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History of Macramé

When we remember the 70’s we can think of many weird and wonderful trends that took the world by storm. Ranging from tacky tie-dye to high waisted pants, lava lamps and tight, tight hot pants. But most would recognize Macramé as a well-remembered 70’s sensation, where people beautifully designed macramé tablecloths or just went completely mad and macramé a car cover for their Holden Monaro. Whether it be from hanging plants to hanging off Instagram influencers at Splendour in the Grass, Macramé has an incredibly old history and has constantly resurfaced over the centuries as a popular trend for arts and crafts lovers over the globe.

What are the origins of Macramé?

Dating back to the 13th Century, Arabic weavers across the Middle East were believed to be the first to create modern Macramé by using cotton, hemp or jute rope to make intricate fabrics. Arabic weavers who were probably a bit bored of the same old fabric styles decided to spice things up by knotting the access thread along the edges of hand-loomed fabrics into decorative fringes. Creating the first known form of modern Macramé! In fact, the word Macramé derives from the Turkish word “Makrama” referring to a coarse lace or fringe made by knotting cords or thick threads in a geometric pattern.

Like most popular trends someone is always trying to take the credit for it and Macramé is no different. Historians have hotly debated that Macramé originated as far back as 3rd Century China. Where the Pan Chang Knot, a series of loops that weave together to form infinity symbols to signify longevity has been identified as a possible form of early Macramé. Others have even held the Assyrian Empire as a Macramé contender, dating as far back as the Bronze Age. Where carvings of kings, warriors and gods within the temples of Nimrud for King Ashrunasirpal II, depict tunics and horse harnesses richly decorated with fringes. These fringes have been credited by some as the earliest known example of ancient Macramé. Even if this isn’t the case, Macramé car covers and the Assyrians pimping out their horses in Macramé seems oddly similar.

How did Macramé end up in the Western World?

Pretty much the rise of Islam inadvertently brought the Arabic art of Macramé into Europe, at a speed that would’ve made Amazon shipping services proud. After the successful expansion of the Umayyad Caliphate, one of the World’s largest empires. Managed to bring Macramé into Europe after its conquest of Spain and the subsequent Moorish Rule of the Spanish in the 15th Century. Spain being a cultural hub for Arabic and European influence, took on Macramé and later passed on the trend to Italy in the 17th Century where it was popularized in the prosperous port city of Genoa.

Sailors and Macramé?

Turns out sailors were very big fans of Macramé and unknowingly spread the art into bustling ports across the world. Sailors who were already familiar with the practice of knotting for rope tying, combined their knowledge of square knotting with other variations of knots to produce beautiful patterns. Just like Assyrian horse riders and certain 70’s car owners, sailors liked to pimp out their ships and themselves in Macramé creations. Crafting items such as rope ladders, steering wheel covers, bell pulls along with personal accessories such as hats and belts. Knowing this, it’s probably made pirates increasingly scary.

Sailors took on Macramé as a hobby in the spare time and a side hustle, often exchanging Macramé at ports for money or a most likely good drop of rum. Exporting Macramé from Europe to Far East Asia and the Americas. 18th Century British and American sailors often referred to Macramé as “McNamara’s Lace”, why they made it a longer name is still baffling to me. Interestingly, it is believed that print killed the Macramé star (I am ashamed of this joke) after the introduction of on-board libraries by “Sailors’ Aid” societies to help educate and civilize shipmates. As most sailors were unable to read, Macramé was the perfect hobby to pass the time over long voyages.

Macramé Monks?

Adopted into Christianity, Macramé was used for a time to decorate religious vestments and to craft table mats, covers and other religious regalia. Monks, Nuns and other missionaries due to this have also been credited to the spread of Macramé across to world. My god, Macramé was everywhere!

Golden Age of Macramé

From Warlords, Weavers, Sailors and Monks, Macramé even found itself amongst the high class of England. Proving most popular in the Victorian Era where it was often used to decorate the trimmings of black and colored costumes for home, garden parties, seaside ramblings and the occasional ball. Like the 70’s, most Victorian homes were adorned in Macramé as it was often found in tablecloths, bedspreads and curtains. Even English Royalty managed to get involved in Macramé trend with Queen Mary II of England being a huge fun of Macramé! Teaching the craft to her ladies-in-waiting after being introduced to the art by the Dutch through her marriage to William of Orange.

Macramé makes a comeback!

Disappearing from the public eye after the Victorian era, Macramé made a large revival in the 1970’s where most remember it from. First used as a funky way to hang up pot plants, the craft was heavily adopted and popularized by the hippy community. Becoming a common household name, enthusiasts began creating Macramé on mass to decorate anything and everything. Ranging from placemats and picture frames, to hammocks, golf bags, wall hanging and even bikinis! An inexpensive hobby, Macramé was made by everyone across all ages. Macramé whilst managing to shine bright, burnt out quickly due to overuse and the craft becoming identified as kitschy through ridiculous creations that have become synonymous with the 1970’s.

Millennial revival of Macramé

However, from the ember’s Macramé has once again resurfaced! After Macramé was found to be the number one way for people (mostly millennials) for hanging up indoor plants. Apartment living and not being able to afford a house with a backyard have spurred the trend of indoor plants. Which has inadvertently brought Macramé back into the spotlight. This time managing to separate itself from its questionable 70’s phase and returning Macramé back to its origins and an aesthetic piece of art and decorative tool.

