

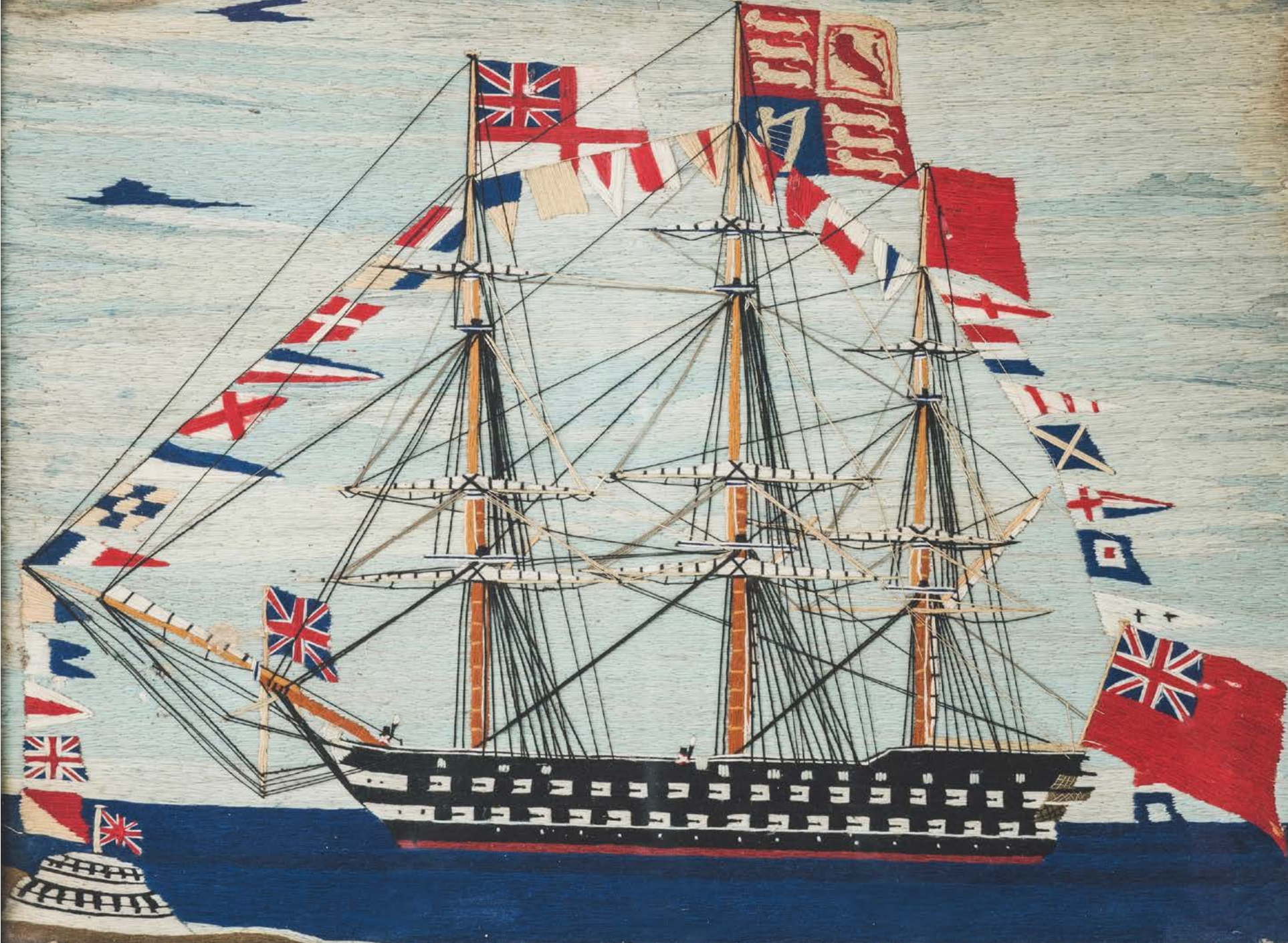
SEA DOG

Stitchers

With the help of New York specialist dealer Paul Vandekar and Katherine Manley, Caroline Zoob recounts the story of what have become known as sailors' woolies.

