

Elizabethan Metal Thread Embroidery

Background

Metal thread has been used for a long time to decorate clothing. The thread used for this in period was made up of a silken core wrapped around with a thin strip of gold or silver foil, making it fairly stiff in handling, but still flexible enough to go around corners. Examples of couched metal thread work can be seen throughout nearly the entire period that the SCA covers. Most of the time this is done on silk or velvet. There are also examples of metal threads used as weft in weaving especially expensive and grand fabric. The ground cloth used is of course linked to the types of fabric that were used to make up outer garments of high enough quality to warrant such expensive decorations.

This lecture and workshop will however concentrate on the forms of metal thread embroideries done on linen ground cloth and made up into small decorative items of clothing towards the end of the Elizabethan era, and beginning of the Stuart era. Most often these items of clothing are headwear, but the main inspiration for this lecture comes from extant linen jackets which have inspired several people to make up their own reproductions¹ lately. Strictly speaking these jackets are post period, most of them with a date of around the 1610s or 1620s, whereas the coifs and forehead cloths that were decorated similarly are slightly earlier, and of a kind used towards the end of the 16th Century as well as into the 17th.

1 Plimoth Plantation being the biggest source of inspiration, through their Blog <http://www.plimoth.org/embroidery-blog/> and continued at <http://thistle-threads.com/blog/> and their inspiration Laura Mellin (<http://www.extremecostuming.com/reproductions/themairstonejacket.html>) whose jacket however doesn't have any metal thread embroidery.

Stitches

Reversed Chain Stitch

Since the metal threads are a little difficult to work with, and precious enough that you want to keep as much of it as possible on the surface and on display, there were a few special stitches developed to accommodate the difficulties and display the maximum amount of precious metal. The idea here is to take as few "bites" of the material as possible, and keep most of the metal showing on the right side by making loops attached to legs of previous stitches.

The simplest form of metal thread stitch is probably the **reversed chain stitch**. In appearance this looks exactly like the common chain stitch, but is worked in reverse. On the front of your fabric will be loops of thread hooked into each other, and on the back a single row of dashes describing the line stitched.



Close-up of V&A coif item numer T.28-1975, taken by Lia de Thornegge.
Working direction down, up, down and up on each leaf from left to right.



Diagram by Felicitas Schwartzbergin



Ceylon Stitch

The next stitch is the **Ceylon stitch**. I first encountered this on the Plimoth Plantation Jacket Blog, and the stitch diagram below is taken from there. I discovered that when working the stitch as per the Plimoth Jacket Project diagram it tends to make the chain stitches on the right hand side tip outwards.

The slight variation I recommend is to bring the needle down at "H" **underneath the loop** rather than over it as shown in the diagram. This counteracts the tendency of the metal thread to tilt towards the outside.

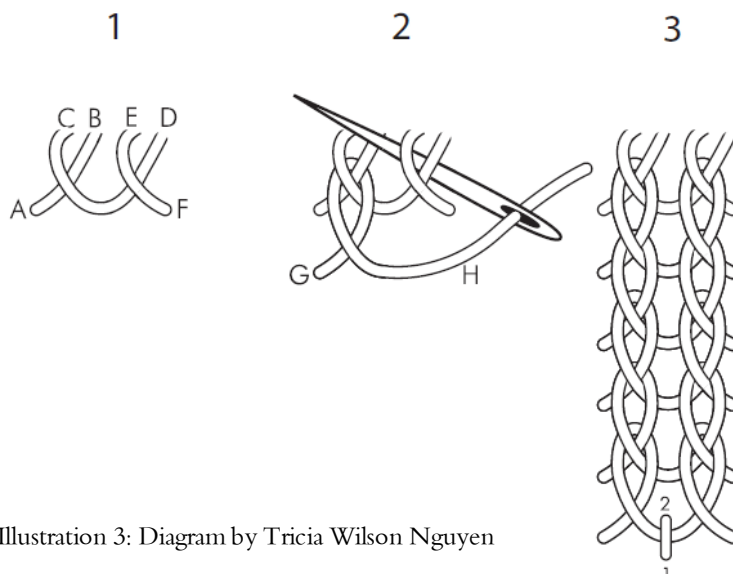


Illustration 3: Diagram by Tricia Wilson Nguyen



Close up up ceylon stitch on V&A item number T.28-1975 taken by Lia de Thornegge. Working direction down and to the right.

Long-Armed Cross Stitch variant

Looking at the original I have been working on re-creating (V&A Item number T.28-1975) I discovered a different sort of stitch used in a lot of places. I could find no descriptions of it, and the Plimoth project did not use any stitch similar to this. In the end, I had to puzzle it out for myself, and I interpreted it as a version of a long-armed cross stitch. Rather than going into the ground fabric twice as normal long-armed cross stitch, you loop the back-stitch around the previously taken stitches and so leave more of the precious thread on the front and produce a nice looking braid. Interesting to note on this stitch is that the direction is immediately obvious on worked pieces as the arrows point the way.

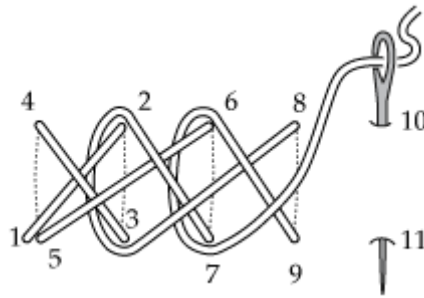


Illustration 6: Diagram by Felicitas Schwartzenbergin



Illustration 7: Photo of V&A item number T.28-1975 taken by Lia de Thornegge. Working direction follows the arrows, to the left in the top two branches, and to the right in the bottom.

Plaited Braid Stitch

For even more coverage, and maximum exposure for your metal thread there are the plaited braid varieties. There are numerous diagrams and variations on this, and although the stitch may look fiendishly complicated, once you get started it is fairly straight forward.

Those familiar with naalbinding will recognize the concept of anchoring more thread in loops of previous stitches. The stitch described here is again taken from the Plimoth Plantation project of embroidering a jacket, and was worked up by Tricia Wilson Nguyen. The photos and descriptions are posted on the blog mentioned previously over several posts, and I have simply compiled them for ease of use.

