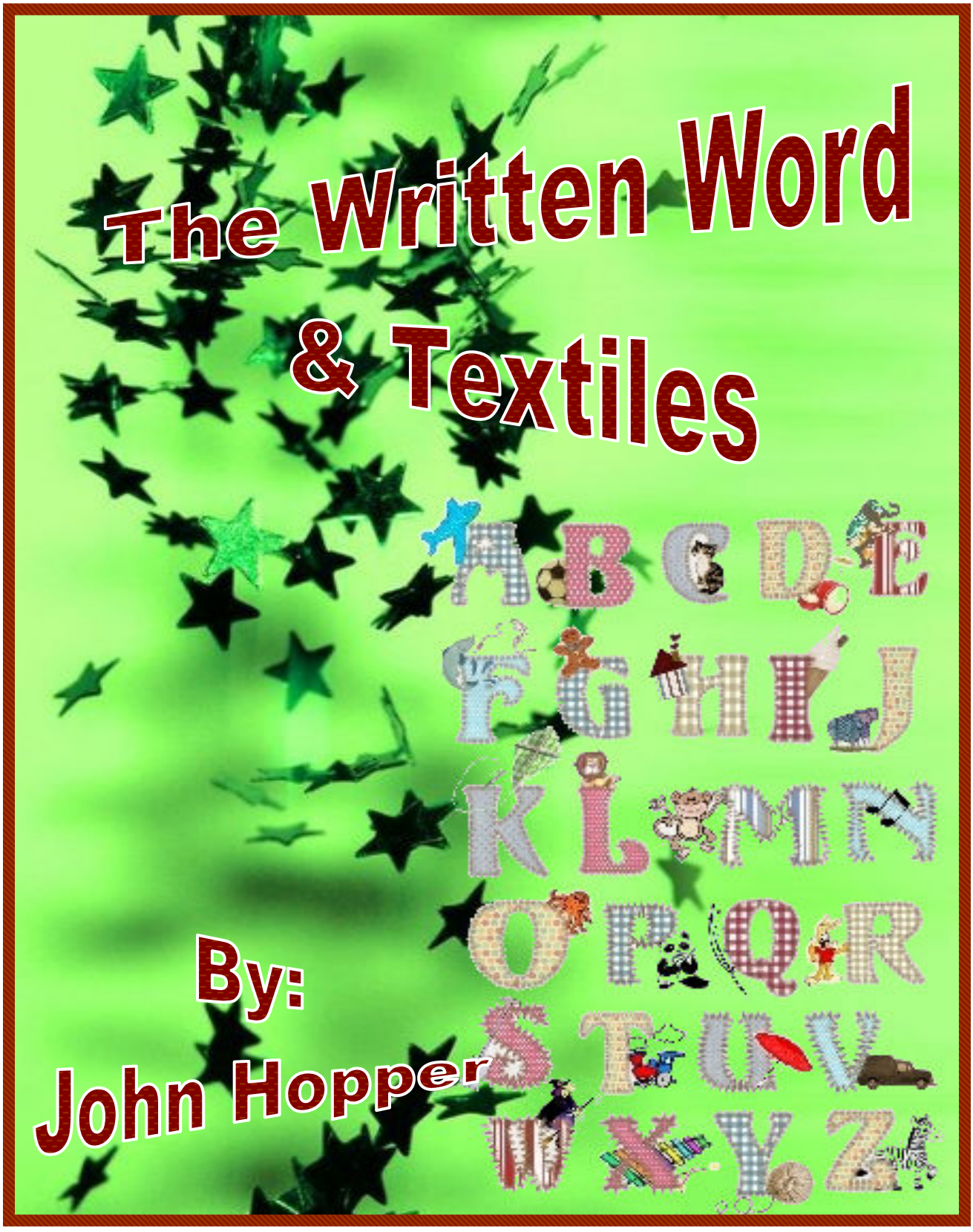
The Written Word
& Textiles