From around the middle of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Great War, many British sailors spent the long hours waiting around in port or becalmed on the open sea, stitching pictures of their ships, mostly in wool, giving rise to the affectionate term 'woolies'. It seems hard to believe that these tough men of the sea, used to hauling heavy ropes, scaling rigging high above deck and fighting hard battles against both man and the elements would, in quieter moments, open their little wooden sailors' boxes and take out their rolled-up embroidery. And yet it is not really so surprising if you remember that all sailors had, of necessity, a basic familiarity with needle and thread. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the average seaman had no standard uniform. Not only did he sew and mend his own clothes, often embellishing them ➔

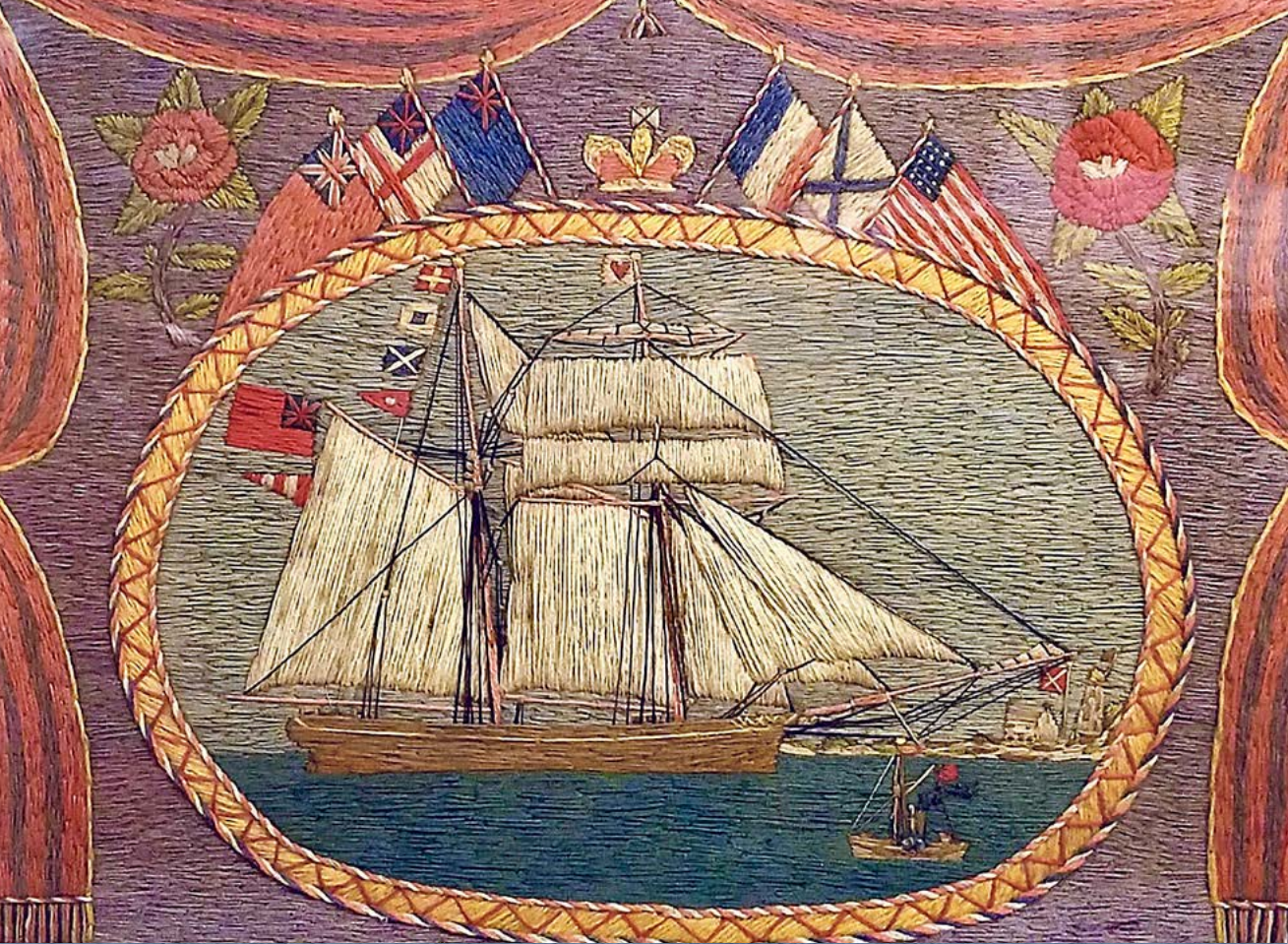
PRIVATE COLLECTION



ABOVE A triple-masted Royal Navy ship with all flags flying. Note the rolled-up sails and fantastically intricate rigging created with long single stitches, not couched down. You can feel that as the stitcher

stitched these, he was remembering hauling and tying the rigging ropes and knew precisely what tension they needed to have. This would almost certainly have been stitched on land, or kept on a frame, to hold those

stitches taut. Note too the shading in the sky. Berlin wool often came in long or short shaded lengths, with shades of the same colour either at short intervals or spread out on a longer length.



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BERLIN WOOL is a type of wool fibre derived from Merino sheep in Saxony, Germany. In the nineteenth century, the wool was sent to the city of Gotha to be combed (worsted), spun and then taken to Berlin where it was dyed and sold. The wool was softer and separated more easily into strands than types of wool from England and the Netherlands, which were widely used at the time. This meant that Berlin wool was easier to work with, especially for crewel embroidery and the form of embroidery that soon became known as Berlin woolwork. The wool also easily absorbed the new aniline dyes, which were developed from the mid-1800s onwards, making the wool available in a greater variety of bright colours and lengths dyed in various shades of the same colour, which explains the shading in some of the skies.

