

Traditional Technique of OR NUÉ

By Jane D. Zimmerman, August 2008

In recent decades there has been a revival of interest in metal thread embroidery techniques, including that of the 15th-century Or Nué, or *nuance on gold*. In this most spectacular form of Western metalwork, silver-gilt (gold) threads in pairs are laid across the surface of linen ground fabric and the metal is 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. (Refer to my website at www.janezimmerman.com—**Needlework History, History of Medieval Or Nué Embroidery** for an article on the historical development of this style of embroidery.)

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

While Or Nue is simply basic couching, it is not a simple technique. The double strand of metal should be turned at the outside edges of the area being filled; the horizontal rows must not be crowded but yet fit side-by-side so no ground fabric is exposed; the horizontal rows must be kept very straight; and the location and color of each perfectly right-angled couching stitch must be placed artistically. Or Nué requires a dedicated stitcher who has much patience—but no metalwork technique is more exquisite.

MATERIALS

Metals:

Originally this work was executed with a foundation of double strands of very fine, smooth silver-gilt passing thread. Today's stitcher can choose among a wide range of foundation threads, each of which will give a different finished appearance. Some examples include real and imitation Japan metal, real metal or lurex passing thread, fine twist (cordonette) or fine tubular braid, each giving a different finished appearance. All these types of metal threads—some of which are manufactured in a range of colors—are couched in double strand.

Silk Thread:

It is critically important to choose the correct weight of the silk couching thread. The "correct" weight depends on the weight of the metal foundation thread. 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 widen the area where the double-strand metal is solidly covered with silk, which will make it impossible to fit subsequent rows of couched metal tightly next to each other and perfectly straight across the fabric. However, if the silk thread is finer than it needs be, the time to stitch solid-couched areas will be excessive. If there is to be background area of exposed metal, select a couching thread that is fine enough to appear "invisible" when the silk color matches the metal. Examples include silk sewing or couching thread in a color to match the metal.

Before stitching, rub the silk couching thread over beeswax at least twice. This will add "wearability"

to the thread and help to keep it from twisting or knotting. Before threading your needle, rub your fingers down the waxed 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, also may be used as couching thread, but it is **not** waxed. (Such tambour thread is harder with which to work than silk couching, but it offers maximum reflection to the metal foundation.)

Here are some suggested foundation thread/couching thread combinations:

- For Japan gold #8 or #10 or Smooth Passing #6 use 1 strand of silk from Vikki Clayton (high luster), Needlepoint Inc. (medium luster) or Pearsall filoselle (high luster).
- For Kreinik Braid #4 use 1 or 2 strands of any of the above silks.

While I have never tried this, Japanese flat silk (very high luster) should work beautifully on a smooth metal foundation (*i.e.* Japan gold or smooth passing). I do suggest you avoid using a silk thread that snags easily over textured threads (such as twist or braid).

IMPORTANT: Be sure to try out your foundation/couching thread options on a doodle cloth before starting your actual piece. Remember, you must complete several rows to determine whether your combination of metal and silk thread will work.

Regardless of the thread combination, or nué is very time consuming form of embroidery. It takes me about 2 hours to work an area 3 to 4 inches long and 1/4" wide (approximately 7.5 by 10.2 cm by 0.6 cm wide), using Japan gold #10 and 1 strand of Pearsall filoselle (this represents 4 double-strand rows). If the couching is solid across the entire area, then the estimate would be a minimum of 3 hours.

Ground Fabric:

Since the metal foundation threads generally cover the ground fabric solidly, a sturdy, close-weave linen is the perfect choice. The fabric must be mounted very tightly onto a stretcher bar frame and kept under firm tension at all times.

After the outline of the design is drawn upon the fabric, the shaded effects can be marked onto the linen with indelible marking pens or fabric paints. If you feel that coloring and shading a paper drawing of the design is sufficient, then at least paint the design area on the fabric in a color to match the metal. (If a slight amount of fabric happens to be exposed here and there it will barely be noticeable if the fabric is not white.)

Colors:

Be sure that the colors of the silk threads offers a good contrast to the color of the metal foundation thread. The or nué technique requires medium to dark values of silk couching threads (unless, of course, a dark value is used for the metal). Under most circumstances pale color values will simply get lost in the field of metal. As long as there is good contrast against the metal threads, subtle color variations among the couching threads can be used to create subtle shading. In addition, the color chosen for the background stitching can be very subdued even to the point of actually matching the metal itself.



