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Keeping it real

WITH AI-GENERATED EMBROIDERY ON THE RISE, HOW CAN YOU SPOT FAKE DESIGNS AND SHOW YOUR SUPPORT FOR AUTHENTIC STITCHING? BECCA PARKER SPEAKS TO THREE TOP DESIGNERS TO FIND OUT MORE...

Words by Becca Parker



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Artists all over the world have been affected by the rise of AI and the speed at which it is developing



Real patterns are created by real stitchers who work hard to test their designs and provide clear instructions

Artificial Intelligence (or AI as many of us have come to know it) has never been as sophisticated as it is right now. Technology has heaps of useful applications, of course, but generating deceptive embroidery images is one that is starting to cause harm to the handmade community. It's playing on the minds of makers and designers alike. "AI is infiltrating the embroidery world not in a drip, but a flood," warns designer Anne Oliver of Lolli & Grace (lolliandgrace.com). "I've seen its presence increase even in just the last 30-60 days, compared to all of last year."

Craft lovers need to be vigilant. It's easy to become bamboozled by the splashy, computer-generated designs. And while using technology as a creative tool sounds great, it turns out AI content flies in the face of what's most amazing about embroidery: slowing down and embracing the tactile wonder of handmade crafts with all its flaws and human imperfections.

"AI might be able to mimic the aesthetic, but it can't replace that human connection," says Stephanie Carswell, founder of Hawthorn Handmade (hawthornhandmade.com). "Nor the joy of creating something that feels meaningful and authentic."

Going digital

So what's all the fuss about? It's pretty likely you have heard of ChatGPT. It's one of a booming number of online software applications known as generative AI and one of their most common uses is to provide creative shortcuts. The idea is simple: tap in a prompt and, in a matter of seconds, the software spews out digital content to fulfil the brief. This could be text, images, even video and audio. Sounds fantastic, right? The problem is, the software is exploitative

by nature and it's causing controversy for many reasons.

As AI creates by regurgitating existing content it has already been fed, it cannot come up with anything truly original. This has raised concerns around copyright infringement and art theft. And then, of course, there are the environmental considerations. AI software requires immense power to complete an overwhelming number of processes at high speed. This means emissions are extremely high, along with excessive consumption of energy and water for training, running and cooling the systems. Artist Niamh Wimperis, who runs subscription business Wimperis Embroidery (wimperis.co.uk), feels strongly about this. "AI is damaging the planet as we know it, so we should not be encouraging the creation of these AI generated patterns by buying them."

Not the real deal

And AI is wreaking a special kind of havoc with embroidery in particular. "The growth of AI patterns has exploded in the last six months or so," shares Stephanie. "There are now thousands of AI patterns with often unachievable stitches depicted. I've been a part of a growing conversation online amongst embroidery designers and hobby stitchers alike who are seriously concerned."

The crux of the matter is, generative AI is being used to create images that look just like photographs of impressive embroidery and some people are unaware that what they're seeing simply isn't real. These images, in turn, are used disingenuously to sell patterns and even kits for designs that aren't real, or to farm engagement on social media platforms. AI generated embroidery images are fundamentally inaccurate as the software lacks the human understanding of what is physically possible in stitching. Stephanie explains: "It's now really difficult to find the real

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Real! Notice how the thread goes 'into' the fabric here, rather than just sitting on top of it



*Telltale signs of AI images include seeing dots on the fabric and lots of flowing lines like these shown here



In genuine designs like this one by Anne Oliver, elements are created using real stitches that you can replicate at home



*Fake! Watch out for shots with overlapping hands and fingers that disappear into the hoop!



*Another AI image. Look closely and you'll find it has exaggerated shadows and incomplete elements

ALL IMAGES MARKED WITH * HAVE BEEN AI GENERATED BY ANNE OLIVER. ALL OTHER IMAGES ON THIS PAGE ARE OF HER OWN STITCHING



REAL LIFE IMAGE © STEPHANIE CARSWELL



By educating ourselves and only buying genuine embroidery designs, AI pattern shops will gradually become obsolete

REAL LIFE IMAGE © NIAMH WIMPERIS

patterns in amongst the AI as most sellers don't declare they are AI and customers are getting confused, scammed and are being put off stitching for good when they realise the pattern they've bought is just a plain line drawing with no instructions."

These phony AI patterns and images are cropping up online across marketplace websites like Etsy and in embroidery Facebook groups. "There are multiple posts per day on these groups," Niamh points out, "of people posting an AI pattern that they've bought for £1 or £2, and they're asking how to do stitches that don't exist in the real world, stitches that are simply not possible with a needle and thread. These designs don't come with any sort of instruction or guidance, so they're turning to the wider embroidery community to try and get this information which doesn't exist."

