

Surface Couching
A Period Embroidery
Technique

Compiled & Presented

by

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GREETINGS!

What I will be demonstrating today is surface couching. I hope you enjoy the class. Thank you for attending!

SURFACE COUCHING

Couching is a very old form of embroidery. To “couch” is to “lie down.” For this class, the following definition is appropriate: Couching is an embroidery technique where cord, thread, yarn, or another material is laid across the surface of a ground fabric and secured with small stitches of the same or a different fiber. Couching threads may be of a contrasting color or the same as the laid threads.

Today you will learn a basic couching stitch – one of many used in goldwork. Couching can be found in portraiture, on articles of clothing including gloves, and on embroidered bookbindings of satin, velvet, and canvas. A wide selection of photographs showing couched work follows.



Depiction of 16th century slate frames and methods of transferring designs onto fabric from Allesandro Paganino's *Il Burato*, 1527.

The basic technique for couching requires both hands. It is easiest to work the technique with your backing and ground fabrics stretched taut. A frame of some type is essential. A makeshift slate frame has been provided for your use. Since classroom time is limited, a simple design has already been drawn onto a piece of silk ground fabric and stitched onto the linen backing fabric of each frame.

Class materials include several different types of needles:

- ✧ An embroidery needle for the couching thread.
- ✧ A chenille needle. This is a larger needle which will enable you to pull the metal threads to the back of your work without damaging them.
- ✧ A large steel tapestry needle to be used as a laying tool or a mellor. A mellor is useful for gently manipulating the metal threads.

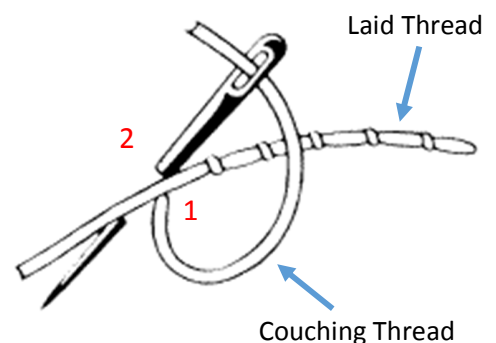
Additional class materials provided are:

- ✧ Gold couching thread.
- ✧ Beeswax. Running your couching thread through beeswax strengthens it and helps prevent it from being cut by metal threads.
- ✧ Metallic cord.

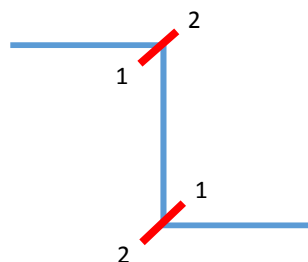
For the purposes of this introductory class, all threads and cords provided are synthetic.

BASIC INSTRUCTION

To the right is a line drawing of a basic couching stitch. Couching is always worked at right angles to the metal threads. The only exception to this is when a cord with an obvious twist is used. Then the laid thread is attached by working tiny diagonal stitches across the cord's twist - rather a "stitch in the ditch" technique. This treatment renders the couching stitches invisible. See examples of both these methods of couching in the photographs that follow. (Note: The diagram to the right shows both parts of the couched stitch with the needle in the fabric simultaneously. Couching on a frame is worked with a stabbing technique. Your needle comes up through the ground fabric (1) and you stab your needle back down into the fabric (2) in two separate motions. When properly mounted on a frame, the ground fabric is stretched much too taut to allow your needle to perform both motions at the same time.)