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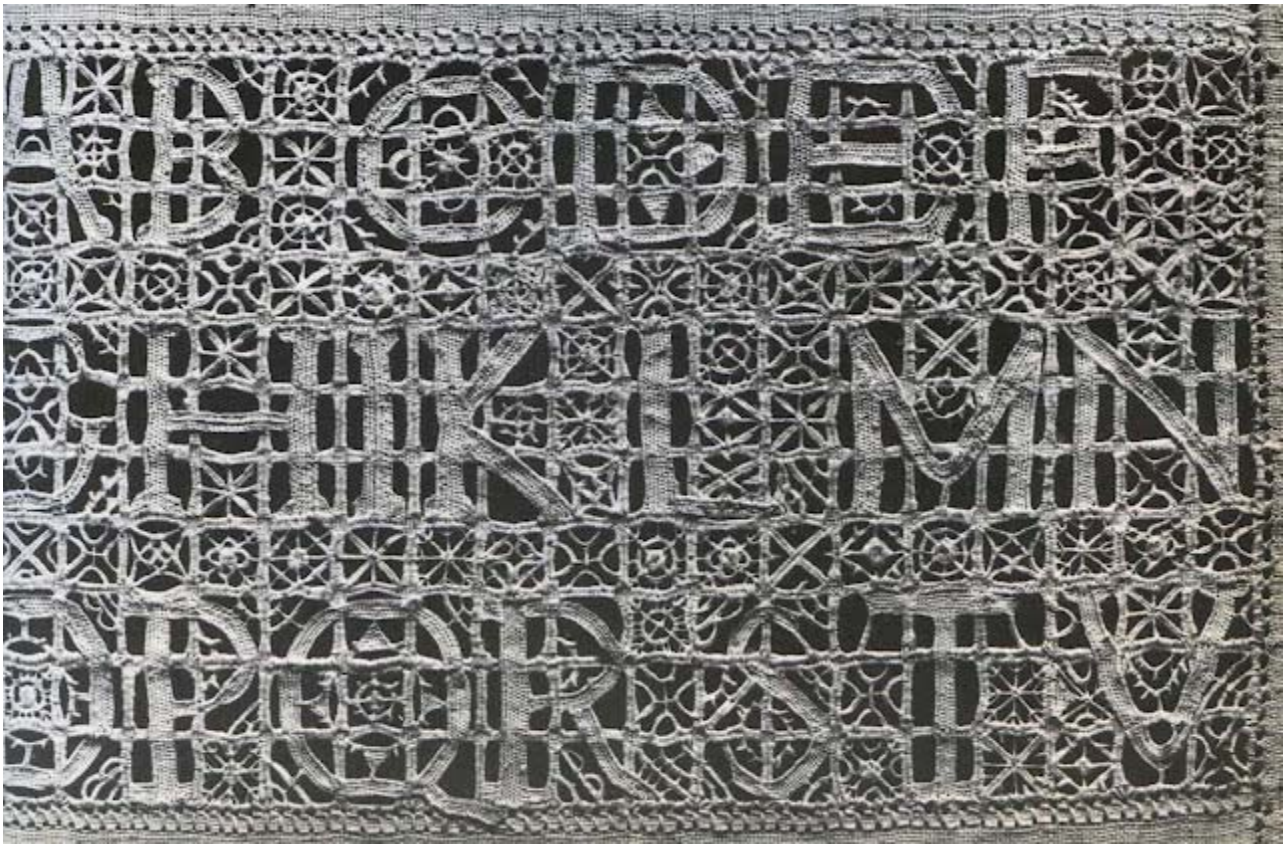

