

Heraldic Embroidery Recreation

By Lady Joan Silvertoppe

This is an embroidered future casket cover, based on an extant embroidered book cover. The book for the original is "*Biblia Sacra and the whole book of Psalmes*", published in London in 1587. The bookbinding's embroidery seems to be of the style of the late 16th to early 17th century, but it was roughly dated to c.1630. I felt the design seemed more in keeping with the earlier date of 1587 with its simple gold vine execution, which is why I chose to recreate this piece.

The original bookbinding was made from red satin, using spangles (oes), gold threads of various sorts, and presumably silk threads (the original site where I found this did not specify.) The original also had 2 pairs of ties, which obscured a portion of the design.

This sort of bookbinding embroidery might have been created by a professional embroiderer upon commission by a client, or it may have been completed by an amateur. Either way, the owner would have had to be able to afford the silk satin fabric, silks threads and gold threads used for the cover, so it would be a person of wealth who could own such a fine cover.



Illustration 1: Biblia Sacra (Davis66), published in London, 1587.

My piece is designed to become the cover piece to a fabric covered casket, so I only recreated the front cover portion. They are both very similar in size as I took my measurements from the original. My recreated embroidery is not exact, but as close as I could determine from the remains of the original design.

The original embroidery

The major flowers in order from top to bottom, left to right on the original design are:

pomegranate, gillyflower (carnation), bachelor's button (cornflower)

honeysuckle, strawberries

dog rose, hearts-ease (pansy)

columbine, gillyflower (carnation), marigold

There are a variety of different leaves, possible seed pods and gold round shapes

Most of the original motifs appear to be embroidered in long and short stitch, according to the blown-up views I could see of the original image. I presumed long & short since the surviving thread colors blend into each other in that manner, and from the way the stitches appear to be placed. Some of the leaves and the seed pods appear to be sewn in satin stitch. A laid stitch was placed on top of the satin stitches to hold them. Most of the motifs appear to be flat, and it is unclear if any padding might have been used. The strawberry fruit and the center of the pomegranate had some laid stitches in a grid design, with French knots within each gridded diamond.

It is difficult to see from the original image if the silk threads were twisted or flat. Flat silks appear to be the normal type of thread used in long and short stitches from the few examples I have seen (mostly from photos of extant gloves). As I am still learning to use silk threads, I chose to keep with the twisted filament thread I used, and only brought in flat threads near the end of my silk work, for the colors that I could not find in Soie Paris.

All of the motifs appear to be outlined with couched gold threads in a simple fashion. It was unclear from the quality of the image if the gold threads were doubled, or if a twisted cord was used. Many of the spangles are missing, but darker spots can be seen where many once were. Some of the gold bullion is also missing, sometimes only leaving dots of thread behind to mark its location. Much of the gold is guessed at because it has tarnished to a near black. It may have originally been silver, or had a high quantity of silver in its makeup to turn so black over the years.

For my embroidered cover, I used:

- Silk changeable taffeta fabric, in red and black.
- An underlying support fabric in linen/cotton (60/40) blend.
- Soie de Paris silk threads for most of the silk embroidered motifs.
- Kreikink Soie Platte silk threads for the 'seed pods' that were done in shades of brown.
- Au Ver a Soie in a light grey and golden yellow for couching the metal threads.
- #371 Dark Gold passing thread, used in pairs for the motif outlines, minor vines, Or nué book, and twisted with the silver for outlining the central heraldic diamond.
- #380 Silver passing thread for the upper triangle, silver needles, and twisted with the gold for outlining, in the central heraldic motif.
- #5 Japan Gold for the larger main vines.
- #1 passing gold thread for the grid over the strawberries
- Medium gold soft twist for outlining the book.
- Faux gold colored bullion metal, and gold check for flower centers and the gold round shapes.
- Red glass beads for the pomegranate center.
- #12 & #14 gilt oes (spangles) scattered around the design.

Preparing the fabric and design

I first prepared the silk fabric cut to design size with an additional 2" margin. This is backed by a larger piece of linen/cotton blend fabric which would be laced into the frame. This was carefully attached to a modern slate frame of the proper size, using instructions I had found in several books, but most fully described in Mary Corbet's Needle'n'Thread web site. Slate frames have a long history and their use can be seen in woodcuts of the period. I did not mount the frame onto a trestle as would have been period appropriate, as I do not have the room with small children and our things to use trestles. The frame was held in a modern embroidery stand while I usually sat in comfort on my couch.



