

What is technique, and why are we so worried about it?

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All of us who are addicted to working with needle and thread have felt apprehension about "Technique." We know that judges are taught to look critically at the technique shown in the pieces they are examining, and that they have a certain number of points to award for the "good technique" that they see in a piece.

In a traditional piece of needlework there is seldom a question raised about technique. We know what we mean by it, and assume that technical skill will be present, noted, and commended. For example, in studying needlepoint we look to see that the stitches have been created in such a way as to make certain that the pull of the threads on the surface of each stitch goes the same way, always toward the center of the stitch. I think it would be safe to say that every one of what we call traditional forms of needlework has its own rules, which are intended to result in a work that is as close to perfection as possible on the surface. Basically there is a "correct" way to construct each stitch, and that is what we think of when asked about technique. But we can also think of technique in terms of good and careful workmanship.

But what if we are faced with a non-traditional work? What is good technique here? Indeed is technique even a relevant concept? It may be that traditional stitches are used in an unusual way, but are still present and can be evaluated. If no traditional stitches are present the viewer may be left wondering how to approach such a piece, because the safety-net of looking at stitch construction is not there. If the threaded needle has gone in-and-out of the ground fabric there are stitches there, and they are intimately concerned with the creation of the work. If we recall the idea of technique being the same as good and careful workmanship then looking for such workmanship can become part of our approach to non-traditional work.

This may also be the time to move above and beyond the surface, to assess the impact of the piece as a whole, and perhaps ask some different questions. Some of these questions might be: Does the piece as a whole grab my attention? and if so, how and why? Am I seeing evidence of the stitcher's creativity? Is the stitcher's knowledge and understanding of design visible? How do the stitches used contribute to the overall effectiveness of the work? What is the impact of the choice and placement of color? Am I looking at a work of art?

All of these questions should also be asked about a piece of traditional needlework, perhaps before any detailed inspection takes place. We need to learn to stand back and consider the effect that a stitched piece has on us, as well as getting nose-to-nose with individual stitches. Technique, or workmanship, has a part to play in the creation of a work of art, but it is not the only participant, and it is different for different stitchers. For some perfection in stitching is their ultimate aim, and beautiful works of art are created by these makers. Others follow a different vision, which is equally worthy of our admiration, but for all of us creation of beauty is our goal, and the standard by which we wish to be measured.

I feel like I have been picking at this for a long time, and I am glad to see it go. Did you know that someone once asked Truman Capote how he knew when a book was finished, and he replied "When they come and take it away from me"