ABOVE Occasionally, ships were presented in a roundel, as though looking through a telescope or porthole. The presentation above is almost theatrical, framed by plush velvet curtains. Or perhaps the sailor was at home, peering down the telescope of memory, remembering his ship. The flowers may have been borrowed from a Berlin wool pattern belonging to a wife or mother.

with embroidery, but he also maintained the ship's sails. In the eighteenth century, life on board a warship was punctuated by 'make and mend' day, in which normal duties were suspended to allow sailors to repair their clothing (and indulge in merry making).

Sailors' 'woolies', therefore, are a particularly enchanting form of folk art created by the hands of men self-taught in embroidery, using materials mostly found on board ship. Sail canvas, duck cloth from sailors' trousers or a simple linen or cotton fabric was sometimes used as a base fabric, although recent research by curators at Compton Verney Museum found that most woolies were made on embroiderer's canvas rather than sailcloth, which was too thick for delicate stitching. Pieces of spare wood from the sail locker would be put together with simple tenon joints to fashion a stretcher. Only the threads were brought from home, perhaps tucked into their rucksack by a wife or mother, or acquired in foreign ports. Early woolies are made of naturally dyed wool but, after the development of chemical dyes in the middle of the nineteenth century, sailors were able to buy less expensive wools in a greater range of colours. Mostly, these were bright colours — white, blue, red, brown and varying shades of green. As well as working in Berlin wool,

they used rolled and button threads, or silk thread, although woollies stitched entirely in silk threads are rare. Some sailors even added bits of bone, metal, wood, glass, mica, carved tortoiseshell, whalebone, ebony, as well as beads, sequins and sepia cabinet cards to bring their embroideries to life. It has been suggested that the texture of the yarn in one or two pictures suggests that sometimes sailors unpicked and re-used the wool of discarded garments.

