

Stitchery Series Part III – The Stitches

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Embroidery stitches in China

Satin stitch appears to date from the Shang Dynasty (1523-1027 BCE). Appliqué and silverwork have been found in tombs in Mongolia from the Chou Dynasty (6th century BCE). Textiles from Han Dynasty tombs show that the stitches used during this time period included¹:

- Satin (ping) – also called flat stitch
- Stem (xian wen) – sometimes referred to as outline stitch
- Peking Knot (da zi) – called seed knot in early centuries and came to be known as Forbidden Stitch, when it was outlawed from embroidery factories during the 1940's because it was thought that women were going blind in their extensive use of it, although modern literature attributes this to an old urban legend. I have personally lost more of my eyesight from working with metallics, than I have working with this stitch.
- Chain (suo) - also known as lock or loop stitch
- Couching (ding) – also called nail stitch

Appliqué, buttonhole, net stitch, pine needle stitch and quilting stitches were also used during the Han Dynasty, but are not detailed in this article.

No new stitches appeared in China until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Counted stitches (Florentine and petit-point) came into use during the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912).

Embroidery stitches in Europe (My Cliff Notes version)

During the Viking era, embroidery stitches were employed more as seam finishing techniques than as decorative elements. When decorative stitches were used, they included stem, back, herringbone, Vandyke, blanket, and chain stitch. Couching was used to secure metal or leather strips around applique, or to secure cords and braids.²

The Bayeux Tapestry that was featured in **Part I** of this series was worked in wools on bleached linen, in stem and outline stitch, with laid and couched work used

as a fill stitch. Elsewhere in Europe, laid and couched work was done predominantly in metal threads, generally for ecclesiastical wear.

During the 12th-13th centuries, the primary stitches used in Britain to produce Opus Anglicanum pieces were underside couching, split stitch, stem, satin, tent and cross stitch. Laid work as well as couching was also employed for household and altar furnishings.³

Motifs from the 13th century included geometric frameworks, barbed quatrefoils and interlaced foliage which included oaks and vines. Heraldic devices, bestiary both real and imagined, flora and even human figures were also subjects of embroidered pieces in medieval England.

Canvas stitch (now called needlepoint), and herringbone stitch, also known as Maltese Cross, made their first appearance in Germany and Italy during the 13th-14th centuries. Quilting and applique work appear in the 15th century in Italy.⁴

Although embroidery was not used in Europe to the extent that it was in China, there are some remarkable extant examples as well as several written analyses of the stitches and materials used to produce these works. I invite you to continue your research of European embroidery at your local library or Google search.

The Stitches

Satin Stitch

Stitches of very similar length are laid side-by-side without overlapping and completely cover the surface. Satin stitch is typically laid at up to a 45-degree angle by using a multi-ply thread in order to get the most surface coverage with the least number of stitches. Single-ply thread is used for very fine work, especially when that work is double sided.

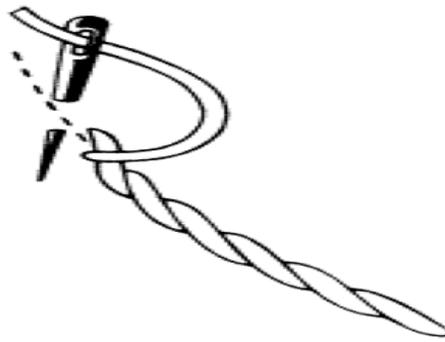


Satin stitch is usually used for small motifs like leaves, flowers and Chinese symbols, but it can also be used as a ground layer over which other stitches are overlaid. This can add dimensional texture to a piece, as well as help to secure long stitches.

A variant dating back to the Han Dynasty and which became very popular during the Song and T'ang Dynasties, is the shading stitch, also called long & short stitch or close-knit stitch, which is used to shade an area or transition to another color where an abrupt line is not wanted.

Stem Stitch

Also called outline stitch, back stitch and rolling stitch, when done properly it gives the appearance of a twisted string on the surface of your textile. It was frequently used for tree branches, the ribs of leaves and to outline other embroidered areas. The appearance of 'twining' is achieved by starting the next stitch 1/3 of the way from the previous stitch, as shown here.