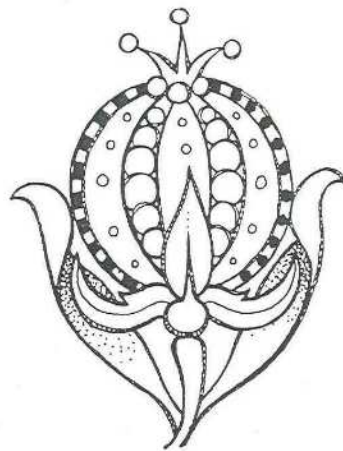
1. To begin, thread your embroidery needle with your couching thread. Run your couching thread through beeswax. Once is all that's necessary. Secure a few stitches into the backing fabric directly below the beginning line of your couching, being careful to only stitch through the backing fabric. Bring your couching needle up through both the backing and ground fabrics to the point you wish to begin couching.
2. Cut a length of metallic cord long enough to extend at least one inch past the beginning and ending of the line to be couched.
3. Leaving at least a one inch "tail," lay the metal cord flat against your ground fabric. This is the perfect time to utilize the large tapestry needle provided – your mellor - to hold and place the cord. The tails from the beginning and ending of your work will be "plunged" to the back of your ground fabric once your design is completely finished. Leaving the tails on the top of your work helps prevent them from becoming entangled with the couching thread underneath.
4. Holding the laid thread against the ground fabric with one hand, take your first couching stitch with your free hand. Come up through the ground fabric immediately to one side of the laid thread. Use a stabbing technique to secure the couching thread immediately to the other side of the laid thread, angling your needle straight down into the ground fabric from the top. Couching stitches should be evenly spaced about 1/8th inch apart along the metal thread. The stitch itself should be the width of the laid thread. Be sure to maintain an even tension – too wide a stitch and the metal thread slides around; too tight a stitch and the metal thread will appear pinched.
5. Points, corners, and sharp angles are couched from the inside of the laid thread to the outside, from 1 to 2, as in the line drawing below. Taking a second couching stitch at the point helps to secure the bend in the metal thread, ensuring a crisp angle in your laid thread.



6. After all the laid threads are couched, you will “plunge” the tails from the beginning and ending points of all the metal threads to the back side of your work. Plunging requires a large, sharp needle to act as a stiletto to pierce the fabric, allowing the metal thread to be taken to the back of the design. The needle must be thick enough to make a large enough hole for the metal threads to pass through the fabric without shredding. You may have to experiment with different sizes of needles depending on your choice of metal thread / cord.

From the top of your frame, insert the larger chenille needle up to the eye adjacent to the point where the metal thread ends on your design. Holding the needle on the underside of the work, thread the tail of the metal thread through the needle's eye. You should have a very small loop of thread between the eye and the last couching stitch. Pull the needle downward sharply until the metal thread has been drawn completely under the ground and backing fabrics. Once all the ends have been plunged, you can trim the tails underneath to $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, leaving them loose. The backing fabric should hold the tails in place. Or, you can fan out the tails of the metal threads and secure them to the back side of your design using an overcast stitch **through the backing fabric only**. Yes, it can be done!

And that, my friends, is basic couching. Hopefully, this class will encourage you to experiment with other goldwork techniques.



EARLIEST KNOWN EXAMPLE OF SURFACE COUCHING



Saddle Cover discovered in Eastern Altai, Pazyryk (Siberia, Russia).
5th century B.C.

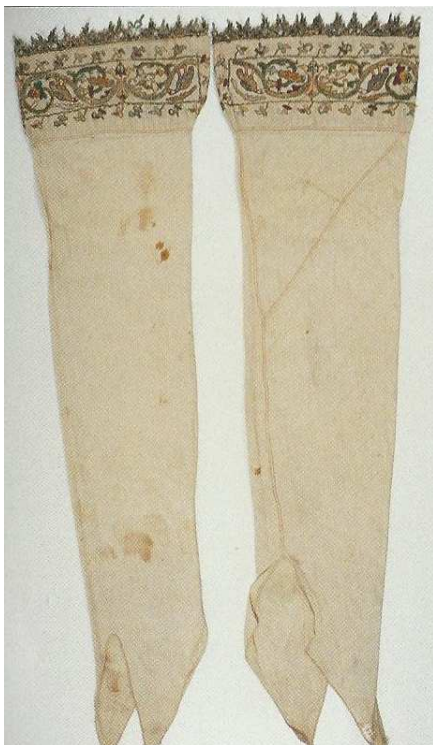
Housed in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



EXAMPLES OF SURFACE COUCHING ON CLOTHING



Boy's white linen shirt, c. 1560-80. Shirt is embroidered with tiny floral motifs in crimson silk. Close-up of floral motif clearly shows couched gold thread. Housed in Museo del Tessuto, Prato, Italy.