I used white silk for the flower on a field of Japan gold in this small design. On this very reflective surface 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 is important. So there are literally endless possibilities. Try birds, fanciful insects, flowers, landscapes,

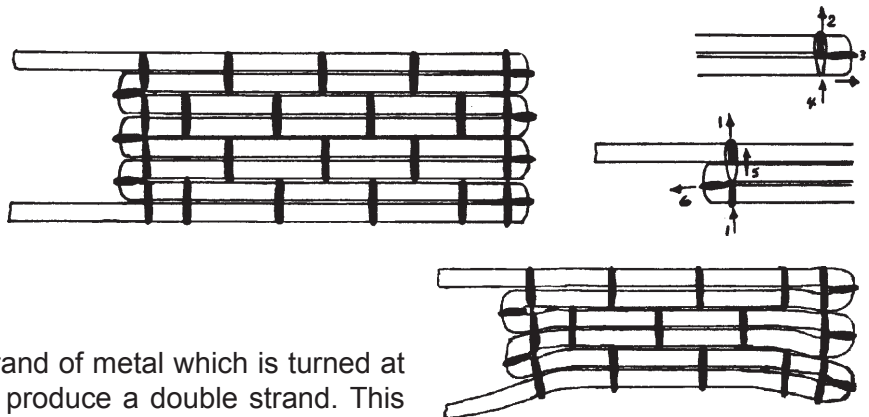
etc. The more shading, the more impact the finished piece of work will have on the viewer. This shaded metal thread technique is sometimes referred to as needle-painting. Any design that would be effective worked in the silk soft shading technique would be most suitable for the or nué technique also.

In the following pages I have used some of my hand-drawn, pre-computer illustrations from my 1980 "Techniques of Metal Thread Embroidery", a self-publication that has been out-of-print since the early 1990s. Go to my website at www.janezimmerman.com—Techniques and Stitches to view other sections from this publication I will release to the internet audience.

GENERAL WORK HINTS

Solidly-Filling Straight-Line Shapes:

- There are actually four methods of filling a shape with horizontal side-by-side rows of metal thread. However, there is only one method suitable for the or nué technique stitched in the historical manner.



This method is to use a single strand of metal which is turned at the edge of the couched area to produce a double strand. This maneuver does require some practice, particularly if you are using Japan metal or smooth passing thread, since neither is easy to manipulate into the tight “turn back” on itself that is required. If the turn is not very tight, a bulging at the ends of the rows will occur, even when the filling uses only a basic pattern of couching (see illustration). Tubular braid is probably the easiest thread to work with, because it can be pinched and handled rather roughly without any damage occurring.

This method of laying the solid filling requires that you keep a needle with heavily-waxed silk couching thread at each end of the filling to be used exclusively for turning the metal.

Step by Step instructions:

- (1) Couch a single strand of metal on the left side, slightly in from the perimeter drawing line.
- (2) Lay the metal across the shape, taking care to keep it straight and flat to the ground fabric.
- (3) Couch over the single strand on the right side, slightly in from the drawing line. Secure this couching stitch with a tiny back stitch adjacent to the edge but within the area to be covered with the solid filling of metal.
- (4) To make a bend in the metal bring the couching thread to the front of the work on the inside edge of the metal and hold tautly up in the air. Take a firm hold of the strand of metal with the other hand. (If any type of metal but tubular braid is used overtwist it slightly.) Now pull the couching thread and the strand of metal in opposite directions (the tautly-held couching thread can actually make a kink in the tautly held, overtwisted metal). CAUTION: This action will damage the metal unless you hold the thread tightly in an overtwisted position.
- (5) Complete this turning tie-down stitch and take one or two tiny back stitches nearby to hold the turn securely, as in Step 3. These back stitches are your guarantee that the turning stitch will not

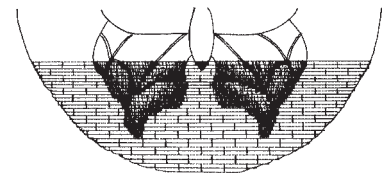
subsequently loosen up and cause the metal to “jump” out of place.

