



# Medieval Reflections

## Nancy Spies



When it comes to cross stitch, Nancy Spies is an old-fashioned girl: she likes DMC floss and plain old Aida fabric. Nothing fancy. When it comes to her cross-stitch designs, she's extremely old-fashioned: she takes her inspiration from medieval and Renaissance artwork created hundreds of years ago.

Although she learned handwork at an early age from a multitalented mother, it took historical research to turn Nancy's needlework skills from an occasional hobby into a consuming passion.

"My introduction to historical needlework came through my participation in a medieval reenactment society. I 'became' a Viking and wanted to learn all the textile crafts that a ninth-century woman from Scandinavia would have done, such as sprang, nalbinding, and weaving on a warp-weighted loom," Nancy says. "You get really exposed to a lot of wonderful textiles doing research in whatever medieval or Renaissance field you are interested in, and in the past five years or so, I've become interested in the various needlework techniques, although I certainly don't do them all."

Nancy's designing career in cross stitch was an unintended result of a book that she wrote on the history of brocaded tablet weaving. "I kept stumbling over the most fascinating designs and motifs that had nothing to do with that particular research but stuck in the back of my head. Until the Renaissance, most manuscript illuminations were done by outlining the design and then filling them in with color. It occurred to me that these could be 'translated' to charts and that cross stitch would be the perfect medium to do them in." Nancy put her vision into action and filled her first cross-stitch book, *Here Be Wyverns*, with borders and motifs that she had charted from medieval sources.

The name she chose for her design company, Arelate Studio, recalls the historical period that so inspires her. "My editor called one day and said, 'You need a company name now' as we were



Medieval Mermaid



Bunny Battle



Musical Angels

getting close to printing. I was studying an early Frankish tribe called the Merovingians at the time—they lived in present-day France—and I was reading about Arles, in southern France. Its Roman name was Arelate, and voila!” Nancy explains. “It is pronounced, by the way, Air-eh-latte (as in coffee).”

In the process of charting motifs for her book, Nancy began to envision samplers and scenes that combined design elements from multiple sources. Soon she began to design and publish these creative interpretations of medieval sources as individual leaflets.

“That has been the true design work, pulling together disparate designs and making a fuller, more ‘picture-esque’ design,” she explains. “My own designs are graphic in that they are simple with outlining and generally large blocks of color. So although these pictorial elements of medieval illumination are graphic, they were seldom, if ever, done in needlework techniques.”

Nancy says she spends countless hours poring over books, exhibition catalogues, on-line sources, and any other primary source material that she can locate. “A tiny design from a border will catch my eye or, perhaps, a large and bold lion will. Very careful studying of, say, an illuminated page from a medieval manuscript can provide designs where you least expect to find

them. Many designs also come from actual archaeological artifacts such as carved stone or wood, extant textiles, et cetera,” Nancy says.

A California native who lived her adult life in Norway, Australia, Germany, and England, Nancy today lives in Maryland with her husband, Steve, who shares her enthusiasm for historical research. “We live near Johns Hopkins University whose library is chock-a-block with books with medieval and Renaissance designs. There are now many online sources for manuscripts, which has been wonderful sources for design,” Nancy says.

Historical research leaves Nancy with no shortage of design ideas. “With a colleague, Lea Sears, I am starting a new line of designs that will appear under the Arelate Studio which are based on the cross-stitched designs of Mary, Queen of Scots, while she was being held prisoner by Elizabeth I,” Nancy says. “We are taking the main animals from the same design books that Mary used. We are using an Elizabethan range of floss and silk colors, but we are adding some fun things to tweak the overall design, such as funny little creatures in the four corners.” The first of four “Inspired By Mary” designs, a rabbit, will be available in fall 2008.

Nancy credits her success to a large circle of family and friends who

have helped her find her niche within the cross-stitch world. “My amazing husband makes it possible for me to stay home and work on my research and designing full-time. He also does amazing final proofreading of my books and manages to catch all the mistakes that my editor and I have managed to miss,” Nancy says. “When a book is in the stage of all the separate designs being charted, I will have a ‘proofreading party’ of wonderful friends who very kindly go through each pattern and find missing symbols or offer suggestions.”

Her largest debt of gratitude, however, for all her medieval and Renaissance patterns are the period sources themselves: “They speak to me, and I feel so honored to be able to make them available to the modern stitching public.”

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View Nancy’s designs online at [www.weavershand.com/ArelateStudio.html](http://www.weavershand.com/ArelateStudio.html). Write to Nancy at 1725 Trotting Court, Jarrettsville, Maryland 21084, or via e-mail at [snspies@aol.com](mailto:snspies@aol.com).



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