

Worshipful Company of Broiderers of Lochac

Information Handout 4 – May Coronet 1999

From the Guildmaster of the Worshipful Company of Broiderers

What I did on my Holidays, Part 3

After a wonderful time in Florence, I finally left for Germany. A hint to travellers – the place to buy an international train ticket in Florence is **not** the railway station! After waiting for four hours and moving 10 places in a 200 person queue, I gave up, to be told by more knowledgeable backpackers that you buy tickets at the American Express office in town. It took 15 minutes!

I arrived in Nürnberg at 9.30 at night, to be met by my SCA hosts at the train station. I knew that SCA hospitality was the same the world over, when Lord Agilmar von Sevelingen, the seneschal of the Shire of Turmstadt (in perfect English) asked if I had a sleeping bag. When I said yes, he said that was good, because we were going to an event on the other side of Germany, now! So we piled into a van with an assortment of German and American SCAers, drove halfway across Germany in the middle of the night and went to a camping event. It was a wonderful introduction to the Drachenwald people and their hospitality. I also discovered how wonderfully liberating and medieval it is to go to an event with one frock, a bowl, a cup, a knife and a spoon and a sleeping bag.

At the event I ran into Count Geoffrey, whom some of you will remember from his visit to Rowany Festival when he was King of the West. He and his wife, Kira, now live in Italy, and Kira is an *opus anglicanum* fanatic, who has been working at tracking down and re-photographing the works described in Mrs A. G. I. Christie's *English Medieval Embroidery* (if you live in Melbourne, go and look at this in the State Library, it's a fantastic book, but well and truly out of print), many of which went to Italy as gifts or commissions for popes. Unfortunately (for me, not her), Kira was in England at a Royal School of Needleworkers workshop, so I didn't get to catch up, but I'm hoping that we might be able to persuade the publishers to reprint *EMI* – yet another project for 'after I've finished my thesis'!

After the weekend, we came back to Nürnberg, where I stayed with Lord Agilmar and his Lady, Catriona le May Doan for a week. I had organised to visit the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, to look at a couple of Tristan embroideries there, so Agilmar (who was on holiday) took me there. It has a fantastic collection of medieval treasures, all the more surprising, when you realise that Nürnberg was 90% destroyed by Allied bombing at the end of World War II. I'd recommend the museum to anyone interested in German daily life. The embroidery on display was very interesting, and like elsewhere in Germany, really changed my views on medieval textiles. Since in Australia, we mostly have access to English language publications, we tend to get a

skewed look at medieval embroidery which focuses primarily on English work, with a few pictures of some of the more famous continental pieces. German medieval embroidery is extensive and interesting and has a number of distinctive styles. For example, there is a great deal more counted thread work, both in white linen and in coloured silks, sometimes darned on net, and ranging from quite coarse to very fine, than we see in English language books. The large portrait collection at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum was also instructive, particularly in the German use of blackwork, which is often represented as a very English style of embroidery.

The two Tristan pieces I had come to see were interesting in that they both represented domestic work, rather than professional pieces. They were probably both made as table cloths, one in the fifteenth and one in the sixteenth century, and, featuring the theme of love, may have been considered appropriate for wedding gifts or parts of dowries. The surprise, however, was that the fifteenth century piece, which had been catalogued by Leonie von Wilcken, the German embroidery equivalent of Janet Arnold in the costuming world, was not, in fact, actually a Tristan and Iseult embroidery at all, but rather one which had borrowed heavily from that theme – it's an interesting experience to discover that the experts can make mistakes, too.

While in Nürnberg, I made a day trip to the nearby town of Regensburg, to see an embroidery known as the 'Medaillon Teppich' or medallion textile. This is a fourteenth century embroidery, in couched wools, which shows pairs of lovers within rondels, one of which is Tristan and Iseult. This is a brilliant and lively piece, in a very good state of preservation. The conservator at the museum was extremely helpful, and like most people in western Germany, spoke excellent English, and gave me large amounts of information on the textiles and also conducted me on a private tour of the textile collection, which included some fabulous tapestries from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

I made some very good friends in Nürnberg and was very sorry to have to leave at the end of a week to keep my appointments in Braunschweig (of which, more in the next installment). It's a city well worth a visit (and I haven't described the half of it) and the SCA people are wonderful.