(6) Now push the turned strand of metal against the preceding strand and couch over the newly-created double strand on the left. Finally, execute the decorative couching across the row. The first row is the most difficult—subsequent rows are more stable because there is a secure preceding row to be pushed up against.

The first couple rows are CRITICAL and can be difficult if the width of the design is considerable. It is imperative that the first row is taken VERY straight and firmly tensioned across the design. If you mount your fabric so that the linen is perfectly on-grain, you can follow a horizontal thread of the linen to guarantee a straight line is followed. OR, you can draw some spaced horizontal lines across the fabric before the filling is begun.

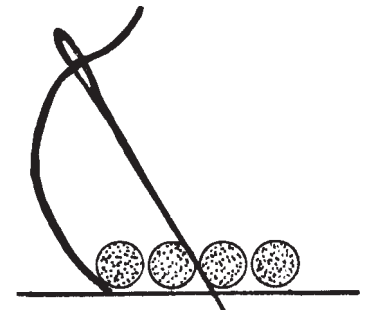
Using a lead pencil and a square ruler, draw lines across the entire area, spaced about $\frac{1}{4}$ " (0.6 cm) apart. These lines are drawn in the direction in which the metal will be laid and allow you to continuously check that your rows are straight and parallel. DRAW LINES AND THEN HEED THEM!

Work the filling from the bottom up. This appears to be how the historical work was filled. As long as the design is clearly drawn (and colored) on the linen ground fabric you could fill from the top down. But if you do this, the many needles required are always hanging in the area that you are filling—a tedious situation. Filling from the bottom-up allows needles of different colors of thread to dangle in a natural position (downward) and not obscure your vision as the filling grows.



Couching in General:

In order to obtain a tight fit of metal from row to row, all subsequent rows must be couched from clean-side-to-dirty side. IMPORTANT: be sure you bring the needle up from slightly from under the double strands of metal AND complete the couching stitch by sinking the needle at a slight angle, just barely under the preceding row of metal. If you were to begin the couching stitches by coming up between two rows of metal there is a good chance that the metal would be nipped/damaged by accident since you are coming up blindly from the back of the work. And if you end the couching stitches by going straight down between two rows of metal there will be a separation the width of the needle between the two rows.



Use a sharp fine needle for the couching—#10 crewel for silk couching thread and fine silk floss and #9 crewel for Japan #1 and all other silks. Note that the finer the needle, the closer the couching stitches can be placed—an important consideration in the or nué technique.

Watch your tension carefully in areas where most of the metal is exposed. If your couching stitches too tight, the metal will be “pinched.”

You must have at least one needle for each color of thread at all times. If there is a considerable distance between the locations where a particular color is used, I recommend using more than one needle of that color. (Ever knit argyle socks?)

The design may be couched solidly so that no metal is exposed between the stitches. If the color and reflectiveness of the metal are features of the design, the spacing of the couching stitches must be varied. The maximum spacing within the shaded part of the design should be no more than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (0.3 cm) and no more than $\frac{3}{16}$ inch (0.5 cm) areas in which the gold is fully exposed.

When the spacing of the couching stitches is less than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (0.3 cm), it is important to keep the spacing random and irregular. Even in areas where the couching stitches are intended to totally obscure the metal, it is attractive to let an occasional “flicker” of metal sneak through.

All couching stitches, regardless of their spacing, **MUST** be executed at a **PERFECT RIGHT ANGLE** 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, but this technique must be used so sparingly that it is not noticeable.

This 3½-inch (8.9 cm) design was worked on double strands of Japan gold #10 using gold silk sewing thread for the “invisible” background couching and 1 strand of Zwicky silk floss in a limited variety of colors for the design. I used the following: four needles of medium-dark red, two needles of medium red, two of medium teal, two of brown, two of green and two of the background couching silk. Since the dark teal was only used in areas that were very close to each other, only one needle of dark teal 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 very small design like this one, you 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 would use up thread much more quickly, and most needleworkers do not like threading needles and tying on and off. That is the trade-off to using a multitude of needles.

I can't say it too often: the rows of metal **MUST** fit snugly side by side so that no ground fabric is exposed between them. In the areas where couching stitches are dense, it is difficult to keep the rows perfectly straight. The thickness of the silk thread tends to make 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 avoid this problem, I suggest that you actually nip the needle into the stitches of the preceding row in very dense areas. This action will damage the metal so this technique cannot be used in an area of any exposed metal.

