



# Straw embroideries in Azores (Portugal)

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## Notes on Ethnobotany

### Abstract

Wheat or rye straw embroideries, typical of the island of Faial (Azores), are the ultimate representatives of a European craft very popular in the XIX century. Our investigation into the cultural use of plants in the Azores presents some examples of straw embroideries and information on the raw materials of plant origin used by the last embroideresses who keep this tradition alive.

### Azores and the straw embroidery

The Azores Archipelago, located on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, between Europe and North America, was uninhabited when the first Portuguese navigators arrived in 1427 and the arrival of Europeans had severe consequences for the natural ecosystems, that were replaced by agricultural lands, pastures, and, later, by woodlands of exotic trees. The Azores have a very rich flora, with 84 species and infra-species endemic taxa ([acores.flora-on.pt](http://acores.flora-on.pt)), but few of the native and endemic plants are now used as raw materials because the material needs of the population rely almost entirely in introduced species. The traditional arts and crafts are also diverse, and it is in Azores that we find a unique European tradition – the straw embroidery.

The European history of straw use for weaving is Millenia old, and we can find exquisite examples in many countries, such as in Belarus, which recently (2022) added this tradition to UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage ([ich.unesco.org](http://ich.unesco.org)) but the pattern of straw work that we find in Azores is closer to the traditions recorded in France (Figure 1), Belgium, Italy, or Switzerland from the XVII century on, when straw was used to embroider in cotton, linen, or silk. An extraordinary sample of this ancient art is the Good Shepherd altar (Figure 2) made by French nuns from the *Couvent des Annonciades* [Convent of Annonciades], in Nozeroy, and now preserved at the local *Collégiale Saint-Antoine* [Collegiate Church of Saint-Antoine] (Fitch 1998).

In the Azores, the straw embroideries are made in the island of Faial; one of the nine islands of the archipelago. The origin of this art in Azores is uncertain although tradition says it started in the middle of the XIX century, with a French embroidered hat sent from Boston to Faial, to inquire about the possibility of producing similar works in Azores. Local embroideresses studied the technique, perfected it and a new craft began (Andrade 2008). The fashion of using straw-embroidered fabrics

was very much in vogue in the mid-nineteenth century, especially to adorn ball gowns (Figure 3) and accessories for festive use.

The embroidery begins with the selection of the design, which depends on the piece of clothing the embroideress will create. The design is transferred to a thick paper which will be attached under the cotton or nylon tulle, the fabric to which the straw will be embroidered. The tulle is usually black but white tulle can also be used. The dried straw is obtained from locally grown wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) or rye (*Secale cereale* L.). To increase the golden shine of the straw, this may be dyed with safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius* L.) – a species grown in Azores for its flowers' edible dye. The straw is always prepared by the embroideress, who cuts it from top to bottom with a splitter, dividing each straw in five or six long segments. After this operation, the inner straw layers are removed with a knife or an awl-like object to obtain the strips that will be embroidered directly in the tulle netting, without needles but with the aid of a thimble. Most of the embroidery is made with isolated stitches that do not touch each other (Figure 4). Fibers obtained from leaves of the American aloe (*Agave americana* L.) are used to create the lines that unite sections of the embroidery and to add details in the design, which usually has the shape of cereal ears, grapes, flowers, and other plant motifs (Silva 2006, Andrade 2008, Teixeira 2016).

In the past, this embroidery was common in shawls (Figure 5), scarves, hats, table mats (Figure 6), and ball dresses used locally or exported to continental Europe and USA. The former American First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy (1929-1994), used Azorean straw embroideries to reinforce the historical links this country has with Azores, where the oldest (1790) continuously operating USA consulate in the world is located ([pt.usembassy.gov](http://pt.usembassy.gov)). Currently it is mainly a product for tourists, rarely used by the Azoreans, although it has a high cultural value to the Faial community. This craft has always been a feminine cottage industry and it is now protected and certified by law [Regional Government Ordinance 89/1998, Dezembro 3<sup>rd</sup>], intended to add value and prestige to the last embroideresses who still maintain this plant-based tradition alive.

## Declarations

**List of abbreviations:** Not applicable

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Figure 1. English or French hat straw (c.1750-1775). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accession number 38.1328, gift of Philip Lehman in memory of his wife Carrie L. Lehman.



Figure 2. Good Shepherd Altar. Collégiale Saint-Antoine, Nozeroy (France), photo by Denis Bringard.



Figure 3. Ball gown embroidered with straw (c.1865). Wien Museum, accession number M 17636, photo by Christin Losta.



Figure 4. Early XX century Azorean straw embroidery (detail). Beja Botanical Museum, accession number CBE 2507, gift of Maria Leonor Pereira de Sampaio Rocha.



Figure 5. Tulle shawl embroidered with straw. Lúcia Sousa (embroideress), Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores, photo by Ofício Luísa Flores.



Figure 6. Tulle table mat embroidered with straw. Conceição Pereira (embroideress), Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores, photo by Álvaro Saraiva.