

142 OF 172 / Set 1 Copyright (c) 1998 Los Angeles Times 000048299

### **Stitches in Time**

Links to the past and handmade tradition make needlepoint enduring and endearing.

By MARNELL JAMESON, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Los Angeles Times Saturday May 23, 1998

Orange County Edition Home Design Part N Page 1 View Desk  
29 inches; 1027 words

In a world where scientists can clone sheep and computers can beat top chess champions, it's comforting to fill the recesses of your home with something technology has not touched.

That's one theory for needlepoint's resurgence in popularity among both stitchers and consumers of the finished, always handmade, product.

"Needlepoint carries a wonderful, Old World look that can be both country and formal," says Michael Illouljian, owner of Aga John's, a wholesale rug seller with stores in Laguna Hills, West Hollywood and San Francisco. "It can create a French Renaissance feel or go beautifully in a traditional home."

Because rugs can cost anywhere from \$800 to \$60,000, pillows to \$400, the uninitiated are more than a little confused as to what constitutes worth. Value, say the experts, boils down to quality of materials, number of colors, fineness of stitch, smoothness of line and the piece's age and condition.

When evaluating a needlepoint piece--whether rug, pillow or wall art--consider those factors as well as how much you love it.

One of the biggest value markers is age. Needlework pieces appreciate in value with age, provided they're kept in good condition. (Illouljian recommends periodic dry cleaning.) Antique rugs are 80 years and older. Faded color and natural wear enhance patina and price.

The earliest needlepoint rugs came from England and date to the mid-1800s. Any rug from the end of the 19th century is valuable.

From the early 1900s until about 10 years ago, when China perfected the art and began to serve as the main source, Portugal was the primary

exporter of needlepoint rugs to this country.

A new 9-foot-by-12-foot needlepoint rug wholesales for \$800 to \$2,400, depending on the colors. That's considered a bargain when you think of the time involved to make it. A needlepoint rug from China that sells for \$1,500 here would cost \$10,000 if it were made in the U.S., Illoulilian says.

Antique rugs can be found from reputable rug dealers, but handmade needlepoint pillows and tapestries tend to stay in families, says Lani Silver, owner of Lani's Needlepoint in Studio City. "You can find some lovely relics in antique stores and at garage and estate sales, but it takes luck."

It also might take imagination. Silver, who has a penchant for vintage needlepoint, buys old needlepoint works and updates them with antique fabric backings and trims. These reinterpreted pillows retail for \$300 to \$400.

One of her favorite "new" needlepoint looks is by Ralph Lauren. "His pillows have a knife edge finish, no trim, with a velvet back. They are very stark and go in everything from a New England beach house to a high-tech Manhattan apartment."

As with the purchase of any high-priced antique, be wary, warns Sheila Perrone, a Newport Beach interior designer. "Sellers sometimes misrepresent age and authenticity. Others have been known to say a product is silk when it's really fine cotton. To the uneducated consumer, it's a case of caveat emptor."

If you're going to drop several grand, Perrone recommends first reading up on the subject or calling a museum that has a decorative arts collection to see if they have someone you can pay to authenticate a piece. Also, she adds, deal with vendors who have been in the business a long time and who have a good reputation, "which they couldn't have earned if they were frauds."

To evaluate fiber quality yourself, first make sure it's not moth-eaten. Pull at the yarn on the back side, under the lining, if you can, Silver advises. That's where the wool tends to fall apart. If it breaks apart easily, pass.

If you love an old piece that's in overall good condition but has a stain or is slightly moth-eaten, you can have it restored, but that's expensive.

If you're not looking for antiquity or prestigious provenance, many beautiful and far less expensive pieces are at hand. Pieces produced en masse, usually in China, are often well made and inexpensive. If you like the design and the price is right, you probably can't go wrong. Just don't be surprised if you see the pillow elsewhere. Originality comes with a price.

You'll also pay a bit more for shading, which can greatly impact beauty.

"You can have two rugs of the same dimensions and same size stitches, and the one that uses more colors will be more valuable," Illouljian says. "Some flowers are made with two colors, some with six or seven. The one with more is better.

"Also look to see if the rug is blocked well. All the stitches should be even, and the rug should lie flat and truly square at the corners."

Another consideration is line flow, says Carol Harrison, a partner for Strands & Stitches in Laguna Beach. A pattern that looks too geometric or has obvious stairstep edges when you want to see a smooth curve gets demerits.

"When the oval on a flower petal looks like a diamond, chances are the design wasn't conceived well, or it should have been stitched on a finer canvas."

Finer canvases allow for more detail, which also has a price but is easy to measure. Get out a ruler, lay it along a row of needlepoint and count how many stitches in an inch.

Most rugs are stitched on 10-mesh canvas, 10 stitches to the linear inch or 100 stitches to the square inch. If you find a rug stitched in 14 or 18, you have something valuable, Silver says.

Needlepoint pillows are more commonly stitched on canvases finer than 10-mesh, allowing for better line control and finer texture. Smaller than 18 stitches per inch gets you into the realm of petit point, an art in itself, Harrison says.

All this is assuming the needlepoint is done in what is called continental stitch, a basic diagonal stitch repeated evenly throughout a canvas, and the basis for 98% of needlepoint.

However, needlepoint offers more than 200 stitches, many quite decorative. A lovely piece that incorporates many stitches could add

value--if the stitches were used well.

The least expensive needlepoint pillows would be produced in quantity, though still by hand, on a printed, large gauge canvas, probably a 10-mesh. It would have minimal shading and rough edges where one color transitions into another, and it would probably incorporate a lower grade of wool.

A finer piece would be stitched on 18-mesh canvas, in numerous colors with more attention to shading and line flow, using the finest wool, silk or cotton.

If you can't find the right rug or needlepoint seat covers, you can order custom pieces. Illouliau works with designers who bring him designs they've created or ones they've copied from antique books but have updated with today's colors.

Illouliau then sends such designs to China to be custom stitched. Another popular option is to buy seat cover canvases with pre-stitched patterns in the middle and the backgrounds left unfinished. You can select the background color and finish it yourself (simple, if repetitious, work, because you never change color), or send it to a stitching service in Haiti or the Philippines.

Die-hard needlepoint lovers do whatever it takes to get what they want, because, as Silver says, needlepoint is most wonderful when it says something about the person who owns it.

"What's most important is not dissecting the piece into parts, but the overall feeling it gives you. You could find a nice piece on six-mesh, made in just three colors by a sixth-grader, and though it's naive, it can make you feel very happy. That's just as valuable as any antique."

PHOTO: (2 photos) Detailed needlepoint of a wool rug, top, can take as long as a year to finish. Pillows, above, go for \$150 each in Laguna Niguel.

ID NUMBER: 19980523ohm0027

PHOTO: Needlepoint rugs can cost anywhere from \$800 to \$60,000.

ID NUMBER: 19980523ohm0028

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARK BOSTER / Los Angeles Times