

Period Needlework

by Helen Abramovitch



Okay, you've got a character, a costume, and hopefully some kind of background. But what are you going to do while you are gossiping (Elizabethans were great talkers)?

Here is a partial list of various types of period needlework (and what is not period). This is a list of the major categories only, and what I have been able to find through my research.

Crochet and tatting are not period. The earliest crochet did not appear anywhere in Europe until after 1800, although an early form of a crocheted chain, now called Tambour Work, may have started during the late 16th Century. Tatting is Victorian.

Weaving is period, both on large floor looms, and on small looms where one could weave tapes or ribbons. An inkle loom -- if you call it a tape loom -- is O.K. Card weaving (or Tablet Weaving), was found in Egyptian Tombs, and so is an early method of weaving trim.

Knitting is definitely period. In fact, the first pair of silk stockings made on a knitting frame for Queen Elizabeth. Knitting needles were probably made of wood...definitely no metal or plastic! Braiding is also done, both with a tool called a Lucet, and just with your fingers.

Lace making; both bobbin lace and needle lace are done. The lace at this time was fairly narrow - no more than 2" wide. Definitely no lace fabric.

Embroidery - yes! No counted cross stitch, but Crewel, and Blackwork are period. Needlepoint is also appropriate, especially petit point (fine gauge). Needlepointed as well as woven tapestries are also done.

Spinning is done by all women, including the Queen. (I'm sure some men did it too, I just haven't found any reference to it). The kind of wheels that are at the Woolery, are Saxony style. They are called "Flyer" wheels and were invented in the 1530's (new invention!) The more upright style of wheel is 18th century.

Drop spindles (in England), had the whorl on the bottom. (Top whorl spindles appeared elsewhere in the world at this time, but not England or Europe).

Fiber:

Cotton - very expensive, had to be imported from the East.

Silk - also very expensive and new.

Flax - yes. Anyone could grow flax. (It takes about a year from the time the seeds are planted until you have the fiber ready to spin). When flax is spun and woven it is known as linen.

When spun wet it is very smooth, when spun dry it is a little rougher.

Ramie - also a plant fiber, spun wet or dry. Has a slightly shiny look, very white in color. (I'm not positive whether ramie is period or not...I've heard both ways).

Wool - this is the most common fiber used. (In fact the Queen enacted a law stating that all men must wear a woolen cap on Sunday; this to promote the English wool industry).

If you are going to knit out at Faire, you can cheat and use acrylic yarn...just make sure it does not have anything in it that sparkles, shines, glistens, etc. Take it outside when the sun is out

and look at it. Wool-Ease (Lion Brand) is very good. It looks and feels like wool, but it is machine wash and dry. You can find Wool Ease, acrylic yarn (Wintuk, Sayelle, or Red Heart) at Jo Ann, Michaels, or Wal Mart. Of course, you can go to any of the "knitting stores", and pay \$\$\$\$.

One last thing, if you are learning, dark colors are the hardest...(hard to see the stitches). The pull skeins will have to be re-wound into balls. (Great project for late in the day or for kids...you don't have to think!)

If you've got any questions...ask me! I'll be glad to help anyone with any of these various types of needlework , before, during, or after Faire. (I have lots of wooden knitting needles, both single and double pointed [for stockings] and period patterns). I also have various sizes of knitting frames that can be used during faire. The only thing I do not do is lace making, but I know who does this in Ives. All you have to do is ask.

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