

Five Period Embroidery Stitches



Introduction

Embroidery played an important role throughout the period and cultures covered by the SCA. It was used to decorate clothing, home furnishings, weapons, religious objects and clothing and much more.

A variety of materials were used, anything from a single strand of silk to thick wools and even finely spun metal threads including gold.

While a wide variety of stitches and techniques were used, the five in this handout will cover the most time periods and cultures. The stitches in this handout are also quick to learn and work up quickly.

Fabrics

The best choice for fabrics for most clothing and embroidery in the SCA is linen, wool and silk. Just about all periods and cultures used various grades of linen for their undergarments, wool for outer

12th Century Dalmatic from Sicily

garments and silk for the upper classes and Church items (both clothing and decorative objects).

The basic principle is that natural fibres such as linen and wool are better than synthetics. This is for a variety of reasons, firstly, they look better, secondly, they are usually easier to work with and to look after, thirdly they are more comfortable to wear as they breathe (synthetics will have you sweating in summer and shivering in winter) and lastly, they last very well.



Skull Pouch

Colours

During the period covered by the SCA, all dyes consisted of natural elements – plants, minerals, animal parts, ocre etc. These dyes could produce soft subtle colours or bright, strong colours. Some of the most common colours produced were:

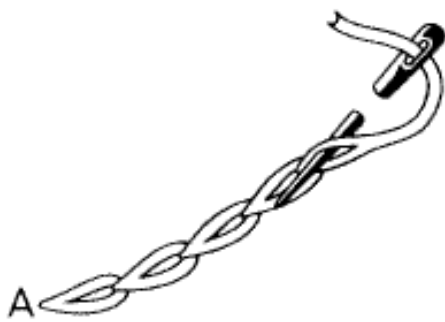
- Reds
- Yellows
- Oranges
- Greens
- Blues
- Browns

If you stick to these sorts of colours, you should be producing something fairly authentic.



Handspun Wool Thread Dyed with Natural Dyes by Mistress Yseult de Lacy (<http://www.goldgryph.com/>)

Part I - Split Stitch



Split Stitch

Background

Split stitch is one of the oldest, most widely used (both geographically and timeframe) and easiest embroidery stitches used in the period covered by the SCA.

Because split stitch follows a curve well, it is a good basic outlining stitch and can also be used as a filling stitch. The densely packed stitching can give an almost painting like effect.

This stitch produced what were acknowledged throughout Europe as the most magnificent embroideries of their times, the mainly clerical garments done in the “Opus Anglicanum” style.

Technique

To do this stitch, bring the needle through at A and, following the line to be covered, take a small back stitch so that the needle comes up through the working thread, as shown in the diagram.

When starting to learn this stitch, it might be easier to use what is called a “stab stitch” method. This means making a stitch (as in the first part of the above instructions), but while the needle is “underneath” the fabric, pull the thread all the way through. Then, bring the needle up through the working thread. You are basically doing the same as above, but doing it in two motions rather than one.

Periods and Cultures

This stitch was used widely by the following cultures (but not limited to), in the following circumstances:

- Coptic – clothing and vestments
- Anglo Saxon - Vestments, secular garments
- Norman - Vestments, Ceremonial garments, Bayeaux Tapestry
- Opus Anglicanum - Vestments, seal bags, wall hangings
- Tudor and Elizabethan – Secular embroidering gains popularity, (decline of use in religious settings due to Reformation and rise of Protestantism in England), wall hangings, secular garments, bed hangings, cushions, book bindings, book bags.

Materials

Split stitch can be done with just about an embroidery thread. It works particularly well with wool thread, but equally well with cotton and silk. When starting off, wool is a great way to begin. I would recommend something like Anchor or DMC Tapestry wool. It can be worked on a ground (your base fabric) of linen, cotton or wool. In period, wool on wool was fairly common, as was silk thread on a linen ground.

A quick word about colours. While loving the intertwined vines of nature, colour selection of threads was not necessarily naturalistic. As such, the stems of vines could be any colour, not just green. When choosing colours, keep in mind that dyes were made using natural products that were available and so colours tend to be muted to modern eyes. Having said that, brighter reds were available as were vivid blues.

