

# Opus Anglicanum Embroidery

By Cerridwen verch Ioreword

## What is it?

(Latin: "English work"), embroidery done in England between about 1100 and about 1350 and of a standard unsurpassed anywhere. The technical skill that was shown by English workers in handling gold-i.e., silver gilt thread-was unequaled. Gold was used in large expanses as background for figures that were embroidered in coloured silks. Another characteristic of opus anglicanum was the general vivacity of expression and pose in the figure modeling of features-the use of split stitches worked spirally, for example, to suggest rotund cheeks and black, popping eyes. Minutely observed birds and animals, clearly based on contemporary animal drawings, figured largely in the decorative schemes. <sup>1</sup>

## History

Embroidery has been utilized for hundreds of years. Starting in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century the English became known for their work in embroidery using a method referred to as *Opus Anglicanum*. <sup>2</sup> *Opus Anglicanum* was revered for its use of colored silks worked in fine split stitches, and underside couching of gold threads.<sup>3</sup> The use of split stitch was prized because the stitches were so fine that they allowed for shading and fine attention to detail in facial expressions of the people being depicted<sup>4</sup> and worked spirally to give fullness and life to the figure. <sup>5</sup> Contrasting colors were used to add detail such as mimicking the natural curl in a person's hair.<sup>6</sup> Further, the use of the split stitch followed the lines of the design to bring a fluidity and flow to the piece, rather than following the rigidity of the weave of the fabric in an up and down or side to side pattern. The fineness of the work from the intricate split stitch and underside couching of the gold was unsurpassed until its gradual decline starting in the 1350.<sup>7</sup>

Pictorial designs were in use during the later half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century as shown by the embroidered bookbinding for the Felibrigge Psalter worked by Anne de Felbrigge.<sup>8</sup> An examination of this piece shows it to be worked using the *Opus Anglicanum* style of fine split stitches and underside couching in a herringbone pattern for the background.<sup>9</sup> *Opus Anglicanum* was used for both papal and secular purposes, although few secular pieces have survived.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>2</sup> Britannica; The Art of Embroidery. P46

<sup>3</sup> Art of Embroidery. P.46

<sup>4</sup> Art of Embroidery. P. 46

<sup>5</sup> Historical Needlework Resources.

<sup>6</sup> Historical Needlework Resources.

<sup>7</sup> Art of Embroidery p. 51

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix for inspiration piece.

<sup>9</sup> Davenport

<sup>10</sup> Historical Needlework Resources.

## **Materials**

The use of silk thread was prized for its high sheen and luster in period works.<sup>11</sup> The colors were done in jewel like quality with dense needlework.<sup>12</sup> My favorite thread to embroidery with is Eterna silk mini twist, which is cost effective at approximately \$.95 per skein. Stranded thread would also be appropriate, but can be much more difficult to work with if you are not experienced with silk threads. Various sources have indicated a slight twist in thread<sup>13</sup>, while others have stated that no twist was present in the silk threads,<sup>14</sup> so either would be appropriate. You can purchase the Eterna silk thread on-line at <http://www.yodamo.net/catalog/>

While real gold is very likely to be cost prohibitive, there are several modern substitutes that work equally as well. My preferred substitute is Clover's gold metallic beading thread because the fineness of the metallic thread is similar to the silk thread used for the piece in order to maintain the same consistency. Also, it has sufficient pure gold sheen to make it an acceptable substitute.

If you would rather use a different gold thread substitute, or choose to work with the real thing, remember that extant metallic thread was produced by wrapping a thin flattened piece of gold around silk, linen, or hemp thread.<sup>15</sup> Be sure to test your thread choice on your piece so that when you work with your chosen thread, it doesn't create large holes that would allow it to poke through your fabric during underside couching. For example, I have found an excellent real gold metal wrapped thread from [www.hedgehoghandworks.com](http://www.hedgehoghandworks.com). While it is excellent for surface couching, the thread is too thick for underside couching. Also, not all imitation gold threads are created equal. Avoid gold thread that stretches easily since the tension used for couching could cause your piece to become distorted or the thread to break.

*Opus Anglicanum* was often embroidered on fine linen<sup>16</sup> with a thread count of around 50-60 threads per inch.<sup>17</sup> Modern day handkerchief linen, which has a fine weave of about 40-50 threads per inch and doubled to provide sufficient sturdiness works as a substitute, as no modern equivalent is available.

I prefer a size 12 quilting needle to work my embroidery. Using such a small needle was necessary because the embroidery needle sizes 3-9 created too large of holes in the fabric. The holes distorted the small stitches and caused them to pull out.

## **Technique**

*Opus Anglicanum* used a minute split stitch, approximately 2mm per stitch, for the main figures or pictorial piece. Contrasting colors were used to give depth and dimension.<sup>18</sup> In *Opus Anglicanum*, the designs achieved a three-dimensional effect by working in solid shading of three to five colors,

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<sup>11</sup> di Bari.

