

Gu's Embroidery

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Abstract

In Chinese embroidery history, the Gu's embroidery (originally a boudoir craft from Lu Xiang Yuan) as a famous brand, was well introduced and accepted during its commercialization. In fact, the Gu's Embroidery became the synonym of all embroideries at that time, and further exerted a far-reach influence upon the "Four Renowned Embroideries" existing in the Qing dynasty through the modern times. It is really a fun for both painting and embroidery lovers to explore the refined tastes of the Gu's embroidery and its cultural background, as the fancy art is deemed a height of Ming and Qing embroidery art.

Keywords: China, Ming dynasty, Female art, Embroidery, Stitch technique

1. Background of the Gu's Embroidery

Gu's Embroidery was created by the ladies of Gu Mingshi's family in Shanghai during the Late Ming Dynasty. It was popular sayings that Mm. Miao, a concubine of Gu Huihai (Gu Mingshi's first son) was the first master of Gu's Embroidery. Only one Miscellaneous Album in the world is concealed by Shanghai Museum. A private seal that reads "Miao shi rui yun" (named Miao Ruiyun) was embroidered on one leaf. Later, another master named Han Ximeng, the wife of the second grandson of Gu Mingshi, developed new skills and was reputed as "Saint Needle". Her embroidery was honored as Ms. Han's Embroidery because of her great reputation in the late Ming Dynasty (17th). Both of them were not only clever at drawing but also at embroidery before marriage. Since entered the Gu's, they had chance to appreciate the classical paintings involved in such reined critical by their husbands' friends of high officials, literati and artists. Under such art influence, they specialized in combining painting and calligraphy with embroidery. Here, the artistic stitch and ink got along well with each other. Furthermore, fine unique observation and the art feeling of female were infiltrated in the painting embroidery.

2. One school of outstanding Gu's embroidery for vivid effect

Their most important contribution was new embroidery techniques, specially in thread preparing, color matching and stitching. Based on embroidery techniques of the Song dynasty, the Gu's Embroidery further improved the old techniques. The Gu's ladies splited the thread to get fine delicate one for different width line. The elegant taste seen in the Gu's embroidery is brought out by a great breakthrough in sewing techniques --- the birth of the irregular long and short stitch (Figure. 1) and the hairy stitch (Figure. 2). In order to create a natural color shade, they also gave up the encroaching satin stitch and refined the long and short stitch in order to solve the problem of abrupt shades and obvious traces left by stitches. The stitches looks irregular arranged both in length and direction for smooth effect. Hairy stitches were added when the motif was animal. Through the unique tone and texture brought out by silk materials and sewing techniques, the embroidery works always possesses an exquisite, feminine and soft flavor that painting brushes can not express. Since both Miao Ruiyun and Han Ximeng were so familiar with the affection of silk thread in reflecting the lights, they could create vivid looks of multi-hued of the silk embroidery painting even by using just only one color silk thread. Such improvement pushed the Gu Embroidery a big step further in copying classical works and rendering the nature. What made their embroidery excels over other embroideries were their aesthetic acuity and art perception.

If not looking closely enough at Gu's embroidery, it is very difficult to distinguish the difference between the beautiful contemporary embroidery works and Gu's embroidery pieces. Some works had detailed pin marks. Some works magically portrayed the edge of the rocks, ashy or cloudy waves, trees in the wind, shape claws and leather of accipiter, and utensils, in elegant picturesque decorative way. The achievement of Gu's embroidery is beyond description.

2.1 Examples from Miao Ruivun's

For example, a masterpiece produced in the early stage of the Gu's embroidery, *Miscellaneous album* by Miao Ruiyun (from Shanghai Museum), was the most extraordinary one at that time. It consists of ten leaves, respectively *Withered tree, bamboo and rockery, Bamboo, Zhaojun's departure for the frontier, Wenji parting with her family, Sad farewell of Su Wu to Li Ling, Li Guang defends the frontier, Bird, camellia and plum blossoms, Squirrels and grapes, Falcon on a willow sprig, Crabapple and Chinese bulbul. The two works, Withered tree, bamboo and rockery and Bamboo, were embroidered in the style close to the famous paintings from Song and Yuan Dynasties. Some well-known scenes of historic stories were displayed in the works of <i>Zhaojun's departure for the frontier, Wenji parting with her family, Sad farewell of Su Wu to Li Ling* and *Li Guang defends the frontier*. The rest of the four leaves were motifs of birds and flowers. What amazed the observers was that Miao Ruiyun improved the technique from arrays of long and short stitches to irregular ones. Her works are shown the high quality in expressing the spirit of the prototype work deftly by colored threads.