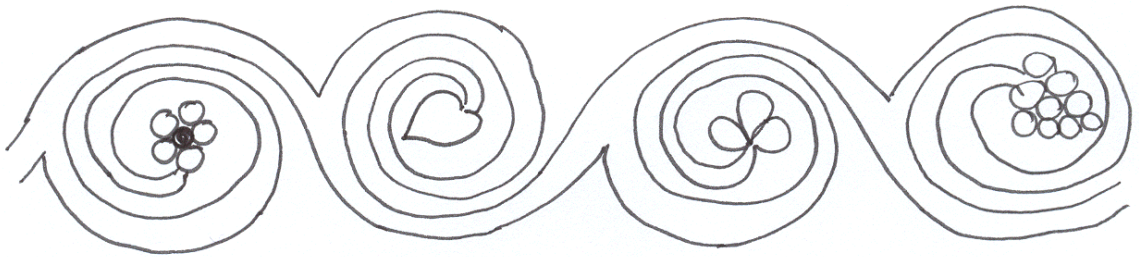
Design Sources

One of the problems associated with research into textiles, is that very few textiles survive today. Those that do tend to be ones that belonged to churches or royal or noble families, who had the means to protect what were in many cases family or national treasures. As such, we must turn to more permanent survivals, such as stonework, illuminated manuscripts, metal work etc.

Patterns to Practice With

Below are two patterns based on period sources that I have put together for those who might like to try a simple design. When stitching, try outlining the pattern in a darker colour, and then filling with a lighter colour.

Either of the patterns below would make a lovely decoration for around a neckline, cuffs or possibly along the front edge of a cloak.



Anglo-Saxon – Spiral vine based on an altar carving from the Church of St. Mary and St. Hardulph.



Norman – 12th Century



Coptic Embroidered Roundel 7th-8th Century – split stitch was used as a filling stitch in this example.



Anglo-Saxon, 10th Century – split stitch was worked in bright colours (mainly red in this set of embroideries) to fill in the background of the design. The main elements were worked in gold thread.



Steeple Aston Cope, 14th Century - Detail of Head



Steeple Aston Cope, 14th Century - Extra Detailed image of head, showing split stitch, used for fine detail in face and hair.

Part II - Stem Stitch



Stem Stitch

Background

Stem stitch was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as an outlining stitch but also used as a filling stitch.

Technique

Work from left to right, taking regular small stitches along the line of the design. The thread always emerges on the left side of the previous stitch. It can

also be worked as a filling stitch if worked closely together within a shape until it is completely filled.

Periods and Cultures

This stitch was used widely by the following cultures (but not limited to), in the following circumstances:

- Byzantine and Coptic
- Anglo Saxon - Vestments, secular garments
- Norman - Vestments, Ceremonial garments, Bayeux Tapestry (in wool)
- English – 12th – 14th Century - Opus Anglicanum - Vestments, seal bags
- Tudor and Elizabethan – Secular embroidering gains popularity, (decline of use in religious settings due to Reformation and rise of Protestantism in England), wall hangings, secular garments, bed hangings, cushions, book bindings, book bags.
- Blackwork – stem stitch often used in various application, such as costume (from which some of the most famous examples come from) or household linens.

Materials

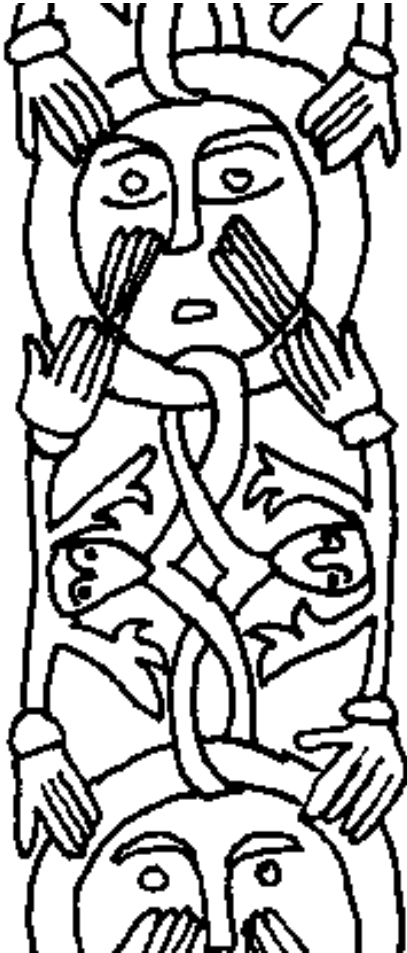
Stem stitch can be done with just about any thread used in embroidery. It works well with wool yarns, cotton and silk thread. When starting off, wool is a great way to learn. I would recommend something like Anchor or DMC Tapestry wool. It can be worked on a ground (your base fabric) of linen, cotton or wool. In period, wool on wool was fairly common, as was silk thread on a linen ground.

