

Hand Needles—A Primer

by Cindy Scraba

Do you find the topic of hand needles to be somewhat overwhelming? You're not alone. Perhaps it's because there are as many different hand needles on the market today as there are thread types. Pairing the right hand needle with the right thread makes a considerable difference in the quality of stitches and overall project. Our primer, below, zooms in on needles we commonly use for quilting, appliqué and embroidery.

Needles certainly evolved from primitive beginnings when first carved from bone and wood in centuries past. Today, we are lucky to enjoy quality and precision due to technology and the diligence of many manufacturers. To name a few brands: Clover®, Bohin®, Colonial Needle®, John James®, Roxanne's®, etc.

According to the Colonial Needle Company USA, their needles are manufactured in England using the following procedures:

- 1 Wire is drawn down from a five-gauge steel rod.
- 2 The wire is then straightened and cut to two needle lengths.
- 3 Points are formed on each end.
- 4 The impression of two eyes is stamped into the wire.
- 5 Holes are then punched through both impressions.
- 6 The wire is then broken into two separate needles.
- 7 Waste metal from around the eye is removed—a process known as checking.
- 8 The needles are then hardened.
- 9 To prevent brittleness, they are subsequently tempered.
- 10 The needles are scoured to remove burrs from inside the eyes and polished.
- 11 The needles are finally nickel plated, inspected and packaged.

Whew! Are you beginning to appreciate the value in this teeny tool? Let's look more closely at the simple anatomy of a hand needle: eye, shaft, and point. These three components determine its type and ultimately what a needle is designed for.

On the following page is a *short list* of hand needles to put this techno-babble into perspective. You'll notice some needle types can have two common names. I don't believe a single *all-purpose* needle is possible where accuracy is expected and when pleasure is deserved. Hopefully a few needles will elicit an "aha" response and an invitation to welcome them right into your toolbox!

There are some other intriguing specialty needles to consider: double-eye, curved needles and up to seven-inch long needles for casting on bullion knots! If you're curious, view the how-to videos from my website (www.cindysthreadworks.com/education.htm). These options are exciting for resourceful stitchers seeking excellence and creative opportunities.

Extra Tips

- Unfortunately, hand-needle sizes are not standardized and vary, especially in their length and diameter, by manufacturers. Remember the higher the number, the finer the needle. This is the opposite of machine needles, which is often a source of confusion.
- Generally speaking with hand needles, select a finer needle size for finer thread or a larger needle size for thicker thread.
- Purchase the multi-size packages for a wider range to experiment with until you establish the sizes and types favoured for your thread needs and projects.
- Organize and store your hand needles in a needle book or case. Perhaps create sections on a pincushion or store needles in tubes with labels.
- Hand needles are basically a replaceable item. They will naturally become dull, bend, peel, rust, etc. Please dispose of them safely by storing worn and broken ones in a small tube or jar.
- Needle threaders can also create harmony in your toolbox. One of my previous columns featured this mighty tool in the *Canadian Quilter* spring 2016 issue.





Needle Type	Size/#	Description	Purpose
Quilting/Betweens	1 to 12	Small eye, very short, sharp	Quilting, appliqué
Embroidery/Crewel	1 to 10	Oval eye, fine diameter, sharp	Embroidery stitches
Tapestry/Cross Stitch	13 to 28	Large oval eye, medium length, round tip	Surface stitches, texturing
Appliqué/Sharps	1 to 12	Small eye, fine diameter, sharp	Appliqué, binding, basting, patchwork
Chenille	13 to 26	Extra-long eye, short to medium lengths, thicker diameter, sharp	Ribbonwork, multiple floss strands, perle cottons, embroidery, wool appliqué
Straws/Milliners	1 to 11	Small round eye, longer equal diameter, sharp	Appliqué, beading, cast on stitches, knots, loops, basting, pleating
Sashiko	34 mm to 70 mm	Large eye, thicker diameter, various lengths to load up several stitches in single pull	Big running stitches with thicker threads

Please note: Size availability varies depending on manufacturer.

Over the past decade, I've had the sincere pleasure to assist many wonderful quilters, excellent embroiderers and appliqué queens acquire great threads and needles. I try to recommend products that are *tried and true*.

All needles mentioned above (and more) are listed on Cindy's Threadworks website.

As always, your feedback and support is greatly appreciated. Feel free to contact me any time with your queries. This article is by

no means comprehensive; however, I hope you will consider options beyond the basics next time you need needles! ♦



Mention this article with your next on-line purchase for a complimentary package of hand needles.

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