

# **OR NUÉ Technique on Canvas**

*By Jane D. Zimmerman, August 2008*

*(Some of the following material was also used in the Chapter on "The Traditional Technique of Or Nue". Historically this technique was never used on a fabric of openweave but use of a counted ground, such as canvas, is possible with certain compromises.)*

In recent decades there has been a revival of interest in goldwork techniques, including that of the 15th-century technique of Or Nué, or nuance on gold. In this most spectacular form of western goldwork, silver-gilt (gold) threads in pairs are laid across the surface of linen ground fabric and the metal held down ("couched") with polychrome silks. The design is created by the couching stitches, whose color and density create the characteristic subtle shading and illusion of dimension in these exquisite embroideries, which can be found in many museum collections throughout Europe. (Refer to my website at [www.janezimmerman.com](http://www.janezimmerman.com)—**Needlework History, History of Medieval Or Nué Embroidery** for the historical development of this embroidery technique.)

It is important not to confuse Or nué with the technique of pattern couching (in which a small motif, usually geometric in nature, is used repeatedly over a solid surface of the laid metal thread). While pattern couching (and other techniques such as the use of padded cording, for example) can be incorporated into a piece of or nué, the main focus of the work is always on the use of detailed, shaded figurative motifs.

## **MATERIALS**

### **Metals:**

Originally this work was executed using a foundation of double-strand very fine, smooth silver-gilt passing thread. The key requirement in choosing your metal foundation thread is that, when laid in the mandatory double strand, the metal will neither overcrowd the space it is allotted nor leave a gap between the double strand rows.

There are only a few metal threads currently on the market that will create the traditional appearance of or nué when using a canvas ground. The count of the mesh dictates the diameter of the metal thread that can be used—Kreinik Braid #4 for #23 congress cloth and Kreinik Braid #8 for #18 mono canvas. I have not found any other metal or metallic thread on the market today that properly fits these popular sizes of canvas.

The tubular braid (#4 and #8) unravels rather easily at the free end in the eye of the needle. You can minimize the raveling by coating the end of the braid with a small amount Fray Check after the needle is threaded. Be sure to allow this coating to dry before you begin stitching.

### **Silk Thread:**

The weight of the silk floss in relation to the weight of the metal thread is critical. Some areas of the design will have solidly-couched areas while others may have spaced stitches that form a background and expose a maximum of gold (for example, simple brick pattern couching). If the silk thread is too heavy, it will substantially increase the diameter of the double-strand metal where the silk is used solidly and therefore make it impossible for subsequent rows of couched metal to fit tightly next to each other and be perfectly straight across the canvas.

However, since couching stitches have to be positioned in relation to the holes in the canvas, it is necessary to use a weight of silk that will give full coverage of the metal between each stitch. This coverage requirement means the many plies of silk used must be handled very carefully. Please use a laying tool and make sure that the 3 or 4 plies used are positioned side-by-side over the metal threads.

If there is to be background area of exposed metal, select a couching thread that is very fine so that it appears almost “invisible.” This should be a silk sewing or couching thread in a color to match the metal. To provide some additional durability and control and to minimize knotting, this special silk thread should be rubbed over beeswax at least twice. Before threading the waxed thread, rub your fingers down the thread to remove excess wax and to melt the remaining wax well into the thread itself. This is the only silk thread which can be waxed. A fine metal, such as Japan #1, may be used instead of silk couching thread but it is not waxed. This tambour thread is harder with which to work than silk couching but it offers maximum reflection to the metal foundation.

### **Ground Fabric:**

The canvas must be mounted very tightly onto a stretcher bar frame and kept under firm tension at all times. Draw the outline of your design on the canvas, then draw in the shaded effects using indelible marking pens or fabric paints. Instead of coloring the canvas, some stitchers are able to stitch from a colored and shaded paper drawing of the design. If you choose this approach, at least paint the design area on the canvas in a color to match the metal. (If a slight amount of canvas happens to be exposed here and there it will barely be noticeable if the canvas is not of a stark contrasting color, such as white.)