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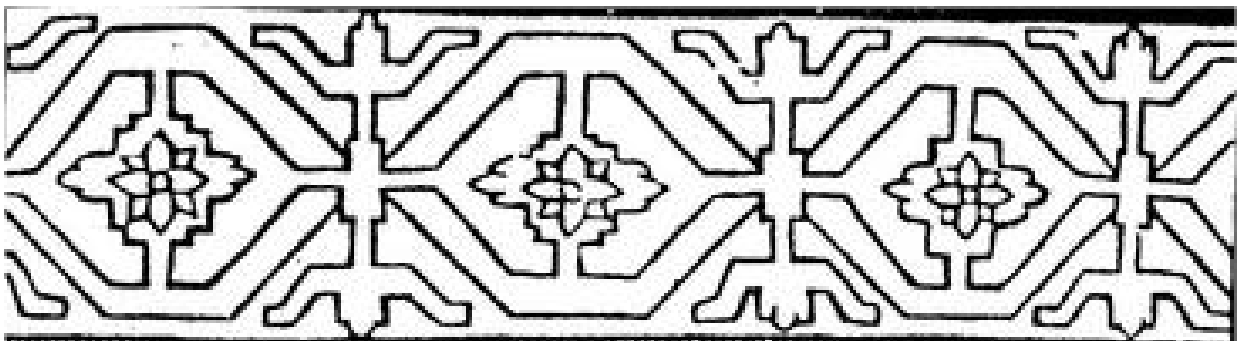


Viking - Interlaced Human Heads taken from the Mammen Cloak



Viking -Human Heads taken from the Mammen Cloak

Above Figures from – <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikembroid.html>



Strapwork Pattern - Schorleyker, 1632. Although published after SCA Period, there are many examples of this type of strapwork pattern in Tudor and Elizabethan portraits.



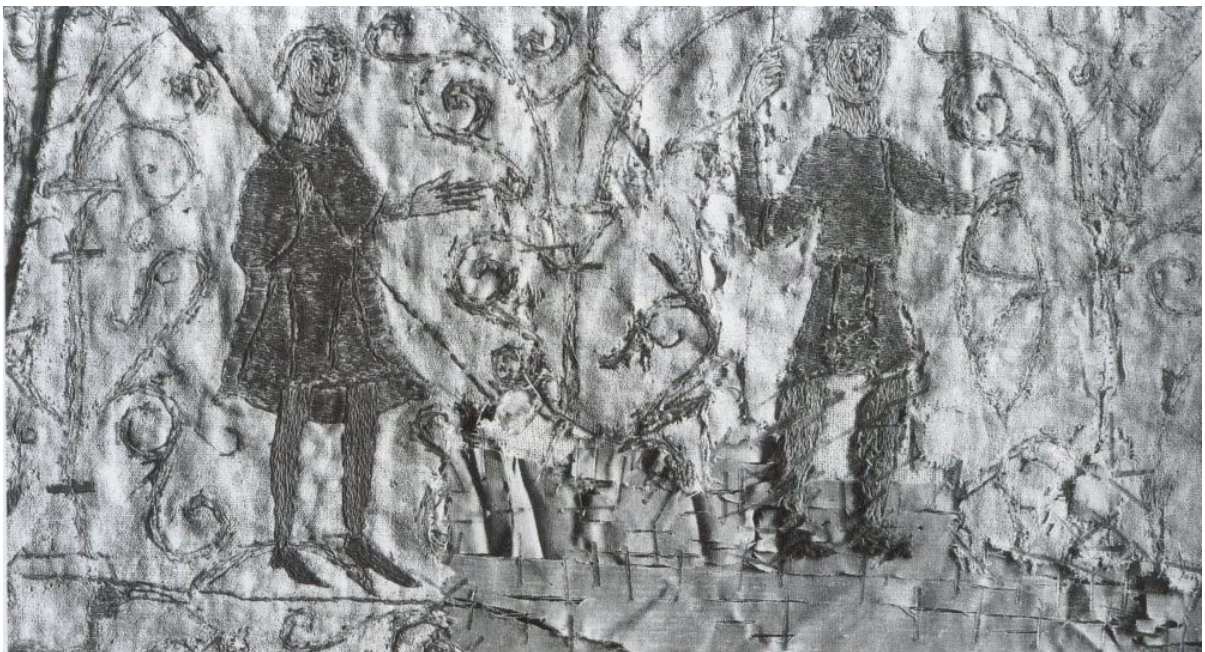
Early 17th Century Women's Smock – Motifs worked in Stem Stitch, silk on linen



