



Bayeux or Laid Work

By Acacia de Navarre

First of all the Bayeux tapestry is not a tapestry at all but an embroidery. A tapestry is a cloth made on a loom, with its pattern or design woven into it. The Bayeux is wool stitching on a linen ground.

The Bayeux is a significant piece of early period artwork and is without doubt one of the biggest measuring over 70 meters in length. Despite the size and preservation of the piece it is not considered to be an example of the 'high art' of embroidery. The Bayeux is a community work, in other words it is the result of a number of embroiders coming together to work on the piece. Some of them learners and some of them expert, the variations in the quality of the stitching is a good indicator of this.

What we do know about the tapestry was that it was made to the order of Bishop Odo, William the Conqueror's half brother to be hung in Odo's Cathedral at Bayeux. It was completed sometime around the 11th century and depicts the Norman Conquest of 1066. The original currently resides at Bayeux, Normandy, at the Centre Guillaume le Conquerant although there are a few full copies of the work most of which were done in the 20th century. The Bayeux depicts the Norman Conquest in a linear story line, with little or no explanation of events or characters. The story was obviously so well known to the people at the time that no embellishment was thought required, also remember there was a high degree of illiteracy in the population so words would also be useless to a fair percentage of the population of viewers as well as the embroiderers themselves. So although we can figure out many of the main players in the story some figures are completely unknown.

We know almost nothing about the stitchers or the designers of the Bayeux and there are a lot of suppositions but not many hard facts. The most plausible theories say that the centre design of the story was more than likely done by an illuminator from one of the local monasteries. The consistency of the design tends to point to one person doing the full work. David Bernstein in his book does comparison with illuminations to determine this. (See his book if you want to know more about the major design of the work)

The border images on the other hand vary considerably in both style and skill level and this tends to point to multiple designers. Jan Messent in her book on the Bayeux puts forward the theory that the work was stitched by nuns in the six nunneries in Wessex, other writers suppose that it was done at a school of Embroidery at Canterbury in Kent. Whoever the embroiderers were, it is agreed that they

designed and executed the border figures. This would account for the inconsistencies between the panels (its all one piece but made up 8 panels stitched together) and the variation in border size and decoration. Interestingly the Bayeux is told from the Norman point of view, but was more than likely stitched by English hands, which could account for some of the irreverent border figures.

I, personally, find the figures on the borders quite fascinating in themselves as they depict everything from daily life; hunting and fishing, fantasy beasts; astrological signs to Aesop's fables; there are also some pictorial comments about the characters in the main part of the embroidery. Some of the images are almost graffiti and are very anatomically correct (if somewhat exaggerated). I think that these border figures are the real link to the embroiderers of the day and would encourage anyone thinking about doing this type of work to check out the borders, as they will surprise you with their variety.

Materials

Embroidery Wools : I recommend Appleton or home spun thread, other Good brands include Gumnut and Kaalund – look for wool with a fairly low twist and not too bulky,

Avoid : DMC tapestry wools, too bulky and tightly twisted and also avoid knitting wools as they are spun in the wrong direction and will unravel on you as you embroider.

Fabric: The original Bayeux work was done on a course Linen with a 56 threads per inch count. It was composed of 8 panels joined together with each panel varying from 13.79m to 5.26m and with a width varying from 51-46cm. If you are planning a simple work or practice piece, one of the best fabrics to use is plain old calico. Choose calico with as dense a weight as you can.

Needles: as you will be working on fabric these need to be sharp (not tapestry) and with a fairly big eye or you will not be able to tread them. Look for large style crewel needles or small chenille needles. Work in this style can be done using bone needles, I have some bone needles done by a local artisan in the Frjoel group and they are fine enough for me to embroider in this style. If you wish to try them you can contact either Sandy or Luke at frojel@dcsi.net.au

Hint : having trouble treading the wool? I fold the thread in half and thread the loop through the hole; this prevents the eye catching on all the loose fibres.

Other Materials : You will need either a large hoop or frame to stretch your work out while working on it. It will need to be large enough that whatever design you are working on will fit over the whole frame. This is not a style where you can move the hoop back and forth over a shape while working on it.

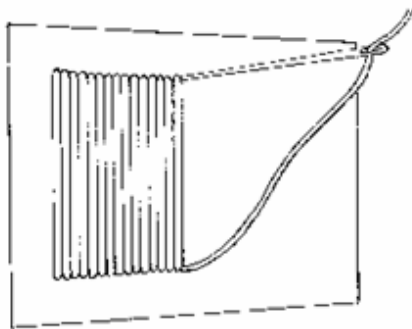
The Stitches

The entire Bayeux Tapestry is made up of two stitches and two stitches only; these are laid work and stem stitch.