### **Colors:**

It is important that colors of your silk threads offer a good contrast to the color of the metal selected. While the changes in values within the silk families can be subtle, and the color chosen for the background stitching can be very subdued (to the point of matching the metal thread), the or nué technique requires medium to dark values in the silk threads, unless, of course, a dark value is used for the metal. Under most circumstances pale values will simply get lost in the field of metal.



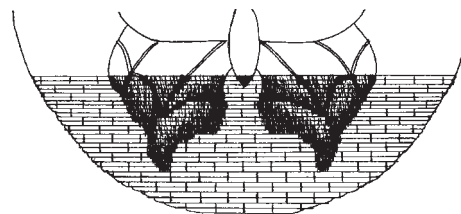
*I used white silk for the flower on a field of Japan gold in this small design executed in the traditional manner on a tight-weave linen. The white stitches are barely visible with some light angles.*

### **Design:**

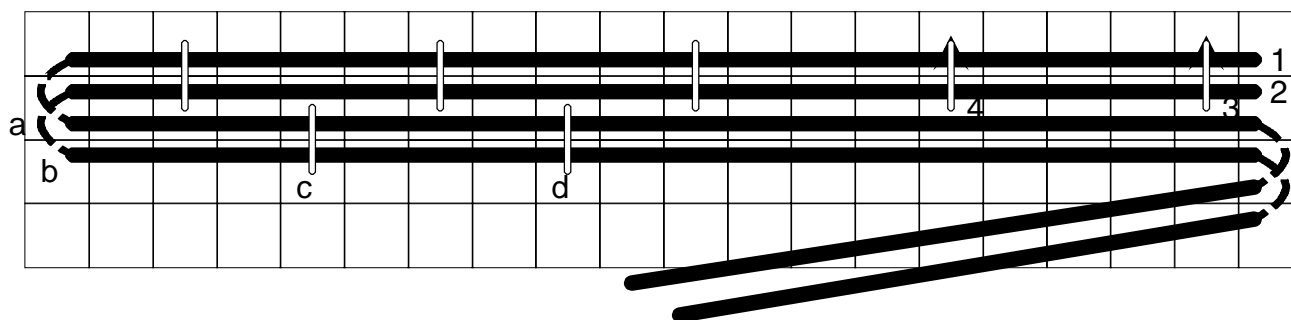
Or nué requires a figurative/pictorial design in which fine details, shadows and the illusion of depth are important. There are literally endless possibilities! Try birds, fanciful insects, flowers, landscapes, etc. The more shading that is necessary, the more impact the finished piece of work will have on the viewer. This shaded metal thread technique is sometimes referred to as needle-painting. Any pictorial painted canvas or a counted cross stitch design is most suitable. (For the cross stitch design, use a couching stitch for each cross—the color selection has already been made for you in addition to the complete design, so the adaptation couldn't be easier.)

