

GOLDWORK
A HANDS-ON WORKSHOP
BY
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DOUBLEWARS, AS41

GOLDWORK

1 A Brief History¹

Gold thread originally came from Asia, travelling with the silk merchants to Beirut, but later became more widely available as silk production grew outside of China. It was used in the Mediterranean countries in the years after the birth of Christ, and its use became widespread on vestments and clothes in many countries such as Egypt, Italy, Turkey, Greece and Cyprus.

Its use then spread across Europe, with the earliest surviving piece of English gold thread embroidery being a 10th Century stole and maniple of St Cuthbert, originally buried with him, but now preserved in Durham Cathedral. This piece has very fine couched gold threads surrounding the finished embroidery.

Heraldic devices of the Middle Ages necessitated the employment of many embroiderers working with both gold and silk threads on coats of arms and other garments. For example, the Black Prince's jupon, embroidered in the 14th century hung above his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral for nearly 600 years, until it was replaced in 1954 by a replica made by the Royal School of Needlework.

Much of the goldwork and other embroidery of the Middle Ages was done for the church, in what was known as “*English work*” or *Opus Anglicanum*. The quality of this work was extremely high and orders came from all over Europe, including the Vatican. The whole of the backgrounds of vestments could be worked with a technique called “*underside couching*” in silver gilt threads.

A new technique called *Or Nué* came into production in the 15th century and was mainly used on vestments. With this technique the gold thread was couched in pairs across a design drawn on to the background fabric and the design lines were picked out in gold or coloured silks while couching.

After the end of the *Opus Anglicanum* period, gold threads were used on domestic embroideries of the Elizabethan era, often in conjunction with blackwork and silk embroidery.

The early thread used in goldwork was a silver wire covered with a gold coating, which could be drawn out to any thickness and still retain its gold coating. The thread could then be hammered flat and wound round a silk core for couching, or it could be spun and drawn through a series of holes of diminishing sizes until the thread was fine enough to spiral into bullions and pearls to be used as gold beads.

¹ Based on Royal School of Needlework “Embroidery Techniques” by Sally Saunders

2 Threads

Many different threads are in use today. These threads come in different qualities as well as different types. The highest quality is Japanese gold which is 18 carat gold, and is very expensive and difficult to find. Imitation Japanese is a good substitute and does not tarnish in the same way as real gold. This is more readily available and much cheaper! There is a second range of threads called Admiralty quality, which have a percentage of gold, but are cheaper than the 18 carat gold of real Japanese gold. The least expensive range is a gilt metallic thread, which looks similar to the Admiralty gold, but will tarnish more quickly.

The thread types can be split into two major groupings. The first group consists of those threads which can be couched down with a gold or coloured beeswaxed couching thread. This group includes Japanese gold threads, passing, rococo twists, plate and pearl purl. The second group of threads is consists of purl types (rough, smooth and Bright Checks) which are cut into short lengths and sewn down like beads using a beeswaxed thread over various types of padding.

Threads are available in a variety of metallic colours, the most common being gold, silver and copper although some threads are available in a whole range of colours. Supplies of thread can be obtained from the following web sites:

<http://www.berlinembroidery.com/goldworksupplies.htm>

<http://www.halfpenney.co.uk/glitindex.html>

<http://www.dinsdaleembroideries.co.uk/>

<http://www.bentonandjohnson.com/index.htm>

<http://www.golden-hinde.co.uk/index.html>

<http://www.maceandnairn.com/>



[Rough Purl](#)



[Smooth Purl](#)



[Wire Bullion](#)



[Bright Bullion](#)



[Wire Check](#)



[Bright Check](#)



[Bright Check Bullion](#)



[Gimp Cord](#)



[Medium Grecian](#)



[Imitation Grecian](#)



[Bright Gimp 3 Ply](#)



[Smooth Passing](#)



[Twist](#)



[Medium Rococco](#)



[Large Back](#)



[Pearl Purls](#)



[No.6 Broad Plate](#)



[Whipped Plate](#)



[Milliary Wire](#)



[Miscellaneous](#)