The bottom line? "It's all about making fast money with little effort," says Anne. Designers are losing out big time as they simply cannot compete with the rock-bottom prices fake patterns are offered at. "When AI 'patterns' can be produced, marketed and sold so quickly and cheaply, they eclipse the visibility of real, human designers. On Etsy right now, there is a bundle of 500+ designs for \$12.00 USD."

Pursuit of perfection

It's a real problem for hand embroiderers everywhere.

Anne's concerns are for those just discovering the craft. "One of the worst side effects is that stitchers – particularly new stitchers – feel like they will never be able to achieve the kind of perfection they see in photos of AI embroidery. They might be excited to try, but then give up because their stitching isn't 'perfect.'"

"I've read so many comments from stitchers who are comparing their work to an AI image that say, "My stitching will never look that good," or "I guess I'm just not talented enough to do this, because mine doesn't look like that." Niamh echoes this: "People are seeing these perfectly smooth stitches, that honestly even the most experienced embroidery artist would not be able to recreate, and then they are getting frustrated and disappointed in themselves. I think it's really putting people off trying embroidery properly."

Too good to be true?

AI is bad news for embroidery lovers and online marketplaces haven't cracked down yet on this new breed of digital scammer, so what can be done? You can get your Sherlock on and learn to sniff out a fake pattern. Embroidery experts have identified telltale signs to look out for, starting with pricing. "If they're offering things like 300 patterns for £10, I can guarantee they're AI," Stephanie reveals. "Real designers can't afford to offer their patterns for such low prices because of all the love and hard work that has gone into them." If it looks too good to be true, it probably is.

A lack of images is a dead giveaway, too. "If it is the only image of that piece, that's a big red flag," warns Niamh. "Actual embroidery artists will most likely post multiple images on their listings, including close ups, different angles, the making of etc. All of these things, and their patterns, are verifiable, either from their social media accounts or their own website."

Then there are the visuals. On closer inspection, there are aspects that just don't make sense. "AI images all have

a smooth, velvety perfection to them," Anne describes. "The textures flow and the colours are so rich you just want to reach out and touch them. This is why, at first glance, they appeal to us and garner so much attention."

"Sometimes it seems like they have a smooth plasticity to them, where the 'stitches' look more like polymer clay. The 'thread' appears to curve in flowing lines that aren't realistic for actual thread stitched into real fabric. The lighting is often dramatic, with glowing highlights and rich shadows. 'Thread' appears to sit on top of the 'fabric', creating strong shadows." There's usually an uncanny three-dimensional effect.

Take a moment to zoom in on the details. Scrutinise the hoop, the fabric and any hands in the image. "Often the screw at the top of the embroidery hoop will look weird," says Niamh. "You won't be able to see the teeth of the screw, it'll be smooth, it'll have two bits instead of one. It'll just be off." The background fabric will likely be made up of dots rather than woven warp and weft threads. "Hands are misshapen," notes Anne, "with too-long fingers or satiny skin that doesn't look real." You might spot odd design elements like botanical details with unnatural placement, funny shapes or parts that disappear. Learn to recognise these glitchy details and scammy practices and you're staying one step ahead.

Stay authentic

Steering clear of AI patterns affords you the best possible experience of embroidery. You're getting the real deal – tried and tested beautiful projects designed with true innovation and creativity. "As a pattern designer, I love the art of embroidery and truly want to teach and share my love of this craft," says Anne. "When someone purchases from an actual designer like me, they know they are supporting an artist, rather than someone who used a computer to spit out a fake image in 10 seconds or less."

Go straight to the source for genuine content that works. "Real designers understand how patterns translate

into stitches and can anticipate the needs of the stitcher," Stephanie explains. "They create instructions that guide you through the process, helping you learn and grow in your skills." They're on hand to support you along the way, like Niamh. "We're available on social media or by email," she says. "We have tutorial videos or blog posts at your disposal. While our patterns are more expensive than a £2 AI-generated one, you get so much more out of them and they're actually designed to be stitched."

AI-generated images of embroidery may be novel and inspiring with their glowy perfection, but they just don't have that innate handmade magic. An impressive hoop is not all that counts in embroidery. The process and how it feels matters just as much. Stephanie puts it best: "A pattern from a real designer often tells a story. It's not just about the finished piece but the journey of creating it – the personal connection you feel to the designer, their vision, and the community of stitchers working on their designs." That's where the handmade joy is built and there's nothing artificial about it. 🧵

You can follow and support the three real, and very talented embroiderers and business owners featured in this piece via: Stephanie Carswell @hawthornhandmade, Anne Oliver @loliandgrace, and Niamh Wimperis @wimperisembroidery

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