Withered tree, bamboo and rockery (Figure. 3) and Bamboo(Figure. 4) were stitched along the vigorous shapes. By closely observing the tree shape, the master emphasized the craggy looks and the mottled scar features by variety stitches of different location, direction and adding stitches in different color. In addition, she developed irregular long and short stitch through turning its direction for curve stroke. (Figure 3-1)

Four pieces depicted respectively scenes of famous stories about frontier fortress in the Han Dynasty, Zhaojun's departure for the frontier, Wenji parting with her family, Sad farewell of Su Wu to Li Ling and Li Guang defends the frontier. Zhaojun's departure for the frontier was about the historical fact during the reign of Yuandi (B.C48~33). (Figure. 5) Wang Zhaojun was sent to the Huns as an ambassador of the Han dynasty and married Hun's khan. In this leaf, each Figureure was expressive. For example, Zhaojun was blushing and nervous while the maid carrying Zhaojun's lute looked back at the way where they came from which indicating that she was reluctant to leave her country. Khan who came to receive his bride was gazing at this beauty with great joy. Two Huns carrying flags looked at each other with pleasure eye look of returning home. Wenji parting with her family (Figure. 6) was about the story that (A.D25~220) Cai Wenji came back to Central China from the Huns in the end of the Eastern Han dynasty. This leaf depicts the very scene of Cai Wenji's parting with her husband and son just before her leaving. Her eyes were full of complaint while her husband looked sad. Sad farewell of Su Wu to Li Ling and Li Guang defends the frontier (Figure. 7) depicts the scene of the departure of Su Wu and his best friend Li Ling. Su was an ambassador of the Han dynasty who was imprisoned by the Huns for nineteen years. Li Ling used to be a general of the Han dynasty but surrendered to the Huns later. In this picture, Su Wu and Li Ling stood gazing at each other, sadly and reluctantly while the sheep were playing happily as usual. The contrast expression made the scene even more sentimental. Li Guang defends the frontier (Figure.8) is the story about General Li Guang in the Eastern Han dynasty. Since Li Guang guarded the frontier areas, the Huns dared not to invade the territory of the Han government for many years. This leaf depicts the scene of Li Guang accepting the peace treaty and the city in the distance was Lulong. Human Figureures depicting in these leaves are vivid and with elegant sculpts. Generally, these leaves were mainly executed in long and short stitch and parallel satin stitch. For example, human Figureure's heads and faces, garments, dogs, horses, flags, trees, grass, stones were all worked in these two stitches. Only some parts were finished in other stitches. Different stitches were used as required by different patterns. Fancy stitch against the painted texture was to create a jin-silk-like effect for silk rug on saddles and the lute bag. (Figure. 5-1, 5-2) Gold couching stitch was used for the edges of saddles and ribbons, hats and garments made of fur and tassels on horses ect.. (Figure. 8-1, 8-2) What made them so exclamatory is that although human Figureures and animals' eyes are no bigger than mosquito's head, they were still worked by embroidery delicately. In the tibia, boundaries between legs and stomach and parts of gills of a horse, silk threads were padded under the embroidery. From the minor variations in the body of the horse, there existed the applying of changing stitches, sometimes concentrated and sometimes scattered. The horse embroidered by Miao Ruiyun is very vivid, fat, healthy and strong. (Figure.5-3)