3 The Design

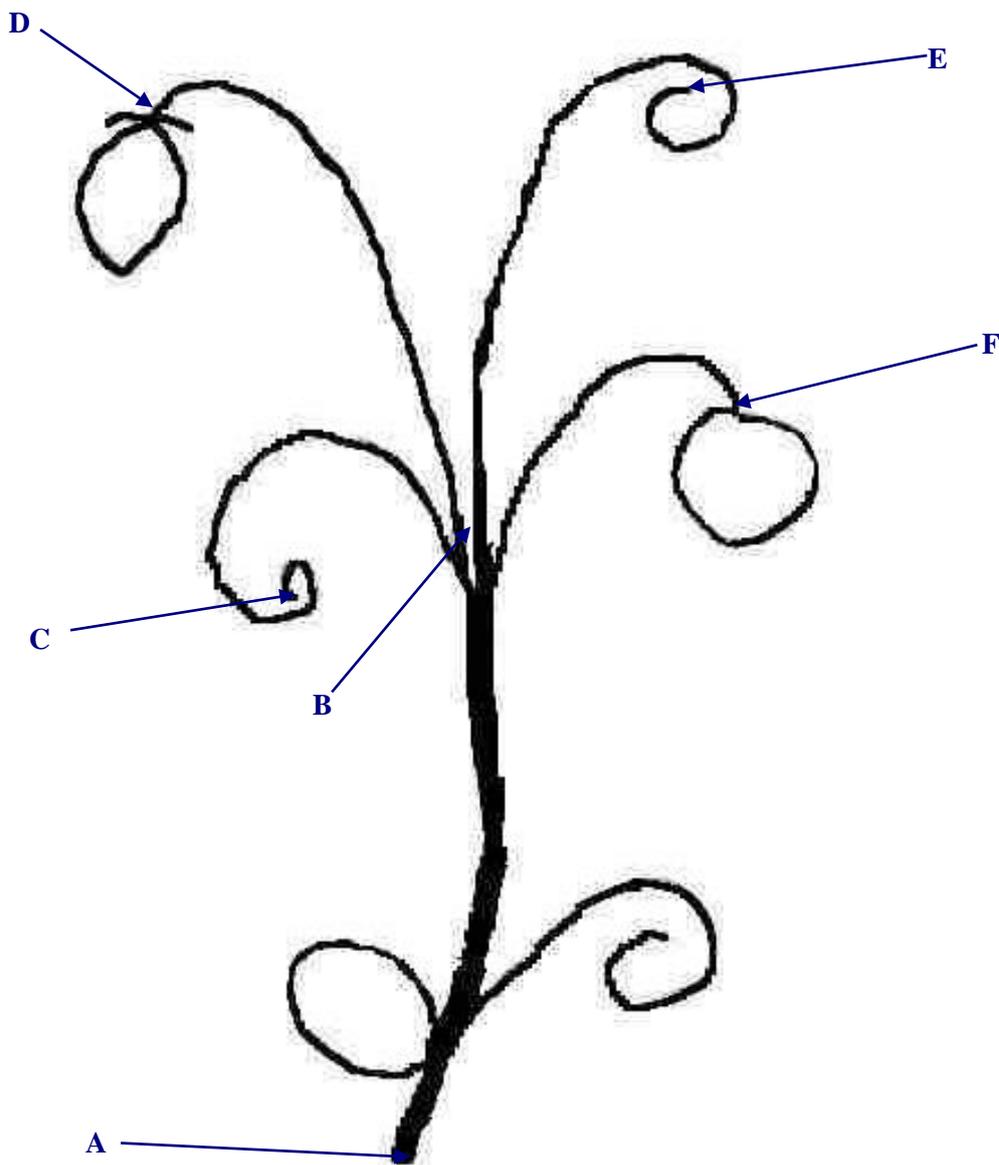
For the purposes of this workshop, a design has been created which demonstrates 4 different technique/thread combinations:

- 1) Couching of Japanese Thread (Jap)
- 2) Filling in a solid area with plate
- 3) Couching of purl-pearl
- 4) Felt padding covered by bright check chips
- 5) Couching of Rococo Twist

Materials needed:

- Embroidery hoop at least 8" in diameter (easier with a free-standing hoop)
- Size 10 needle (for couching)
- Possibly beading needle – small enough to pass through centre of Bright Check
- Large Chenille needle
- Square of fabric big enough to go in embroidery hoop (I used a cream coloured cotton)
- Square of calico same size as fabric
- Approx 1.5m of imitation Jap thread (I used K8 size)
- Approx 0.5m of plate (I used whipped plate)
- Approx 8cm of purl pearl
- Approx 10cm of rococo twist
- Approx 20cm of bright check – mixture of copper or gold
- Gutermann 488 gold cotton – although other colours can be used if you want the couching to contrast with the gold thread.
- Small piece of yellow felt (2.5cm square max)
- Beeswax