## WORK HINTS

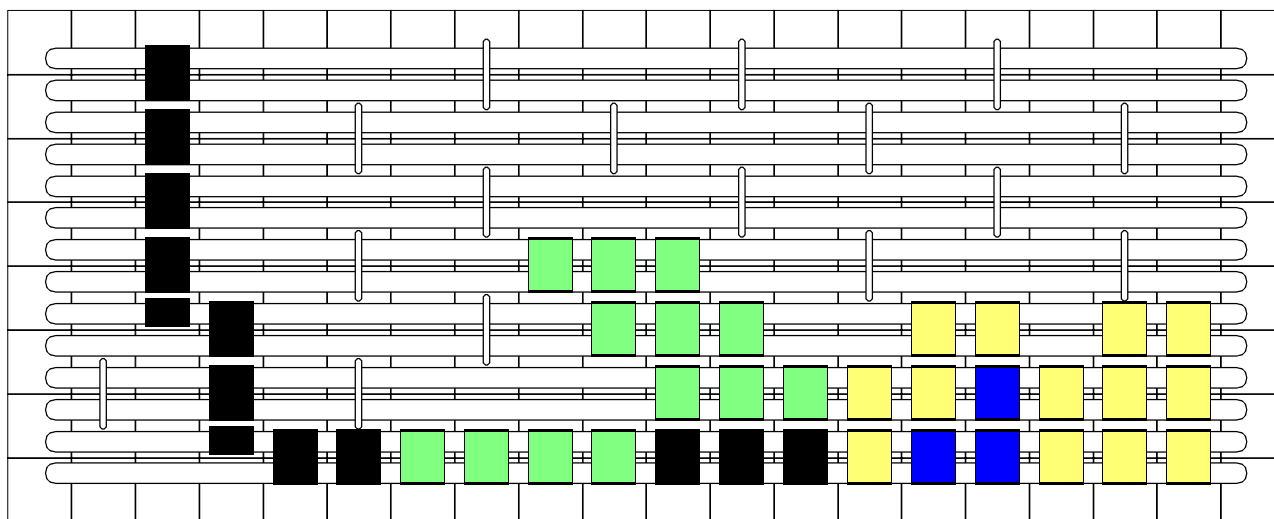
- It appears that the historical work was filled from the bottom of the design upwards and this is the approach I recommend. As long as the design is clearly drawn and colored on the ground fabric working from bottom-to-top is no different than working from the top down. However, if the filling is worked from top-down, the many needles required are always hanging in the area that you are filling—a tedious situation. Filling from the bottom-up allows the needles of different colors of thread to dangle in a natural position (downward) and not obscure your vision as the filling grows.



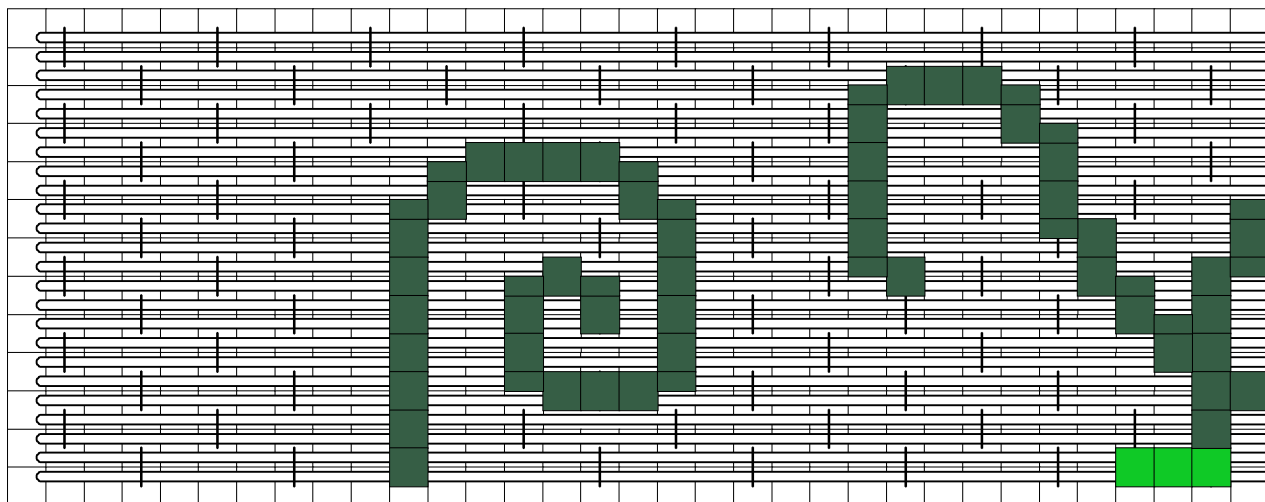
- Since most of the silk couching stitches must fall directly underneath each other, the metal foundation must be arranged so that these stitches are executed over a single canvas thread. For such to be possible, a double strand of metallic must be used, with one strand falling above a horizontal canvas thread and one below it as illustrated below. (In this method of solid filling, the second strand of metal of one row and the first strand of the next row share a common canvas hole.)
- Execute the metal foundation in a “laid” manner—i.e. the strands are brought up to begin a new foundation row on the same side of the work as the previous foundation row was completed, as illustrated below.