Footless linen boot hose, c. 1600. Boot hose are embroidered in polychrome silks and metal threads. Close-ups clearly show couched gold threads. Housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Red silk velvet cloak,
c.1560-80. Appears to be
couched metal threads.

Housed in the
Germanisches National
Museum, Nürnberg,
Germany.



Red silk satin cloak,
c.1580 - 1600.

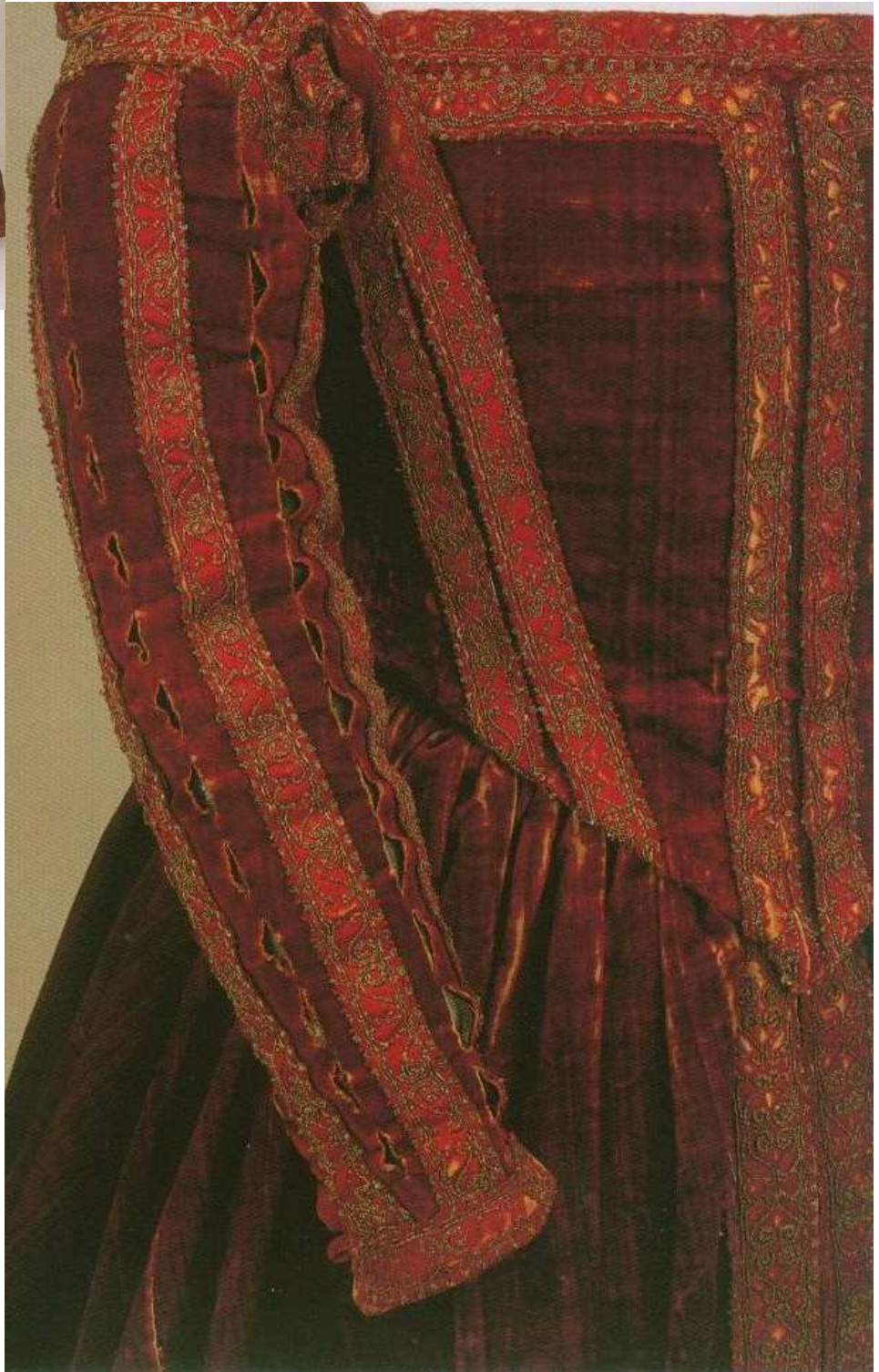
Couched metal
threads.