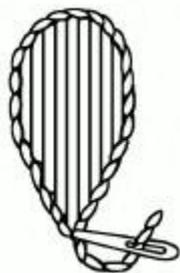
In addition it is useful to have a separate pair of scissors for goldwork, since the gold threads can blunt scissors. A muller is also a useful tool for positioning the threads.



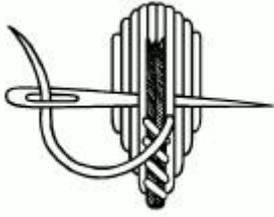
Steps:

1. Transfer the design onto the top fabric. Using the fabric I chose for the design, I found that by placing the fabric on the drawing I could trace through (the above image is sized for use with an 8" embroidery hoop). I used an HB pencil to do this, although pencil is not ideal because it may smudge on the fabric. Alternatively you could use a fabric marking pen which vanishes in time, or you could trace it on to the calico and use tacking stitches through both layers of fabric to demark the design on the top fabric.
2. Position the fabric and calico in the embroidery hoop, fabric on top of the calico. You need to adjust the fabric/calico to get the pair held as tight as possible – ideally “drum-tight”. This will make the goldwork stitching easier!
3. Cut 2 lengths of the Jap approximately 30cm long – these will be used together for the first couched stem
4. Cut a length of Gutermann thread for sewing, run it through the beeswax a couple of times. Thread the size 10 needle and tie a knot in one end (note use single thread, don't double the thread up)

5. Starting at the foot of the stem (point A on diagram), take the needle through from front to back of the fabric on the stem line you have marked and pull the thread through until the knot is against the fabric. Now make a couple of small stitches on top of each other, sufficient to hold the thread and carefully snip the knot off – this how the sewing thread should be started for each part of the design. You are now ready to begin couching the first gold threads!
6. Hold the two gold Jap threads together, with about 4-5cm or a bit more protruding beyond the end of where you want the stem to start. Take the sewing thread over the two Jap threads and back through the fabric. Repeat this about every 1 cm along the Jap threads, placing the Jap to follow the line of the stem (i.e. covering the pencil line or whatever you used to mark the design on to the fabric), until you get to point B on the diagram. This is called couching and can be done either in a thread matching the gold thread or in a contrasting colour.
7. At point B separate the 2 Jap threads and continue couching each on separately until you reach the end of the lines drawn on the fabric i.e. the 2 places marked as point C and D on the diagram.
8. It is now time to “plunge” the ends of the Jap! Using the size 18 chenille needle, partially push it through the material at either point A, C or D, i.e. where you want the Jap to end. Thread the Jap through the eye, and pull through to the back of the work (this make take some effort, and may need pliers or rubber disks used in quilting to get a better grip on the needle!) – see pictures below:



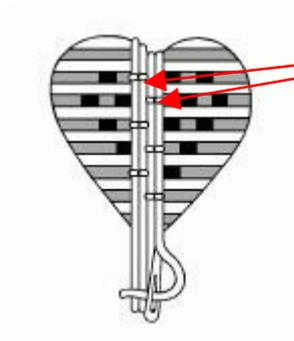
9. Once the Jap thread is through to the reverse of the work, cut it so that there is about 1cm left, and sew this down with several oversewn stitches along the length of the thread. Be careful not to let the stitches show on the right side of the design, and sew each Jap thread down separately – see pictures below.



10. You should now have the first half of the stem complete, and your work should look like this:



11. Now repeat steps 6 to 10 using another 2 lengths of Jap, but this time going from point A to points E and F on the diagram. This second set of threads should be positioned against the first set at the bottom of the stem, and the couching stitches should be spaced so that they are halfway between the previous stitches, forming a kind of “brick” pattern – see diagram for an example. To ensure the second set of threads are close to the first set, bring the needle up on the outside of the threads, and down between the first and second set for each stitch



Couching stitches in a “brick” pattern

12. You should now have the four main stems done, and the design should look like this:



13. To finish off the stems, use a single piece of Jap to do the last stem at the right of the main stem – couch on like the others, with the stitches at the same place as for the first double Jap stem whilst the single piece is against the others (note this bit can be left until last if you prefer – which is what I did).

