

**GOLDWORK
A HANDS-ON WORKSHOP**

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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 simple design has been created which demonstrates 4 different technique/thread combinations (all very basic) :

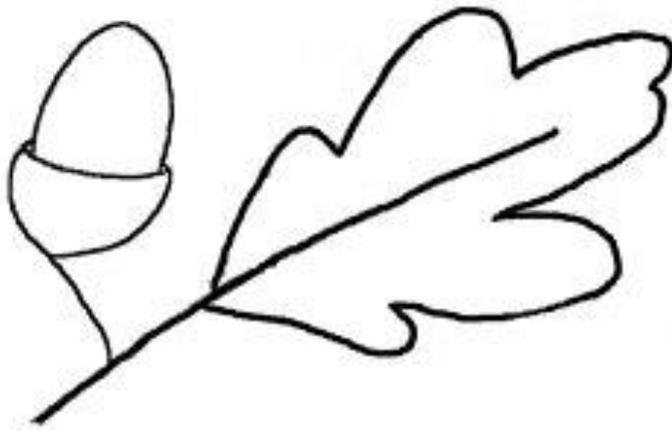
- 1) Couching of Japanese Thread (Jap)
- 2) Covering a solid area with kid
- 3) Couching of purl-pearl
- 4) Felt padding covered by bright check chips



Materials needed:

- Embroidery hoop at least 4” in diameter (easier with a free-standing hoop) – bigger is better
- Size 10 needle (for couching)
- Possibly beading needle – small enough to pass through centre of Bright Check
- Large Chenille needle
- Square of calico big enough to go in embroidery hoop
- Square of fabric big enough for the design with some margin round the edge (I used a green silk)
- Approx 1.5m of imitation Jap thread (I used K8 size)
- Approx 1.5cm square of gold kid
- Approx 4cm of purl pearl No. 2
- Approx 7cm of twist (or rococo)
- Approx 10cm of bright check
- 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 meller is also a useful tool for positioning the threads.



Steps:

1. Transfer the design onto the top fabric. Traditionally this is done by a “prick and pounce” method whereby the design is traced onto heavy tracing paper and the lines are then pricked with a thick needle to make lots of holes. The tracing paper is placed on the fabric and either powdered cuttle fish (for a dark fabric) or powdered charcoal (for a light fabric) is rubbed through the holes using a tightly rolled piece of felt. This transfers the design on to the fabric and the lines should then be painted over with gold paint and a thin brush. However, using the fabric I chose for the design, I found that by placing the fabric on the drawing and holding it against a window I could trace through. I used gold gel pen to do this (note some don’t work very well on fabric).
2. If the fabric is smaller than the hoop then tack the fabric to the calico (it’s a good idea to do this anyway, especially if you are likely to remove it from the hoop before you’ve finished). 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 possibly – ideally “drum-tight”. This will make the goldwork stitching easier!
3. The first step is to apply the felt. Trace the acorn and the cup separately and cut out the shapes from the felt, slightly smaller than what you traced.
4. Sew the felt over the acorn and cup shapes, leaving a small gap between the two, using small stab stitches to catch the edges – this type of stitching is shown below. When finished it should look like the picture on the right



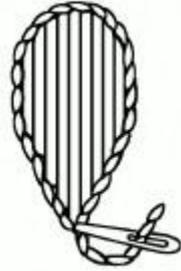
5. For all the work following this, use lengths of the Gutermann gold thread which has been run through beeswax a couple of times. Thread it through the needle and bring the ends together so it is doubled. Tie a knot in the end, and with the knot at the front take a couple of small stitches on top of each other, near where you want to start, but in a place where the gold thread or kid will cover it. Once the thread is secure, carefully cut the knot away. This is how the thread should be started for each part of the design
6. 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 not to stretch it out for my design. Starting with the end of the purl pearl at the top right corner of the cup, 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:



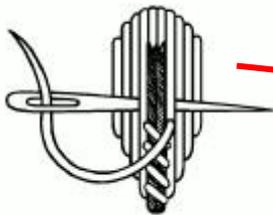
7. Trace the acorn shape again, and use the pattern to cut out a piece of kid by drawing round the traced shape onto the back of the kid. Stitch the kid over the felt acorn shape again using small stab stitches. Make sure the kid is held against the purl pearl where the acorn meets the cup (may need to trim the kid to get an exact shape match). Your work should then look like:



8. Take the twist and starting from where the acorn meets the cup, couch the twist round the acorn, leaving about an 1" free before you make the first stitch – this will be taken to the back of the work to finish it off.
9. Once you reach the other side where the acorn meets the cup, you need to “plunge” the ends of the twist. This means using the large chenille needle to pull the ends through the fabric. Partially push the chenille needle through the fabric at the point where the acorn meets the cup (just against the purl-pearl you couched on earlier). Thread the twist through the eye and pull it through to the back of the work. (this may take some effort, and may need pliers or rubber disks used in quilting to get a better grip on the needle!) – see pictures below:



