



**TWO
EMBROIDERED
PANELS IN THE
OPUS
ANGLICANUM
STYLE**

**GULF WARS
ARTS & SCIENCES
COMPETITION**

MARCH 14, 2008



DESCRIPTION OF ITEM TO BE JUDGED:

Two embroidered panels in the Opus Anglicanum style, using the split stitch technique.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Opus Anglicanum, meaning *English Work* in Latin, was not an embroidery stitch; rather, it was a descriptive applied to a style of embroideries created during the 13th and 14th centuries. The skilled execution, use of shading and detail, and the lifelike expression of the figures set it apart from earlier embroidery techniques.

Opus Anglicanum quickly became popular and the style was copied throughout Europe. The technique was most particularly prized for use in ecclesiastical (church) works such as capes, altar frontals, and stoles. Wilson states, "Only the best that the hand of man could form would be suitable for use in the house of God."¹ However, the style was also used to create secular garments and accessories such as purses and wall hangings. Probably because the Church used their embroidered works only during religious observances and took care to preserve their items, there are more surviving extant works of an ecclesiastical nature as opposed to secular items.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The panels were designed to be appliquéd to a velvet background and used as a vigil book cover for a friend's peerage ceremony. The commercially purchased journal is approximately 8" by 6", and this dictated the design size.



Illumination of Herr Wachsmut von Mühlhausen, from the Manesse Codex

The inspiration for the embroidered panels came from an illuminated manuscript known as the *Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift*, or the Manesse Codex. The Codex was completed in Zurich in the early 14th century, at a time when Opus Anglicanum embroidery was at its zenith. The Codex was commissioned for the Manesse family and contains 137 illuminations that accompany the texts of love poetry. It is currently housed in the Heidelberg Museum.

I wished to make the embroidered panels serve as a personal representation of my friend. In my search through the illuminations, I found several elements to incorporate into my design.

From the first illumination, I took the lady on horseback, as my friend is an accomplished equestrian. As my friend is also a musician, I took the psaltery from the second illumination. From the third illumination, I took the fox, as my friend's device contains a fox.

From all three, I took the idea for the block border, but I used the colors of green and gold, as her device contains those colors. To add a bit of design

interest, I decided to have the border of each picture form an arch, as was done in a number of the Manesse Codex illuminations. Arches are also used as design motifs in the Orphrey Fragment, a piece of ecclesiastical embroidery from the 15th century, housed in the National Gallery, and the John of Thanet Panel, another Opus Anglicanum work from the early 14th century, now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In period, methods of transferring patterns to fabric prior to embroidering varied. Staniland states: "Production of these repetitive motifs was aided by tracing the design onto paper, pricking the outline, and then transferring the design onto cloth any number of times by pouncing with powdered chalk, pumice or charcoal."²

As I wanted the finished piece to have the look of the illuminations upon which the design was based, I commissioned



Fox, detail from the Manesse Codex

the drawing and painting of the design. The design was painted onto the ground by Her Ladyship Teleri of Gwynedd, Barony of Nordwache, Kingdom of Caid. The commissioning of an artist to render the design for an embroiderer is well documented. Staniland describes the practice by saying:

"The work of some of the designers of embroideries can be seen on specimens where the stitching has worn away or the dyes have rotted the embroidery silks themselves. These reveal how careful was the preparatory design drawn up by the artist, providing embroiders with detailed guidance. The latter, of course, still had to interpret the intentions and style of the artist, and this they will have learned to do during the years of their apprenticeship. Even the details of the patterned grounds of the couched gold thread were drawn in for the embroiderers, though worn embroideries reveal that on occasion these were ignored."²

In most cases I stayed close to the original design. However, instead of depicting the lady on a grey horse, I chose to depict the lady on her own mount, Bansidhe (pronounced Banshee).

EMBROIDERY TECHNIQUE

Many larger Opus Anglicanum pieces of the time used the split stitch to embroider figures. Underside couching (metal thread couched with a silk thread) was used for filling in the background of the pieces. However, underside couching was considered inappropriate for smaller pieces, due to the inability to organize the couching into either a chevron or diaper pattern. As this was a smaller piece, I utilized the split stitch throughout.



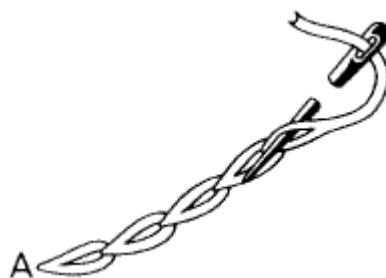
Musician, detail from the Manesse Codex



Bansidhe

The split stitch itself is relatively easy to learn. However, the multitude of stitches needed to cover the design does make it relatively painstaking. Both panels required almost four months of work, approximately three hours per day. In addition, Opus Anglicanum work requires pre-planning the direction and flow of the stitches. This is critical, as this is what gives the embroidery its texture and brings the details to life. When light hits the work, it has almost a three-dimensional aspect, which led to the technique's popularity. It has the appearance of being painted with a needle.