Most of the vessels depicted fly flags of the British Isles or the Navy and historians generally concur that nearly all known woolies were made by British sailors. It has been suggested that the idea of woolies was inspired by the Chinese embroideries sold to sailors in Hong Kong and the five Treaty Ports opened to foreign trade in 1842 by the Treaty of Nanking (incidentally, the same treaty that ceded Hong Kong to Britain in perpetuity until we gave it back in 1997). Just imagine the hanks of silken thread one might have found in the markets of these Far Eastern ports. Perhaps less easy to imagine is a group of burly sailors spending their shore leave in search of additions to their haberdashery stash. When creating a woolie, the sailor often sketched the outlines of the ship and rigging with pen and ink. The pictures were then stitched freehand onto the ➤

“Seamen never made woolworks with the idea that they would be considered valuable works of art. They were simply crafts to document their journeys, symbols of the pride they felt representing their ships and country.”

PAUL VANDEKAR

BELOW & RIGHT

Superbly stitched example, almost certainly made on land, perhaps after retirement.



canvas. Sailors employed a great variety of stitches, few of them essential to nautical life, other than darning and running stitch. The earliest existing examples of woolies date from the 1830s. These early pieces demonstrate the use of a chain stitch. An adaptation of this stitch is the long stitch. Used in woolies after 1840, it is a long stitch that, unlike satin stitch, which it resembles from the front, leaves little thread on the back, saves wool and makes for much faster sewing. Attention to the ship's detail is unusually keen and meticulously accurate in terms of rigging, number of gun ports, signal flags and other identifying features. To create the rigging, sailors mainly used long stitches with fine cotton or linen threads. In some unusual woolies silk thread or thinly twisted gold threads were used.

Quite apart from being timelessly charming decorative pieces, woolies documented an important transitional period in the history of ships and all who sail in them. They are detailed portraits capturing the transformation of vessels from the age of sail to that of steam. Occasionally, a sailor went beyond mere ships' portraiture to create detailed scenes of faraway ports, naval battles, ships in distress on rough seas, forts or lighthouses. Later in the nineteenth century, patriotism was added to the ➤➔