Housed in the V&A
Museum, London,
England.



Red velvet Florentine gown, c.1560. Appears to be couched gold thread on decorated bands.

Housed in the Museo di Palazzo Reale, Piza, Italy.





Embroidered leather gloves, 16th century.
Embroidered and couched
directly on the leather.
Housed in The
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York.

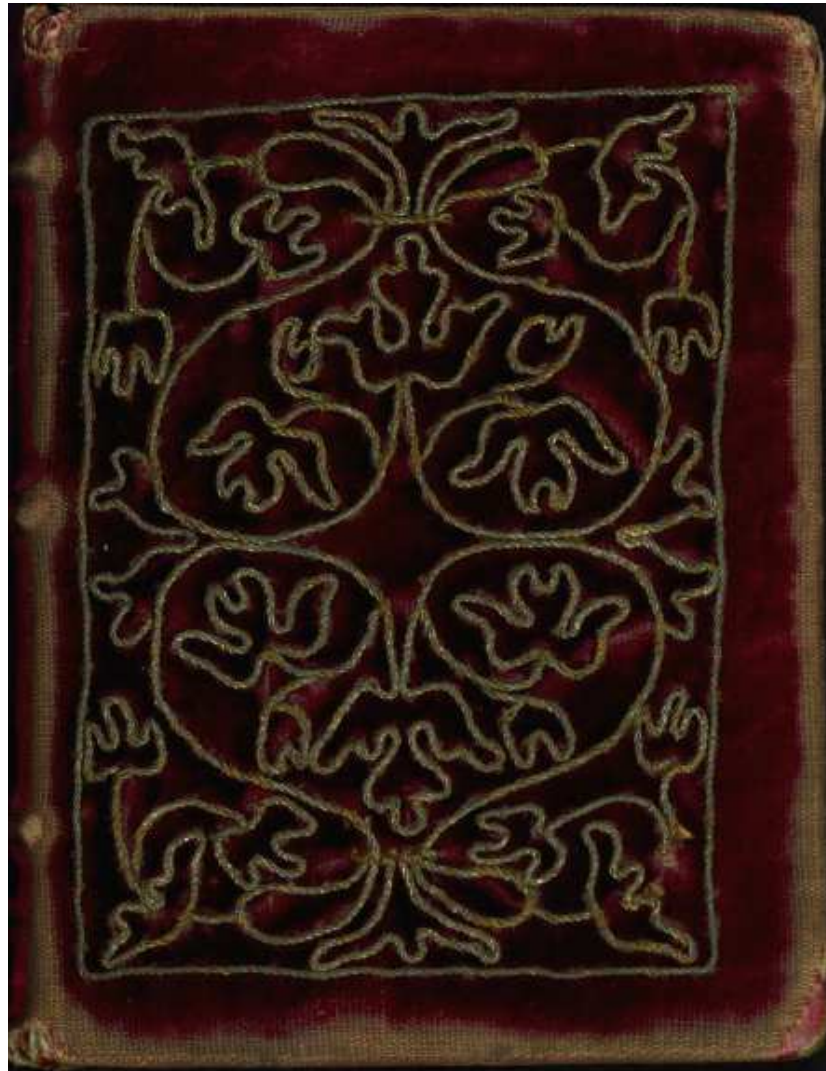




Leather gloves with lavishly embroidered satin cuffs, c. 1600-25. Close-up shows two different couching techniques. Housed in The V&A Museum, London, England.