Several people have asked me if I have photographs from this tour and if I can put them in the company newsletter or up on a web page. I do have quite a large collection of photographs, postcards and slides, but since most of them are produced by the museums who own copyright, I am not able to reproduce them. I also have some of my own photos, which I could reproduce, but the coloured format is unlikely to translate well to a photocopied newsletter. So, in order that you can see them, I propose to hold a collegium at some time, as part of a Worshipful Company of Broderers event, at which I will do a show and tell, and you can all see them. I'm not sure when that will be, except of course, like everything else 'after I finish my thesis'! Much of this information will also be available in the thesis itself, and once it is finished, I will investigate making copies for those who would be interested in reading it. Until then,

Keep stitching,

Bess

Contacts

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Guild Patron – Viscountess Keridwen the Mouse (Janelle Heron), 58 Redmyre Road, Strathfield 2135. (02) 9746 8865. jheron@comtech.com.au

Other Resources

West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild

Guild Mistress – Mistress Isela di Bari (Debra Cobb), PO Box 22, Lockwood, CA 93032, USA. (408) 385 3040. dcobb@MAIL.MEYERNET.COM

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Report from River Haven from Madylin de Mer

Metal Thread Embroidery workshop - River Haven on 21 April

Well, what a success!

With many trepidations I approached the teaching of this class. Sweaty palms, dry mouth (you know the sort of things): and those who attended were in much the same situation.

However, after looking at gorgeous piccys, and playing and examining all the different metal threads available, we set down to doing some basic work.

The response: "Why didn't anybody tell us that it was all couching?"

We then spent a very fun couple of hours working out Or Nue patterns and designs, and starting these (although not all in gold - one of the girls could only get some bronze coloured metal couching thread and so used it - it did look rather effective).

I haven't yet convinced anybody to do an Opus Anglicanum style piece, but I think that we have had a really good start with this. I had 8 in the class who did practical work, and a few others who just sat in for the theory side (different threads, etc.).

Now to persuade them to enter in the June Baronial A&S comp for Metal Thread embroidery, and then the Company couching comp, and if I can do that, I think that I'll be ahead of the game!

Results from the 12th Night Competition - Beading

Thank you everyone for such a fantastic response to the beading competition. We had 10 competition entries and various other beaded works on display.

The competition was judged by Mistress Bess Haddon of York, Mistress Myfanwy ferch Daffyd and Viscountess Keridwen the Mouse. There were two first prizes awarded to Contarina La Bianca for her Byzantine tunic, and to Aeron Lassair for the German Renaissance dress.

Well done everyone and I hope to see the interest and the standard maintained in the other competitions for the rest of the year.

Competitions

The next four competitions will go towards the Company of Broiderer's Championship. The points will be added up at 12th Night 2000 and the winner will be declared the Champion of the Company of Broiderers.

May Coronet

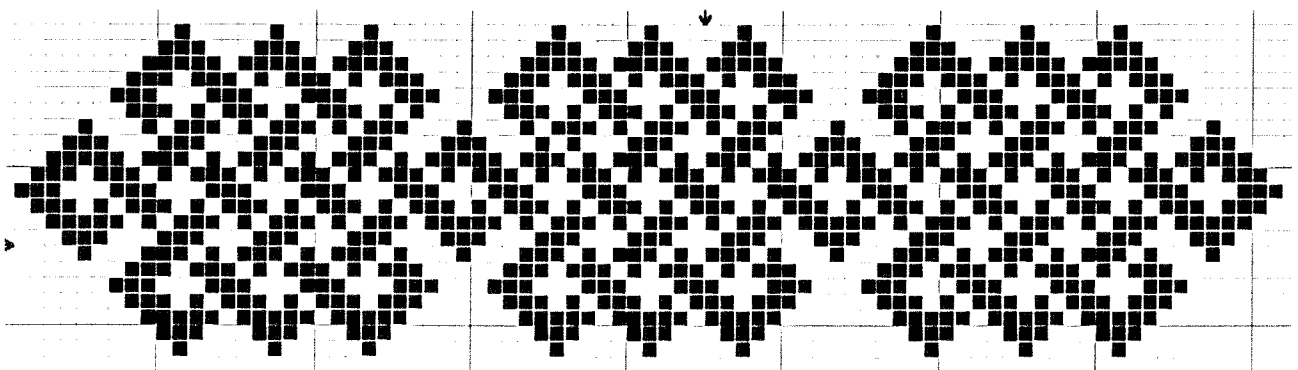
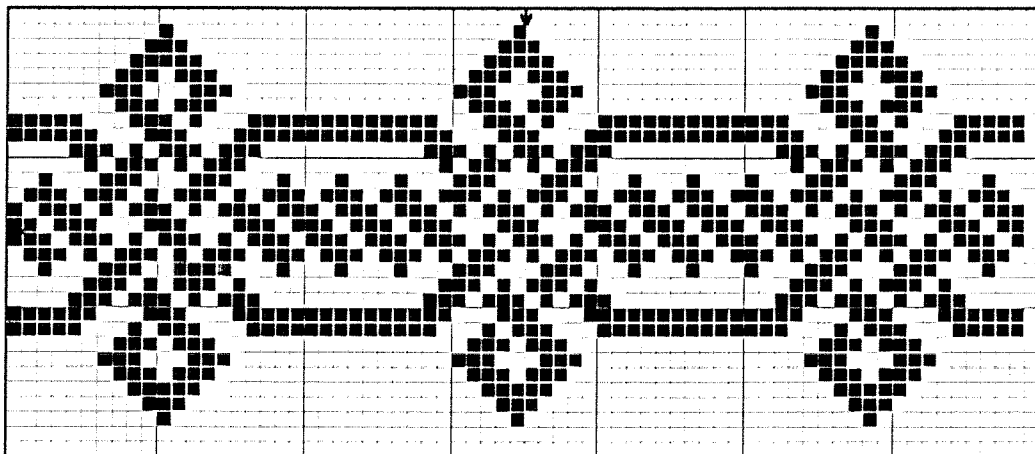
Embroidered pouches