PRIVATE COLLECTION

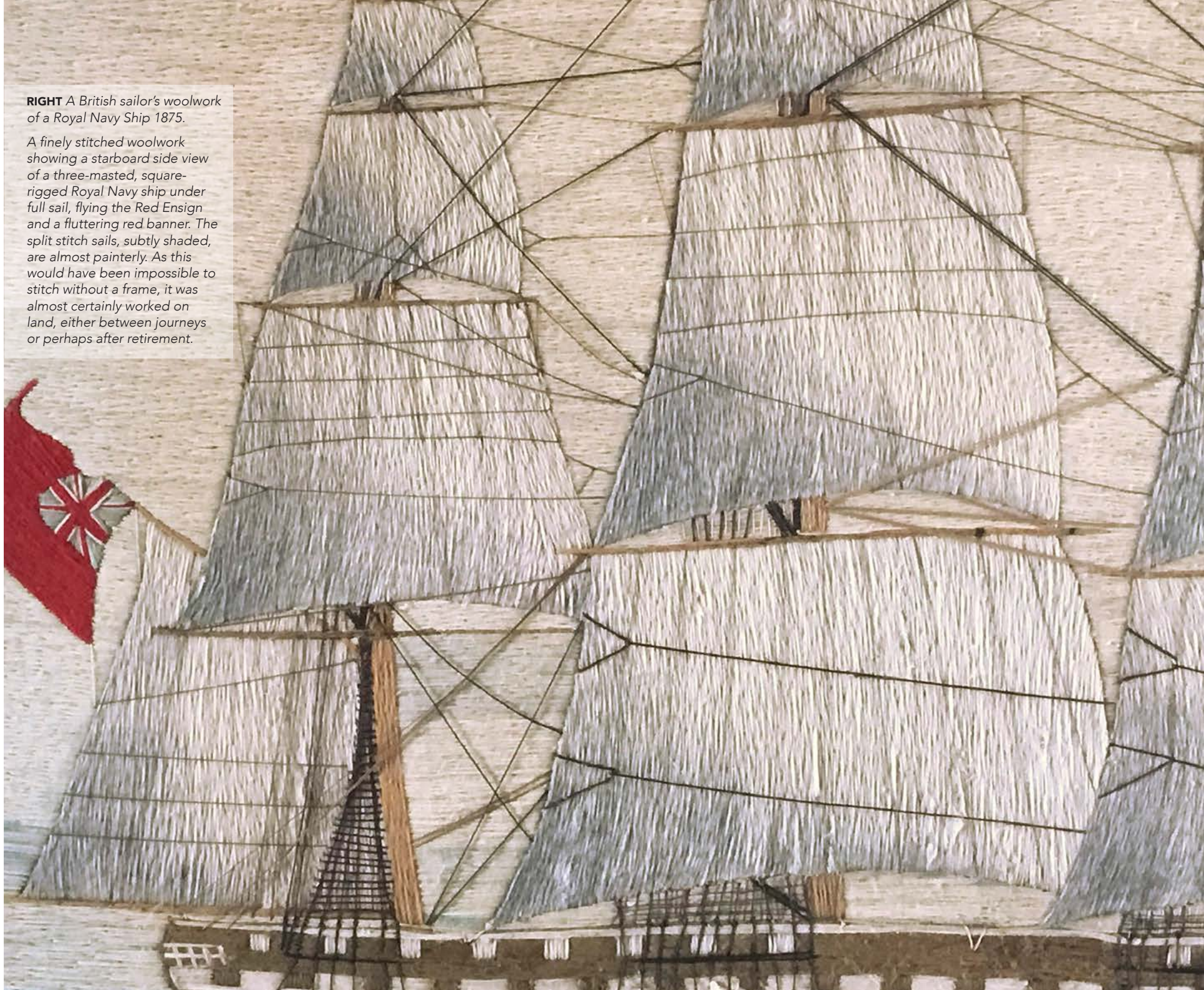
mix with national and signal flags hung from the rigging. Ships were sometimes placed in a roundel formed like a lifebuoy, surrounded by flags of many nations, royal emblems, heraldic symbols, coats of arms, photographs, flowers or allegorical figures, with the flags of the British Royal Navy and Crimean Allies (France, Turkey and Sardinia – Crimean War 1854-1856) used foremost. The language of the sea, these flags and pennants could reveal a ship's nationality, yacht club affiliation, place of origin, function and type of ship, as well as its destination. A long streamer indicates that a ship was on her way home.

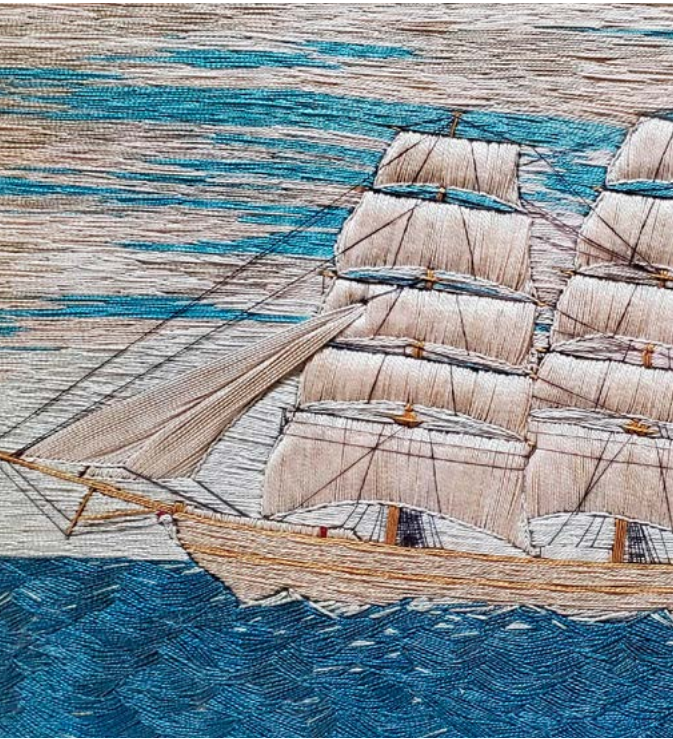
Woolies reached their height from about 1860-80. With the advent of steam engine power, dependency on sails came to an end, which resulted in the need for much smaller crews with different skills. Sailors had uniforms and no longer needed to know how to sew in order to repair the sails. A sailor could now remember his travels through photographs.