Laid Work

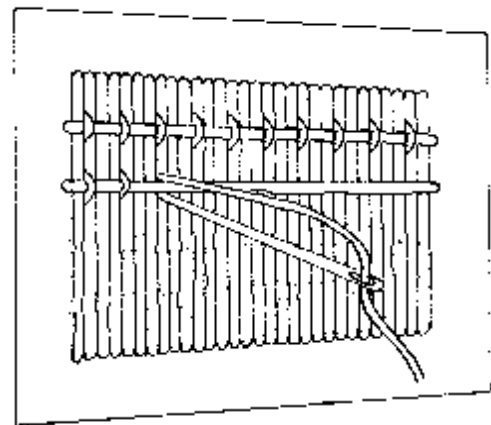
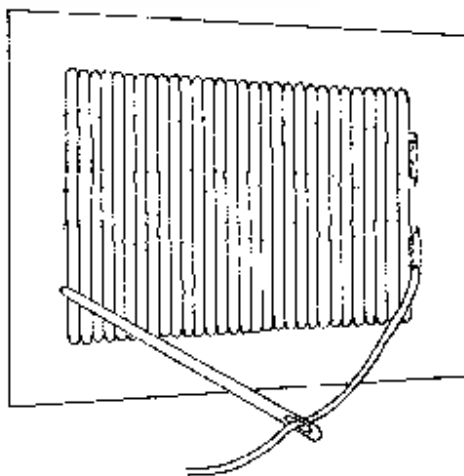
Laid work is the main filler stitch of the tapestry and is a very quick way to cover large area's with colour. There are three main steps to laid work.

First working across your shape, cover your area with very large stitches.



This is not satin stitch, it differs in that all the stitches must be on the front of your work, so that the back of the fabric barely shows anything but the outline of your shape.

Hint – to make my work more even I often do rows of guide stitches across my work first about 1 cm apart then go back and fill in the gaps. Remember also to overfill the shape to avoid gaps later as wool will compact down a lot once you couch it down.



The next step is to couch down the treads. At a right angle to your existing stitches, stitch over the whole shape (this is a passing thread), now couch your passing thread down so by the end of the row you have returned back to where you started. Now repeat approximately 1 – ½ cm apart until you cover the entire piece.

Hint – I will often do my couching stitches diagonally rather than straight up or down as this will secure some of the longer treads beneath the stitch and prevent gapping around the couching stitch.

Interesting fact: this style makes a resurgence in popularity around the 17th century where it is done in varicoloured linen threads.

Stem Stitch



This is used extensively in the Bayeux hangings and is the stitch used for outlines, writing and chain link on the armour.

Hint: I will often outline a shape after I have done the laid work as it does give a neater line. Remember also that you can stitch right over the laid work so you can fill in the colour and then add the detail afterwards using stem stitch.

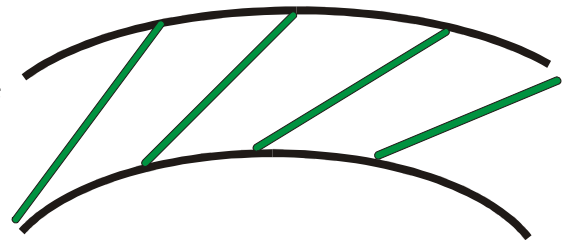
Note: Knotting your thread - it is almost impossible to do laid work without a knot to start your thread. Knots were used on the Bayeux and the back of the work is not that neat. In places where they used different threads close to each other (like alternate colours for different letters of words) they would just pass the thread through the back. So don't worry about the back of the work too much.

Curves

One question which I have been asked a lot is how do you do curves in Laid work. As I have not seen the original except in photos what I am about to explain is supposition, but it works for me and gives me an effect close to what I can see in photo's of the original. Curves are very common in the Bayeux tapestry and the designer seem to take great delight in exaggerated stylised trees that are chiefly composed of curved lines. So if you are attempting this style you will need to master curves.

Step 1

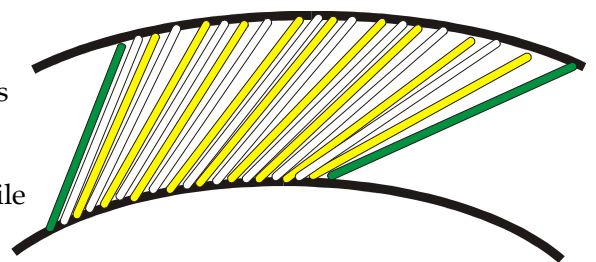
Lay down your guide stitches so that you have a direction of the flow of the curve.



Step 2

Now that you have your guides, fill in the gaps with stitches following the line of the guides.

