

Illuminations in Dark Times: An Embroidered Bestiary

It was purely by coincidence that a little over two years ago I purchased an embroidery pattern—from an online mega store named for a South American river—with the purpose of occupying my hands. In the winter, when darkness comes early and temperatures drop, my partner and I spend many a cozy evening on the couch, wrapped in blankets, cats curled on our laps, streaming our favorite television shows. The problem is, even though I am theoretically sitting staring at one screen, I would often look up to realize that I had missed what was happening because I had actually been compulsively staring at the smaller screen aglow in my hands. The solution? Occupy those hands with another pursuit.

My first piece was a standard “bunch of flowers” embroidery pattern. I chose it for three reasons: 1) it was inexpensive, 2) it used a variety of stitches. Some beautiful patterns I saw only used one type of stitch, which I felt was not great for learning and testing one's skills, and 3) the kit included everything I needed: hoop, thread, needle, fabric, and instructions. It was not an especially exciting pattern, but it did confirm that could I competently perform the motions necessary to conjure flowers from thread—and, also, I enjoyed it. I found the motions soothing and meditative, and the results deeply satisfying. The only thing I was dissatisfied with was the subject matter; I knew if this hobby was to stick, I would need to find a muse that spoke to me. So, I dove into Pinterest and Google images, letting broad searches for embroidery show me what was possible and what might appeal to me. Along the way, I came across a technique known as needle painting or thread painting. Needle painting works by using long and short stitches to create shading, allowing colors to appear to fade into each other to create beautiful, lifelike works. If you do an image search for needle painting you will see a lot of flowers and wildlife, but the effects of needle painting reminded me of something else. The way the thread

fades and blends together in needle painting reminded me of images of the sometimes rude, often forlorn, and always strange creatures populating the pages of medieval manuscripts. If you look at a medieval manuscript closely, you can see the way the paint used to illuminate them has a similar quality to that effect achieved through needle painting. The paints, worked upon by the dual forces of chemistry and time, fade and blend to reveal subtle gradients in color that are not only beautiful, but also speak to us of the age and history of the physical books in which they reside. I had set out to find a muse, but had instead found an entire bestiary waiting to be brought to life.

When I began my new hobby in mid-February of 2020, I had no idea what the year had in store for me or the rest of the world. Over the past two years I have found a kind of quiet and meditative solace in bringing these ancient creatures to life in thread. I have created a total of eleven six-inch creatures in about as many months: two given as gifts to dear friends, the other nine climbing the walls of my home office, which was for about a year and a half my primary office. I often think of the monks and nuns who originally rendered them, working in the isolation of their scriptoriums, so many hundreds of years ago, and I consider my own isolation working from home during Covid. My life is certainly much larger in scope than that of a medieval monk or nun but staying cloistered inside due to a plague ravaging your land is an experience that, oddly, I now share with these medieval artists. I am sure I would be a strange and perhaps even unimaginable sight to them—sitting in my living room with the glow of a large flat screen television lighting my face, wearing clothing and generally living a life that would be foreign to them. But I like to imagine that, in my embroidery, they would be able to see something recognizable: an art form that stretches even further back in time than their own works of paint on parchment, and has endured into our own digital age where, with a few taps of

a finger, their own creations can be summoned to a small glowing screen that fits in the palm of a person's hand.

The Process

I find most of the images I use by searching Pinterest, which has an extensive collection of artwork from illuminated manuscripts. Sometimes the images on Pinterest have citations to go with them, but far more often they do not. I use reverse image searches in Google to hunt down citations for or the actual digitized versions of the manuscripts in which the illuminations I am searching for appear. This can be tricky because a lot of the results I get in these searches just link back to the same unattributed Pinterest posts that I originally found--so I have also learned to rely on my own growing knowledge of the styles of different manuscripts to identify works. For example: Creature 4. can be found all over the internet on lists, in blog posts, pins, and tweets of medieval cats, none of which provide any kind of citation whatsoever. Growing frustrated I tried to think of how else I might track down the manuscript this cat called home, and then it occurred to me, the colors of the paint and the style of the cat were strikingly similar to the two other creatures I had done from the Luttrell Psalter manuscript. Could that be this cat's source? I navigated to the British Library's digital version of the manuscript containing 639 pages/images, and began flipping through scanning each page, looking for my elusive cat. By some small mercy the cat was lounging on folio 22.r near the front of the book. I had found him!

In addition to where I get my images, the question I am most frequently asked is how I create my patterns. I have tried a few different methods including tracing with a backlight and print and stick pattern paper, but the technique I like best is using transfer paper.

- 1) I download a copy of the image to my computer and flip it along its horizontal axis so that it will be oriented correctly after tracing, I erase as much of the background as I can to save printer ink, and I then print.



2) I lay down a wooden cutting board to protect whatever surface I'm working on, then the transfer paper face up, then the fabric facedown so that the side of the fabric touching the transfer paper is the side I will embroider on, then the printed image which I secure to the fabric with duct tape.



3) I use a thick needle wrapped with duct tape to protect my fingers to trace over the image. By applying pressure and carefully tracing color transfers to the fabric creating a pattern to work from. For color and shading I keep a copy of the original on my phone to reference while I work.



I try to stay as faithful to the colors of the original work as possible, but occasionally I take artistic license and diverge. For example: the original image for Creature 5 is very busy so I chose to scale it back and focus on the primary image of the hell mouth, while for Creature 7 I chose to make the horn and the haunch dappling gold. I always include citations, and where relevant dates and other context, with my finished work. I post all of my work to my embroidery account on Instagram [@Embroidered_Bestiary](#)

The Bestiary

Creature 1

Embroidery completed March 15th 2020

London, British Library, Monsters of the Luttrell Psalter, MS 42130, Fols. 69r.

Manuscript made in Lincolnshire, England, between 1320-1340 for Sir Geoffrey Luttrell.



Creature 2

Embroidery completed April 8th 2020

Aberdeen, Special Collections Center University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen Bestiary, Fols. 68V-MS



12th century English Illuminated manuscript.

Creature 3

Embroider completed April 11th 2020

London, British Library, Monsters of the Luttrell Psalter, MS 42130 Fols. 84r



Creature 4

Embroidery completed April 16th 2020

London, British Library, Monsters of the Luttrell Psalter, MS 42130 Fols. 22r.



Creature 5

Embroidery completed May 15th 2020

(Made as a gift for a friend who loves the imagery of Medieval hell mouths)

New York, The Morgan Library, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, in Latin. MS 945 Fols. 168v.



Creature 6

Embroidery completed May 24th 2020

The Virtual Library of Medieval Manuscripts, Aix-en-Provence, Bibl. MS. 0011, p. 463 - view 2



Creature 7

Embroidery

completed early

June 2020



(Gift for a friend)

London, British

Library, Monsters of the Luttrell Psalter, MS 42130, Fols. 178v



Creature 8

Embroidery

completed July

2nd 2020

Paris,



Sainte-Geneviève, MS. 1029, Fols. 79r

Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum* (Occitan version), Toulouse ca. 1350.



Creature 9

Embroidery completed July 25th 2020

London, British Library, Monsters of the Luttrell Psalter, MS 42130, Fols. 192r





Creature 11

Completed January 30th 2021

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, "Nun offers cat fish in exchange for penis Fleisch macht Fleisch



(Meat Gives Meat),” German Engraving 1555.