stitch over stitch. Cristina does not draw her designs, but simply starts to stitch and stops when the piece tells her it is finished.

sofa, over that long summer of recovery, and taught myself to stitch. I can remember my first attempt was a scabious. I just looked at the flower and tried not to think about stitches: I just – go!” Cristina quickly became obsessed, learning as many stitches as she needed to, and buying embroidery books, both old and new, preferring patterns in books to kits. However, rather like talented cooks who can never follow a recipe without adding a transformative dash or two, Cristina rarely followed the patterns precisely. Gradually, and in part inspired by the ravishing work of Japanese embroiderer Kazuko Aoki, Cristina moved off-pattern



and experimented with a different style of stitching, using a number of different threads and varying the number of strands, resulting in embroidery that at first glance looks delicate and yet is richly textured.

Cristina adores England, and in normal times she visits regularly to see her two sons and to visit gardens with her ➡

gardening group. Flowers are as essential to her life as embroidery has become. A recent encounter with a jeweller introduced her to the words “gli occhi tra i fiori”, which translates as ‘your eyes amongst flowers’, simple words which resonated deeply with Cristina. “My eyes are forever amongst flowers! Whenever I’m in a garden, out walking in the woods, when I’m looking through my books or working on my embroidery.” Her trips to England almost always include a visit to a second-hand bookshop, where she scours the shelves for books filled with botanical illustrations of flowers and plants. For a couple of years now, she has been working on a new style of botanical embroidery, which has become the core focus of her daily stitching practice. While Cristina chooses not to sell her work yet, she enjoys sharing her stitching skills and runs exclusive workshops for small groups in her *atelier* at her home in Varese, in the north of Italy. “My aim is to inspire and instill confidence in the ➡➡

LEFT & RIGHT One of Cristina's first pieces of decorative embroidery, based on a Burda pattern, but worked with colours chosen by Cristina. Working her French knots in DMC Perlé No 5 gives them a particularly plump look.



BELOW and OPPOSITE

Botanical embroideries of *galanthus nivalis*, or snowdrop, and pilewort plantain. Cristina has her baskets of thread around her and pulls colours out as she needs them, rather like a painter with a paintbox. The snowdrop leaves are stitched in the finest Perlé no 12.



participants. I pick flowers from the garden and bake a cake, and we stitch and talk, and the creativity flows from this."

We both pause on the telephone, remembering that it is a long time since any of us have been able to entertain or share our stitching time, and may be longer yet. As this Journal goes to print, another lockdown has just been ordered in her home town. ❖



Follow Cristina on Instagram for inspiring posts about life, flowers and stitching.

📷 @embroiderytherapy