Four leaves depicting flowers and birds, *Bird, camellia and plum blossoms*, (Figure. 9) *Squirrels and grapes*, (Figure. 10) *Falcon on a willow sprig*, (Figure. 11) *Crabapple and Chinese bulbul*, (Figure. 12) were skillfully embroidered with elegant and blithesome color scheme and patterns faithful to life. The flowers, leaves, grapes and vines were embroidered in long and short stitch with threads in a variety of colors. For example, the plum sprigs in the leaf of camellia, plum blossom and bird were embroidered with threads in more than five colors including light green, gray-green, gray-purple and more. A leaf gnawed by worms in the leaf of squirrel and grape was embroidered with threads in no less than nine colors. (Figure. 10-1) Birds' bellies were executed in hair stitch, bodies in long and short stitch. Stamens was done by Chinese knot stitch. (Figure. 9-1, 9-2) The most wonderful leaf among the four works was *Squirrels and grapes* which was finished mainly by irregular long and short stitch, together with hair stitch in painting-styled embroidery for the first time. (Figure. 10-2)

2.2 Examples from Han Ximeng's

Miao Ruiyun made a breakthrough in the art of embroidered paintings. She discerned the limitations of parallel long and short stitch which was widely used in Suzhou, and developed an irregular long and short stitch for embroidering realistic paintings. Latter, Han Ximeng applied and improved the skill in her embroidery. (I deleted one sentence here.) The four album leaves were respectively titled *Rockery, flower and butterflies, Autumn cricket, Fish*, and *Waterweed and shrimps*. They were all chosen motifs of the surroundings of a pond in the garden.

Leaf 1: Rockery, flower and butterflies (Figure. 13)

A little rockery stood erectly on the slopes with several flower twigs growing beside and two butterflies fluttering lightly above the swaying flowers in the sun. The rockery was executed in long and short stitch with grey-green threads. The sloping land was first outlined by embroidery worked in slanting parallel satin stitch then painted. The butterflies were executed in long and short stitch with fine threads in different shades of yellow. The flowers were embroidered in irregularly centralized long and short stitch. It should be pointed out that the artist paid more attention to the final effect through perfect design including flexible density of silk stitches, the shadow of stitch and uncovered painting color. (Figure. 13-1) She produced a vivid visual effect for observer by the glisten characteristic of silk thread. It was a pity that similar motif could not be found in later Gu embroidery and the vivid expression of such techniques was missing.

Leaf 2: Autumn mecopoda (Figure. 14)

The embroidery depicts a mecopoda singing on a wildflower with its wings buzzing. Purple flowers were behind the rockery and graceful marguerite was spreading out. Irregular long and short stitch was used in horizontal for the mecopoda. Daisy leaves were used parallel stain stitch like fishbone. The colors of the leave were arranged from yellow-green, deep green to dark brown by using irregular long and short stitch due to the realistic leaf. The flower leaves were executed in long and short stitch while the stamens were in Chinese knot stitch. The mecopoda with strong legs and highly raised horns was very much alive.

Leaf 3: Fish (Figure. 15)

The embroidery depicts three fishes swimming in a clear pool. The water was so clear to see the algae floating between two silver-grey carps and tawny catfish. Some duckweed was drifting on the surface of the pool. Duckweed looked so rich with three-doped color hue stitches which were white, yellow and green. By using long and short stitches, there were five hues: the separation of white, light yellow, yellow, green and light green. Dark green was also useful in embroidering the duckweed when stitched in slightly different angle direction which helped in making a different silk sheen for producing light green, green, dark green, and different shades of green. Leaf color changes under the light from different angle. With the same principle, Han Ximeng embroidered fish with the same silk sheen. Irregular long and short stitch in colors was adopted in catfish and carp on the scales of natural performance in real life.

Leaf 4: Waterweed and shrimps (Figure. 16)

The scene of shrimps in pond: clear pond water, bulrush flower shrimp and five shrimps enjoyed feeding and cruising around the duckweed in the water. Fan-shaped leaves of aquatic plants were embroidered with outline stitch along a slightly curved line. Grass green and light pink stitches were used in order to describe the outgrowth of the plant. Parallel satin stitch was used for bulrush flower and leaves. By using the irregular long and short stitch with several colors of black, dark grey, gray, and Qi Laoxian, the shrimps were vividly embroidered. Qi Laoxian is a skill of contouring edge with outline stitch, and then covering satin or groups of long and short stitches from the outline stitches for making tidy and thick edge. Split stitch and hairy stitch were applied to the shrimps to bring out their thin exoskeleton.

