

# Embroidered Book Cover and Bag (Genevieve's Vigil Book)

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From the Shire of Mynydd Gwyn

## Introduction

For this project, I wished to create a book which could be used for those attending the Vigil of the Lady Genevieve to leave their thoughts. I wanted it to be something she would want to keep.

This records the steps I took to make both the book covers and the bag in which the book is to be kept...

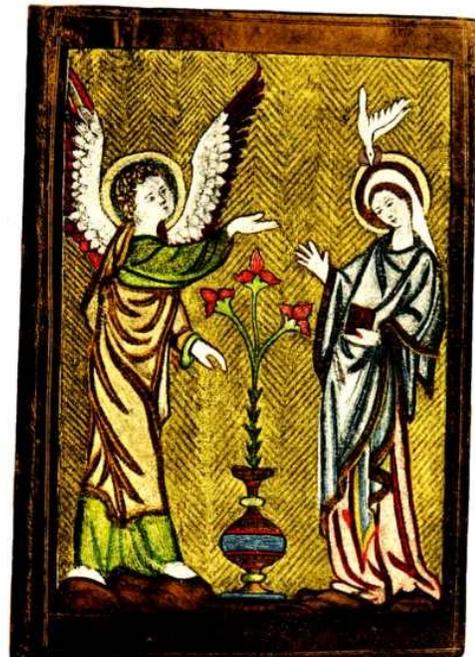
## History and Context of Embroidered Book Coverings Within the Medieval Period

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:

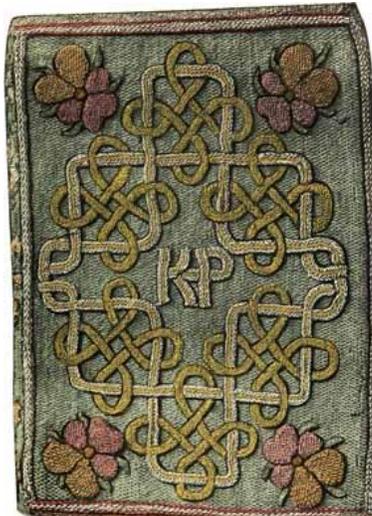
- Canvas
- Satin
- Silk
- Velvet

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 project, I chose to use heraldic designs, with additional decoration in goldwork for both the back and front covers, and a simple couched gold design for the bag. The book cover design was selected because I wanted something which signified the event for which it was created (i.e. a Pelican Vigil, hence a Pelican symbol) and to signify the person involved (i.e. the use of their arms).

### Front Cover

Since the Lady Genevieve's arms are white, black and red, and since the white pelican emblem looks more dramatic against dark colours, I chose to use a double-faced silk as the basic fabric, using the red side for the covers, and the black side as the background for the pelican motif.

The design for the elements of the pelican 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.

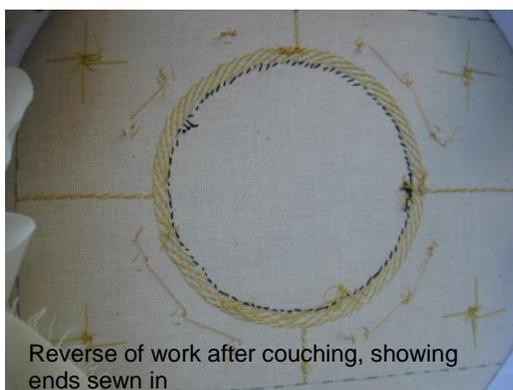
The fabric, and a backing of calico to provide strength, was then mounted in an embroidery hoop to maintain the fabric under tension during the embroidery.

I chose to implement the pelican and the pelican chicks elements of the design using a somewhat random stem stitch with 2 strands of 60/2 white silk thread and 1 strand of an iridescent blending filament to give a shimmer to the finished embroidery. Obviously the

blending filament is a modern thread, but I felt the effect it gave to the finished embroidery excused the use of a non-period thread. The randomised stem stitch was intended to give the effect of feathers, and was stitched in the direction I felt appropriate to feathers on the bird shapes. Once all the white had been completed, the black lines were added, using a basic back stitch and 60/2 black silk thread. The beaks were done using Coats Ophir gold thread in a satin stitch. To make the nest a piece of yellow felt the same shape and size as the nest portion of the design was attached to the fabric, using small stab stitches. A series of long straight stitches on the diagonal were then placed over the felt, using the Coats Ophir gold thread. These were kept fairly closely spaced, but not as close as normal satin stitch filling would be. Once all threads had been laid in one direction, I started with threads in the direction at 90° to the original threads and “wove” in thread in an “over-under” pattern through the existing threads, going over 4 threads, then under 4 threads. Once this had been done 4 times, I then reversed the “over-under” sequence to give a basket weave effect. I have no idea whether this would have been done in period, but to me it seemed an ideal way to represent the woven effect of the nest often seen on “Pelican in her Piety” images. The Coats Ophir thread was used as it is just the right weight to sew through the fabric with, without being too thin to be useful. Threads of this weight are seen on period examples. Finally the red blood drop was embroidered in chain stitch and back stitch using a red Rayon thread.