EXAMPLES OF SURFACE COUCHING ON
EMBROIDERED BOOKBINDINGS

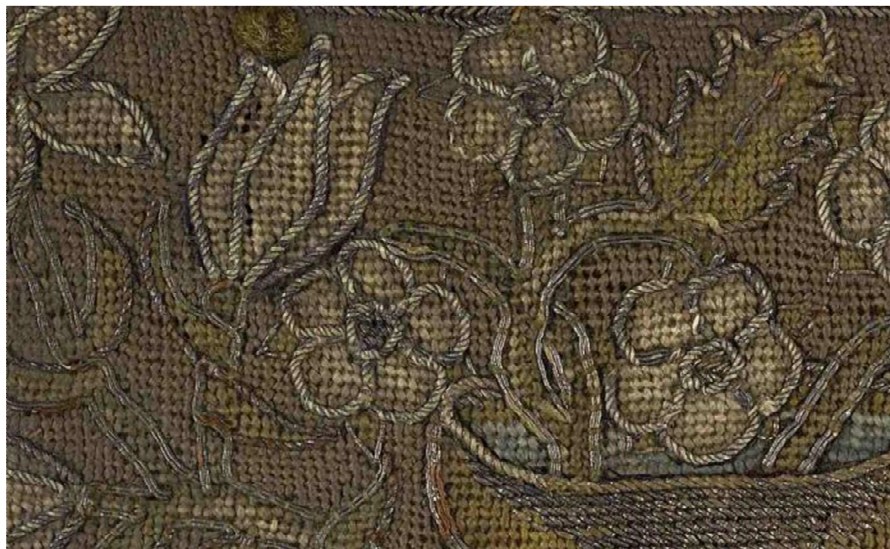


Manuscript W.431, Book of Hours (Use of Rome), c. 1490-1500. Velvet embroidered bookbinding couched with silk and silver metal thread. Close-up shows technique where metal thread is couched onto embroidery surface using small diagonal stitches that disappear into the twist of the metal thread.

Housed in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland.



A Booke of Christian Prayers, c. 1581. Embroidered canvas showing two different couching techniques.
Housed in The British Library, London, England.





Crimson velvet
bookbinding with
couched silver torsade,
c.1608.
Housed in the Folger
Shakespeare Museum,
Washington, D.C.





L'Eupheme des Francois,
c. 1615. Velvet
embroidered bookbinding.
Close-up shows two
different couching
techniques.
Housed in The British
Library, London, England.



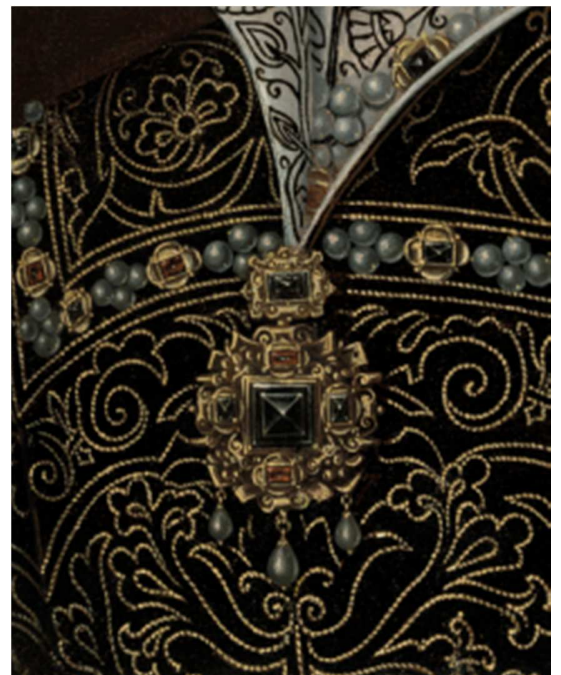
Henshaw's *Horae Successivae*, c. 1632. Satin embroidered bookbinding wrought with silk and metal threads. Close-up shows two different couching techniques.

Housed in The British Library, London, England.

EXAMPLES OF SURFACE COUCHING ON PORTRAITURE



Mary I of England, c.1569.
Artist: Anthonis Mor.
Appears to be couched
metal threads.
Private collection.