<sup>12</sup> Art of Embroidery. P. 52

<sup>13</sup> Crawfoot p. 86-100.

<sup>14</sup> di Bari.

<sup>15</sup> Crawfoot p.87.

<sup>16</sup> Art of Embroidery p. 47

<sup>17</sup> Textiles and Clothing. P. 80

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B.

by moving from the darker to lighter to show the folds and dimensions giving the piece an almost painted or stained glass look.<sup>19</sup>

Around the decline of *Opus Anglicanum*, stitches such as the stem stitch began to replace the split stitch. The need to produce mass quantities of embroidery by the late 14<sup>th</sup> century by using the satin stitch resulted in the decline and end of *Opus Anglicanum*.

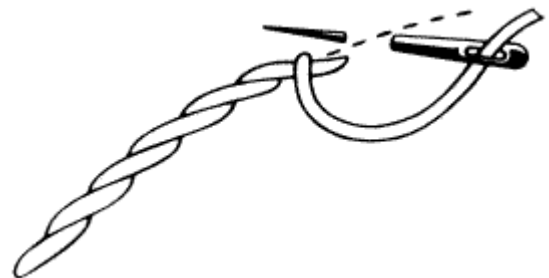
The gold thread was couched in a variety of patterns such as herringbone, lattice, chevron, and floral.<sup>20</sup> The underside couching was most commonly used because it allowed embroidered garments to drape as a result of the “hinge” created when pulling the thread through, where surface couching resulted in a stiff and ridged piece.<sup>21</sup> Even when the piece was not going to be used as a garment, underside couching was still used in extant pieces.<sup>22</sup>

Explanation of stitches from Historical Needlework Resources found at <http://medieval.webcon.net.au/index.html>

## Stem Stitch

Stem stitch was often used in the pre-modern period as an outlining stitch. It could also be used as a filling stitch.

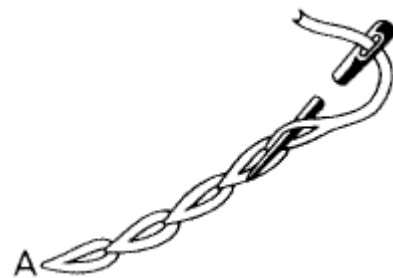
**To Work Stem Stitch** - Work from left to right, taking regular small stitches along the line of the design. The thread always emerges on the left side of the previous stitch. This stitch is used for flower stems, outlines, etc. It can also be worked as a filling stitch if worked closely together within a shape until it is completely filled.



## Split Stitch

A popular stitch, split stitch was used in many forms of embroidery including [Opus Anglicanum](#) and [Heraldic Embroidery](#). It was used for very fine work, often only using a single strand of silk thread or was done using quite thick threads, such as wool. It was used as an outlining stitch or as a filling stitch.

**To Work Split 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. Generally, it is easiest to work this as a two step stitch by making a small stitch, then bringing the needle up through the thread at the half way point.



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<sup>19</sup> di Bari.

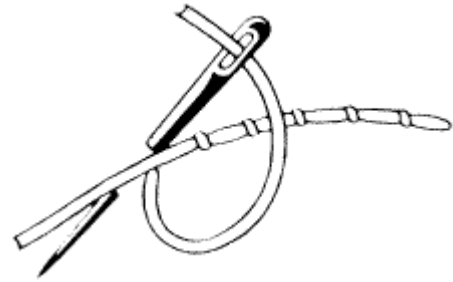
<sup>20</sup> See Appendix for examples.

<sup>21</sup> Art of Embroidery. P. 46; Historical Needlework.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix A and B.

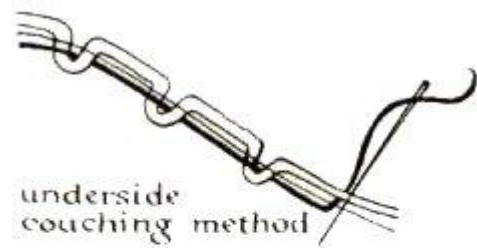
## Surface Couching

**To Work Surface Couching** - Lay down the thread to be couched, and with another thread catch it down with small stitches worked over the top.



## Underside Couching

**To Work Underside Couching** - In the embroidery technique of underside couching, thread (usually gold) is laid on the surface of the ground fabric, couching threads are then passed over it. As each couching stitch is worked over the gold thread, the needle is carefully re-inserted into the hole in the backing fabric that the needle created on the way out. The couching thread is pulled tight and a tiny loop of the gold thread from the surface drops through the hole in the backing fabric to the underside (thus giving the technique its name).



This creates a hinge in the gold thread, allowing the fabric to bend and giving it a great flexibility. Fabric worked with gold thread in underside couching has much more drape than fabric with surface couched gold, thus making it a much better technique for working objects which will be worn, such as ecclesiastical vestments.





*Detail of English Altar Frontal, c.1315-35*



*English lions - horse trapping*



*Felbrigge Psalter c. 1350*



*Chasuble - Adoration of the Magi c. 1330-1350*

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