

THE PISCHIELLO EMBROIDERY SCHOOL



The daughter of Charlotte Shaw and Howell Robert, Romeyne Robert descended from a French Huguenot family that immigrated to the United States in the eighteenth century. She was born in Morristown, New Jersey, in 1878. While travelling in Europe with her mother, Romeyne met Ruggero Ranieri di Sorbello in Rome and the couple married in 1902. She founded the *Ranieri di Sorbello School of Embroidery* at the family villa of Pischello, near Lake Trasimeno, in 1904. During this period – the early twentieth century – embroidery schools were established throughout Italy, attracting renewed interest in textile crafts. Other examples include *Aemilia Ars* in Bologna, *Industrie Femminili Italiane* in Roma and the *Scuola Veneziana* in Burano. In the wake of the Pischello experience, in Umbria alone there were 24 embroidery schools specializing in different types of workmanship. Following World War I, the different schools were united in a cooperative named *Arti Decorative Italiane*, which had a shop on Corso Vannucci, the main street in Perugia, and sold the works made at the various schools.

The goal of the Ranieri di Sorbello School of Embroidery was to valorize and redeem women's decorative arts in Italy, producing high-quality traditional items. The school recruited female workers from the countryside or convents; they came from every walk of life, particularly the poorer classes. The young embroiderers thus had the chance to learn a trade and establish a dowry, while also receiving a moral and religious education. Romeyne thus also gave the school a social value. She was probably inspired by the schools in the United States that taught immigrant women a trade and helped them become integrated into society.



Textile history and techniques

The unique aspect of the school is that it set certain rules: the work was not mass-produced but had to be completed entirely by hand, thereby creating unique pieces that were made to order and never repeated the same patterns. The school specialized in only one embroidery technique, with decorative motifs inspired by the major arts. The real innovation was that, with the help of her friend Carolina Amari of Florence, Romeyne revived a stitch called *punto umbro or portoghese* from the ancient textile collections of Countess Rucellai in Florence. Arabic in origin, this type of stitch spread across Europe through the Spanish and Portuguese arts of embroidery. It was thus revived in a new and original way, and was even patented. Named *Punto Sorbello*, it consists of a series of stitches that create a raised effect, like a knot.

The work was done using cotton, hemp or linen thread on a type of cloth known as *tela umbra*, which was produced in Città di Castello at the workshop directed by Baroness Alice Franchetti. The products could be sold at affordable prices, given the fact that inexpensive materials were used in place of wool or silk. Moreover, they were quite sturdy: despite the fact that they were used, they have survived to our day in excellent condition. *White* or *ecru* thread was typically used on cloth of the same colour, for a monochromatic effect. In some cases, *red, rust, green* and *antique cerulean* were used, in keeping with traditional Umbrian works.

The Punto Sorbello was never used on its own, but was combined with other traditional embroidery stitches and was applied to the decorative motifs of the Italian Renaissance. These motifs were often copied from both the figurative arts and ancient textiles. The stitch could be used to decorate any object, such as table runners, centrepieces and pillows, and was ideal for creating tassels, due to its relief effect.

The strong entrepreneurial approach of the school allowed it to conquer markets such as the **United States** and **Great Britain**, making it necessary to publish an English brochure. The school closed in about **1934**, when a tax on products imported into the United States led to a slowdown in orders for Italian crafts.

The embroidered works from the Ranieri di Sorbello School are now preserved at the *Cooper-Hewitt Museum* in New York, at the *Museo Storico Didattico della Tappezzeria* (Historical and Educational Upholstery Museum) in Bologna, and in the art collections of the *Ugucione Ranieri di Sorbello Foundation*.