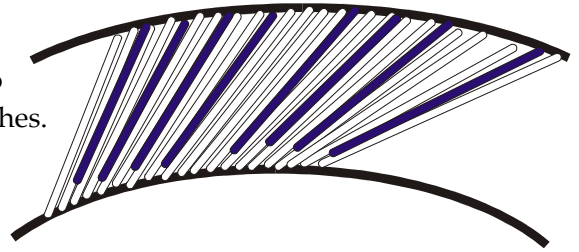
You will soon find that the inner circle fills up quickly while the outer circle still has gaps, if you continue to fill in at this stage then your work will become uneven with bulk forming on the inner circle side.



Step 3

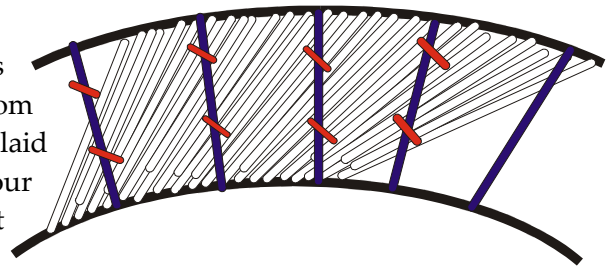
When you do your next series of stitches do not go fully to the edge of your work, but fill in the gaps with shorter stitches. This will reduce the bulk on the inner circle side.

Hint: if you have to do a number of shorter stitches in one spot it can become noticeable by an obvious indent showing in your work. You can hide this by stitching a long stitch (from edge to edge) right over the top of your indent.



Step 4

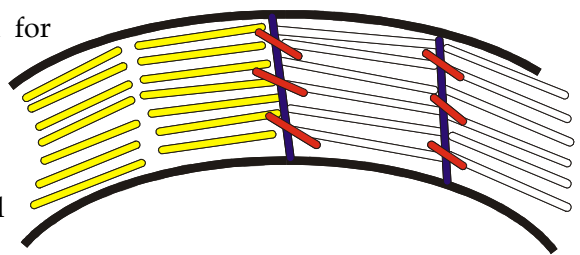
The last step is to couch down your treads, to do this correctly your couching threads should be radiating out from the circle like sun rays, couch them down as in normal laid work. The passing stitches will not be at right angles to your laid stitches but in curves this will not affect your work at all



Alternate Method

Jan Messent in her book suggests an alternate method for curves, I don't personally agree with this style but if you are having difficulty with the other method then this might be an easier way of doing it.

In Jan's method you lay down a series of short parallel stitches in the direction of the curve. These are only about 1 centimetre in length (the distance that would normally be between your passing threads)



Now with your passing thread you cover the gaps between the series of stitches and couch down as normal.

Finishing your Piece

It is worth remembering that wool has a natural elasticity. What this means is that it will always try and go back to the shape it was, rather than the shape you want it to be. What does this mean for laid work? When you first take the finished piece out of the frame it will look fine but within hours you will find the work shrivelling up. The bigger the piece and the longer the stitches the more pronounced this effect will be. – DON'T PANIC!!! It can be fixed. In my hanging each panel (about 30 cm squared) almost halved in size after being taken out of the hoop.

This is normal and is part of the natural elasticity of wool trying to assume its previous shape. What you will need to do is to block the piece, this is the same process used for jumpers and tapestries. What does it involve? First you have to launder the embroidery, wash as you would for any woollen piece – not in hot water (warm or tepid) and do not agitate too much (squeeze not scrub). While the piece is still wet it will need to be stretched out and kept stretched while drying. If this were a

tapestry then it would be pegged to a frame, but if you are doing a big wall hanging then you need to look for ways to weight the work while it is drying to keep it stretched.

Yes you can iron the piece, that also helps and if you are using linen then you will need to have the steam on, otherwise it will not get the creases out. Be careful with the steam on the wool as too much will make it shrink. One suggestion is put your piece in the freezer before you iron it as the creases will come out easier on the linen.

Lastly for large wall hangings it is good to let the piece hang as much as possible, I have put some curtain weights at the bottom of my work while it is still settling into shape which later I will remove once the wool has stopped shrivelling.