*Couching laid metallic foundation with “invisible” stitches of fine gold metallic, executed in a bricking pattern.*



*Example of both “invisible” background couching and multicolor silk-floss couching as a design is developed. Note the use of “half-stitch” couching on the left.*



- All couching stitches, regardless of their spacing, must be kept at perfect right angles to the metal, regardless of the actual angles of the lines being followed in the design. To produce a softer curve, it is possible to couch over only one strand of metal, as shown above, but this technique must be used so sparingly that it is not noticeable to any but the expert eye.

*This "Christmas Bells" project was executed on #18 gray mono canvas with Japan silver #1 and 4 ply Needlepoint Inc. silk floss over a field of Japan silver #8 braid. The gaps between rows in the background area was due to the pinching of the metal with the fine metallic couching stitches.*



- The tension of the couching stitches in areas where most of the metal is exposed is critical. If the stitches are too tight, the metal thread will be pinched.
- Working on canvas does not allow the subtlety of shading possible with traditional or nué in which spacing of the stitches has much flexibility and can be placed with random irregularity. With canvas you either use the canvas hole adjacent to the last stitch or you do not! While it is not done intentionally, if the side-by-side couching stitches are not laid perfectly there will be an occasional "flicker" of metal sneaking through. This can be most attractive so just let it happen.
- To create some subtlety in shading as you change from one value to another, use 1 ply of the new value in the needle, and then two plies, ending with the full number of plies of the new value. This "blending" will give a random appearance of color variation, at least from a distance.
- The traditional or nué technique requires that the double-strand rows fit tightly against each other, allowing no exposure of ground fabric. In the areas where the couching stitches are dense, it is difficult to keep the rows straight—i.e. the thickness of the silk thread makes the diameter of the metal increase to the point that it is impossible to snug the metal of one row up against the metal of the

preceding row. To get around this problem, I suggest you intentionally "nip" the needle into the stitches of the preceding row in these dense areas. This is a simple process because the tubular braid is hollow, which allows it to be compressed with relative ease and without damage.

- At least one needle for each color of thread is required to be on the project at one time. If the distance between the location where a particular color is used is considerable, I suggest you use more than one needle of that color. (Ever knit argyle socks?)

*This 3½" design of traditional or nué on a tight-weave linen ground, was worked with Japan gold #10 with both gold silk sewing thread for the "invisible" background couching and 1 strand of Zwicky silk floss in a limited variety of colors. It was necessary to maintain four needles of the medium-dark red, two of the medium red, two of the medium teal, two of the brown, two of the green and two of the background couching silk. Only the dark teal was used in areas a close distance from each other so that only one needle was necessary. Just imagine the number of dangling threads one would have with a large design and/or an extensive number of hues and values!*

*Note that in a design this small one could use a single needle of many of the colors and just jump back and forth on the back of the work for every use of that color on a row. However, this means that the thread is quickly exhausted—most needleworkers do not like threading needles and tying on and off. That is the trade-off to using a multitude of needles.*



- Plan carefully as you stitch. Planning the placement of each stitch may seem tedious, but the importance of this contemplation cannot be stressed enough. Ripping is very tedious and some types of metal threads can be damaged in the process.

- You MUST complete all couching on a row before proceeding to the next row. However, within the row you can work your stitches in any sequence—jump around at will. A good hint is to stabilize the double strand of metal with a few spaced stitches across the row before you begin the dense couching.

I hadn't realized I had a "butterfly" design period!) This 4" by 5" design was worked on #23 gray congress cloth with Japan silver braid #4, gray sewing thread and 3 ply Zwicky silk floss. If your design is of a good size and you use this fine mesh, an attractive amount of shading is possible.

If you find a fine metal that can be passed repeatedly through the canvas at the edges without being damaged, try silk gauze with one ply of fine silk floss, such as Vikki Clayton's silk at [handdyedfiberworks.com](http://handdyedfiberworks.com). (Note that her silk is marvelous and the color selection will accommodate anyone's "comfort zone".



- **Examine your progress frequently**—move away from the work and change the angle of the light playing off of it.