Illustration: **Latin alphabet in needle-made lace.**

The written word has long been associated with textiles. Probably ever since the invention of script, which post-dated textiles by quite a stretch of human history, script of differing cultures has been added to textile products to explain, enhance and sometimes merely to embellish or decorate.

The written word within a textile base has very often appeared in embroidery, but not so often in lace. This is not to say of course that such a precedence does not exist, the examples shown in this article clearly show letters being used in a variety of guises and across different generations, in fact alphabet patterns for lace are still being produced today. However, they are not nearly as popular as geometric, floral and even elements of realism in composition.

The pattern world that existed before the invention of script, in any form, was long and extensive as was the non-literal culture of the human species; we have lived more generations without written script than we have with. Therefore it would probably go without saying that the amount of textile pattern work, whether it be in printed, woven,

embroidery, or lace, that uses a much older system of decoration than written script, has dominated our various cultures.

There is also the matter of the cultural limitation of reading and writing which for many generations was severely limited to those with power and was very often maintained within the upper sections of a hierarchy. This meant that often those producing script for textiles might well not have known what they were producing and could well have taken the idea of script as one of an extension of the pattern work that was involved in the composition. This copying of unfamiliar text has led to all sorts of interesting accidents and unintentional mistakes. Islamic derived textile work from North Africa and the Islamic Mediterranean was often imitated in Europe, that the Islamic text was also copied without an understanding of its meaning led to Islamic script gradually losing its identity as a written language the more times it was copied so that eventually the script became little more than a decorative construct, a blurred image of the initial lettering. There are a number of European medieval textile based pattern work examples still in existence that pay homage to the original Islamic pattern work but pay scant knowledge to the initial script which correspondingly becomes unreadable.