Sources for Designs

Unfortunately not many examples of laid work have survived, but we do know that they did exist. For example in the "Liber Eliensis", a 10th-century account about the life at Ely, there is a mention of a work The section is as follows:

"This man's [Ealdorman Byrhtnoth] wife, indeed, the Lady Aelflaed by name, at the time when her husband was killed and buried, gave to this church [of Ely] an estate at Rettendon, which came from her marriage-portion, and land at Soham, which is by a mere adjoining Ely, and Ditton, and a hide at Cheveley, and a golden torc, and a hanging woven upon and embroidered with the deeds of her husband, in memory of his probity." (unpublished translation by Janet Fairweather)



Flag of War - c. 962, embroidery on silk, height 13". Cathedral treasury, Cologne

The centre of this fabric shows the victorious Son of God holding a cross, flanked by Sol and Luna, symbols of the divine order. Sol is the symbol of the Supreme Godhead or Christ; Luna is the sign of all Creation dependent on God and radiant in the light of Him or of the Virgin. In the two upper corners are the archangels Michael and Gabriel and below, two saints, so that together the figures form the usual symbolic fivefold composition. Count Ragenard, named in the inscription, kneels at the feet of Christ in an attitude of worship. The lady who made it is also named: "Gerberga me fecit" (Backes & Dolling, 1969:198).

Stole and Maniple of St Cuthbert, 909-16

Figures of Peter the Deacon or St John the Baptist and St. Sixtus from the V&A museum (Figure of Peter the Deacon – right). This is a variation of laid work done with the gold threads making up the laid work and the silk passing thread creating the pattern. An excellent picture of this can be found in the King & Levey book (1993).



Was Bayeux Work done on Clothes?



This is not an easy one to answer, as there is very little surviving clothing from this time and even fewer examples of embroidery. So what do we know? We do know that there was embroidery on clothing; the earliest Anglo-Saxon surviving piece is a sacred piece of work - the chasuble of SS. Harlindis and Relindis (now in Belgium) that was embroidered in the mid 9th Century. It shows interlacing of birds and animals in medallions worked in silk and silver-gilt thread. We also know that England had a thriving wool textile industry as early as the roman period, but we do not have any surviving examples of secular embroidered clothing in England.

To find examples of secular work we need to look at surviving Viking work which we have a few late 10th century examples. The most famous surviving example is the Mammen finds in Denmark. A wool twill cloak and another garment with several different motifs embroidered in stem stitch (To the right is a picture of the cloak fragment). I would recommend going to the Viking

Answer Lady website to see a reconstruction of the cloak and garment.

Also in a 10th century Viking grave in Valsgarde there are some examples of silver-thread embroidery on silk and three fragments surface couched embroideries - two onto samite and one onto silk twill. There is also evidence of wool on wool stem stitch as well as silk on silk embroidery in 10th century graves in Birka (Sweden) belonging to both men and women. I would recommend visiting Dóra Shartooth's web page for a detailed listing of these items.

Want to do an Original Work?

It is worth remembering that throughout SCA "period" designers worked across mediums and would work not only on embroidery designs but also calligraphy, frescos, stained glass etc. If you are trying to design an original piece first determine the time period that you wish to work. Look for surviving embroidery pieces, what materials did they use, stitches, etc. Then explore contemporary pieces such as calligraphies, wood and stonework, jewellery, stained glasswork and other art forms.

Things to look for include colour choices and schemes, common themes or patterns or even popular stories or myths. The Bayeux border also points to some sources for designs like beasteries, Aesops fables and events of daily life like fishing, hunting, bear baiting, ploughing, to name a few that are depicted. Look to some of the stories or events of the time for inspiration.

Keep also in mind the country of origin of the artwork and the embroidery style, as just because laid work was done in England in the 10th century does not guarantee that it was done in Germany in the same era. In fact in this instance the stitch would more likely have been convent work.

Lastly as so many embroidery pieces have been lost over time, it is worth reading up on some of the surviving books and paperwork for the time period that you have chosen. A rich source of reference information survives in ship manifests, household accounts, wills, guild charters and church inventories. These references can point to ways in which the embroidery was used and the type of materials used. For example commissions for cushions, wall hangings, horse trappings or clothing, descriptions of works in manifests and accounts of jewels, silk etc can give you pointers about an embroidery which no longer exists as is show in the "Liber Eliensis" reference above.

There is a wealth of art and references that can assist you in your endeavours.

Most Importantly – HAVE FUN!

Websites to visit

Piccys of the Full Bayeux tapestry

<http://www.sjolander.com/viking/museum/bt/bt.htm>

Master Richard Wymarc's page

<http://wymarc.com>.

Viking Answer Lady

<http://www.vikinganswerlady.org/>

(Follow the link to daily life - Viking clothing ornamentation)

Póra Shartooth's webpage

<http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikembroid.html>

(This site includes an article on Viking Embroidery Stitches and Motifs including information on rare finds)

Secrets Of The Norman Invasion by Nick Austin

<http://www.cablenet.net/pages/book/>

(Insight to the story depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry)

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Wall Hanging embroidered in Bayeux Style by the Author (1.3m x 1/3m)