

Fashion Outlook

A stitch in time

Blouses can fondly embrace embroidery

One of my most treasured possessions comes from my college days — a workshirt that I embroidered during a long car trip to Martha's Vineyard. The fabric is now tissue-thin and faded to the most pale of blues, but the chain stitching around the collar and button placket, the rainbow on the pocket and the flowers on the collar corners are still bright and sturdy. Although I don't dare wear this fragile shirt, it's a very personal piece of folk art, hand-adorned with symbols from a past era.

The charm of folk art is that allure of distant places, at distant times, rendered simply. Centuries ago, women would spend hours embellishing practical clothes with handsewn decorations. As if embroidering flourishes into the stories of their lives, these women would stitch in place garlands of hearts and flowers as well as familiar symbols and scenes.

I don't find a lot of time to embroi-



PUTUMAYO OFFERS shirts and skirts embroidered with motifs inspired by 18th and 19th century Scandinavian folk art. The colorful work should brighten any winter day.

der now, even though months ago I bought thread to sew a scroll of flowers on the placket of a blouse. "Can't find the right blouse," is my official excuse, but there's another reason for my procrastination: This year it's easy to find beautiful embroidered blouses.

Don't label yourself too-buttoned down to consider the light touches of Americana embroidery that the Gap adds to denim and parchment-colored cotton shirts (under \$35). Pick a sweet chain of daisies, which stretches along the button placket, or select a simple design to add interest to a V-neck sweater or vest. At the Gap, these embroidered designs seem to be another way to stretch American tradition into place.

Blending foreign folklore with fashion has always been Dan Storper's in-

tervention. In 1975, a few years after Storper received a degree in Latin American studies, he opened a store named Putumayo, after a South American river valley. Storper stocked this New York City store with the treasures and trinkets found during his extensive travels. With the exotic excitement of a foreign bazaar,

Putumayo attracted shoppers bored with sleek boutiques. Over the years, Putumayo has expanded — three stores in Manhattan, branches in Boston, Princeton, N.J., and Washington D.C. It's also a popular line in specialty stores across the country. Putumayo never meandered far from its original creative path. Storper has cultivated the craftsmanship found in Mexico, Portugal and India into clothing that can be worn for casual or office wear. The Putumayo creative team recently made a pilgrimage to research the handicrafts of Scandinavia for the store's autumn line.

"Most of our inspiration came from their folk crafts of the 18th and 19th century," explains Judith Falci, spokeswoman for Putumayo. The designers found that some patterns, especially flowers that were favored by certain families or regions. A delicate snowflake pattern on a handwoven 19th century Norwegian blanket inspired Putumayo's Scandia print. And delicate flakes drift down the placket of the new Gustav shirt. Putumayo, who also offers embroidered sweaters and skirts, used bright colors and biblical motifs like Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge, as well as animal figures, especially reindeer.

"We always try to capture the spirit of a country, but we give our designs a contemporary twist," explains Falci. And as always, Putumayo offers affordable clothes (most of the embroidered blouses are under \$65) that have an heirloom potential of their own.

The French Connection also offers embroidered shirts (under \$60) but

they've taken an exotic twist by using black fabric and glittery threads. The flowery vine on black or white blouses brings to mind those beaded sweaters from the '40s and sari prints from India. There's also a mountain scene that was inspired by Portuguese blouses and a shirt with large flowers on the collar and cuffs, which are embroidered along the edges.



This year it's easy to find. Don't label yourself too-buttoned down to consider the light touches.

Eclectic embroidery makes Todd Oldham's blouses for Times 7 special. Sprigs of flowers grace one shirt and its matching vest, while others have free-form patterns of elegant leaves or scroll work. Oldham just doesn't put a dainty patch of embroidery

FANCIFUL DESIGNS and details make Todd Oldham's shirts special. His Times 7 line is distributed by Onward Kashiyama and can be found in many department stores.

along the placket, he can put a larger-than-life lily across a shirt yoke, or he puts a color block behind the

embroidery.

A "science project" is how Oldham describes his design approach. He may experiment with stitch size and use atomic or amoebic design shapes, but Oldham's method isn't pure science. Some of his freewheeling designs reminded me of Alexander Calder mobiles flattened to one dimension, and Calder would have appreciated Oldham's bending wire into buttons of whimsical spirals and random objects. One shirt, graced with wire buttons in the shape of seven, his lucky number, reveals his superstitious side.

Oldham likes the idea of incorporating folklore into his creations. His sketches are inspired by his travels and by his visits to flea markets. He can trace an arabesque motif back to childhood years spent in Iran. He decided to put arrowhead buttons on a shirt after visiting a natural history museum in Dallas, where both his family and the Times 7 factory are located. Oldham's shirts range from \$100 to \$150, and part of this year's "science project" was creating some for men. As Oldham says, "It can be subtle, but embroidery makes things come to life."

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