

# Completely Basic Period Embroidery

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Nov. 1, A.S. XXXVIII (2003 C.E.)

Today we will look at pictures of historical needlework from many cultures and get hands-on experience of four basic period stitches. We'll discuss how to develop an embroidery project from start to finish.

The topic of embroidery is so big that any one class isn't going to be able to do it justice. The bibliographies in this handout are a starting point for your continued research into this fascinating art form, as I've included titles SCA stitchers repeatedly recommend. There is also a resource list for fabrics, threads, and other needlework supplies in the greater Portland/Vancouver area. I appreciate your feedback, and if you have any questions/concerns or run across something interesting, please contact me at the email above. --RdA

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## **Four Basic Medieval Stitches:**

- Double running stitch
- Split stitch
- Stem stitch (also called outline stitch)
- Chain stitch

### ***Technique tips:***

- The key to beautiful needlework is consistency. Even big stitches can be beautiful if done evenly (same stitch size and tension throughout).
- To avoid having threads knot up when working:
  - Use shorter working thread.
  - Use thread with the spin or grain of the yarn (not against the grain).
  - Let thread untwist every few stitches.
  - Keep waste tails trimmed while working.
- Neatness counts (sometimes!): In period the goal of the backside of the needlework was that it shouldn't cause the front to rip out with use. For wall hangings it's less important to be neat than for a cloak which will get worn (cloaks were usually lined to keep this from being a problem). Knots may look lumpy when pieces are appliquéd for example. Modern/SCA tastes usual dictate a neat reverse side, especially in competition.
- Watch tension; avoid puckering, maybe your project needs backing fabric.
- Stitch ergonomically, turn project so you're comfortable.
- Keep hands clean! No lotion, perfumes, or food that will rub off onto the project.
- Wash both fabric ground and threads if you are worried about sizing and dye running later. Most of my projects have been boxes or wallhangings that aren't getting wear and tear, but it's better to be safe than sorry, especially if you've got a dark color thread on a light background (blue or red on white for example). Most stitchers recommend using Woolite or Ivory soap flakes with a gentle handwashing (no machine!) for needlework projects. Like I said, I haven't done it myself, so be careful. See the article in [TI #132](#) [see "Gabrielle" in bibliography] for needlework finishing techniques.

## **Getting Started with Decorative Embroidery:**

Handedness (lefties will need to translate): Left Handed Stitchery by Sally Cowan

### Design

- Pattern/design/motif [depends on your timeperiod, culture, and social status]
- Color: Keep color scheme simple, and the colors do not have to be realistic. [Look at the Bayeux Tapestry] Think heraldically [no metal on metal, no color on color]. Use dark/light combinations that have good contrast.

### Fabric

- Linen; Silk; Cotton; Wool; Hemp

### Thread

- Wool (crewel, Persian, and tapestry weights)
- Silk (Soie d'Alger is the silk equivalent to DMC floss, Soie Platte is flat silk)
- Cotton (floss, perle cotton) [cotton floss is the "substitute" for silk]
- Metals (silver & gold)

### Needles

- On cotton: medium/short needle with a long eye
- On silk, satin: short, very sharp point, gold plated needle
- On wools: large "Crewel" needles with long eyes
- On evenweave canvas: blunt point Tapestry needle

Scissors/snips; Hoop/frame (optional); Marking pen/pencil/chalk [fine .5 mechanical pencil is best]

### ***Some Types of Embroideries:***

- Ecclesiastic (church): copes, albs, chasubles, mitres, etc.
- Household Linens: sheets, curtains, bed hangings, tapestries, pillowcases, runners, more.
- Garb: hems, cuffs, other decorative panels and motifs
- Book covers, Boxes, Purses/Pouches, other small personal items.
- Heraldic: clothing/regalia, wallhangings, banners, funeral cloths, etc.