*Illustration
2: Woodcut
of laced
frame*

To create the design, I pulled the image into Photoshop, then removed the color layer from the original, and increased the tonal contrast to get a decent and relatively clear outline that I could work from. I printed this outline, taped down the print onto a light box, taped a piece of tracing paper over this, and traced the outline with a pen as best I could determine. Some portions of the vines and outlined motifs were missing or covered by closures, so I sometimes had to guess as to design placement. I ignored the placement of the spangles and the odd center design, which I replaced with my own heraldic design of my own coat of arms. I then scanned the tracing, darkened the tracing image as best I could, flipped the tracing image, and printed the result onto cardstock for prick & pounce.

In the period, designs could be purchased from artists already printed onto paper. They could also be designed by the creator using images taken from books of the time, especially herbal books. Some surviving books still show prick marks from such uses.

To transfer the design to the prepared silk fabric, I hand pricked the outline cardstock with a thick quilter's pin. I lightly marked the fabric edges into quarters, used a light piece of chalk to mark straight lines to follow, then using a fine silk thread and needle did a large running stitch down the center of the mounted fabric. This would help serve as a guide for placing the pricked pattern. After carefully aligning the pattern and taping it down, I then pounced from the wrong side with white pounce powder with a purchased large pouncer. The design came out looking like little dots, right side up. To keep the design permanent, I used a very light yellow water based gouache, which had already been prepared for use, and a very fine brush to paint the dots into a proper design. The design flaked off in part during work, but is mostly still underneath the stitches.

My embroidery process

I tried to follow the original for the stitches used, and with color choices, as much as I could, mainly so I could better learn how they did such a piece, and also because some of the shading colors was not something I would have thought to do. I did switch the rose and the pomegranate in position, but not in color, which gave me a red pom as I wanted. Some flower stem locations were moved to reflect more common positions. The yellow & red flowers I emphasized the red more, and I made other creative choices along the way.

Most of my work was done with at least three shades of each color; yellow, red, blue and green. I also added cream for highlights, and shades of brown in flat silk for the seed pods. I used one strand of thread in a #10 Pony embroidery needle for all of my silk work and others as needed. Period needles would have been hand made.

Most of my stitching started with a knot placed on top, with 2-3 small stitches to hold the thread before the knot was cut off. The long and short stitch started with an outline of split stitch, usually just at the outer edge. Some leaves I would outline all around the motif except in the center line where the gold threads might run down the middle as a vein. Then starting from the outside, in the middle of each section I would do long and short stitches, leaving clear the painted areas where I planned on placing the gold threads. I would do each petal or leaf in one shade, then another usually from the outside in, carefully fanning the threads as needed.

The motifs of satin stitched leaves, strawberry fruits, and seed pods were also outlined with split stitches, then most were lightly padded with cotton embroidery thread underneath. Some leaves and the pods I did one layer of cotton thread in an laid stitch with space between stitches. The leaves I did one or two layers of padding, and the fruits were done in three layers, all in different directions to provide more lift to the padding. The direction of the uppermost padding layer was approximately 90 degrees to the planned direction layer of the satin stitch that would cover it. Some of the satin stitch was done as a laid satin stitch to save on the amount of thread used, and I would try to lay the threads as close to each other as possible. To hold the satin stitches from snagging (and following the original) I used a lighter shade of thread laid down over the satin stitches at an angle to the satin stitch layer, and held that thread down with small holding stitches, using the same thread. I did similar to the strawberries, using a #1 gold passing thread.

For the metal threads, I chose to use mostly artificial gold threads. I wanted the color and sparkle of gold as compared to silver, and artificial when possible for the lower price. The gold or silver color should not tarnish over the years. The spangles I used are gold gilt over silver and will tarnish, but are the only type available.



*Illustration 3:
Embrautherers
Broach*

The gold threads were all couched with a single waxed strand of silk thread. The pairs of passing or Japan Gold threads were wrapped around something, either a tight roll of scrap wool fabric pinned at the edge, or 2 wooden koma once those arrived. The use of the koma was suggested to me by Mistress Eowyn Amberdrake. Koma are two wooden rolls with flat ends usually used in traditional Japanese embroidery. In period western embroiderers may have used wooden “Embrautherers Broach” as seen in a woodcut from 1688. I did not know this at the time I started my embroidery and had no chance to get one, but the koma worked well.

Western practice is to cut the metal threads 1/2” - 1” long, and then plunge them down through the fabric to the back. This sometime meant a cluster of gold threads which made sewing through them hard to do. Frustrated, I tried the Japanese methods where the metal threads are cut to 1/4” before plunging, and are not tied off but left alone until they are glued. The gold embroidery went faster, and the dangling ends were less likely to interfere with other aspects of the embroidery.

The bullion were cut into pieces to generally fit the available space, then sewn down like a bead. The check threads were cut into smaller pieces and sewn as a bead in a random sequence across the centers of the flowers, usually to fill in the available space. I also did this to the center of the blue cornflower with small bits of bullion. The center of the pomegranate was sewn with red glass beads as a deviation from the original, since I wanted something with more visual interest.