Midwinter

Couching

Spring Coronet

Needlework using one of the following patterns



These pattern comes from “The True Perfection of Design by Giovanni Ostaus, In Venice 1567”. These patterns were redrawn by Susan J. Evans and put into a book published by Falconwood Press.

12th Night

Needleworked lace (filet lace, reticillia, punto in aria, not bobbin lace)



Note on competition entries

If you cannot get to a competition, don't know anyone who is going and do not wish to trust your precious work to the postal service (I know I'd be worried), we will accept photographs as entries to competitions.

If you choose this method, the judges can only mark what they can see. You will need very good close up pictures and possibly a picture of the back of the work, and one of the piece in use – ie a piece of costume being worn.

I recommend colour photocopies, as they show more details than I can get with my camera. Remember to tell the printer to use photographic mode rather than text mode. Text mode places more attention to the black portions of the work, since text is normally black on white. This will bring out the spaces in between the threads and stitches. This sometimes makes it easier to see the stitches themselves, but overall, it looks terrible. On photographic mode, the image is weighted towards making a better overall picture. You might want to submit both types of photocopies to give the most information.

When you enter a competition with photos or photocopies, you are in control of what the judges see, but make sure you give the judges enough to see. Also, since the judges cannot touch and feel the work, you should give extra information in your documentation – for example, give details about the weight and composition of the ground fabric.

Good luck and keep the competition entries coming.



New Judging Forms for Competitions

It was decided that the original judging form had too many categories on them and thus were hard to fill out. Therefore, in consultation with the Lochac Arts and Science Officer, the following judging form was devised and will be used for the next four competitions (this years championship). At 12th Night, we should discussion how well the new form worked and revise the categories if necessary.

To bring us into line with the Lochac A&S competition, the scoring is out of 50, broken up as follows. The intention is that the Lochac A&S will also use our scoring forms when they have a needlework related competition.

- 10 points doco
- 10 points use of sources
- 10 points technique
- 10 points use of materials
- 10 points presentation

Documentation: if no documentation is present, the item must score zero in this category. Good documentation should discuss the source(s) as well as merely present it. It should include information on the dating and provenance of the work, and should itself be properly sourced, i.e. it should indicate which books etc it is taken from.

Use of sources: These points are for the way in which the embroiderer has used the source material (i.e. the period pieces or documentation) in making the piece. This need not rely on the presence of documentation, but if there is none, may well depend on the knowledge of the judges in this field. This category will cover the level of 'authenticity' or period style of the piece. Points will be awarded for creative use of sources within period style.

Technique: These points will be awarded for the execution of the piece - i.e. how well the embroidery is done. The assessment of technique will be dependent on the style of the piece, and may also contain an assessment of the appropriateness of the technique in rendering the particular piece. (This will be more of an issue in general comps than those on a specific technique.)

Use of Materials: These points will be for the appropriate choice of materials for the style and purpose of the piece. Substitutions for period materials (e.g. on the grounds of cost or availability) should be justified in the documentation. These points will also take into account considerations of appropriateness of colour, weight of thread and type of ground fabric, both as they relate to period examples and to the overall consistency of the piece.