Like nearly all folk art, most woolies are unsigned, anonymous creations and all the more touching for that. Occasionally, a piece might be traced back to particular seamen, such as a woolie of a ship within a roundel surrounded by flags once sold by dealer Paul Vandekar. On the reverse was a note: 'Tapestry made by Gunner Charles Wood ➡➡

RIGHT A British sailor's woolwork of a Royal Navy Ship 1875.

A finely stitched woolwork showing a starboard side view of a three-masted, square-rigged Royal Navy ship under full sail, flying the Red Ensign and a fluttering red banner. The split stitch sails, subtly shaded, are almost painterly. As this would have been impossible to stitch without a frame, it was almost certainly worked on land, either between journeys or perhaps after retirement.





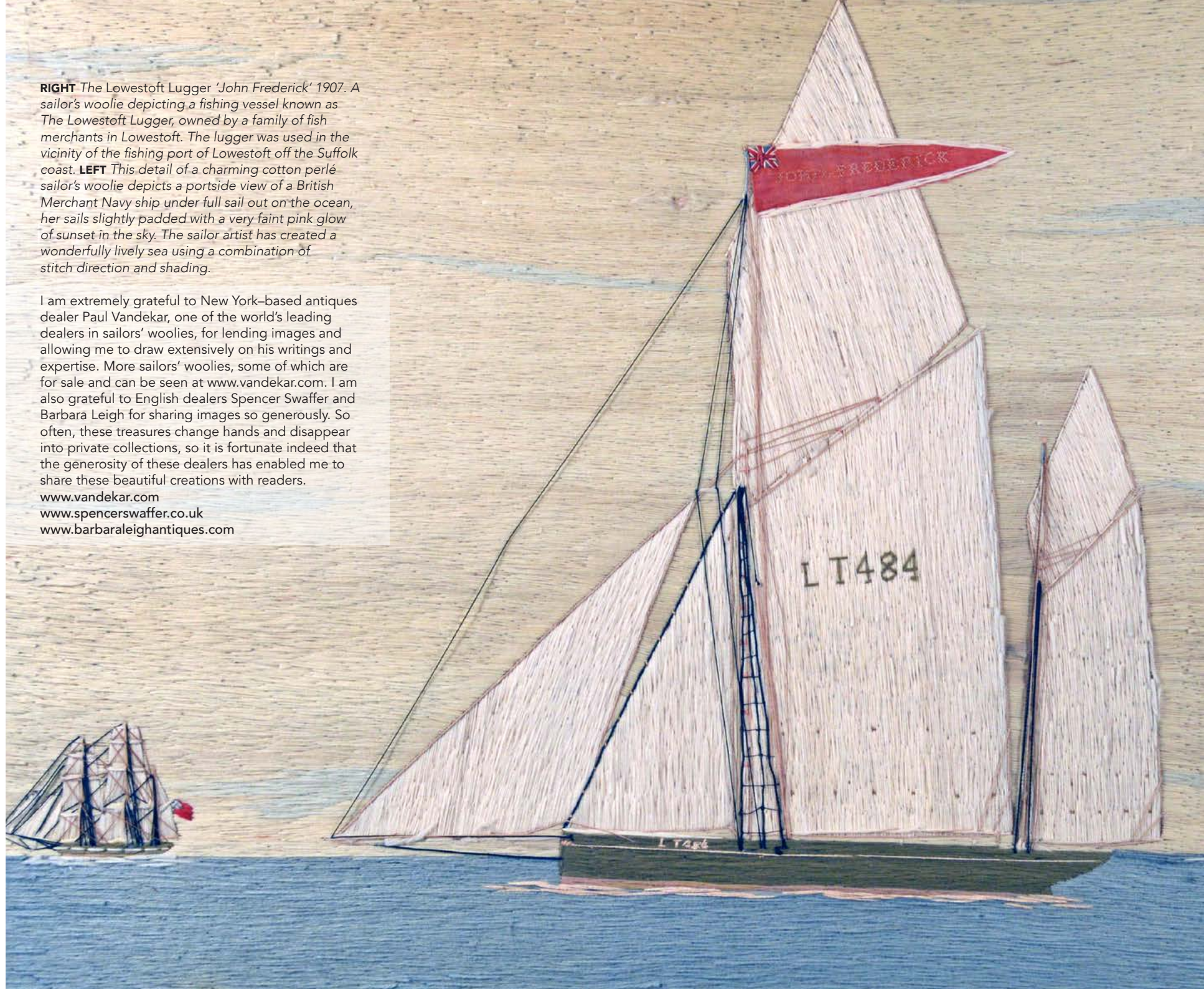
of 12 Company, R.M. Artillery during his service in Royal Marine Artillery 25 January 1870 to 30 January 1882'. It was given to his granddaughter Edith Agnes Wood. It is this type of personal detail that brings a woolie out of the haziness of history and makes the artist into a real person.