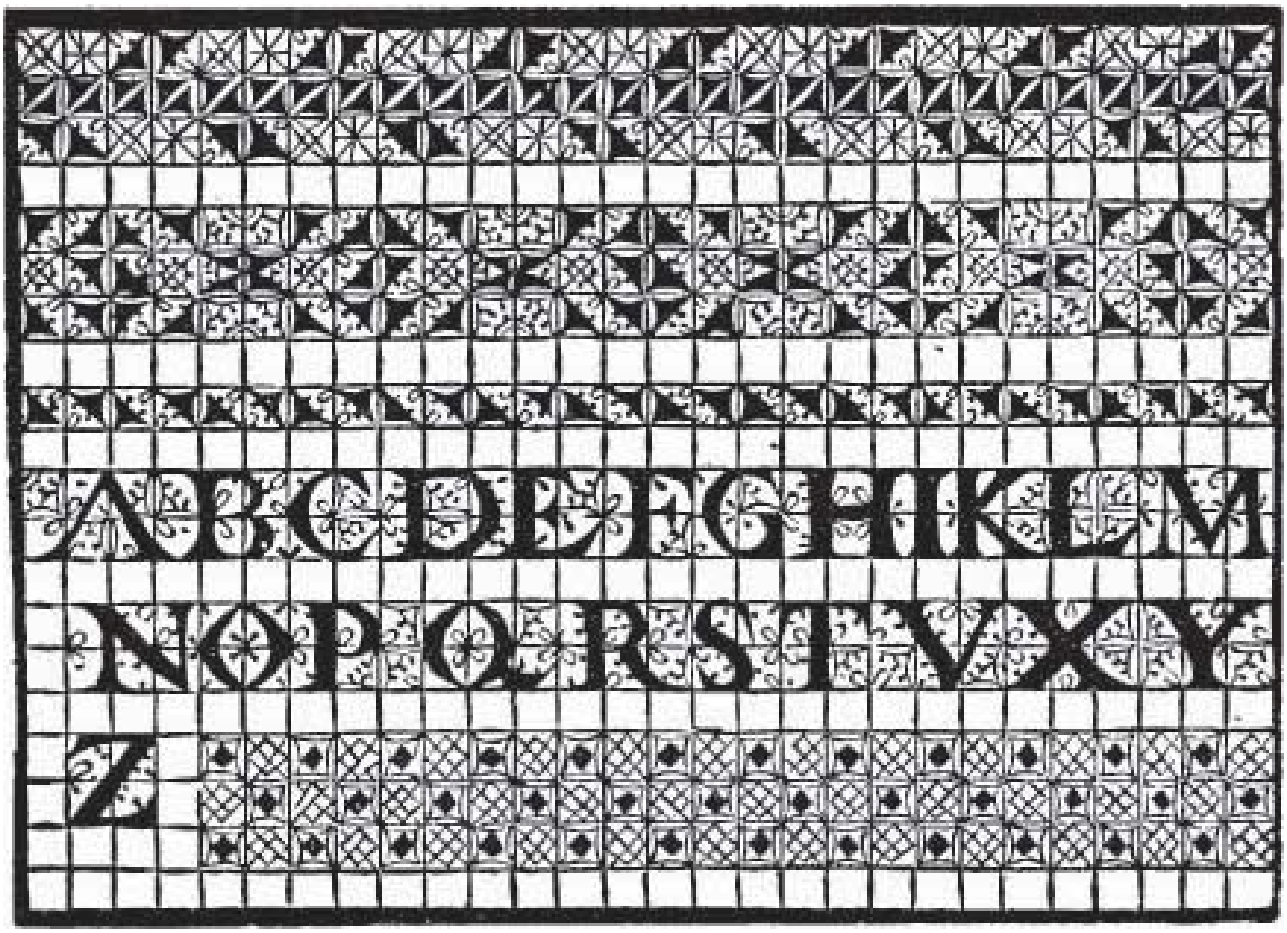

Illustration: Cut work incorporating the Latin alphabet, 1550.

The same must also have been true for the Latin alphabet used across much of Europe. Although much of the prodigious medieval work produced must have been carefully guided by those in the hierarchy who could read and write, there must also have been a certain amount of work that was copied and recopied without any real idea as to the true nature of the sound of each letter and word, just as to its shape as in a motif or pattern. That these letters would eventually have become corrupted and non-readable goes without saying. However, this pathway that led illiterate makers to reproduce script which they would never be able to understand is both an important one in the development of at least an avenue of textile design and craft, but also a social one whereby millions of bright and intelligent individuals were purposely denied the right to understand script in order to control their destiny and that of their descendants.

Alphabet training in Europe, particularly for children became important and more wide-ranging in the eighteenth and particularly nineteenth century, when children of most classes were expected to have at least a modicum of literacy. Much of this, interestingly, had to do with the development of the railways. Whilst it had always been important in previous generations to withhold literacy from all but the most powerful or seemingly useful members of society, Railway Company's as they expanded their role in transportation, needed an ever increasing workforce. As the timetable was central to the railway network it became an important necessity that literacy was introduced to the vast bulk of the population, many of whom would have been employed in the railways and their support network of companies and services. Whilst it may appear as if the extension to near universal education in much of Europe was led by a struggle towards equality, as with many movements by national governments, pin-pointed pressure from commerce and industry to address the practical needs of business and enterprise really led events.

As to the lace examples themselves, the first is of unknown origin but is a fine example of not only the use of individual Latin letters within the lace craft, but the incorporation of decorative work which both adds to and integrates the alphabet into a framework. This framework might appear a little heavy duty, compared to some of the lighter touch lace work, but it has a strong identity and works extremely well as a solid piece of compositional work of both pattern and script.

The next example is of cutwork from the mid-sixteenth century. In some respects it is very similar to the first example in that it has incorporated both the alphabet and decorative detail within the same framework. Admittedly the framework itself does give the impression that it practically holds the letters together and therefore lacks the delicate details of some of the gentler geometric work and certainly that of the floral based. However, the Latin alphabet is largely made up of relatively strict verticals and horizontals as opposed to some other scripts, the Islamic being the first to spring to mind. Therefore, because of its natural rigidity perhaps the framework can be seen as a compliment to the alphabet and certainly seen as a practical extension to the geometric nature of the script.

