

Spring GREENS

As gardeners' thoughts turn to checking seed supplies and double digging the vegetable garden, Caroline Zoob talks to Japanese embroiderer Konekono Kitsune about her embroidered harvest.

When I started *The Stitcher's Journal* I knew I wanted to include and celebrate the work of amateurs, in the correct sense of the word, deriving from the Latin *amare*, to love. The only difference between an amateur and a professional is that the latter earns their living from their work. It is not about training or talent. Some of the most beautiful hand embroidery I have seen was created by amateur embroiderers, many of whom have become professionals whose work is highly sought after.

I feel certain this will be the case with Konekono Kitsune ("KK"), a Japanese embroiderer who currently stitches for her own pleasure in the spare time afforded

her by a full-time job, but whose sculptural embroidery is attracting huge interest on Instagram and has already been featured in books and stitching blogs.

Looking back, KK does not remember a time when she did not stitch. Rather like paper and crayons, fabric and threads were simply part of childhood play. She grew up in a creative household surrounded by cushions, bags and other embroidered gifts made by her maternal grandmother 'a wonderful embroiderer' who, sadly, lived too far

away to teach KK to stitch. Indeed, KK has never had any lessons or even used kits; her training at university in product design involved developing skills in ➤



ABOVE Lollo rosso (red leaf lettuce), one of KK's larger embroideries. KK draws the outline first, then stitches one layer of padding onto the fabric, adding more as she builds the form of the lettuce. Clever use of long stitches, some twisted over each other, and a froth of pistil stitches and French knots where the leaves break into frills.

drawing and photography but, apart from that, she is entirely self-taught. She admits that embroidery is what gives her joy, especially since taking it up “seriously” about four years ago, devoting much of her spare time to it. When I ask KK who inspires her now, she replies that it is Kazuko Aoki, whose embroidery makes her feel, in common with many of us, ‘that there are no limits to what can be expressed with embroidery threads’.

After some initial experiments with naïve embroideries illustrating an invented

story, KK found herself embroidering a cabbage. To this day she is not entirely sure why she did so, but the reaction to the finished embroidery made her realise that she was perhaps “better at stitching real things than imaginary ones”. Certainly, her vegetables could be plucked from the canvas to the chopping board. KK’s powers of observation for texture and colour are simply an extraordinary gift. When I say this, she replies modestly “Maybe I just match the colours of nature with the embroidery threads”. If only it were that simple.

Just as botanical painters paint from life, KK stitches with the real vegetable in front of her, sometimes having to replace it three or four times so it is always fresh. I wondered if she grows her own vegetables to paint, but although she has a small patch, KK enjoys choosing them in markets. Sometimes her sister, a keen gardener, brings them ‘with the ➤

“For the broccoli I used so many different greens!”



ABOVE The broccoli above is one of KK’s larger embroideries, worked at almost life size. A base of felt was stitched onto a drawn outline, and then extra layers added in different areas to create the florets. KK used ball knots (tama dome in Japanese) for the broccoli florets. You can see a clear demonstration at www.youtube.com/watch?v=kL4TBg4JNVg. At the end, you simply take the thread back down very close to the knot and bring it back up to repeat the stitch. KK used two or three strands of thread. **LEFT** Edamame or green soy beans. The roots have a lot of rhizobia which provide a source of nutrition for edamame.

“Roots are very important, so I stitch them very carefully.”

mud, and even the roots, still on them’. “I don’t always embroider the roots but when I do, I stitch them towards the end of the work. Roots are very important, so I stitch them very carefully.” In fact, as she describes her process, it is clear that KK does everything carefully. Starting with a sketch, or perhaps a photograph she has taken, she traces the design onto the fabric. Then she selects her threads. For KK, this is the most important stage for she chooses all the threads and decides where to use them before she starts to stitch. “I may change a few things as I go, but on the whole I stick to the plan”. She uses DMC stranded cotton threads inherited from her mother and grandmother as well as Japanese brands Olympus and Cosmo.

“Choosing the threads is a long process. I lay them on the vegetable I propose to embroider and make notes on the sketch. For the broccoli I used so many different greens!” If she is planning a sculptural, three-dimensional finish, KK stitches a base of felt onto her fabric. For the more subtle variations in height and textures, she uses layers of stitching “over and over”, rather than padding. When I ask her about the next stage in the process, she replies simply “I embroider the

vegetables, over the base, observing them carefully.” And there you have the magic ingredient that makes this young embroiderer’s work so exciting. Her natural gift for observation from life, coupled with an instinctive, untrained approach to her stitching, results in work that is fresh and energetic, the effect a cross between a painter’s brushstrokes and a sculptor manipulating clay with none of the stiffness that can accompany needlepainting and/or stumpwork. At the moment, KK does not sell her work, but the response to it on Instagram, the endless requests to buy her pieces, all suggest that she will at some point turn professional. It will be so exciting to see in what direction she next turns her powers of observation. She tells me that “if I hadn’t embroidered vegetables, I would have embroidered grasses along the roadside”. The thought of what KK might make of grasses and flowers seems almost too exciting to contemplate. ❖

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