

Susan J. Palmer

Silken Stitches

Bio

Silk stitches have always attracted me. At the age of eight, when my family lived in Holland, we had an embroidery class in school where we were taught the different stitches – stem stitch, chain stitch, feather, buttonhole, fishbone, cross stitch, etcetera. We made samples to bring home which my mother still keeps. At age twenty-two living in California, my wild blues musician boyfriend took me to visit his grandmother who lived in a beautiful Victorian house. We'd had a fight and split up on the way so my face was red and puffy with crying, but after I showed an interest in the embroidery she had just laid aside to greet us, she opened up her Martha Washington-style sewing cabinet to reveal oval hoops, needles, thimbles and shining embroidery threads folded neatly rows like jeweled necklaces. She then handed me a stretch square of linen on a hoop and got me started.

When I go to museums I am most drawn to the Queen Anne appliqué, the Chinese phoenixes in gold thread, the Jacobean stitched leaves and flowers. Embroidering my own scenes and images is a bit like watercolour painting which I also studied. Each stitch is like a brushstroke, but more precious and palpable, like a writhing muscle or a string of beads. There is a sensual pleasure in threading the needle with pure colour and watching it pierce the taut fabric, disappear and resurface, pulling out silken thread - like a jumping fish with glittering scales.