Presentation: This is a bit of a catchall category, enabling the judges to award points for such intangibles as style. Judges should also award more points to finished pieces, and to pieces which are for a purpose (the one exception would be samplers, but even then, they should be completed i.e. hemmed). This is to encourage embroidery for period uses rather than random bits of embroidery.

Guild Stats and Ranks

May Coronet is the fourth event for the Worshipful Company of Broiderers and there is a lot of interest around Lochac. The mailing list currently has 40 names on it, and I'm sure there are more people out there who haven't gotten in touch with me yet.

Ranking has occurred already, at 12th Night and at the Rowany Festival. Here are the current ranks. Congratulations to everyone, and thank you for presenting your work.

Master Broiderers

Mistress Bess Haddon of York

Mistress Vitoria del Fiore

Journeyman Broiderers

Apprentice Broiderers

Contarina la Bianca

Aeron Lasair

Alarice Beatrix von Thal

Bartolomeo Giancristoforo Agazzari

Contributions

If you have good ideas to share, or wish to write an article, draw pictures, share patterns, give a books review, or wish to contribute to this regular handout, please contact the guild patron, who is currently the compiler of this handout.

Also let me know if you have any ideas for competitions.

Thank you to Mistress Bess and to Madelin de Mer for their contributions to this handout.

West Kingdom and Lochac Arts and Sciences Competitions

Needleworkers should note that your work can also be submitted for Kingdom or Principality competitions. There are a few needlework related competitions coming up.

West Kingdom – A&S Tourney

- Needlework: Portraiture. Techniques and style should be appropriate for period chosen. Min 3"x3"

West Kingdom – October Crown

- Embroidery pre-1000AD

Lochac 12th Night

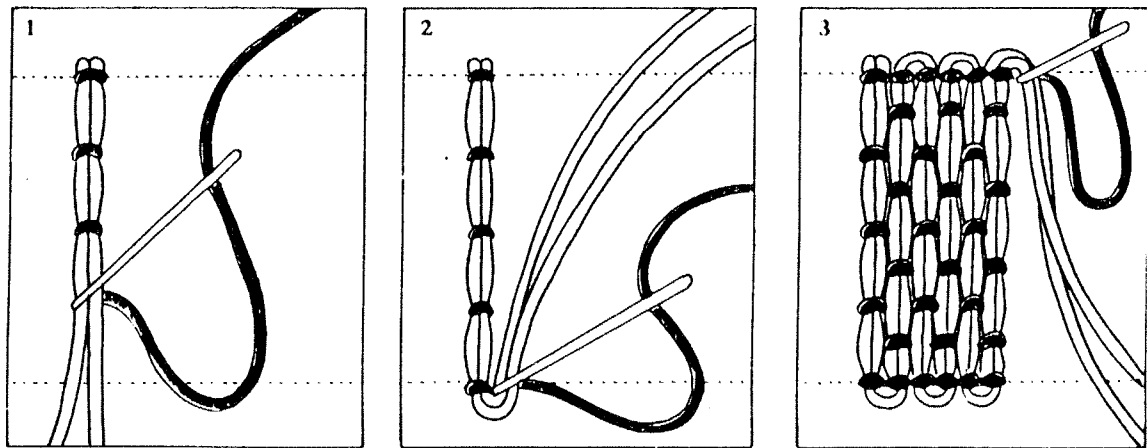
- Needlework: Blackwork handkerchief
- Trim: Lace (minimum of 6 inches)

Note –This competition is not restricted to needlemade lace. However if you do make needlelace, you can enter same piece work in the Principality competition and the Broderers competition.

The Technique of Couching

The term 'couching' comes from the French verb *coucher* meaning to lay, and couching is, essentially, the laying of one thread across the surface of a ground fabric, and securing it to the fabric by small stitches over it with another, or the same thread, known as the passing thread. This simple technique is used throughout the SCA period, and is varied to produce many different effects, depending on the types of threads used. Probably the best known embroidery of the Middle Ages, the Bayeux Tapestry is executed in a form of couching, known as laid and couched work, using wool. The fourteenth century Tristan embroideries from the convent at Wienhausen in northern Germany are also couched, and this technique was so common in German convents, that it became known as *Klosterstickerei*, or convent stitch. In the Elizabethan period, interlace patterns were often couched on clothing, frequently in gold or silver cord.