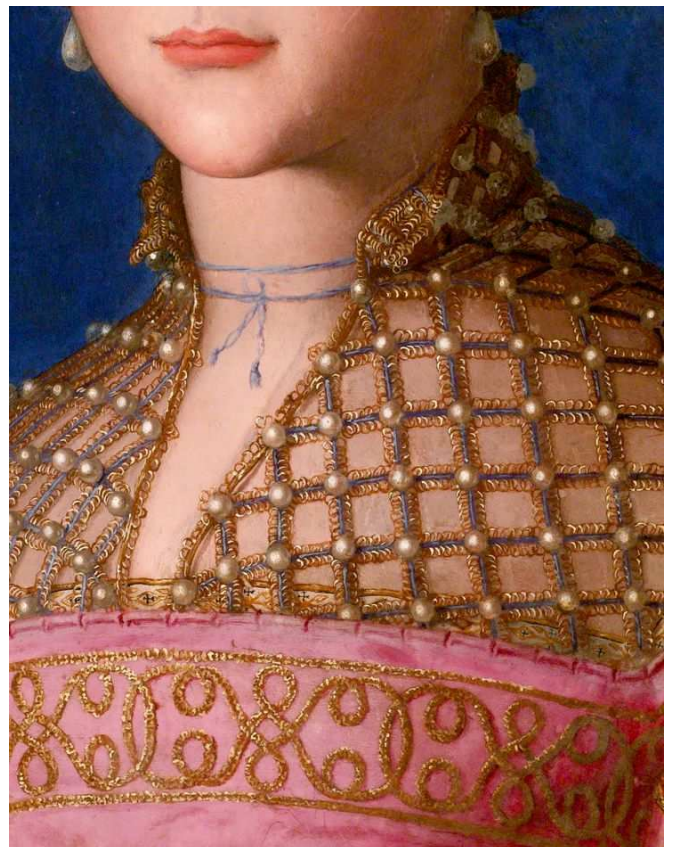
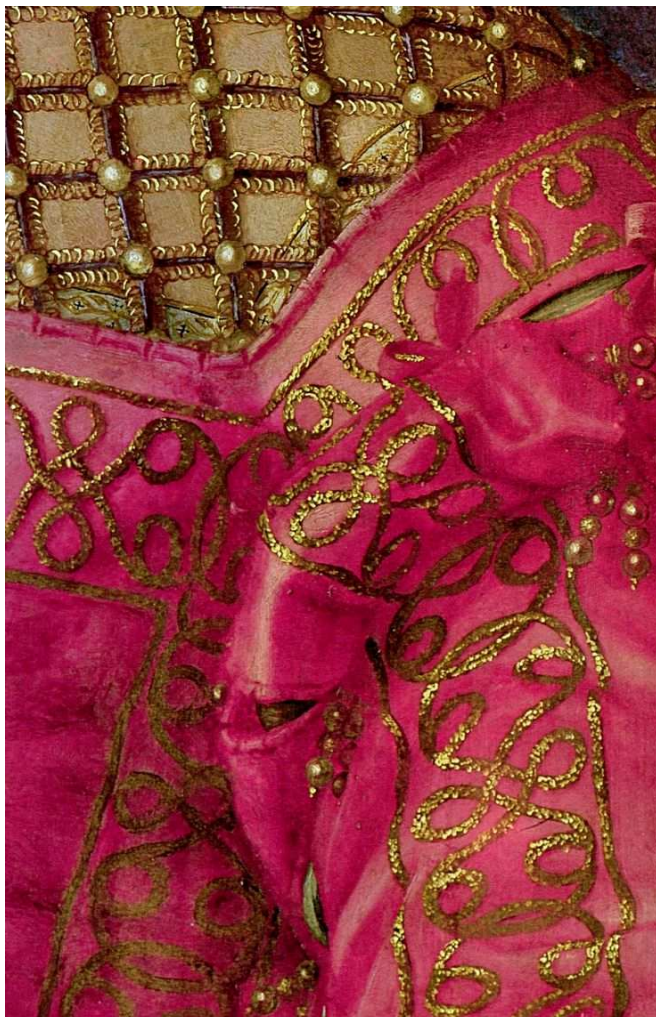




Eleonor de Toledo,
c.1560. Artist: Alessandro
Allori. Possible couching
and satin stitch.
Housed in the State
Hermitage Museum in St.
Petersburg, Russia.



