

# Needles, Laying Tools, Threaders and Scissors

By Mary Lou Wilson

For CGNA November 2011

## NEEDLES

### Thimbleful of History

Ancient peoples used stiletto-like sticks or bones (which had no eye) to punch hole into skins through which they threaded sinew to make garments. Somewhere around 17,000 years ago the eye appeared and sewing, as we know it today began.

The Chinese (who are credited with the invention of steel) made steel needles some centuries BCE. The process of making steel was slow to travel across Europe. Up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century only needles made of bronze and by hand were available throughout most of Western Europe. The steel manufacturing process traveled through Damascus, to the Moors of Spain, where in the Middle Ages Cordova became the needle-making centre.

Catherine of Aragon (Henry VIII's first wife) introduced "*Spanish Needles*" to England.

In 1598, John Stow wrote in his "*Survey of London and Westminster*" that steel needles were being made in London. Up until the Industrial Revolution, each household might have only one or two hand made needles and they were as precious as gold. With the invention of machinery, needles became mass produced and plentiful.

### How they are made

The technique of manufacturing needles has remained the same for centuries. The wire is cut into lengths (2 needles per length) and each end is then ground to a point. The eyes are punched into the centre of the wire and the excess material filed away. The needles are then separated and polished. Most modern needles are Carbon steel coated steel wire with a nickel coating to prevent corrosion. However, there are some needles on the market that are made of platinum and others made of a composite material. The two latter types are good if you have an allergy to base metals

Needles are the one piece of equipment that confuses stitchers the most. There are 3 things you need to know about needles-- the **gauge**, the **tip**, and the **eye type**:

### Gauge

The diameter of the wire used to manufacture the needle determines the size of the needle.

**FYI: a general rule: The higher the number the finer the needle**

**Tip---** there are 3 types of tips:

**Blunt tip**—The wire used has been filed round. Tapestry needles fall into this category and are ideal for counted work on evenweave cloth where you are going between the threads of the ground fabric. Bodkins also are blunt tipped and used to carry threads such as ribbons, cords, and elastics, etc.



**Sharp tip**—The wire is ground to a point. This needle is designed to pierce the fabric. Sharps, Quilting/Between, Milliners/Straw, and Chenille, and Crewel needles fall into this category.



**Ballpoint**—The wire is ground sharp with a small bulge near the tip. This needle type is designed for knitted fabric



**Eye---** can be round, oval or elongated oval and can vary in size

**Round eyes** are found in Milliners/Straw, Quilting/Betweens and Sharps.

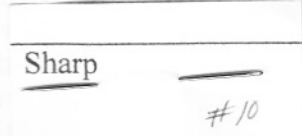
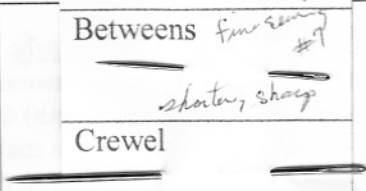
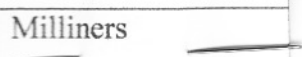
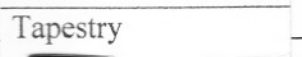
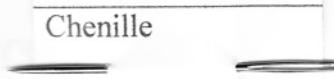
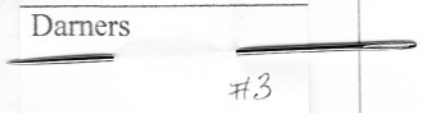
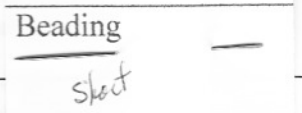


**Oval eyes** are in Darners and small oval eyes in Beading needles.



**Elongated ovals**, these are the needles most often used by needle artists as they allow for several strands or thicker threads to pass through the eye. Tapestry, Chenille/Embroidery, and Crewel needles all have elongated oval eyes.



<p><b>Sharps</b> are medium length needles. They are the most commonly used for hand sewing needles.</p> <p>Sizes 3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11,12</p>	
<p><b>Between</b>s are shorter than <i>sharps</i> needles. They used for detailed handwork, such as fine stitching on heavy fabric. Used in tailoring and quilting. Sizes 7, 8 and 9 between are quilting needles.</p> <p>Sizes 5,7,8,9,10,12</p>	
<p><b>Embroidery/Crewel</b> needles are identical in length and thickness to <u>Sharps</u> but have a small oval eye for easier threading with thicker embroidery threads.</p> <p>Sizes 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</p>	
<p><b>Milliners</b>, also called <i>straw needles</i>, have a long shaft and round eyes that do not bulge as other needles. Most used commonly for French knots and bullion knots. They are also used for basting and millinery</p> <p>Sizes 1, 3,5,6,7,8,9,10,11</p>	
<p><b>Tapestry</b> needles are identical in length to <u>Chenille</u>. Tapestry needles points are <i>blunted with a elongated oval eye</i>. These are the workhorses of counted embroidery.</p> <p>Sizes 18, 20,22,24,26,28</p>	
<p><b>Chenille</b> needles are the same as <i>tapestry</i> needles, but have a <u>sharp point</u> for heavy embroidery on closely woven fabric.</p> <p>Sizes 18,20,22,24,</p>	
<p><b>Darners</b> are long needles with and wide oval eye, thick shank and a very sharp point with no bulge at the eye. They are used for stumpwork, raised embroidery, basting and darning with cotton</p> <p>Sizes 1,3,5,7, 9, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18</p>	
<p><b>Darners</b> are long needles with and wide oval eye, thick shank and a very sharp point with no bulge at the eye. They are used for stumpwork, raised embroidery, basting and darning with cotton</p> <p>Sizes 1,3,5,7, 9, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18</p>	
<p><b>Beading</b>  <u>Long</u> needles are very fine needles used for beadwork, and for sewing sequins onto fine fabrics.  <u>Short</u> At 1.25 inches long they make it easier to apply beads to embroidery. They are available in tapestry and sharp points.</p> <p>Long needles Sizes 10,12,13,15 Short needle Size 10</p>	

There are also specialty needles such as:

Curved quilting needles  
 Silk ribbon needles  
 Trapunto needles

Leather needles  
 Doll needles  
 Etc.

