

Basics of Opus Anglicanum

by Sidney Eileen
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What is Opus Anglicanum?

Opus Anglicanum is Latin for “English Work”, and refers to a style of embroidery practiced in England from approximately 1200-1350 c.e. It is typified by underside couched gold and silver thread, and silk thread worked in split stitch to create flowing details and shading often referred to as “painting with thread”. A handful of ecclesiastical examples survive to this day, but at the time it was may also have been used for secular pieces.

Stylistic Details

Metal threads are typically used for halos and backgrounds, worked almost exclusively in an underside couching stitch. This is done because it saves the couching thread from wear, and it creates a hinge in the metal thread, allowing the finished piece to move and flow, rather than being overly stiff. Background stitches are often placed in a way that creates a pattern on the finished piece, such as herringbone, lattice, chevrons, or florals. Halos are stitched in an oval or circle around the subject's head.

Silks are worked in split stitch, often very tiny (as small as 2mm in detailed areas like faces), using three or more shades of each color to create detailed flow and shading of the figures, objects, and garments. The direction of the stitches is important to indicate flow and direction. For example, spiraling stitches on the forehead, cheek, tip of the nose, and chin to give a feeling of roundness and fullness. Stitches follow the folds of fabric, and the flow of hair.

Pale pink thread is sometimes worked in a spiral on the cheeks of faces to give them fullness and definition.

Hair is often worked in bands of contrasting colors to show flow, wave, and curl.

Black thread is often worked as an outline to give further definition. This is usually done on faces and in other areas requiring minute detail, and sometimes it is used to outline an entire figure or object.

Complex Opus Anglicanum embroideries can also include surface couching, especially in background details, and be lavishly decorated with pearls, stones, and gems.

Materials

You will need a frame of some sort to hold your fabric taut throughout the embroidering process. Round hoops work decently, but they tend to not hold the material very securely and must be constantly re-tightened, which can result in puckering of the embroidery. Scrolling frames or slat frames work much more reliably. Be sure to whip stitch your fabric on all sides so it is held under even tension on all sides. If you choose not to use a frame while stitching the silk, watch the tension of each

stitch very carefully, as it is easy to pull too tight and create puckering.

In period Opus Anglicanum was always worked on linen material. This was a very fine, tightly woven fabric that is difficult or impossible to find available in the modern market. Try to get a fabric with the highest possible thread count per inch, as this makes it easier to accurately place tiny, detailed stitches. Handkerchief weight linen is the easiest to find but is a bit lightweight, so you may want to use two layers. DO NOT use modern evenweave fabrics, as these are entirely unlike any period fabrics and they have too few threads per inch to be suitable for Opus Anglicanum style embroidery.

If you are embroidering on velvet, place linen over the velvet while embroidering to provide a clean foundation for your embroidery. After the embroidery is finished, trim away any excess linen.

Silk thread in period was flat silk, and flat silk lends itself exceptionally well to creating a beautiful split stitch. It also has a beautiful sheen that is lost in most twisted silk threads, as twisted silk is often manufactured from shorter filaments. It has been noted by some people that some extant pieces appear to have a slight twist, but I argue that the appearance of slight twist can be created while embroidering, and is not necessarily an inherent property of the threads used. In my own experience I have found that unless I take great care to keep it untwisted, the flat silk will have a tendency to twist slightly as I work.

To my knowledge, there are only two modern manufacturers of flat silk. The first is Soie Ovale, made by Au Ver a Soie in France. The second is the flat silks sold by the Japanese Embroidery Center (JEC). Both are genuine flat silks, composed of individual long filaments of silk. Both are excellent quality, but do have slightly different properties. The Soie Ovale is slightly more robust, such that one stitch of the JEC silk is about 2/3 the thickness of the Soie Ovale. The JEC silk is a much longer roll at 60 meters vs. 15 meters on a roll of Soie Ovale. The JEC silk also has a much more delicate feel to it. This means the JEC silk will lend itself well to creating finer details, but you will have to make a great many more stitches total to finish a piece of embroidery. In the USA, Soie Ovale may be purchased through Hedgehog Handworks. The JEC silk may be purchased through the Japanese Embroidery Center Store.