Woolies are a fascinating way to glimpse what a 19th-century sailor saw in his life at sea, as well as to capture a bit of maritime history. Whether done in the coarsest wool or finest silk, each woolie has its own charms and story to tell. ❖

RIGHT The Lowestoft Lugger 'John Frederick' 1907. A sailor's woolie depicting a fishing vessel known as The Lowestoft Lugger, owned by a family of fish merchants in Lowestoft. The lugger was used in the vicinity of the fishing port of Lowestoft off the Suffolk coast. **LEFT** This detail of a charming cotton perlé sailor's woolie depicts a portside view of a British Merchant Navy ship under full sail out on the ocean, her sails slightly padded with a very faint pink glow of sunset in the sky. The sailor artist has created a wonderfully lively sea using a combination of stitch direction and shading.

I am extremely grateful to New York-based antiques dealer Paul Vandekar, one of the world's leading dealers in sailors' woolies, for lending images and allowing me to draw extensively on his writings and expertise. More sailors' woolies, some of which are for sale and can be seen at www.vandekar.com. I am also grateful to English dealers Spencer Swaffer and Barbara Leigh for sharing images so generously. So often, these treasures change hands and disappear into private collections, so it is fortunate indeed that the generosity of these dealers has enabled me to share these beautiful creations with readers.

www.vandekar.com
www.spencerswaffer.co.uk
www.barbaraleighantiques.com





Inspired by this article? See next page for a free pdf of the design opposite, inspired by a naive watercolour of a British Navy steamship, and just have a go at some of the stitch ideas on the preceding pages.



Frosty (No 4) is a wonderful variegated thread for sky, and combines well with Bluebell. Or try DMC Ecrú shaded with DMC 3072 and Bluebell.

“A red streamer meant the ship was homeward bound”

Long-and-short stitch.

Long stitch.

Split stitch with padding.

ROLLED SAIL Three short six-strand lengths twisted and couched, covered with Satin stitch.