Extant Embroidery from Mammen and Modern Reconstruction, Viking, 10th Century

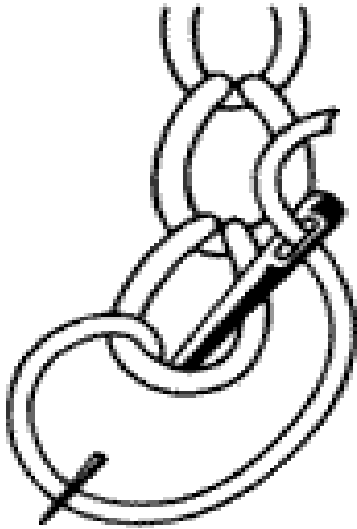


Scene from the Bayeux Tapestry, 10th C English, wool on linen (text and outlining in stem stitch)



Possible Anglo-Saxon Fragment, 9th Century

Part III - Chain Stitch



Chain Stitch

Background

Stem stitch was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as a fill stitch and also for things such as stems on vines or plants or as the frame for detached buttonhole, popular in late Elizabethan stitching.

Technique

Bring the thread up at the top of the line and hold it down with the left thumb. Insert the needle where it last emerged and bring the point out a short distance away. Pull the thread through, keeping the working thread under the needle point.

Periods and Cultures

This stitch was used widely by the following cultures (but not limited to), in the following circumstances:

- Byzantine and Coptic –used a filling stitch
- Egyptian Islamic – 9th – 16th Centuries,
- Anglo Saxon - Vestments, secular garments
- Norman - Vestments, Ceremonial garments, Bayeaux Tapestry (in wool)
- Germanic Lands – 13th Century – altar panels.
- English – 12th – 14th Century - Opus Anglicanum - Vestments, seal bags
- Tudor and Elizabethan – Secular embroidering gains popularity, (decline of use in religious settings due to Reformation and rise of Protestantism in England), wall hangings, secular garments, bed hangings, cushions, book bindings, book bags.

Materials

Chain stitch can be done with just about any thread used in embroidery. It works well with wool yarns, cotton and silk thread. When starting off, wool is a great way to learn. I would recommend something like Anchor or DMC Tapestry wool. It can be worked on a ground (your base fabric) of linen, cotton or wool. In period, wool on wool was fairly common, as was silk thread on a linen ground.

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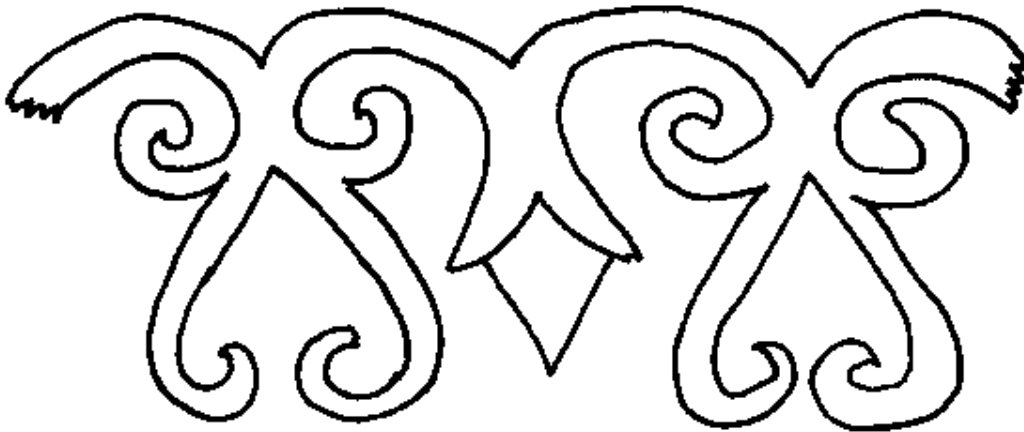
Either of the patterns below would make a lovely decoration for around a neckline, cuffs or possibly along the front edge of a cloak.