To Work Split Stitch - Bring the needle through at A and, following the line to be covered, take a small back stitch so that the needle comes up through the working thread, as shown in the diagram. Generally, it is easiest to work this as a two step stitch by making a small stitch, then bringing the needle up through the thread at the half way point.³



To make some of the figures more prominent, I used the same stitch, but outlined the figures in black. In the case of the faces, hands, and veils, I used a slightly darker shade of white. An example of an Opus Anglicanum piece worked almost entirely in split stitch, with minimal couching, is the Syon Cope from the Syon Abbey in Middlesex, England, circa 1300.

The reverse side of embroidery was not always neat in period. However, when appliquéing an item to a background, if the finished item is not neat, the work could appear lumpy and misshapen. Special care was taken with these pieces to avoid that possibility. The reverse sides have been left exposed so that the overall technique may be viewed.

MATERIALS USED TO CREATE THE EMBROIDERY

Ground: Linen, velvet and silk were the most commonly used ground fabrics for embroideries during period. This design was embroidered onto two layers of linen. Several sources, including Staniland, Barrett, Swift, and d'Navarre, state that coarse linen would have been used as the bottom layer and fine linen for the top layer. At the time I purchased my embroidery linen, I was only able to purchase one grade of linen locally. While I could have ordered differing grades of linen from online sources, I would not have been able to purchase less than a yard of each. Needing only a small amount, I used two layers of medium-weight fabric linen that I was able to purchase locally. While I do not have access to extant pieces, I am unable to see any appreciable difference in the finished work from the photographs accessible online.

Thread: Silk thread was often used in creating Opus Anglicanum work. I also utilized silk threads, but purchased several different types of silk 12-ply floss. Brands used included Splendor, Needlepoint Silk Inc., Silk Mori by Kreinik, and Soie Cristalle by Caron. Most needlework shops in my area have limited supplies of silk thread; hence there was the necessity to purchase several different brands.

Had I access to a wide range of colors in one brand, I would have utilized only one to achieve a more consistent look. Some brands had a difference in consistency: For example, the Splendor tends to be a bit coarser than the others. I could have purchased silk threads online, but I felt it was important to be able to see the threads in person, to evaluate differences in the

shades of the silk. For example, look closely at the veils and the sleeves in the garments on both ladies. There are two shades of white silk thread used in the veils and two shades of blue for the sleeves. The difference is quite subtle, but again, important to this type of work.

The skeins of silk were separated into single strands to complete the work. Using a single strand of thread made the technique more time-consuming, but also allowed for finer details in these smaller pieces.



The Syon Cope from the Victoria and Albert Museum

Frame: Paintings of medieval embroiderers at work show the ground fabric stretched on wooden frames, held to the frame with thread. This would likely have been a strong linen thread or even cord. Staniland and Barrett both refer to the similar use of frames and technique.

I originally began with my piece sewn to a wooden frame in a similar manner. However, as I began to work the piece, the linen continued to stretch to the extent that the piece was not held taut and became unworkable. I am uncertain how medieval embroiderers overcame this obstacle. Perhaps they continued to tighten the linen throughout the embroidery process; perhaps the use of coarser and finer linen made this unnecessary. However, in the interests of maintaining tautness to the fabric and obtaining the best possible finished piece, I converted to a modern plastic frame that allowed me to easily tighten the pieces as they were worked.

LESSONS LEARNED

This was my first attempt at embroidery in the Opus Anglicanum style. As with many artistic attempts, there are things that I would do differently to improve the finished piece.

First, I would have changed the size of the piece. Making the piece as a book cover forced constraints on the detail I was able to achieve. This can be seen most clearly in the faces of both ladies. Opus Anglicanum was famous for detailed circular work that created a liveliness of expression on the faces depicted. I also would also have added more variety of movement in the line of travel with the stitches, particularly in the ladies' dresses, for a better play of light and texture.

Secondly, I would have attempted to find a flat silk, rather than twisted silk thread. Flat silk is a beautiful, untwisted silk with a lustrous, satiny finish. I was unable to find flat silk in any local embroidery shops, but ordering a color sample of the silks threads prior to ordering the

silk thread is a viable alternative that I will explore in the future.

Finally, rather than using a flat wooden frame and stitching the fabric to the frame, in the future I will use the scroll frame displayed today. I would use thread to fasten the sides to the side of the scroll frame. This would allow me to tighten the ground while working without having to revert to a modern plastic frame.

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