**FYI:** Each eye is slightly larger on one side. Having trouble threading the needle? Turn it over

### **General rules for choosing a needle**

- The type of fabric you are using as a ground will be the main factor in choosing your needle. The technique employed will also be a contributing factor. For example, counted work on evenweave fabric will require a blunt tipped needle while work on a tightly woven ground such as Linen Twill will require a sharp tipped needle.
- When choosing the needle make sure it slips easily through the ground with no distortion to the ground threads
- The other factor is the thread you are using. The thread should slip easily in the eye of the needle. If it is too loose it will slip out, as you work. If it is too tight the eye will abuse the thread.

### **Care of Your Needles**

- The biggest enemy is humidity. Store your needles in a needle case or needle book in a dry place.
- Never store your needles in your work. As the marks they leave, if they corrode, are virtually impossible to remove without damaging your threads or ground fabric.
- Pincushions should be filled with a substance that will absorb moisture such as *emery* or *wool*. A pincushion filled with batting (cotton or polyester) is not a good idea to store your needles for long-term storage.
- Don't mix the types of needles. This makes it difficult to know which needles you own.
- Dispose of a needle that is showing signs of wear.

**FYI:** to absorb the moisture use silica packets in your needle storage area

### **Needle Threaders**

These are important additions to your embroidery box. Not only will they aid you in threading your needle but also some styles can aid you in finishing short ends. This is especially useful when you rip. They allow you to remove fewer stitches. There are lots of needle threaders on the market, the bent wire styles and the flat metal styles. The one you choose will depend on the eye of your needle. A wire threader is best for round or small oval eyes while a flat style works best in elongated oval eyes



### **Laying Tools**

It is believed that early embroiders used large needles or even stilettos to lay their work evenly. They can be wood, metal or plastic, long or short and some even fit on your finger. The type and style of laying tool is a matter of preference. They all do the same job--aid you in laying your threads straight and smooth.



Laying tool



Needle trolley

### **Thimbles**

A thimble is a small hard pitted cup worn for protection on the finger that pushes the needle in sewing. The earliest known thimble was *Roman* and was found at *Pompeii*. Made of Bronze, dated to the 1st century AD. Originally, thimbles were used solely for pushing a needle through fabric or leather



Thimbles are usually made from metal, leather, rubber, wood, and even glass or china. The use of the thimble is a personal preference.

## Scissors/Shears

Shells and sharp stones were probably the first cutting implements used but soon came bronze and iron and steel implements. There are two types:

**Bent** --piece of metal sharpened at both ends. This is the earliest type of scissor

**Pivotal** --two pieces of metal crossed at a balance point and turned on a pin came into use in medieval times.



### The difference between scissor and shears

- **Scissors** are less than 6 inches long and have matching handles. The Dutch artisans of the Renaissance began decorating the blades with engraving and turning the handles into Storks (Dutch national bird) and other birds turning them into works of art.
- **Shears** are over 6 inches long and have one handle with a small hole known as the "eye" and the other handle has a larger eye to accommodate ~~the thumb~~ *the thumb, fingers*.

### What to look for in a good scissors or shears

- The tips meet perfectly in the closed position.
- They should cut evenly all along the blade.
- They should open and close smoothly.

### Test for good scissors/shears

- Look at the scissors/shears from the side in the closed position only the tips should meet and you should be able to see light between the blades.
- Open the scissors/shears fully and then let the blades fall towards each other they should not stay open or close completely they should meet half way

### Needle artists need three pairs:

- . **Embroidery Scissors** should have thin blades that meet well at the point.
- . **Dressmaking Shears** should have long sharp blades. The longer blades cut straighter.
- . **General-Purpose Scissors**. For paper, plastic etc.

### To protect your scissors:

- . **NEVER** cut paper, plastic etc, with your dressmaking or embroidery scissors/shears. This dulls the blades
- . **NEVER** put a strain on the blades. This distorts them and damages the pivot point.
- Keep your scissors sharp and in a protective cover.
- Use only for the purpose intended.

**Good scissors, no matter what the use, are an investment in fine accurate work.**

### Bibliography

Canada Cutlery Inc.  
John James Needles  
DMC Corporation  
Access Commodities  
Entaco Limited  
Valley Quail EGA

[www.canadacutlery.com](http://www.canadacutlery.com)  
[www.jjneedles.com](http://www.jjneedles.com)  
[www.dmc-usa.com](http://www.dmc-usa.com)  
[www.accesscommodities.com](http://www.accesscommodities.com)  
[www.entacolimited.com](http://www.entacolimited.com)  
Walnut Creek Ca