14. The next step is to do the couching for the round “fruit” on the right-hand side of the design. This is done using a single length of Jap – start with a length about 30cm, and start the sewing thread off in the centre of the circle, and position the Jap to start in the centre. Gradually work outwards, placing the Jap to form a spiral, until you have covered the area, including the pencil line. I found it easier to do by plunging the end of the Jap almost immediately at the centre of the circle. I think the couching stitches look best if there are spaced so that they form “spokes” radiating out from the centre. This should look like:



15. Once completed, and both the ends plunged, your work should look like this:



16. The next stage is to do the “bud” on the top left-hand side. This will be padded slightly with felt. To get the shape for the felt, use a small piece of tracing paper to trace the shape off the fabric, and use this as a pattern to cut out a piece of yellow felt.

17. Sew the felt over the bud shape using small stab stitches to catch the edges – this is shown below:



18. Now take the purl pearl and stretch it slightly (very gently). You can choose to couch it on virtually unstretched, or you can stretch so that it is more like a spiral than a tightly coiled spring. I chose to stretch it out for my design. Starting with the end of the purl pearl against the plunged end of the Jap at point D, place a couching stitch as close as possible to the end (you can twist the purl pearl to work it through the stitch to get it right at the end), so that the purl pearl is against the edge of the felt. Working round the edge of the felt couch the purl pearl down, pulling the thread so that it vanishes in to the coils of the purl pearl. Snip the purl pearl off, so that the edge of the thread abuts the start – see picture below:



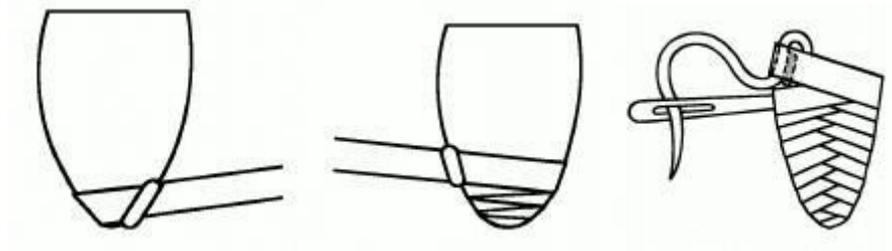
19. When you have finished the work should look like:



20. Take the bright check and snip it into small pieces around 2-3mm long, trying to get the size as even as possible. Be careful, because they tend to fly about as you cut them – cutting them on a board covered with cotton velvet helps to stop this.
21. Sew the bright check on by placing a stitch through the centre of each, using a double waxed thread (i.e. treat them like beads). They should be randomly placed to cover the whole of the yellow felt, gradually working from gold to copper as you move from the base to the tip (or could be done using a single colour) as shown below:



22. Now for the final stage – the leaf done with plate and rococo! Taking the length of gold plate, fold the end over. Start a double waxed thread at one side of the leaf shape, near the stem, and thread the needle through the fold completing the stitch by taking the needle to the back of the design at the other side of the plate. Lay the plate across the leaf, close to the stem. Take a stitch over the plate at the other edge of the leaf and fold the plate over the stitch, bringing it back to the first side, against the first line of plate and take another stitch. Repeat until the shape is filled in, then finish off in a similar way to what you started, by cutting the end to size, with a small amount extra to allow it to be folded back and a stitch placed through the fold. The general idea is shown below:



23. Finally couch a length of rococo around the outside of the leaf to hide the slight untidiness – this is done in the same way as the Jap, with ends to be plunged to the back of the work and sewn down. The leaf should look like this:



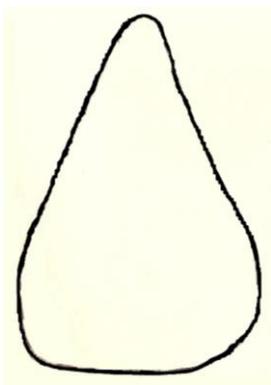
24. You have now finished! – although for a final touch, you could sew two small pieces of bright check either side of point D just to finish the bud off!