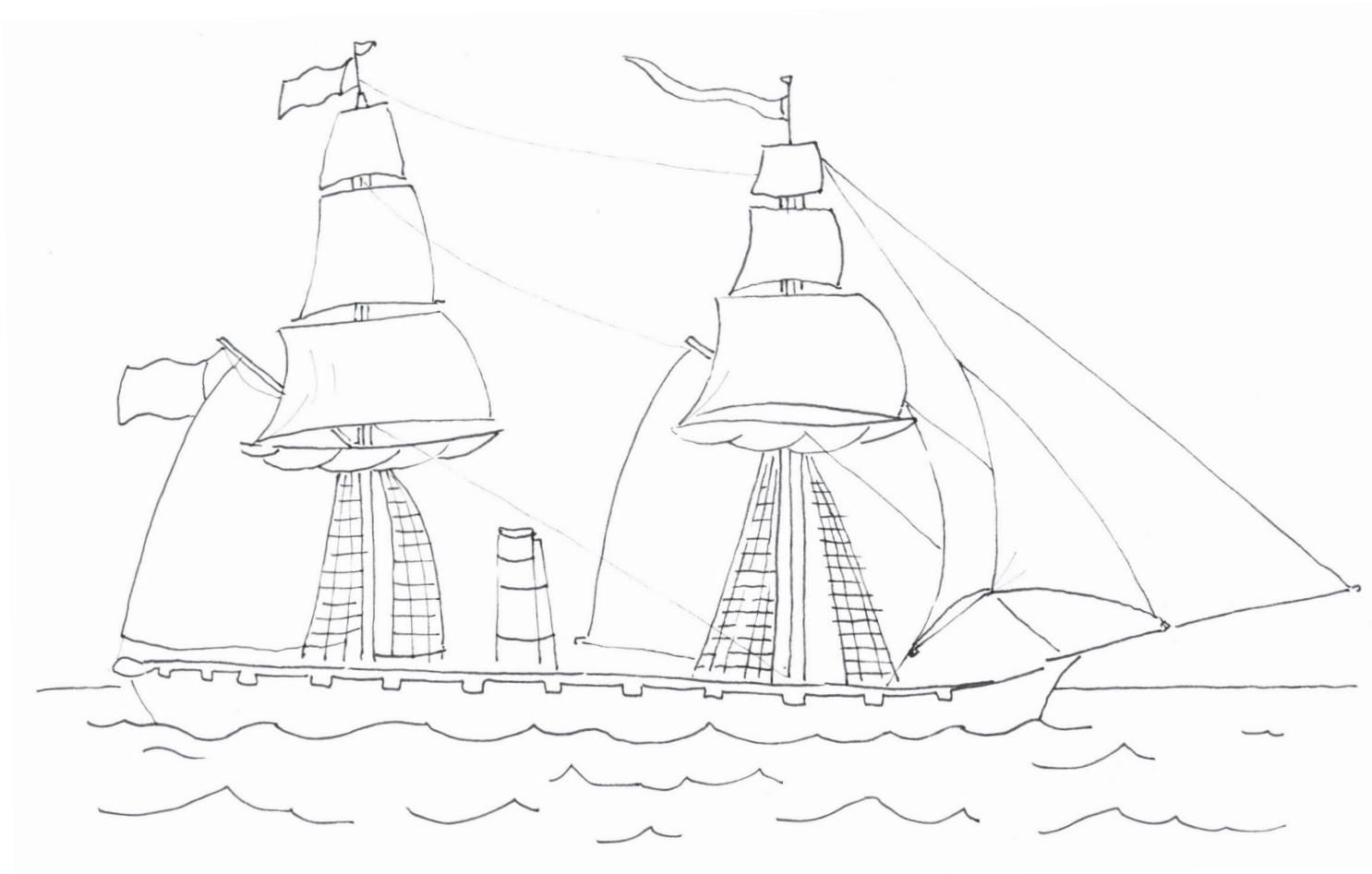
All Gentle Art unless otherwise indicated

- 1 Carriage Black
- 2 Geranium
- 3 Bluebell
- 4 Classic Colorworks Frosty
- 5 DMC 3865
- 6 Weeks Dye Works Grits
- 7 Blue Jay
- 8 Dungarees

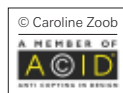
There are so many stitching ideas in the preceding pages of this article, that I just had to have a go. Wool probably fills the canvas rather more quickly, but I like the delicacy of the stranded cotton, and when I work the second half of the rigging I will use some very fine vintage silk sewing thread. You may download this pattern as a PDF, or wait for the kit which will be available at the beginning of July from www.carolinezoob.co.uk.

SHIP PATTERN

From The Stitcher's Journal, Issue No 10, June 2021



Original design by Caroline Zoob, available as a free pattern-only download



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