Peking Knot

Also called Forbidden stitch, seed stitch and knot stitch, this knot was used as a fill stitch in China. It's earliest documented use dates from a pair of shoes from the Warring States period (475-221 BC). A Han Dynasty fragment shows this knot incorporating silk and feathers.



This is a great stitch for adding texture to your project, I have used it to simulate curly fur on animals or on portraits of people who are wearing fur hats or collars. I have also seen it used as a shading stitch for flowers. In China it is used for objects where satin stitch would wear out easily, such as on shoes and

purses. It has been used as an accent knot in embroidery in Europe and the US since Victorian times.

Though some people call this a French knot, I believe there's a subtle difference. To make a Peking knot, you wrap the thread around your needle once; a French knot requires 2-3 wraps. A bullion knot is a version of the French knot, where you wrap the thread around your needle 10-20 times, which leaves a bar on the surface instead of a knot.

Chain Stitch

Also called lock or loop stitch, it's one of the oldest and most universal stitches. Dating back to China's Zhou Dynasty (1100-221 BC), it was a predominant stitch for 1700 years. Several varieties of this stitch evolved, including loop and daisy stitch.

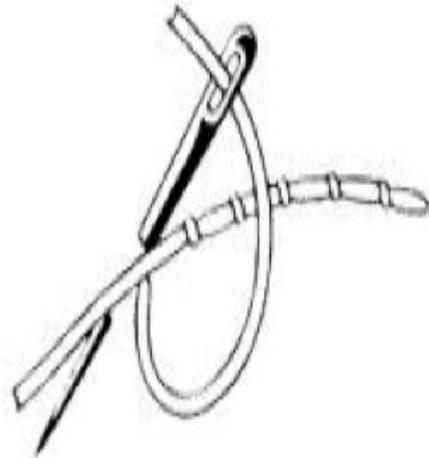


Extant European examples include textiles from 7th century Byzantium, and as a fill stitch in 12th century Germany.



Couching

Hands down, this is my favorite stitch and I use it almost exclusively in my work. It is accomplished by laying a cord on the surface of your textile, and whipping it in place with a second, smaller thread. It is one of the most recognizable Chinese stitches, used as a fill stitch almost as frequently as satin stitch.



It is an excellent technique for metallic embroidery because you can leave the fragile metals on the surface rather than wearing them out by pulling them

through your cloth. It was one of the stitches of choice for church vestments in Italy and England.

The embroidered piece (from the previous page) that I now use as my company logo, is couched entirely by hand by a friend of mine, **Lois Hale**. She couched the gold surface threads down with colored embroidery floss, which she shifted in color from the base of each 'feather' to the end, resulting in panels that are iridescent in bright light. It is beyond my imagining how much time it took her to produce this pair of sleeve bands...

Summary

My notes remind me that there are somewhere around 100-150 identifiable embroidery stitches used worldwide. I have only scratched the surface here by presenting those that are the oldest and most recognizable.

Footnotes

1. Chinese Folk Art: the Small Skills of Carving Insects Nancy Zeng Berliner, Little, Brown and Co., Boston 1987
2. Seam Treatments and Finish Techniques in Migration-Era Scandinavia by HJ Satre, Ph.D.
3. Opus Anglicanum by Cateline de la Mor, Tournaments Illuminated, Issue 93
4. A Catalog of Medieval Embroidery Stitches by Airmid Godwin, Tournaments Illuminated Issue #69, 1983

Resources

- The Art of Oriental Embroidery; Young Yang Chung, Ph.D; Charles Scribner's Sons, New York
- Complete Book of Needlecraft; Ida Riley Duncan; Liveright Publishing Co., New York 1949
- A Catalog of Medieval Embroidery Stitches; Airmid Godwin; Tournaments Illuminated No. 69, Berkely CA AS 23
- Needlework Through the Ages; Mary Symond and Louisa Preece; Hodder & Strought, Ltd. London 1928
- The History of Textile Art; Agnes Geijer; Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd., London 1969
- The Bayeux Tapestry; Sir Frank Stenton, Phaidon Publications, London and New York 1957
- A Pictorial History of Embroidery; Marie Schuette and Sigrid Muller-Christensen; Freerick A. Praeger, NY 1964
- The Complete Encyclopedia of Needlework; Theresa de Dillmont, Running Press, Philadelphia 1978
- Opus Anglicanum: English Medieval Embroidery; Donald King; Curwen Press, London 1963