3. The other school of outstanding Gu's embroidery for ink effect

It is worth mentioning that, the other genre of Gu's embroidery came up at the same time in addition to Han Ximeng or Miao Ruiyun in the early development of Gu's embroidery. Although it is impossible to know the embroiderers, we can still identify the works by the symbol word of the Gu's embroidery with "Hu Tou" mark and "Emperor Ming Gu embroidery" mark. There are works from the collection of the Shanghai Museum, *Victory report* hand scroll, *Sixteen arhats* album and *Zhong Kui* hanging scroll. The main techniques were to stitch along the outline in order to make up the glinting colors. These stitches were made freely in the performance of pen and ink lines. The technique made it hard to distinguish in the work which part was embroidered and which part was painted even looking closely at it. The embroidery techniques of using the very fine silk yarn in couching embroidery is to fine-tune the arc of the stitch for proper silk overtone, particularly the very fine lines in Figureures to be made, smoke, etc. According to the width and curve of the lines, parallel satin stitch, turning stitch, outline stitch and split stitch and couching embroidery were used by the turn of mixed-embroidered line in one stroke. These were the main features of the genre. Most chosen subjects were joss and scenes of the historical story as well. The famous piece, for example, was *Victory repor*. (Figure. 17) This work presented a historical story called dong shan zai qi (means "bob up like a cork"). The postscript written by master

Dong Qichang at the end of this scroll confirmed that this work was embroidered by the Gu's ladies, dating the 5th year of Chongzhen reign (1632). It is the earliest Gu's embroidery as far as known. In the story the Prime Minister Xie An was playing chess with another gentleman in a pavilion while waiting for the victory report from the battlefield which was indicated by a horse rider behind a stone bridge. Most of the part in this work was painted while only some part was outlined by silk threads. Various stitches were adopted to fit together in one stork, include parallel satin stitch, split stitch, outline stitch, long and short stitch, couching embroidery. (Figure. 17-1) The other techniques used for real pattern were pine-needle stitch, hairy stitch, crackle embroidery and brocade embroidery. The whole work boasts refined colors, rich painting flavor, dense stitches, and a subtle luster.

The most exquisite work should be the *Sixteen arhats* which reveals the combination of wonderful painting and techniques. (Figure. 18) This album consists of eighteen leavesl, with the fist leave presenting the image of Avalokitesvara and the last, Skanda. Each of the other sixteen leaves depicts one arhart in Buddhism. The images' contour lines were first drawn on the silk textile before various shades of black threads and white threads were sewn accordingly. The main technique was to stitch along the outline in order to make up the glinting colors. These stitches were made in very freely styles in the performance of pen and ink lines. Concerning the embroidery techniques, the use of very fine silk yarn in couching embroidery is to fine-tune the arc of the stitch for proper silk overtone particularly on the very fine lines. According to the width and curve of the lines, parallel satin stitch, turning stitch, outline stitch and split stitch and couching embroidery were used by the turn of mixed-embroidered line in one stroke. The other stitch types used in this work were split and outline stitches for contours, basket embroidery, couching stitch and broken stitch to render the cushion, tassel, human hair and moustache. (Figure. 18-1) Through this way, even when we observe closely to the work, it is hard to distinguish which part was embroidered and which part was painted. This work is prized as a masterpiece of arhat-themed embroidery.

4. The development of Gu's Embroidery from Ming dynasty to Qing dynasty

When Gu's embroidery was developed in high repute, more and more ladies embroiders, not only in the courtyard of Gu but also others, began to Figureure out Gu's embroidery stitch techniques. Thus the works gained the name, Gu embroidery. Some even started to its imitate the style. The art of Gu's embroidery spread constantly in the country and was well accepted by the public as works of art. A variety of refined styles were also known as Gu embroidery. There were also excellent works, such as *Majestic Eagle*. (Figure. 19) This work presents an eagle with golden eyes and tough claws who was staring at two flying kingfishers on a camellia spray. The scared kingfishers set a sharp contrast to the majestic look of the Eagle. The details of the stitches can be seen in the photograph. Generally, in the process of the stitching development, the techniques complicatedly applied by Gu's, had heritaged, specially the irregular long and short stitch and hairy stitch. To a certain extent, these stitches were used in various color density and length and loose thread. (Figure. 19-1) Besides, embroidery techniques used in this work include fancy couching stitch, outline stitch as well as long and short stitch.