## **Resources used for this Class:**

- Airmid Godwin, "A Catalog of Medieval Embroidery Stitches", In The Known World Handbook, 3rd ed., Milpitas, CA: Society for Creative Anachronism/Office of the Stock Clerk, 159-163.
- Burnham, Dorothy K. Cut My Cote. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1997.
- Cateline de la Mor, "Opus Anglicanum", In Tournaments Illuminated, Winter (1989) #93, 34-35.
- Coss, Melinda. Reader's Digest Complete Book of Embroidery. Pleasantville, New York/Montreal, 1996.
- David of Moffat, "Opus Anglicanum: the Stem and Split Stitch", handout from Needlework Ithra, 28 March 1998.
- Dean, Beryl. Ecclesiastical Embroidery. London: B. T. Batsford, 1989.
- Freeman, Margaret B. The St. Martin Embroideries. Greenwich, CT: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1968.  
Discusses in details one set of 15th c. embroideries. Excellent closeups.
- Gabrielle Chasserresse de Chevreuil, "Mounting Needlework for Framing or Display", In Tournaments Illuminated, Autumn (1999) #132, 22-26.
- Langdon, Helen. Holbein. London: Phaidon Press, 1993.
- Morrell, Anne. The Techniques of Indian Embroidery. Loveland, Colo.: Interweave Press, 1995.
- Paine, Sheila. Embroidered Textiles: Traditional Patterns from Five Continents. New York: Rizzoli, 1990.
- Priest-Dorman, Carolyn. "Viking Embroidery Stitches and Motifs"  
[online at: <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikembroid.html>]
- Siban ni Sheaghda. "Simply Embroidery" [online at: <http://members.aol.com/tbyrnes883/armonye/embroidery.html>]
- Staniland, Kay. Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.  
Good discussion of opus anglicanum. Author is Keeper of Costume and Textiles at the Museum of London. Full of pictures of period examples.
- Wilson, David M. The Bayeux Tapestry. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

## **Further reading:**

- Antrobus, Mary Symond and Louisa Preece. Needlework through the Ages. London: Hodder & Strough, Ltd., 1928.  
Includes non-European work. Fewer plates than Schuette.
- Bahouth, Candace. Flowers, Birds, and Unicorns: Medieval Needlepoint. NY: Harry Abrams, 1993.
- Christie, A.G.I. English Medieval Embroidery. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938.  
THE book on opus anglicanum methods and materials with many black and white pictures (only a few color plates). Discusses both style and technique, great pictures and diagrams. Out of Print; available through ILL, though the copy I got was so fragile I didn't feel right taking any photocopies. Large folio size tome, 16"h x 12"w x 3"d.—Rafaella.
- Crowfoot, Elisabeth, Frances Pritchard and Kay Staniland. Textiles and Clothing c.1150-1450. London: HMSO, 1992.
- Don, Sarah. Traditional Embroidered Animals. NY: Sterling Publishing Co., 1990.  
Period embroidery techniques within the context of the title, that of animals. It's a general survey book-- there's a section here and there on just about every major period embroidery technique. And, it has projects.
- Drysdale, Rosemary. The Art of Blackwork Embroidery. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975.

Epstein, Kathleen. A New Modelbook for Spanish Stitch. Austin: Curious Works Press, 1993.

Geijer, Agnes. The History of Textile Art. London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1979.

German Renaissance Patterns for Embroidery -- A Facsimile Copy of Nicolas Basse's New Modelbuch of 1568. (ISBN 0-9633331-4-3, 1994, Curious Works Press, 107 RR 620 South, #11-E, Austin Texas 78734).

Facsimile pattern book. Lots of period patterns: Spanish work, laxis, counted satin stitch, and couched cordwork.

Gostelow, Mary. The Complete Guide to Needlework Techniques and Materials. Chartwell Books, Inc., 1982, ISBN 0890095973.

Isela di Bari says see p. 30 for an example of historical evenweave linen canvas fabric.

Jones, Mary Eirwen. A History of Western Embroidery. London: Studio Visto, 1969.

King, Donald. Opus Anglicanum: English Medieval Embroidery. London: The Curwen Press, 1963.

Exhibition catalog. Quality of pictures better than other works.

King, Donald and Santina Levey. The Victoria and Albert Museum's Textile Collection Embroidery in Britain from 1200 to 1750. New York: Canopy Books, 1993.

Montclare, Kay. Patterns From Seventeenth Century European Samplers. (self-published; Available from Special Projects, 232 Osgood Road, Milford, N.H. 03055-3430.)