Winged seraphim worked by Beryl Dean in 1958 for the English Development Scheme, a traveling educational exhibit. Ms. Dean was responsible for the revival of interest in ecclesiastical embroidery in the West during the 20th century. The 4-inch by 11-inch (10.2 by 27.9 cm) design was executed in Japan gold #10 which is totally obscured with silk stitches except in the background. The face and hands were executed in split and/or burden stitch.



An alternative to this “nipping” technique is to come up from under the metal at such a severe angle that the couching stitches will now be shorter than the width of the metal they cover. This “pinching” maneuver will reduce the diameter of the silk-covered metal but barely be discernable. However, never use this technique where there is exposed metal.

After laying the double strand of metal, complete all the decorative couching on that row before proceeding to the laying of a new row. The row of metal you have just laid hides so little of the design it is not difficult to follow the drawing as you couch the row. Sometimes it is necessary to go to a previous row or two and add a few stitches. This must be done very carefully if Japan metal is used as the metal is so easily damaged with the point of your sharp needle.

Adding a few couching stitches is easy compared to removing stitches. Your only choice is to rip out all the couching back to the stitches you wish to remove! Planning each stitch may slow the progress of the work but the importance of this contemplation cannot be stressed enough.

The couching can be completed on the row in any sequence—jump around at will.

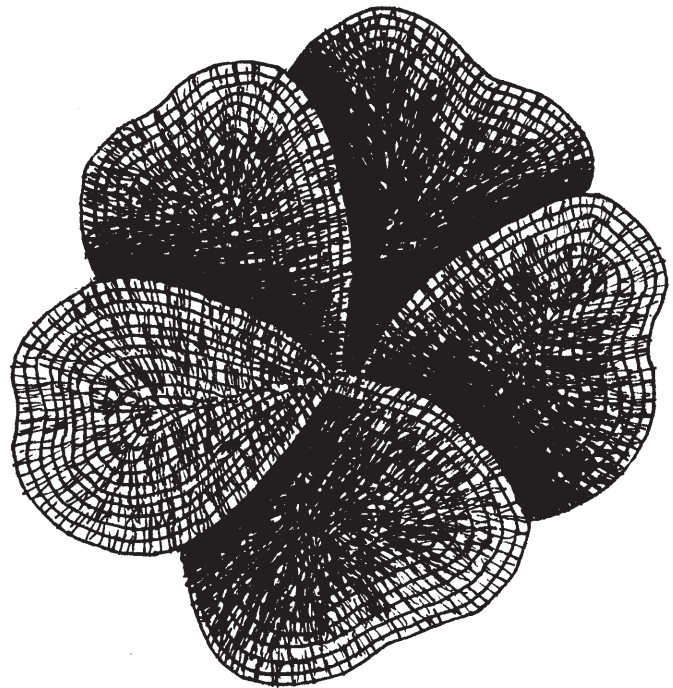
Examine your progress frequently—move away from the work and change the angle of the light reflecting off of it.

Tips for Shaded Couching:

- **To create shadows and highlights:**
 - (1) Lightest effect is created by the use of the bricking pattern worked in silk sewing thread,.
 - (2) Vary the spacing of the couching stitches executed in one value of silk.
 - (3) Vary the hues and values of silk.
- **To create a subtle shaded effect:**
 - (1) Do not jump from closely-spaced to 1/8"-spaced couching stitches.
 - (2) Do not change the spacing of the stitches and the value of silk at the same time.
 - (3) Alternate (“blend”) between two values of silk for a distance before you change to the use of the second value entirely.

Italian Shading:

This name was coined by Beryl Dean, the renowned 20th-century British ecclesiastical fiber artist. In this shading-on-metal technique the rows of metal are laid to follow the contours of a single motif, or the individual elements within a motif as illustrated. As in the traditional or nué technique, it is the values of silk thread and the density of the couching stitches which are all-important. This form of needle-painting allows you to shade when it is appropriate for a motif and also work with innumerable other silk and metal techniques within a single design.



Detail from a silk and metal thread sampler I executed and taught in the 1970s—designed by Elsa T. Cose. Many techniques were used in this design including applique of gold kid over padding and the use of “beads” of check purl in the flower center.