In the mid-Qing Dynasty, it was recorded a lady known as *Gu Lanyu*, who made a living by embroidery works. She was also praised as the descendant of Gu's embroidery. She set up an academy for teaching the embroidery techniques. As a result, *Gu Lanyu*'s Gu embroidery stitch techniques were widely spread and eventually established another embroidery techniques in the Qing Dynasty. Commercialized Gu's embroidery or Lu Xiang Gardern embroidery were well known in the world. Since embroidery of Figureures in story started from Gu's embroidery, special stitches came out and were widely used during the development of Gu embroidery. *Wang Huizhi*, and *the bamboo lover*, as an example, represented the mid-late Gu embroidery as story subject. (Figure. 20) This work depicts a bamboo lover called W ang Huizhi sitting in the bamboo groves. The inscription at the top expresses Wang's cheerful state of mind when enjoying bamboo scenery. In Wang's view, it is more joyful being in the bamboo scenery than being a high-ranked official. Wang Huizhi (? -388) was the famous calligrapher in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. He was very fond of bamboo and personally planted a lot in his residency. He adored highly on the bamboo and told a friend once, "The bamboos symbolize the noble spirits. I can not live a day without it!" While making his young servants cook the tea for him, he was also monitoring with great joy the two porters who were carrying bamboos. Bamboos were planted by his young servants. Embroidery techniques used in this work including long and short stitch, outline stitch, overlapped stitch, as well as network embroidery and brocade embroidery which can be seen in the details from the photograp. (Figure. 20-1, 20-2)

Looking through Gu embroidery art from the late Ming Dynasty to the Qing in the development process, it can be seen that from it was embroidered to imitate painting, further to sketch the natural and latter turned into more stylized forms. These various style were accompanied by different stitches. As far as I can take into account, there are two stages of Gu embroidery in the process of techniques. At the beginning, the techniques of incorporating the skill of painting into embroidery in the Gu's embroidery was highly regarded. Two school took place. The *Sixteen arhats* was the representative work from one school. The techniques were outline stitch, split stitch, parallel satin stitch, turning stitch, couching, in one stroke according to the painting. However, it was a great pity not be able to pass down the skills to the later followers. Han Ximen was the representation of the other school for her special skill of painting by needle. Works

were carefully embroidered to deliver vivid sense with a combination of stitch techniques in various colors for the first time. The stitch forms were irregular long and short stitch, hairy stitch and turning stitch. The techniques had significant impact on future generations. Two schools both had a lively style of the extraordinary quality. Thus, Gu's embroidery entered the Arts Center.

Excellence in the arts of Gu embroidery made the upper clans compete to collect the works. Soon, Gu embroidery was in high repute. Under the high price for famous piece, the Gu embroidery attracted to many embroider to do similar pieces. The techniques adapted into forms for quick learning. As a result, the next stage came out. When the art of Gu embroidery was becoming more and more popular, various styles were developed through the techniques. The typical three types are the line-type, the area-type and the surface simulation category. The line-type consists couching, split stitch, outline stitch, parallel satin stitch and turning stitch, and so on. Couching or outline stitch was used for very fine lines such as wave lines and cloud outlines. Parallel satin stitch or turning stitch were used for strips. Parallel satin stitch in various directions or by irregular parallel long and short stitch is used for covering big area in the work. The former was used in simple colors or in small area. The latter was used in large area and in complex colors. In surface simulation category, there were many different kind of stitches used according to the needs in the paintings. They are hairy stitch for the performance of hair, the pine-needle stitch for the performance of pine needles, and brocade embroidery for the performance of clothing or fabric. And fancy couching stitch was to form a pattern or texture structures, such as the paws of birds or prey, the Figureure's wrinkles. The integration stage of the Gu embroidery focused on the refinement measures in stitching types. Much effort were given in the area of new stitches (new and typical are contrary meanings). Most of them could be formatted easily, that's to say, they were required the embroidery knew some simple stitch skill enough. They needn't know how to painting and apply it into embroidery. New techniques by adding other material in embroidery or using bi-colored thread in one stitch lines were also welcomed at that time. Untill mid-Qing Dynasty, Gu's embroidery works attached brand marks of "Lu Xiang Garden" or "Qi Bi Zhai" were clearly for commercial purpose. The neatly stitching for painting effect was gradually lost in details and was replaced by plain stitching. A notch between two parallel satin stitches was formed in the Gu embroidery technique later on.