4 Other Ideas for Goldwork Projects.

Here are a few other things which I have done, which take between 2hrs and 25hrs. They all use similar techniques to those above as far as the goldwork is concerned. I've included a basic description of how they were made – hopefully that combined with the course notes above gives sufficient information to attempt any of these you wish to. If you have any further questions I can be contacted at mary@maryfrost.org.uk.

4.1 Bookmarks

Create a pattern which looks something like a teardrop about 5cm by 3.5 cm at its widest point (see below). Fill in the shape starting from the top point, using couching and imitation Jap thread No. 8 (K4) in either gold or silver. It's easiest if you use a single thread, rather than two. Once completed cut the shape out, leaving enough fabric for a seam, although the calico should be trimmed close to the outer row of couching. Cut out the same shape again in the fabric, and sew the two pieces together close to the outer row of goldwork, stuffing the inside with wadding as you go. You should finish up with a padded teardrop shape, like below.



Now make an 8 bobbin maru-dai cord. Start with 1m lengths of thread (I used 16 lengths of each silk thread per bobbin from the Handweavers Studio in London -

<http://www.handweaversstudio.co.uk/>). I did 9” of a simple flat braid from “Beginners Guide to Braiding” by Jacqui Carey, then swapped to a simple round braid from the same book and did enough to go round the outside of the goldwork, then 7” of the flat braid

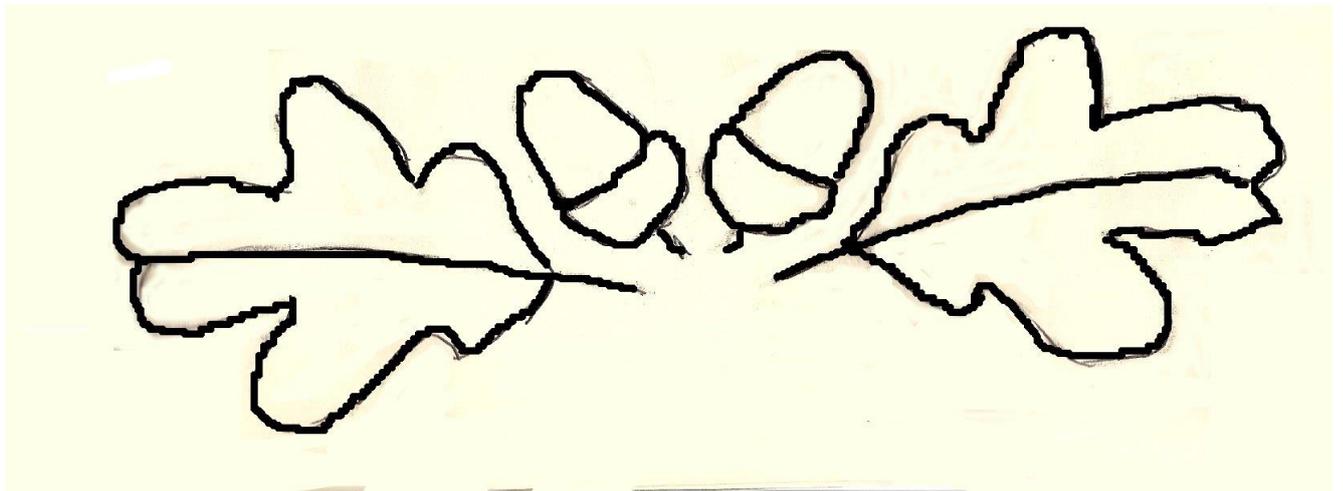
again, all as one braid. I stitched the round portion around the goldwork, and the two portions of flat braid together, finishing off the end with a tassel. The finished product looks like those below. It takes about 1-2hrs to make the teardrop, and about 1-2hrs to make the braid.



