

Brazilian Dimensional Embroidery Contemporary Hand Embroidery for the 21st Century

By Rosalie Wakefield

Development, Growth and Popularity of a Creative New Form of Stitchery

Creativity – Color – Innovation – Artistry: The experimental stitcher suddenly enters the amazing Technicolor dream world of Brazilian dimensional embroidery by using the basic stitches of traditional embroidery, and then changing wraps, loops, numbers and combinations, and incorporating silken smooth 100% rayon floss. The final result is an exciting new way of expressing one's imagination and producing truly stunning art with the needle.

Rayon fiber was developed in the mid-nineteenth century as a substitute for natural fibers such as cotton, linen, silk or wool, each of which had specific undesired properties. It was first known as artificial silk, then as viscose near the end of the nineteenth century, and finally in 1924 it became known as rayon after it was combined with plant cellulose. Its successful commercial production by the American Viscose Company began in the United States in 1910. DuPont Chemicals acquired the rights to the process in the 1920s and quickly turned rayon into a household word, churning out yards of the inexpensive, versatile fabric when textile manufacturers found they could purchase the fiber for half the price of raw silk.

Rayon and viscose are manufactured in the same process, but they differ in materials used. While rayon can be made with cellulose from a variety of plants, viscose is made from wood pulp or cotton linter. Rayon is highly absorbent and easy to dye; viscose looks like silk and feels like cotton. Rayon is usually classified as a manufactured fiber and considered to be "regenerated cellulose".

The Origins of Brazilian-style Embroidery

Rayon fibers were first used to manufacture fabrics, and rayon threads were eventually produced for embroiderers in the home. Today a variety of rayon threads are used for home and machine embroidered products, as well as for many other applications. In the mid-twentieth century, a young cottage industry in South America saw the origins of this embroidery as a few Brazilian homemakers began to hand-dye rayon viscose fibers for their household linens and other items. Mrs. Elisa Hirsch Maia, better known as Madam Maia, receives credit for first producing the dyed, brightly-colored threads used for Brazilian embroidery in the early 1960s.

The original rayon threads were sold under the name Var-I-Cor, and later the floss was available as Mat-I-Kor. Other rayon threads, some stranded, were produced by Star, Coats, Divine Threads, Dye-Pot, Rajmahal, Marlitt, the DMC Corporation, and others. Today most stitchers are drawn to the high quality rayon floss produced by the EdMar Company, located in the United States, for their embroidery.

Growth of Brazilian Embroidery

The popularity of the embroidery, its vibrant colors and dimensional stitches led to gradual growth of the art. Soon small groups of stitchers along the West Coast of the United States began to gather and share information about the stitches, teaching each other from a limited number of designs available in the 1960s and 1970s. The designs, mostly floral, were often used to embellish wearable items and household items such as pillows and other linens.

Contributing to further development were the number of teachers willing share and teach what they have learned from others as interest in the needle art extended throughout the United States and Canada. The creative stitches and colorful fibers inspire stitchers and teachers alike to more adventurous stitching and also motivate designers to create ever more designs for others to stitch.

Modern Brazilian Embroidery

Dimensional stitches may be made with any fiber, most often with S-twist Perle cotton. However, embroidery work takes on the added description of "Brazilian" dimensional embroidery when the lustrous Z-twist rayon floss is used. Rayon threads used for Brazilian embroidery are Z-twist, whereas fibers such as Perle cotton are S-twist. The difference is apparent when wrapping dimensional bullion stitches. Z-twist rayon thread must be wrapped clockwise

around the needle so the thread plies do not separate. Directional wrapping and looping adds a final touch of beauty to dimensional stitches including bullion, cast-on, buttonhole stitch, stem and outline stitch.

Z-twist rayon floss is manufactured exclusively in the United States by EdMar Company, which offers the floss in over 200 colors – shaded, variegated, over dyed and solid. It is available in eight different weights, from the very finest (equivalent to one strand of DMC rayon) to heavier weights and also nubby textured floss.

BDEIG, the Brazilian Dimensional Embroidery International Guild is Formed

Due to the foresight of one person, Virginia Chapman, the Brazilian Dimensional Embroidery International Guild was formed in the early 1992. Virginia began offering seminars through her own B.E. business, including classes and a source for threads, books and designs. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response, she worked to fulfill her dream – a guild for other stitchers who enjoyed this form of needlework. In the twenty years since the guild was formed, it has become a truly international guild with over 400 members throughout the world. Each year more stitchers find out about B.E. through various online resources, small chapter classes and the many books and instructional designs available.

Florence Worcester, one of the guild's early presidents, encouraged members to "Each One, Teach One", and stitchers have happily shared their knowledge with others. Because of the large number of creative stitchers who begin designing, the guild encourages and protects the rights of each designer with copyright education articles in the guild's quarterly newsletter, *The B.E. Wrap-Up*, and in classes. Rather than suppress the creative spirit, this knowledge arms designers with information so they can freely design or teach the work of other designers.

The Future of Brazilian Embroidery

Dimensional embroidery with rayon floss is now trending toward other needlework disciplines. In addition to traditional Brazilian dimensional embroidery, stitchers are experimenting with rayon floss for stumpwork, crewel, blackwork in color, Romanian lace, crochet, needlepoint, needle lace and cross stitch.

Floral motifs have been beautifully combined with rayon-thread machine embroidery, where a design is partly embroidered by machine and finished by hand with embroidered floss flowers. Adding even more dimension, YLI's Candlelight, which is another Z-twist fiber, other fibers such as those from Rainbow Gallery, beads and even ribbonwork are included. This is most noticeable in crazy quilting. Applications are limited only by the stitcher's imagination.

After stitchers were introduced to the popular ribbon embroidery that is often used for crazy quilting, embroiderers soon began to incorporate the durable and colorful stitches of dimensional embroidery to embellish their projects. Many stitchers now enjoy art quilting as textiles are creatively embellished with colorful fibers. Fiber art can take many forms and uses many materials especially created for the artist.

Exciting color choices and textures stimulate the imagination of creative needle artists as additional designs and books about Brazilian embroidery become more easily available to stitchers. Online forums, blogs and email correspondence increase knowledge for new stitchers.

The Brazilian Dimensional Embroidery International Guild (BDEIG, Inc.) has lists of contacts, sources of supply, guides to stitches, and free patterns, as well as information about upcoming seminars, workshops and other guild activities. In addition to education about copyright issues, the BDEIG Standards Committee also encourages continuing education with other papers, such as class guidelines and procedures for judging at competitions.

The future for Brazilian dimensional embroidery looks as bright as the amazing array of rayon threads produced for creative stitchers.

I was invited to write about Brazilian embroidery for Needle Arts, the magazine of the Embroiderers Guild of America in March, 2013. This is a copy of that article.

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