



Opposite, above: Using her mother's vintage sewing machine, Emily Alexander works on one of her signature pillows. This page: Some of her beautiful wares are displayed in her home.



Divine Inspiration

Relegated to the back room of an antiques shop in France, worn vestment chasubles, trimmed in goldwork hand-stitched by nuns centuries ago, may not catch the eye of most treasure seekers, but to one Mississippi-based artisan, they are precious finds.

PHOTOGRAPHY MAC JAMIESON





The old Singer sewing machine that once belonged to her mother hums merrily along in Emily Alexander's Oxford atelier, E. Alexander Designs, as she adds borders of antique silver *galon* around the remnant of an ancient tapestry mounted on a velvet background. When the last stitch is in place, she will have a beautiful bespoke pillow destined to grace a client's interiors.

Emily's stitchery talents are a family tradition. Her grandmother was a milliner, while her mother was accomplished in a variety of needlework, including quilting, and she schooled her daughter in these skills from childhood. By age nine, Emily was embroidering samplers and knitting sweaters. After graduating from Louisiana State University, she worked for Delta Airlines, where she was able to combine her love of travel with her interest in antiquated textiles and passementerie.

Opposite, above: Raised metallic embroidery clipped from ecclesiastical garments covers an inspiration board. Below right: A pelican with its babies is a popular religious motif—symbolic of Christ and his flock. This page: Emily's interiors brim with beautiful examples of her work.





Opposite: Tapestry pillows adorn a cozy spot in the enclosed porch, with its stacked-stone fireplace and lovely views. This page: Emily carefully cuts around raised embroidery, above, while a trio of embellished cushions nestles in a basket, below.



“On layovers, I would seek out the international *brocante* markets,” says Emily. “When others were looking at clothes, I was on the floor going through stacks of old Aubusson tapestries at the Paris Flea Market.” When the book *Antique French Textiles for Designers* by June K. Laval was published in 2004, Emily absorbed every word and had a clear vision of how she would put this newly gleaned knowledge to use. On her subsequent trips to Paris, she simply showed pictures from the volume to the dealers, and they pointed her toward the ecclesiastical robes and garments where she could browse to her heart’s content.

Venturing beyond France, the designer now sources components all across the continent, from England and Scotland to Belgium and Italy. Though she has developed a network of tried-and-true dealers, she also enjoys scouting out new markets because “the love of the hunt never stops.”

Emily’s wares, which now include lavender sachets and framed fragments in addition to pillows, are much-coveted by those who appreciate the beauty of aged items and their inherent imperfections. “Some of the vestments I buy have threads unravelling, torn places, and melted wax that dripped from candles in churches hundreds of years ago,” explains Emily. “Customers love the idea of old pieces of vestments being used on a new pillow—it is ‘going green’ at its best.”