Eleonore de Toledo,
c.1569. Artist: Agnolo
Bronzino. Looks like
couching to me!
Housed in the National
Gallery in Prague.



Portrait either of Maria de Medici or Eleonora di Garzia di Toledo, c.1555.
Artist: Alessandro Allori.
Appears to be couched metal threads on front green bands of dress.
Housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.





Katherine Parr, late 16th century. Unknown artist. Appears to be couched metal threads.
Housed in The National Portrait Gallery, London, England.

WORKS CITED

Arnold, Janet (with additional material by Jenny Tiramani and Santina M. Levey). *Patterns of Fashion 4: The cut and construction of linen shirts, smocks, neckwear, headwear and accessories for men and women c. 1540-1660.* 2008. Pan MacMillan, London.

Christie, Grace. *Embroidery and Tapestry Weaving: A Practical Textbook of Design and Workmanship.* 1906. John Hogg. London.

Christie, Grace. *Samplers and Stitches: A Handbook of the Embroiderer's Art.* 1921. B.T. Batsford LTD, London.

Zimmerman, Jane D. *Techniques of Metal Thread Embroidery.* 1975. Zimmerman.

Photographic Examples of Embroidery Stitches cited from the following:

The British Library, London. Photo of canvas embroidered bookbinding – *A Booke of Christian Prayers*, c. 1581.

The British Library, London. Photo of satin embroidered bookbinding – *Henshaw's Horae Successivae*, c. 1632.

The British Library, London. Photo of velvet embroidered bookbinding - *L'Eupheme des Francois*, c. 1615.

Folger Shakespeare Museum, Washington, D.C. Photo of crimson velvet bookbinding with couched silver torsade, c. 1608.

The Germanisches National Museum, Nürnberg, Germany. Photo of couched red silk velvet cloak, c. 1560-80.

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Portrait of either Maria de Medici or Eleonora di Garzia di Toledo, c. 1555. Artist: Alessandro Allori.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo of embroidered leather gloves, 16th century.

Museo di Palazzo Reale, Piza, Italy. Photo of red velvet Florentine gown, c. 1560.

The National Gallery in Prague. Portrait of Eleonore de Toledo, c. 1569. Artist: Agnolo Bronzino.

The National Portrait Gallery, London. Portrait of Katherine Parr, late 16th century. Unknown artist.

Private Collection. Portrait of Mary I of England, c. 1569. Artist: Anthonis Mor.

The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Portrait of Eleonor de Toledo, c. 1560. Artist: Alessandro Allori.

The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Photo of saddle cover, 5th century.

The V&A Museum, London. Photo of leather gloves with lavishly embroidered satin cuffs, c. 1600-25.

The V&A Museum, London. Photo of red silk satin cloak with couched metal threads, c. 1580-1600.

The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland. Photo of velvet embroidered bookbinding – Manuscript W.431, *Book of Hours (Use of Rome)*, c.1490-1500.

RESOURCES FOR GOLDWORK MATERIALS:

www.berlinembroidery.com

Tanja Berlin of Berlin Embroidery has goldwork supplies including a 99 page PDF file entitled "Metal Thread Information" that is invaluable for the beginning metal thread embroiderer.

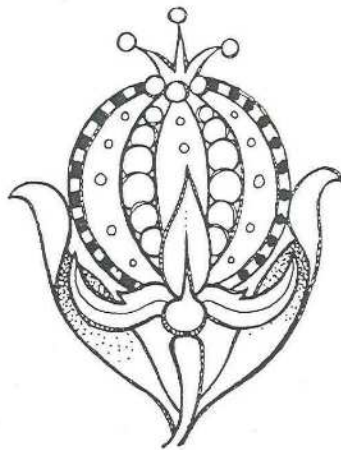
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/GaribaldisNeedleWork>

Garibaldi's Needle Works is an etsy shop that has available for sale a deluxe goldwork starter kit.

<http://www.creativestitchesandgifts.com/>

This needlework shop is located in the Preston Valley Shopping Center in Dallas, Texas and has a few goldwork supplies. Their assortment of threads for stitching a variety of needlework techniques is quite extensive.

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For a pdf copy of today's class handout,
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