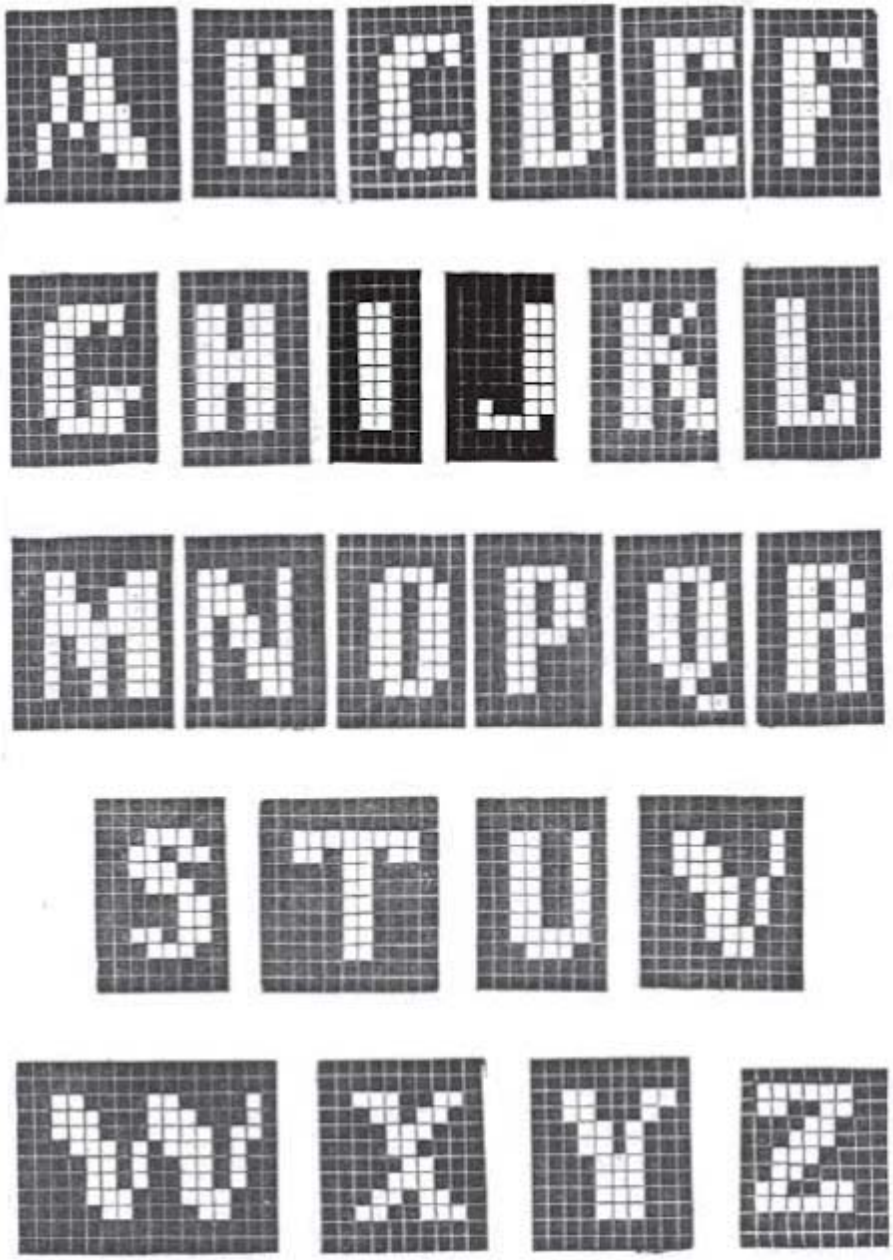

Illustration: Latin alphabet for crochet, 1858.

The last illustration is from the mid-nineteenth century and is an example of a crocheted alphabet. This example is much stricter, having a simple almost brutally practical attitude to it. Script in embroidery and lace became popular in the nineteenth century as it was used for many more practical rather than decorative-based purposes. Textile based lettering was used in domestic life to identify any number of small containers that contained anything from gloves, spectacles, cigars, buttons, all of which had to be individually identified.

In some respects the use of lettering within textiles, whether officially or within the more domestic craft network, tells us much about the development of our own relationship with the written word and the long path over generations between the original withholding of literacy to the many, to the eventual and often grudgingly won expansion of literacy to all. The fact that much of our textile output today is script free is an interesting one, considering literacy is seen by most as a fundamental human right. However, the number of combinations of script and language and our tendency to do business on an international scale, might well limit the appeal of script based textiles. We still live in a world whereby many speak and write in only one of the over six and a half thousand spoken human languages available on the planet. In that respect we still have a long way to go fully understand each other and our myriad of cultures.

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