Couching is a relatively quick and easy form of embroidery ('quick' being a relative term in embroidery circles) and is an economical way of using precious threads, since almost the entirety of the couched thread is visible on the surface of the fabric – except at the beginning and end of the thread, none of it is hidden on the wrong side. It is also an effective technique for using metal threads, since they do not suffer abrasion from passing repeatedly through the fabric. For this reason, the majority of metal thread work in the medieval period used couching techniques, where the metal thread was secured with tiny silk stitches.



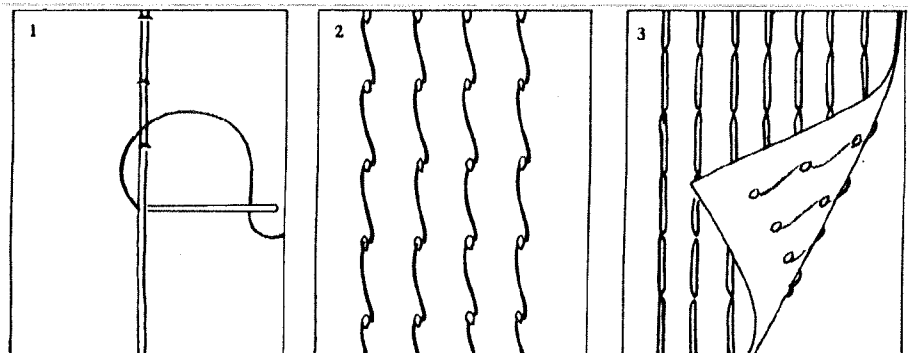
Simple Couching. The light coloured threads are the couched threads, and the dark coloured ones are the passing threads.

Some of the most glorious embroidery of this type is the English work of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, surviving today mostly in church vestments, known as *opus anglicanum* (Latin for 'English work'). In this style the figures were usually executed in very fine split stitches in coloured silks, but the backgrounds were formed in couched gold. As the style developed, embroiderers formed patterns with the anchoring threads, so that they too became part of the design, often in chevron or lozenge patterns.

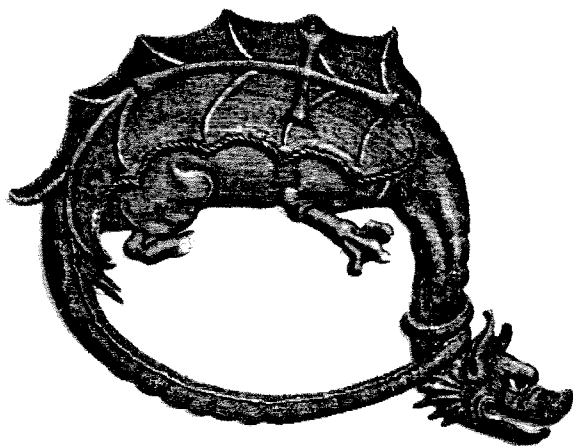
As *opus anglicanum* was frequently used on vestments which were designed to be worn, and since the use of the laid gold work tended to make them very stiff, a further refinement of the technique, known as 'underside couching', in order to counter

this effect. In underside couching, instead of using the passing thread merely to anchor the couched thread, it is also used to pull a small loop of it through to the back of the ground fabric, allowing the embroidery to remain supple. In order to achieve this it is necessary for the passing thread to go down through the same hole it came up.

Underside couching: secure laid thread on wrong side at top left. Bring couching thread out a little below, take it round laid thread and insert into same hole (1). Pull firmly taking a small amount of laid thread through to wrong side (2). Keep an even tension throughout. Continue to work like this covering the fabric surface as needed (3).