Once the Pelican embroidery was complete, it was stitched to the main book cover fabric (the same silk, using the red face of the fabric), using small stab stitches at the edge and a small running stitch just inside the edge to ensure that it laid flat.

A piece of Pearl-Purl gold wire, in a “fine” weight, was then slightly stretched and couched down around the emblem., and this was then surrounded by 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 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 weight I used is called “T71”. 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).



Once this was completed, I felt that the rest of the cover needed further decoration, so I stitched down a mix of bulge beads and seed beads to form a design in each corner. I then used the Coats Ophir thread again to make a series of “roundels” surrounding the picture. This is an Elizabethan stitch, which Jackie Carey calls “Spider’s Web” in ref 4.

### **Back Cover**

For the back cover, I started with Genevieve’s arms, which were traced on to a 28 count evenweave linen. The crosses were stitched first, using a 60/2 black silk thread. These were done using a stitch that Jackie Carey calls “Elizabethan Ground Stitch” in ref 4. Once

completed, the white background was filled in using the same stitch in a white 60/2 silk thread. To make the crosses sharp, these were then outlined with back stitch using the same black silk. Finally the red diagonal stripe was completed in a padded satin stitch (i.e. satin stitched were run in the horizontal direction first, then covered with vertical satin stitches), using a red 60/2 silk thread. Care was taken to make sure the threads in the top layer all were laid flat, with no additional twists in order to give a sheen to the finished embroidery. The red line was then edged with back stitch, just to give a crisp finish. This panel was then sewn to the back cover, again using small stab stitches, and the same white silk thread which was used for the background of the emblem. In order to cover the edges where the panel was inset, medium pearl purl was couched down around the edge. To fill in the rest of the cover area, "jap" thread was couched down into a design of swirls. More appropriately in the Elizabethan period, this would probably have been done using some kind of braid stitch, but I did not have sufficient time for this.

### ***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 paper.

In order to complete the book, the "booklets" of heavy parchment effect paper or handmade paper, with 10 pages (i.e. 5 sheets of folded paper) to a booklet, were made, 9 booklets in all. Each booklet was stitched through at the fold to hold the pages together, with 5 evenly spaced shorter stitches, interspersed with long stitches. The ends of the threads used for this were tied, then sealed with a small dot of clear glue. Once all the booklets were made, threads were run

through from bottom cover to top cover, taking in each of the booklets by threading under the smaller stitches. This was repeated several times at each location. Then, in order to “lock” everything together and to give strength a buttonhole stitch was worked over the threads to hold them together. I am not sure if this is a period technique for book-binding, but it seemed to work! It gives a somewhat similar result to that method described in ref 5, but is probably not as sturdy.



As a final touch a fine lucet cord tie was added to keep the book closed. This was again made from 60/2 silk thread, using a strand of the black and a strand of the red silk together.

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 do an elaborate design for the bag, but couched “Jap” threads into a simple geometric pattern, with a circular insert on side to give the Lady Genevieve’s initials, again in couched “Jap” thread. The bag was lined with a second layer of the same double-faced silk fabric, and held closed by more silk lucet thread, finished with small beads.



### **Sources of Materials**

The silk threads used came from the Handweavers Studio in London (<http://www.handweavers.co.uk/> )

The gold threads and wires came variously from :

- Golden Hinde (<http://www.golden-hinde.co.uk/33/home-GoldenHindeGoldworkEmbroideryWarrington.html> )

- Berlin Embroidery (<http://www.berlinembroidery.com/goldworksupplies.htm> ) - best source for Jap threads!

The silk fabric came from John Lewis several years ago.

### ***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”)
- 4 Elizabethan Stitches – A Guide to historic English Needlework by Jacqui Carey, ISBN 978-0-9523225-8-0
- 5 Medieval Bookbinding by Robert G Farrell, 1989 (available from <http://www.antithetical.org/restlesswind/plinth/bookbind2.html> )