

P O R T R A I T

Erica Wilson

Catherine Amoroso Leslie

Erica Wilson received a diploma in Embroidery and Design from the Royal School of Needlework in London, where she learned crewel, whitework, needlepoint, quilting, appliqué, needle lace, and pulled work. In 1954, Margaret Parshall invited her to teach embroidery at Parshall's needlework school in Millbrook, New York. Thus began her stellar career.

Wilson is the author of more than twenty-five needlework books, including *Crewel Embroidery* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), which sold almost one million copies, and four videos; she has been producing and selling needlework supplies and equipment since the early 1960s. Magazine articles about and by Erica Wilson have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Life*, *The New Yorker*, *Woman's Day*, *House and*

Garden, and *House Beautiful*. Her syndicated newspaper column, *Ask Erica*, became a book. A pioneer in television programming

about needlework, Boston's WGBH produced two series of programs featuring Erica Wilson in the 1970s that were broadcast nationwide and in England. Her needlework products are available in Erica Wilson Needle Works shops in New York City and Nantucket and are distributed by Anne Brinkley Designs, Inc., to independent retailers.

Erica Wilson continues to design needlework while dividing her time between homes in New York City and Nantucket and international travel. She and her husband, the furniture designer Vladimir Kagan, have three children and five grandchildren.



Erica Wilson. 2002.

Photograph by Donalene Poduska.

Catherine Leslie: What is your idea of the perfect needlework experience?

Erica Wilson: Working in my Nantucket garden on a frame in good light, in a phone-free environment, surrounded by all the fabrics and threads I need.

CL: Which historical needlework do you most admire?

EW: The Cloisters' unicorn tapestries.

CL: What is your current state of mind in terms of your needlework?

EW: Eager to create new designs to go with [my husband] Vladi's modern furniture.

CL: Which needlework talent would you most like to have?

EW: The eyesight I had when I was twenty-one.

CL: What do you consider your greatest achievement in your needlework?

EW: My white-on-white sampler worked at the Royal School of Needlework.

CL: What is your most treasured needlework possession?

EW: An embroidered coat that belonged to the last Chinese empress.

CL: What is the quality you most admire in a needleworker?

EW: A good sense of color.

CL: What do you value most in your needlework friends?

EW: Their lifelong dedication to the art.

CL: If you could change one thing about your needlework, what would it be?

EW: Less unpicking!

CL: What is your favorite needlework technique?

EW: Crewel, particularly the shading that one can achieve.

CL: What are your favorite stitches?

EW: Whichever one I am using at the moment, but especially bullion knots, turkey work, Roumanian, and fishbone.

CL: How would you like to be remembered?

EW: As a user-friendly teacher.

CL: What is the most marked characteristic of your needlework?

EW: Variety.

CL: If you could choose any needlework project, what would it be?

EW: A huge wall panel for a public space.

CL: What do you most deplore in needlework?

EW: The downgrading of quality in kits.

CL: What is the greatest love of your needlework life?

EW: My television shows for PBS.

CL: Who is your needlework hero?

EW: Mary, Queen of Scots.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Catherine Amoroso Leslie is an assistant professor in the School of Fashion Design and Merchandising at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. Her doctoral dissertation includes information on Erica Wilson's contributions to needlework.