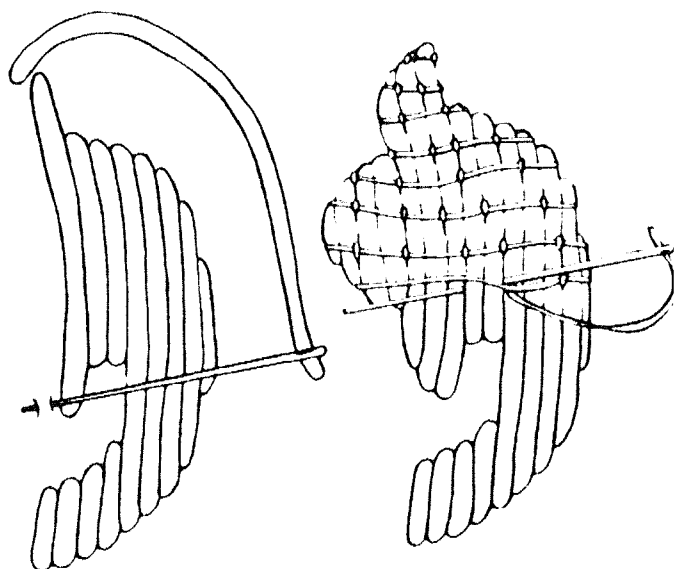


A later development of metal thread couching occurred in the fifteenth century. Instead of using the passing thread to form geometric patterns in a single colour, the colours of the passing threads were varied and used to provide colour and shading. This technique is known as *or nué* in French, meaning 'shaded gold' or *Lazurtechnik* in German. The general principle of *or nué* is that the closer the passing threads are to each other, the darker the effect. This technique is used to spectacular effect in the 15th century Burgundian vestments of the Golden Fleece, where the shading has been done with such skill that the figures almost appear to have been painted over a gold ground.



Or nué dragon, embroidered over padding to enhance the three dimensional effect.

At the more achievable end of the scale, however, is the woollen laid and couched work of the Bayeux Tapestry and the Tristan embroideries. In these textiles a relatively coarse wool has been used to cover large areas of ground fairly quickly. In the Bayeux Tapestry a two step technique has been used where the design elements are first covered with long stiches, which take a tiny stitch at their ends in order to turn round. A second pass of stiches are placed at right angles to these, some distance apart from each other, and then these are caught down with small passing stiches, giving a richly textured effect.



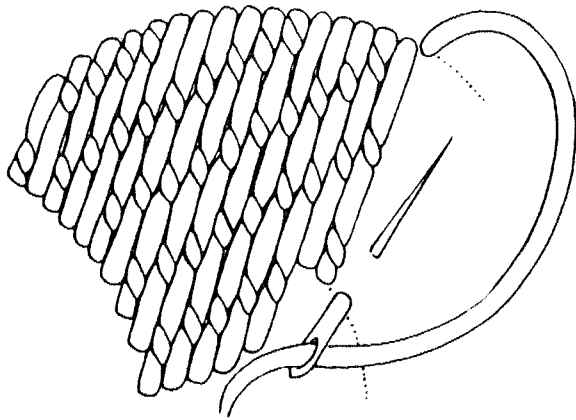
Bayeux Tapestry style couching.

A similar form of couching is used in Icelandic embroidery, where it is known as *refilsamr* or *refilsaumur*. In one Icelandic embroidery dating from between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the couching is used to fill in the background, while the pattern is left unstitched.



Example of voided refilsaumur from Iceland.

The *Klosterstickerei* work of the German Tristan embroideries is executed in a form of couching where each thread is tied down by the same thread in a second pass. First a long stitch is made and the embroiderer comes back to secure it. This is not as economical of thread as the Bayeux Tapestry style of couching, but the embroideries in many of the northern German convents use this style to completely cover large linen grounds in colourful woollen threads.



Convent stitch couching using a single thread.

The secret to success in executing couching of any kind is to keep your ground fabric taut on a frame or in a hoop. This is essential to keep the the couched thread from buckling or distorting. The passing threads must be close enough together to ensure that the couching thread is held close to the ground fabric. If your project is too large to fit into a hoop without having to be removed and re-situated, use a frame with rollers on the ends instead. This is particularly important in couching metal threads which will be damaged if the hoop squashes them.

Bibliography

Sarah Don, *Traditonal Embroidered Animals*, Sally Milner Publishing, Birchgrove, NSW, 1990. This has a not particularly brilliant demonstration of the Bayeux Technique.

Beryl Dean, *Ecclesiastical Embroidery*, Batsford, London, 1958. Very useful of *opus anglicanum* backgrounds.

Constance Howard (ed.), *Needlework School*, Quarto Publishing, Castle Hill, NSW, 1982. Some useful instructions.

Kay Staniland, *Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers*, British Museum Press, London, 1991. Fabulous pictures of various types of couched work, including various *opus anglicanum* copes, the Golden Fleece vestments (back cover) and a wonderful *or nué* dragon badge on p. 31.

Gay Swift, *The Batsford Encyclopaedia of Embroidery Techniques*, Batsford, London, 1984.

Elsa E. Gudjónsson, *Traditional Icelandic Embroidery*, Iceland Review, Reykjavík, 1982.

If undelivered, return to 58 Redmyre Road, Strathfield 2135