Examples to Stitch



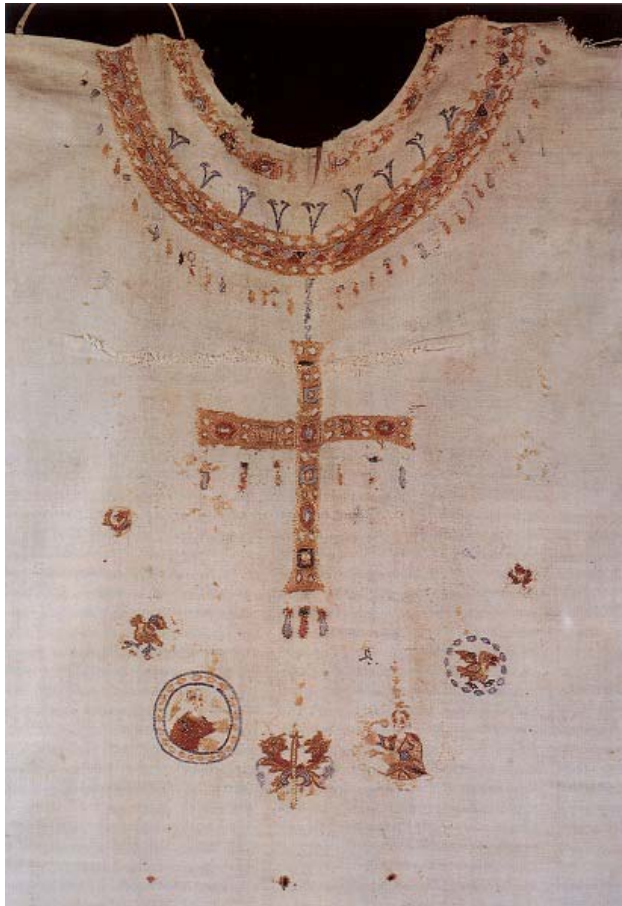
Repeating flower and vine motif from the 1568 “New Modelbuch” of Nicolas Bassée. However, this type of pattern was common in Northern Europe from the 13th century on.

This pattern would look very nice and be quite authentic done in white thread on white linen, especially as part of some sort of table linen.



Viking collar pattern from Valsgärde. Possibly Byzantine inspired design. This re-drawing from <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikembroid.html>

Try outlining this pattern in a lighter or darker colour to the fill colour. Would make a great pattern for collar and cuffs. In the extant example of this design, the piece was worked in goldwork techniques.



Tunic Found in the Tomb of Frankish Queen Bathilde, 9th Century, silk on linen

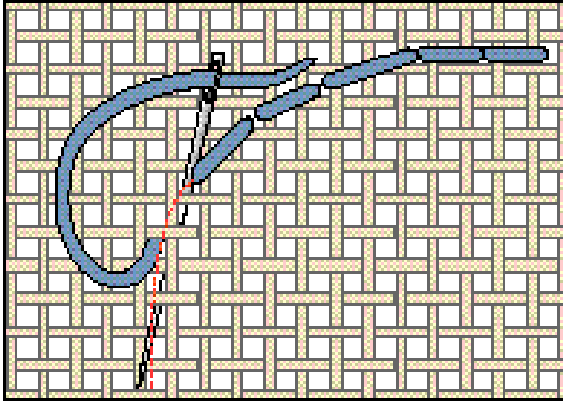


Fragment from Egypt, wool on linen, 9th Century



Coptic Tunic. 13th Century. wool on linen

Part IV - Back Stitch



Back Stitch

blackwork, a single back stitch is usually worked over two threads on a single-thread evenweave. If working on evenweave fabric, this stitch is best worked with a blunt needle.

Background

Back stitch was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as a decorative stitch on clothing, made most famous in the Tudor period, as a decoration on chemises.

Technique

Bring the thread through on the stitch line and then take a small backward stitch through the fabric. Bring the needle through again a little in front of the first stitch, then take another stitch, inserting the needle at the point where it first came through. In

Periods and Cultures

This stitch was used widely by the following cultures (but not limited to), in the following circumstances:

- Asissi work— 15th and 16th C - household linen.
- Tudor and Elizabethan - Blackwork – Secular embroidering gains popularity. Back stitch used extensively in personal clothing and other household linens. Please note, Blackwork was not only done using black thread, other colours were also popular (red, blue and purple in particular).

Materials

Back stitch can be done with just about any thread used in embroidery. However, most embroidery involving back stitch was done on a linen ground, using either silk or linen thread. Coloured silks were used in blackwork, while white or natural linen was used to produce various types of whitework, a style particularly popular in Northern Europe, especially Germanic lands.