The center heraldic design deviated completely from the original. The silver upper portion is done in a brick pattern with simple couching using a paired silver passing thread as the base. The silver needles were free-form couched into shape. The background is long & short stitch in only one shade of dark blue. The golden book is done in Or nué, which I had found an extant alter frontal made in Spain in the late 16th century, after Or nué was thought to have generally seen its heyday in England. I could not think of any other style of embroidery that could give me the detailing on the book as the Or nué technique provided, which is why I used it. It was also done with pairs of gold passing with silk threads to provide the details. The book was outlined with a gold twist couched into place. The diamond shape was outlined with one silver and one gold passing thread, hand twisted, then stitched into place. The ends of the twists were not plunged, but sewn together on top of the fabric.

The gilt oes (aka paillettes or spangles) were the last to be applied, and were scattered across the surface as whim

took me. In this case I started the knot on the underside to remain, along with one small stitch to hold. I tried to keep the spangles roughly an inch apart, but some areas had more room to add in spangles, while others were too small to place any. I stitched them three times to help keep them in place for a long time to come. Spangles of the period appear to be made in a similar manner to the modern ones I used. “... *coiling a metal wire around a fine wooden dowel. The resulting spring was cut along its length to make small wire rings. These rings were hammered flat to make the spangle, with the hole in the centre and an almost invisible join.*”

Following Japanese practices to finish the embroidery, the resulting piece was turned upside down, pounded from the front and back sides to remove any dust or random thread, steamed from underneath to freshen the silk threads, and allowed to dry. I then glued the back with a pH neutral fabric glue to hold the fibers together. The Japanese use a rice starch glue to hold the threads on the back, but I used Kraft fabric glue instead as I don't want bugs to possibly eat my work. The fabric was cut from the frame, placed onto a board cut to shape and padded with cotton quilters wadding. The back was folded on opposite sides and laced together.

What I've learned

- I have found over the course of working the piece that I did make mistakes in the initial tracing. I should have made more room for the gold passing between parts of the flowers, like the cornflower and the honeysuckle, and made the flower petals narrower instead.
- I've become much better at doing long and short stitch, but upon looking at more close-up images of other extant pieces, the long & short stitch of the period seems more mechanical in placement, and less likely to blend together as seems to be encouraged in modern practice. It was hard to tell with the original piece.
- Satin stitch will lay straighter than laid satin stitches, but once covered with holding stitches it didn't visually matter which I chose (unless one looks very carefully).
- I did not have a period instruction book on stitches for both silk and gold threads, or access to extant items to work from, so I used a blend of western and traditional Japanese instructions. I found the Japanese methods for working gold often used fewer stitches to bend a thread around corners. They also cut the gold threads very short in the back, which I had expected would pull out. With glueing the back as is tradition, I do not foresee problems with the threads later.
- Japan gold is finicky, and needs proper tension at all times which the koma provides (if used correctly – which took me awhile to figure out). Wool rolls do not work very well with Japan gold.
- It takes longer then expected to figure out the placement of the oes, before I put them into place, as a balance in the design is affected by their placement, and it is annoying to remove oes. Plan ahead.
- The use of a doodle or practice fabric to try out ideas was something I should have adopted earlier than I did. The heraldic center piece was originally going to be on a blue silk fabric, and once complete would be appliquéed to the main embroidery. But problems happened with tension on the fabric while working the Or nué which was unattractive. I then chose to embroider directly on the project, and I think this came out better in the end.

Embroidery created by Lady Joan Silvertoppe, from the Barony of Nordwache in Caid. (aka Kimiko Small, Fresno, CA, USA)
 Project started: April 20, 2011
 Project ended: February 3, 2012
 Final dimensions: about 9.25" x 7" including plain border.
 Total hours worked on embroidery: approx. 225 hours

Winning entry for Caid's first A&S Champion at the Festival of the Rose and Olde Tymers Tourney, for Queen Cassandra, on February 11, 2012.



Illustrations

- Illustration 1: Biblia Sacra and The Whole Booke of Psalmes (London, 1585, 1587), English embroidered binding. c. 1630. Shelfmark: Davis66. © The British Library Board, <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings/LargeImage.aspx?RecordId=020-000003288&ImageId=ImageId=41249&Copyright=BL>
- Illustration 2: “Woodcut of laced frame” and Illustration 3: “Embrautherers Broach” from Randle Holme's *Academy of Armoury* 1688, posted by Mary Elizabeth Dodkins onto the Facebook group Historic Hand Embroidery's photo page. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/HistoricHandEmbroidery/>

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