



Why I Became an Embroiderer: Choices of High Fashion Embroiderers from Europe

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Despite being a prevalent part of the haute couture world and a highly visible element of high fashion collections, high fashion embroidery has largely been ignored by fashion researchers. There has been little research or documentation about the high fashion embroidery industry of Europe or of the professionals working within the industry. Monographs concerning the lives of individual embroidery designers, such as François Lesage give glimpses into the embroidery industry, but through an individual (White, 1994). Additionally, there are books that focus on haute couture workshops and include sections on couture embroidery. These give brief descriptions of the operations of high fashion embroidery ateliers (Naudin & Simon, 1996). However, these are some of the very few examples of literature concerning high fashion embroidery.

With so little documentation about the high fashion embroidery, the question arose, “How did the embroiderers find out about the industry?” As part of a qualitative study using oral history methods, I proceeded to ask that question to embroiderers in Paris, London, Milan, and the Lunéville area of France. The purpose was to find out what inspired them to become part of the high fashion embroidery industry and what choices guided their career path.

I interviewed 19 embroidery professionals ranging from interns to company presidents. The individuals all worked for high fashion embroidery companies that specialized in hand or hand-guided (Cornely-type or Irish-type) embroidery. I contacted companies in Paris, London, Milan, and the Lunéville area of France because of their connection to the high fashion industry, such as haute couture and alta moda. The embroiderers participated in interviews, which I recorded and later transcribed using the gisted method (Evers, 2011).

The embroiderers’ sources of interest could be grouped into one of three categories: 1) school or internship inspired me, 2) friends or family inspired me, or 3) other people or personal interest inspired me. While expected friends and family to be a large influence, due to the legends of passed-down embroidery skills, this was the smallest group. More embroiderers were influenced by what they learned in school and school internships or by a personal interest that either they discovered by themselves or someone else helped them discover.

All but one of embroiderers that stated school or an internship inspired them to become embroiderers were British. The British embroiderers had all attended a traditional university

where they majored in designed-oriented degrees and were required to complete internships. One of the British embroiderers said he wanted to study print design but his tutors told him, “You’re an embroiderer. You shouldn’t be doing print.” For the other embroiderers, the influence was not so direct, but it was as life changing.

The French embroiderers were more evenly split between being inspired by family members and by personal interests. A few of the embroiderers did grow up with exposure to embroidery, sewing, or dressmaking in the family. Some of these embroiderers directly attributed the exposure to their progress into the embroidery industry, however, not all. Two embroiderers were introduced to embroidery through close friends instead of family. One embroidery designer had a childhood friend whose father was a high fashion embroiderer. The connection eventually enticed the gentleman into the trade. For the second embroidery designer, a friend made a connection to her love for handwork and introduced her to a famous embroiderer.

Personal interests ranged from “liking to work with my hands” to a good business opportunity for one individual. One participant told me that would not have thought about embroidery except that another famous embroidery took interest in his fashion drawings and started talking to him. The reasons were varied but led to careers in the industry.

Each embroiderer related how they got into embroidery. Sometimes the story was long and heartfelt, sometimes brief and matter of fact. Nevertheless, each embroiderer acknowledged the importance of the events leading up to their choice to join the high fashion embroidery industry and none expressed any regrets. Finally, each embroiderer voiced their desire to let more people know about the high fashion embroidery industry so that the opportunity to become an embroiderer is open to more young people.

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