Design Sources

Usually, one of the biggest problems associated with research into textiles, is that very few textiles survive today. However, once we enter the later periods, when back stitch was in extensive use, we have not only many surviving samples of work but also other sources for designs, for example, period design books and portraits. The early 16th Century saw the beginning of the widespread production and use of design books specifically for domestic use.

Some of the more famous (and easy to access are):

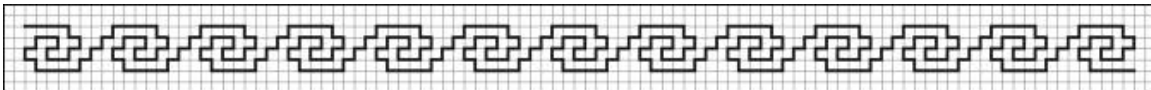
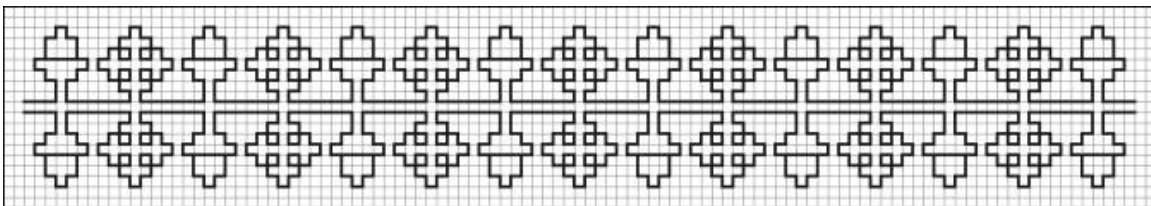
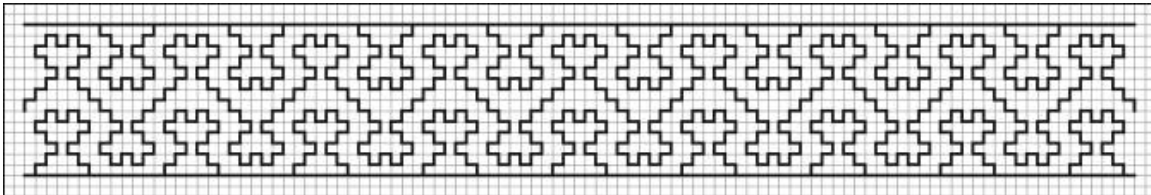
- Nicolas Bassees - “New Modelbuch” of 1568
- La Fleur de Patrons de Lingerie of 1532
- Richard Schorleyker , “A Scholehouse for the Needle” of 1632

Patterns to Practice With

Below are three patterns based on period sources that I have put together for those who might like to try a simple design.

Either of the patterns below would make a lovely decoration for around a neckline and cuffs or possibly as the border on a handkerchief.