In short, the art of Gu embroidery reached a peak of the art in embroidered painting, and it also succeeded in commercialization of Gu embroidery brand as embroidered paintings.

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Figure 1. Irregular long and short stitch



Figure 2. Hairy stitch



Figure 3. Tree, bamboo and rockery
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 3-1. Detail (rockery) in Figure 3



Figure 4. Bamboo Ming dynasty (1368-1644) L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 5. Zhaojun's departure for the frontier
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 5-1. Detail (Figureure and bag) in Figure. 5

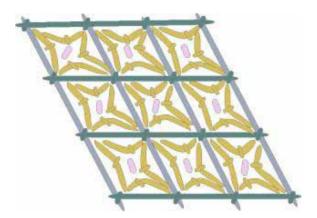


Figure 5-2. Brocade embroidery for bag

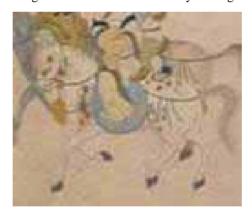


Figure 5-3. Detail (horse) in Figure.5



Figure 6. Wenji parting with her family
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 7. Sad farewell of Su Wu to Li Ling
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 8. Li Guang defends the frontier
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 8-1. Detail (Sword and Armor) in Figure 8

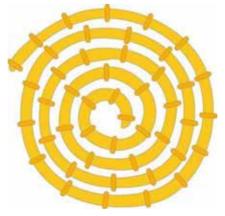


Figure 8-2. Gold couching embroidery for sword and armor



Figure 9. Bird, camellia and plum blossoms
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 9-1. Detail (camellia) in Figure 13

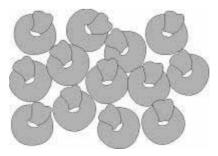


Figure 9-2. Chinese knot stitch drawing for camellia stamen



Figure 10. Squirrels and grapes
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 10-1. Detail (grapes) in Figure 10



Figure 10-2. Detail (squirrel) in Figure 10



Figure 11. Falcon on a willow sprig

Ming dynasty (1368-1644)

L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm

In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 12. Crabapple and Chinese bulbul
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 28.7 cm W. 26.8 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 13. Rockery, flower and butterflies
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 30.3 cm W. 23.9 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 13-1. Detail (flower) in Figure 13



Figure 14. Autumn mecopoda

Ming dynasty (1368-1644)

L. 30.3 cm W. 23.9 cm

In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 15. Fish
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 30.3 cm W. 23.9 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 16. Waterweed and shrimps
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
L. 30.3 cm W. 23.9 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 17. Victory report
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Handscroll: L. 27.1 cm W. 79.5 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 17-1. Detail (pine tree) in Figure 17



Figure 18. Sixteen arhats
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)

Eighteen album leaves: each L.28.2 cm W. 29 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 18-1. Detail (arhat) in Figure 18



Figure 19. Majestic eagle
Qing dynasty (1644-1911)
L. 163.7 cm W. 46.1 cm
In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 19-1. Detail (the eagle) in Figure 19



Figure 20. Wang Huizhi, the bamboo lover Qing dynasty (1644-1911) Mounted: L. 156.6 cm W. 41.1 cm In the collection of the Shanghai Museum



Figure 20-1. Detail (Wang Huizhi) in Figure 20

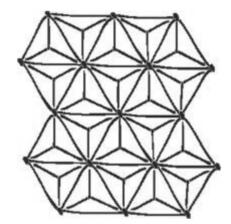


Figure 20-2. Network embroidery for white lap