10. Once the twist 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 – see pictures below. Repeat for other end.



11. The acorn should now look like this:



12. Next is doing the leaf. Take a length of Jap and fold it in half. Starting the bottom of the stem, take a small stitch to hold the fold on to the fabric, then another small stitch across both threads to hold them together. Lay the threads up the line of the stem, and round the outline of the leaf, and back down the stem, couching it on with stitches going across both threads at regular intervals. Note that when you start down the stem for the second time, it looks nice if your stitches on the second lot of threads are spaced between those on the first lot of threads, forming a “brick” pattern.
13. Leave about 1-2” of Jap protruding past the last stitch, and plunge each of these separately in the same way as for the twist.
14. Now take another piece of Jap, folded in half, and using the same technique, couch it in place from the bottom of the stem to the centre of the bottom of the acorn cup, plunging the ends as close as possible to the purl-pearl already in place round the cup
15. Take a third piece of Jap, folded in half and couch it in place along the centre of the leaf

16. Your work should now look like:



17. Now the final stage is to complete the cup. This is done using “chips”, small pieces of a triangular springy wire called bright-check

18. 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. The smaller they are the more they catch the light when stitched on, but the longer it will take to finish!

19. 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 – the finished design should look like this:

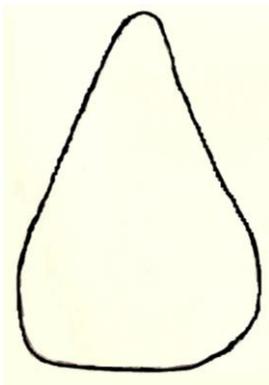


Other Ideas for Goldwork Projects.

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.

3.1 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

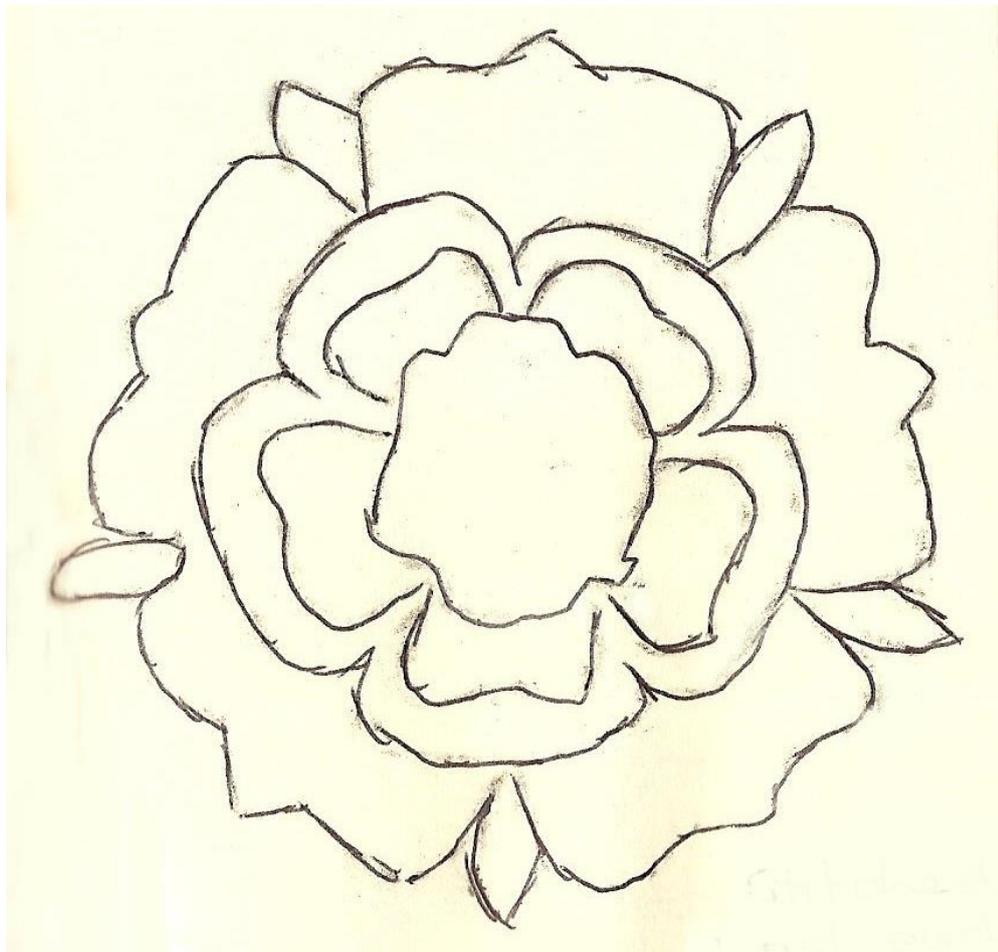
again, all as one braid. I stitched the round portion around the goldwork, and the two portions of flat braid together, finishing off the end with a tassel. The finished product looks like those below. It takes about 1-2hrs to make the teardrop, and about 1-2hrs to make the braid.



3.2 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



3.3 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)



4 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