O'Steen, Darlene. The Proper Stitch. Birmingham, AL: Symbol of Excellence Publishers, 1994.

Salazar, Kim Brody (writing as Ianthe d'Averoine). The New Carolingian Modelbook. Albuquerque: Outlaw Press, 1995. ISBN 0-9642082-2-9

TNCM contains more than 230 counted thread patterns from before 1600 - all with specific citations of provenance and date.

Schuette, M. and S. Muller-Christiansen. A Pictorial History of Embroidery. New York: 1964.

Available in both English and German. EXTREMELY Good general work; LOTS of pictures of period examples, and good section on technique. Out of print, very expensive, use Interlibrary Loan.

Snook, Barbara. English Embroidery. London: Bell & Hyman, 1974.

Warner, Pamela. Embroidery, A History. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1991.

Wilson, David M. The Bayeux Tapestry. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

Definitive book on the tapestry (which is really an embroidery).

Wilson, Erica. Crewel Embroidery. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1962.

## List of Suppliers (Three Mountains/Dragon's Mist/Mountain Edge area)

Acorns & Threads, Owner: Roz, (503) 292-4457  
4475 SW Scholls Ferry Rd. #158, Portland, OR, 97225  
Her shop is targeted at fine cross-stitch and hardanger artists. Will special order fabrics and books.

Aurora Silk, 503-286-4149  
5806 N. Vancouver Ave, Portland, OR 97217 USA  
<http://www.aurorasilk.com>

Fabric.com (formerly Phoenix Textiles)  
<http://store.yahoo.com/phoenixtextiles/>  
Online discount fabric supplier, great prices, good quality. Good cotton, linen, silk, and wool, especially blends.

Fabrics-store.com  
<http://www.fabrics-store.com/Shop/enter.html>  
Online discount fabrics house. Reportedly fabulous 100% linen.

Jo-Ann Fabrics & Crafts, (503) 639-2434  
208 SW Tigard Plaza, Tigard, OR, 97223  
Aida cloth and other evenweave fabrics available off the bolt (especially the wide stuff).

LACIS, (510) 843-7178, fax: (510) 843-5018  
Lacemaker's supply store, <http://www.lacis.com/>  
3163 Adeline St., Berkeley, CA 94703

Michaels Arts & Crafts, (503) 684-8255  
17880 SW Lower Boones Ferry Rd., Lake Oswego, OR 97035  
Michaels carry a nice line of wool-blend tapestry weight yarns, plus lots of other needlework supplies.

Needlepoint Plus, (503) 641-7100, M-S 10-5, except Thursday 10-9  
8640 SW Scholls Ferry Rd., Beaverton, OR 97008  
Really nice shop with twisted silk and lots of colors and sizes of DMC perle cotton (especially hard to find #3!)

Northwest Wools, (503) 244-5024  
3524 SW Troy St., Portland, OR  
Their shop is target towards weavers. Lots of yarn and goodies including card weaving supplies. Carries Cleckheaton brand wool tapestry yarn.

Pastiche, SCA merchants: Foggy & Asha, email: [pastinc@aol.com](mailto:pastinc@aol.com)  
3634 NE 19th, Portland, OR 97212  
They carry Kreinik Silk Embroidery floss (flat silk). Catch them at events, especially large Kingdom events, like Twelfth Night and Kingdom Arts and Sciences, or send them an email to make an appointment to drop by or what their next event will be. They also sell fabrics and books.

Robin and Russ Handweavers, Inc., (800) WEAVE-91, <http://www.robinandruss.com/index.html>  
533 North Adams St., McMinnville, OR 97128  
Fabulous store, mecca of weavers. Great for silk thread, books, looms, and accessory supplies (cardweaving cards and shuttles).

Woodland Woolworks, Phone: (503) 852-7376, Orders: (800) 547-3725, Fax: (503) 852-6685  
<http://www.woodlandwoolworks.com/>, Email: [info@woolworks.com](mailto:info@woolworks.com)  
100 E Washington St., Carlton, OR 97111  
Even more fabulous than Robin & Russ. Volume discounts, fabulous wool yarn (Cleckheaton!), patterns, tools, accessories. Don't take your credit card, just what cash you're willing to part with. ☺