

# Embroidered Book Cover

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From the Shire of Mynydd Gwyn

## Introduction

For this project, I wished to create an item of regalia to record the creation of the Principality of Insulae Draconis, and to make a record of its history from the inception of the Crown Principality to the point at which full Principality status was granted.

This A&S entry is specifically for the book covers, not the content or pages within the book, which are produced using modern techniques..

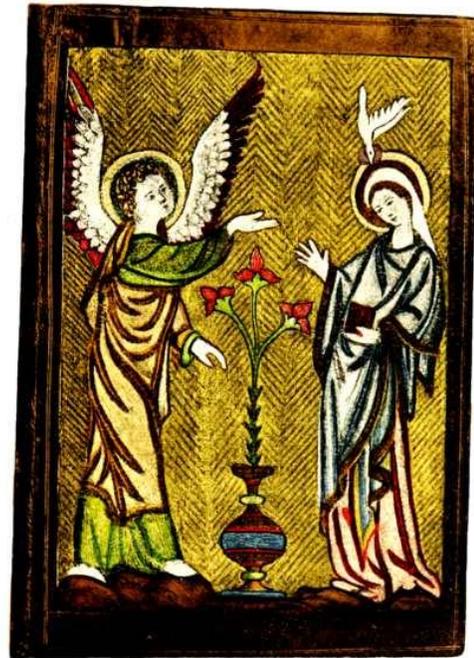
## History and Context of Embroidered Book Coverings Within the Medieval Period

The oldest surviving examples of an embroidered book cover is dated to a psalter (the Felbrigge Psalter) written in the thirteenth century, and later owned by a late fourteenth century nun in Suffolk. The two panels are both done in a goldworking technique called Opus Anglicanum and depict religious scenes, and now inset in a much later leather cover.

The British Library has over 100 embroidered book covers, many dating from the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century [ref 3].

According to Cyril Davenport [ref 1], embroidered book covers can be categorized either by the subject matter, or by the base material used. The subject matter depicted by the embroideries fall roughly into 4 categories:

- Heraldic
- Floral
- Figure (often scriptural or symbolic)
- Arabesque



The Felbrigge Psalter (13<sup>th</sup> Century embroidery)

The heraldic designs are most common on the earliest books (pre 16<sup>th</sup> century & 16<sup>th</sup> century), whereas floral and Arabesque are most common on later books (17<sup>th</sup> Century or later)

The materials used for covering are:

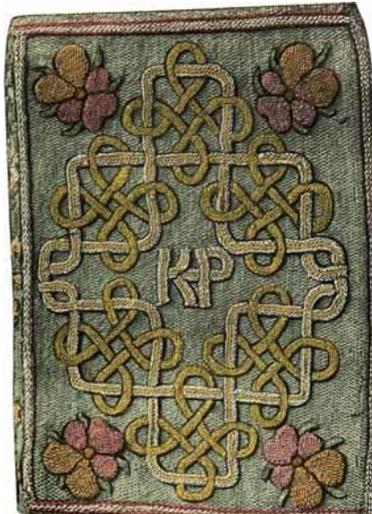
- Canvas
- Satin
- Silk
- Velvet

Canvas was used continuously throughout the period, whereas velvet was mainly used during the Tudor period, and Satin during later periods.

All manner of embroidery materials and techniques are used on surviving examples, including metal threads and couched wires and silk thread embroidery. Common stitches include tent stitch, tapestry stitch, chain stitch, brick stitch and buttonhole stitch.



Simple stem stitch on heavy twill  
(British Museum, book bag, 17<sup>th</sup>  
Century)



Brick, chain & buttonhole stitch –  
made by Elizabeth I for Katherine  
Parr



Couched gold cord & silver purl  
on velvet. Owned by Elizabeth I  
(from Geneva)

## My Design

For this A&S project, I chose to use 2 different styles of decoration, a goldworked heraldic design for the front cover, and a tent stitched figure for the back cover. The reason for not using a complicated goldworked design for the back cover is that I considered that the book is likely to be placed resting on the back cover often, and therefore a goldwork design was more likely to get damaged.

### **Front Cover**

Since my intention was to use the Insulae Draconis arms for the front cover, the choice of colours for the base fabric was imposed by the background colours for these arms (i.e. black and bright blue). Ideally the fabric chosen would have been velvet, but, although black velvet was readily available, I was unable to find a suitable blue velvet. Similarly I could not find a suitable tone of blue readily available in a useable weight of silk or canvas. For this reason, I chose to use cotton fabric which was readily available in most craft shops at a reasonable price. I consider that this is a good compromise between cost/availability and a true period appearance of the embroidery.