4.2 Oak Leaves and Acorns



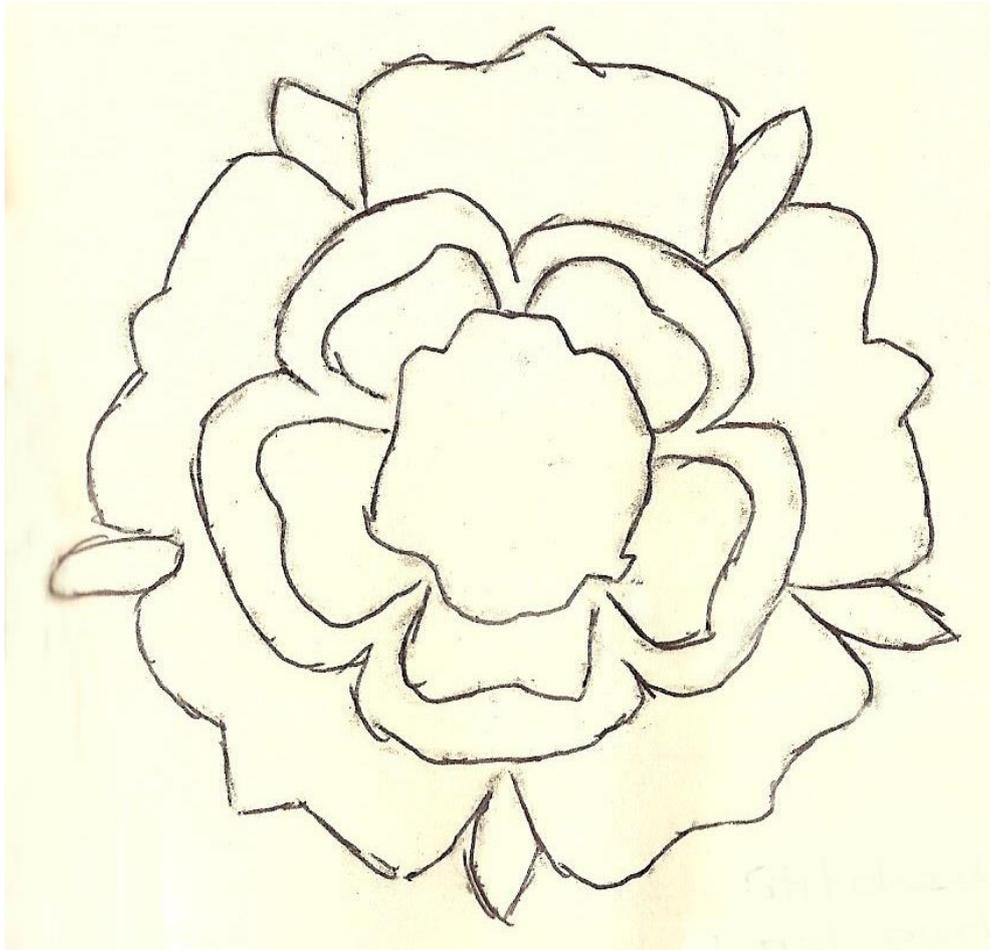
This one is just couching, felt padding and bright check and use of plate. The pattern is given below. I used a mixture of Jap and rococo for the couching – the leaf outline and central stem was in Jap and the acorn outline was in rococo. It was done on black velvet. It took about 5hrs to sew.



4.3 Tudor Rose



This one is probably the most complicated! The pattern is given below. I started with the centre which is a mixture of couched purl pearl and gold beads, surrounded by an outer ring of couched purl pearl. The inner petal outlines are edged with couched twist, then filled in with lengths of smooth pearl. The outer petal is also couched twist. The inner petals are lengths of black smooth pearl. The green leaves are metallic green embroidery thread used to do satin stitch. It took about 25hrs



4.4 Fleur-de-Lys Tudor Pouch



The basic pattern for the pouch was taken from the Elizabethan Wardrobe Accessories Pattern by Margo Anderson. It was made using cotton furnishing fabric. To do the goldworked fleur-de-lys, I first did the centre petal in Jap No 12, plunging each thread at the join with the 2 outside petals, but curving round the central “spine”. For the outer petals I used the same thread, but plunged the ends both at the bottom of the petal, and along the central “spine”. I then did the lower ends to the petals in a similar manner, but with Jap No 8. The crossbar I did using Jap No 8 couched in a spiral, then edged with overstretched purl pearl. The two outer rings were couched milliners wire. (treated like purl pearl)



5 References

- 1) Royal School Of Needlework Embroidery Techniques by Sally Saunders, published by Batsford Press, ISBN 0-7134-8817-4
- 2) Beginner's Guide to Braiding – The Craft of Kumihimo by Jacqui Carey published by Search Press, ISBN 085532828-2
- 3) <http://berlinembroiders.com/freedesign.htm> (for the sketches used to illustrate techniques) by Tanja Berlin