Underside couching was done with a fine linen thread in period, but this can be hard to find now. Since the couching will not be visible on the finished piece, all-purpose thread will work fine.

Metal threads used are usually very thin. I recommend using thread that is no larger than .5mm. In period metal threads were made from a thin strip of metal (usually gold or silver) wrapped around a silk core. Imitation gold and silver are far more economical, but genuine gold and silver are also available through specialty embroidery suppliers catering to gold embroiderers. I buy my metal threads through the Japanese Embroidery Center Store.

You will need a fine gauge embroidery needle for embroidering the flat silk, and a large gauge needle for the underside couching. When embroidering with the flat silk you want the needle to make as small a hole as possible so it will disappear. For the underside couching you want a large hole so you can cleanly pass the needle up through the fabric and then back down through exactly the same hole.

Beeswax or other thread conditioner makes underside couching far easier.

Flat Silk Embroidery Tips and Techniques

The greatest challenge of working with flat silk is snagging. Flat silk is very delicate, and will snag on anything rough, be that exposed wood on your embroidery frame, or dry skin. I highly recommend keeping hand lotion handy and moisturizing whenever needed, but be sure to let the moisturizer soak in completely before handling the silk or it may cause discoloration. Also consider

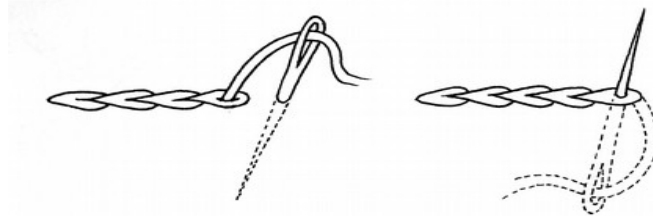
clipping and filing your nails, and using exfoliants like salt or sugar scrubs.

For a newcomer to flat silk embroidery, it is usually easiest to work in short lengths, no more than a 12" at a time, and possibly less. By doing this, if the silk snags or knots beyond use you are only losing a short length of your silk. As you become more comfortable using the flat silk you can increase the working length as much as you are comfortable with. I tend to work with lengths of a yard or so.

Also keep the eye of your needle close to the tail end, maybe only three or four inches from the end. It's fairly common for a modern needles to have small imperfections in the eye that will abrade and damage the delicate silk, so if you try to keep the needle closer to your work and slide it as you go, you are likely to find that the filaments have been damaged, lost their beautiful sheen, and possibly even been cut. If you find your needle is damaging or cutting your silk quickly, try switching needles until you find one that does less damage.

Split stitch is worked in a manner similar to a back stitch.

- Stitch forward a full stitch length.
- Come back up through the stitch you just made about 1/3 of its length from the end, splitting the threads of the prior stitch in half.
- Stitch forward a full stitch length.
- Come back up through the stitch you just made about 1/3 of its length from the end, splitting the threads of the prior stitch in half.
- Repeat.



In areas with a lot of compact detail, like faces and ornaments, stitches should be correspondingly compact, between 1mm and 2mm. In other areas where you want to give the impression of luxurious flow, like on the folds of a long gown, the stitches can elongate to 3mm.

Stitch in directions that flow with the shape of the subject being embroidered. Make round foreheads, cheeks, nose tips, and chins; stitch in sweeping curves and lines along the folds of fabric; stitch down the length of the neck or the length of an arm rather than going across; and follow the fur direction of a dog or a unicorn. The goal is to make it look like it was painted, so stitch with a mind for the flow of the piece so it will be as dynamic as possible.

Stitch the same direction in each part of the garment to create a smooth appearance and avoid a striped look. Do this even if that means you have to stop, go back to the other side, and start again to create the next row of stitches.

Pack your stitches as close together as you can manage to avoid any gaps in your stitching that may show your ground fabric. All you want to see is the silk.

Outline the face and any other areas before filling them in. By doing it first, the outline will be squished by the surrounding rows of stitches and won't overpower the shading. If you outline last, it will most likely be forced to sit on top of the other stitches and can appear overstated or overly bold.