The design for the elements of the ID arms were transferred from paper on to the fabric using the “prick and pounce” method. This means that the design was traced using heavyweight tracing paper. The outlines were then pricked with a thick needle to form a series of holes all along the lines of the design. This was then positioned on the fabric and a roll of felt used to force powdered cuttle fish through the holes. When the tracing paper was removed and the excess powder blown off the design remains on the fabric in a series of white dots. Gold coloured paint was then used to draw fine lines between the dots to show the complete design.



Pricked design on tracing paper

The fabric, and a backing of calico to provide strength, was then mounted in an embroidery hoop to maintain the fabric under tension during the embroidery.

I chose to implement the laurel wreath and crescent moon elements of the design using couched "jap" threads. This type of thread is similar to the type of threads available in the SCA period, and is basically a silk thread wrapped with a gold leaf or gilded paper (modern threads use a synthetic). It was typically



Painted design on fabric

named after the country in which it was made, so would have been called many things within the SCA period. Today it is called "Jap" being short for Japan. The thread is couched on, using small stitches (i.e. small stitches over the gold threads, with the gold threads lying on the surface of the fabric), with the ends taken through to the back of the design and sewn in (see picture of the reverse side).



Reverse of work after couching, showing ends sewn in



Front with Jap & pearl purl couched on

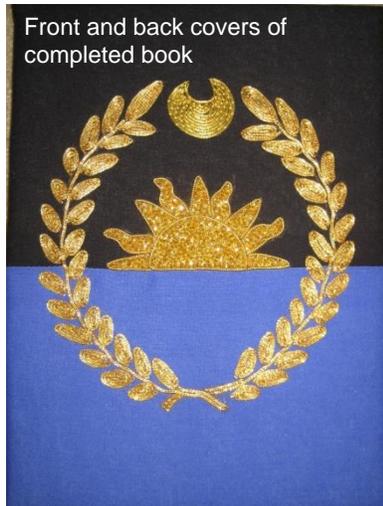
For the sun element, this couching technique would have been awkward to implement because of the many small "rays", so I decided to use "chipping", whereby the sun shape was first covered in yellow felt, stitched down with small stab stitches. The yellow felt was then edged with pearl purl (a round spiral gold wire), couched down with small stitches. The felt was then covered with small "chips" of bright check (another variation of spiral gold wire with a triangular cross-section), stitched on by running the thread through the centre of each, like a bead, and applied in a random pattern. Similar gold wires or "purls" were used in a number of embroideries within the SCA period.

### **Back Cover**

For the back cover, I wanted to include some element to show where Insulae Draconis came from, so I decided to include a black dragon to represent Drachenwald. In order to achieve a dense appearance of the final embroidery, I chose to use tent stitch implemented with 2 strands of Madeira silk, over 1 fabric thread, on 28 count evenweave. The design was stitched, then mounted on to calico with some padding included between the calico and the embroidery to make the panel stand out on the final cover. This was then inset in to a cotton fabric which

would form the basis for the back cover. In order to cover the edges where the panel was inset, pearl purl and gold twist threads were couched down around the embroidery.

### **Completion of the Book**



The front and back covers were laced on to a stiff piece of card covered with a layer of wadding. The corners were stitched together on the inside, to neaten the edges. The lacing was then covered by gluing on a heavy hand-made paper.

In order to complete the book, the contents were printed on heavy parchment effect paper, in booklet form, with 8 pages (i.e. 2 sheets of folded paper) to a booklet, making 7 booklets in all for the complete book. These

were then each stitched separately to a silk ribbon, using silk thread, to form a spine (see picture). The front and back covers were then stitched to this ribbon, forming a complete book. This ribbon was then covered by a fabric strip to form the external spine of the volume.



Ribbon spine, showing lacing

As a final touch a fine lucet cord tie was added to keep the book closed (note lucet cord is made by Baron Coahmin, not by me).

A small silk bag was made to protect the book covers – often such bags were used, and could be as elaborately decorated as the book covers, but in this instance I did not have sufficient time to embroider the bag.

### **References & Bibliography**

- 1 English Embroidered Bookbindings by Cyril Davenport, F. S. A, 1899 (available from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17585/17585-h.zip> )
- 2 Online article - Prose, poems, points & purls: Embroidered book covers by Christian de Holacombe ([http://wkneedle.bayrose.org/Articles/emb\\_book\\_covers.html](http://wkneedle.bayrose.org/Articles/emb_book_covers.html) )
- 3 British Museum Database of Bookbindings (<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings/> and search with keyword “embroidered”)