Examples to Stitch

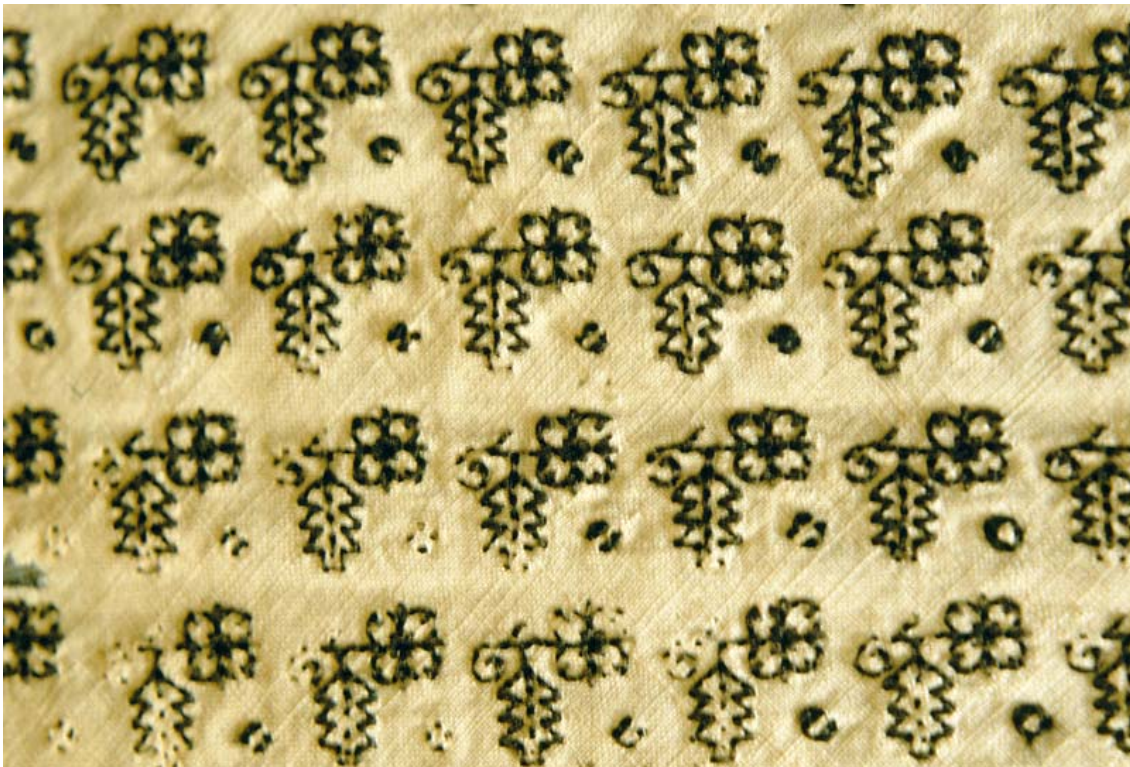
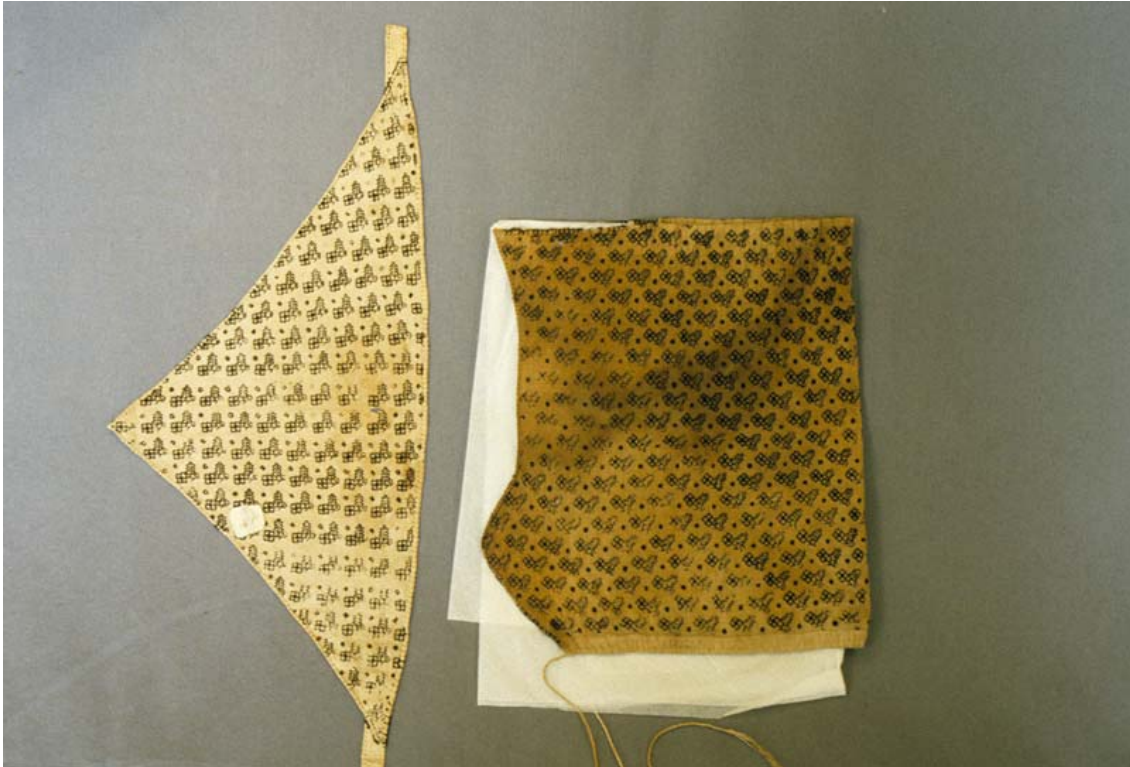


Three edging patterns taken from Nicolas Bassees “New Modelbuch”, 1568 (recharted examples from <http://costume.dm.net/blackwork/germanblackwork.html>)

These patterns would make great edgings for chemises, done in black thread. Would suit early Tudor or Germanic garb.