To knot or not knot is a matter of personal preference. Which I do depends upon the individual piece of embroidery. In the case of Opus Anglicanum I usually do not knot, because there is more than enough thread on the back of the piece to tuck the tails to secure them.

Metal Thread Underside Couching Tips and Techniques

Have a special set of shears just for cutting your metal threads. DO NOT use your nice embroidery snips on any metal threads, or you will ruin them very quickly. I find kitchen shears and crafting shears are both extremely nice for cutting metal threads.

Don't be afraid to work with long lengths of metal thread and couching thread. Underside couching tends to cover a lot of distance fairly quickly, and metal threads tend to ravel badly at the cut ends, so it saves a lot of time and lost material to stop and start less frequently.

Use a large gauge needle for your couching thread. The larger hole makes it easier to put the needle back down through the same exact hole.

Wax your couching thread liberally. It will make the sewing process easier. If you are using Thread Heaven, you can also lubricate your metal thread. If you are using beeswax, do not apply it to your metal thread as it will dull the finish.

Tuck the tail ends of your metal thread through the stitches on the backside of the piece to stop it from fraying.

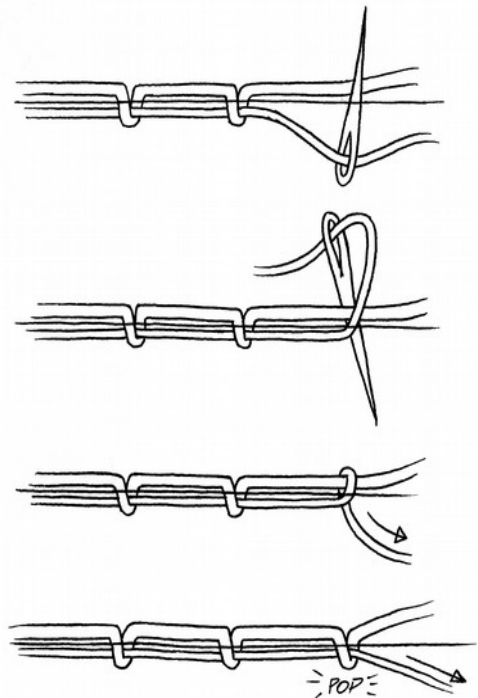
Mark on your fabric the pattern for your underside couching stitches before you start stitching. For example, if you want a diamond pattern, use a ruler to draw your diamonds on the fabric before you stitch.

Keep your metal threads as close together as you can manage to avoid gaps and glimpses of the underlying fabric. This is where a high thread count foundation material really helps, because it will allow you to place your stitches very close together when using very thin metal thread. If you are working on a low thread count linen (<30 threads per inch), it may be difficult or impossible to completely cover your background with even and clean stitches, or you may be forced to use a thicker metal thread than is ideal for this style of embroidery.

Start and end metal threads at the edge of the area to be embroidered with metal, NEVER at a couching stitch location. If you end and start anew in the middle of the background at a couching stitch location, it can cause an awkward pucker.

To underside couch:

- Tuck the starting end of your metal thread through the stitches on the back side.
- Secure your couching thread on the back side.
- Bring your metal thread to the front of the work.
- Bring your couching thread to the front of the work at the next stitch location.
- Loop your couching thread over the metal thread.
- Run your couching thread to the back through exactly the same hole.
- Hold your metal thread straight across the surface of the work.
- Pull on your couching thread until you hear a slight “pop” of the metal thread dipping through to the back.
- Bring your couching thread to the front of the work at the next stitch location.
- Repeat.





(Above) **Fragment (From an Orphrey Band),**
1400/50



(Above) **Detail of English Altar Frontal, 1315-35**



(Right) **Opus Anglicanum Embroidery in the
collection of Dumbarton Oaks Research
Library and Collection**

This textile is a fragment of an English Gothic opus anglicanum ("English work") embroidery dating to ca. 1320-1340. As presently preserved, the textile is assembled from two fragments, each eleven and a half inches wide, that are seamed together vertically down the center.

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