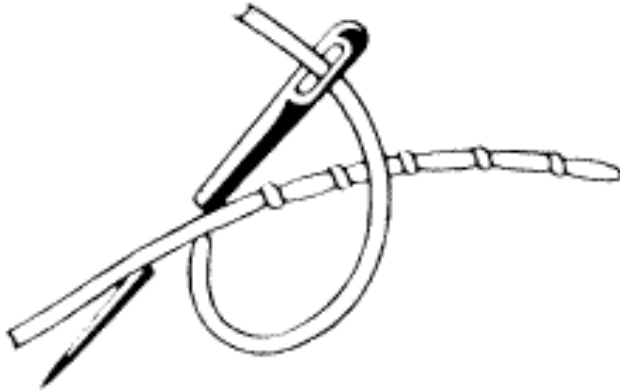


Detail of 14th Century Mamluk Sampler worked in silk and linen



Late 16th Century Woman's Coif and Forehead Cloth (Both and detail)

Part V - Couching



Couching Stitch

Background

Couching was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as a decorative stitch on clothing, either as a filling stitch or to outline and highlight designs.

Technique

Lay down the thread to be couched, and with another thread catch it down with small stitches worked over the top.

Periods and Cultures

This stitch was used widely by the following cultures (but not limited to), in the following circumstances:

- 8th and 9th C Anglo Saxon – silk and goldwork – ecclesiastical and secular.
- 10th-11th Century Norman – eg Bayeux Tapestry
- 11th-12th Century - Opus Anglicanum
- Tudor and Elizabethan – not so much on ecclesiastical garments due to the reformation but much couched goldwork in court and noble clothing.

Materials

Couching can be done with just about any thread used in embroidery. The most common use for couching was in the production of goldwork pieces. This could be done on just about any ground but silks, velvets and other rare and expensive fabrics were the common base for high goldwork. Conversely, there are many examples of simple wool couched designs on clothing and other forms of decoration. It was an easy and fast form of decoration.

Design Sources

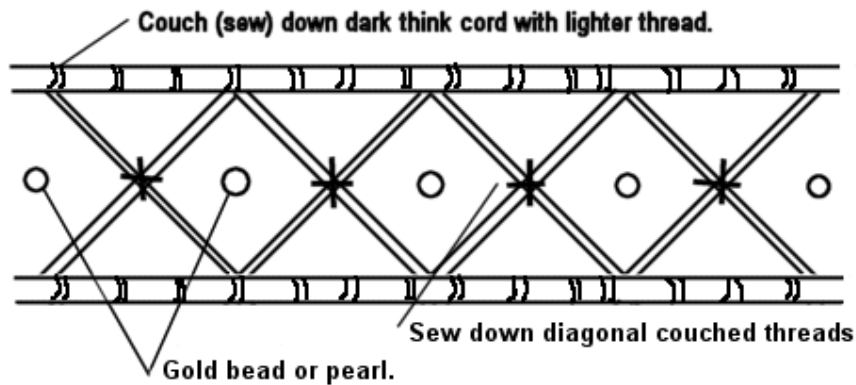
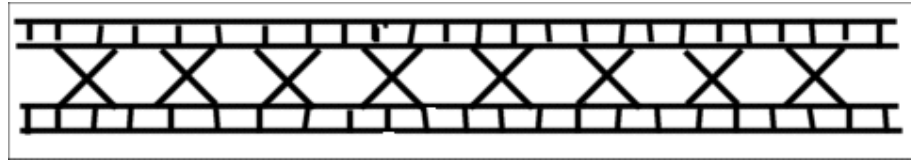
Just about any design can be rendered in couched work, from simple lines to complex narratives. Apart from surviving examples and pattern books, another good source for designs are things such as illumination and architectural details.

Patterns to Practice With

Below are two patterns not based on anything in particular! They are, however, very simple and reflect the geometric patterns popular throughout much of the SCA period.

Suggested uses for these patterns could be as decoration around necklines, cuffs, hems, or cloak borders.

Examples to Stitch



Use one thick cord and two thin ones (one light, one dark). Place the thick one down and couch with cross pattern, using contrasting thread (that is, if the thick cord is dark, couch with light thread, and vice versa). Then lay the thin cord on each side and repeat the process, this time, make the stitches straight across.

Pattern from http://www.geocities.com/hansensmtn/toby/what_to_wear.htm and recharted.



Embroidered Book Binding belonging to Henry VIII, 16th Century



Woollen Textile with Blazon of Jukandar, 14th Century Mamluk, wool on wool