

# A Stitch Out Of Time:

14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> Century  
German Counted Thread Embroidery.



By  
Timothy J. Mitchell

### **Acknowledgments:**

A project of this size cannot be completed without help. I wish to thank the following people for their help and encouragement: First and foremost, my dear wife Lisa (Mistress Ceridwen ferch Rhys ap Michael in the SCA) for her Saint-like patience; Linda Woolley, Asst. Curator of the Textiles and Dress Department of the Victoria & Albert Museum; Leann Drury and the staff of CompuServe's Living History (GO LIVING) Forum; Janet Cole who created the Internet's Medieval Embroidery Page, helping to spread my work to a global audience; The United States Air Force for giving me ten years in England. And finally to all the members of the electronic global village who have exchanged E-mail encouragement with me over the years. Thank you all.

### **Art Credits:**

COVER - Artwork by Anne Berdanier, based on Allesandro Paganino, Il Burato 1527, Woodcut, "Pricking and Pouncing". Used with permission.

FIGURE 8 - Artwork redrawn from photo by Barbra Worden. Edited by author. Used with permission.

Page 26 - Photograph by Joyce Miller from her website (<http://www.tiac.net/users/drbeer/joyce/emb/embroid.htm>). Used with permission.

All other illustrations are by the author.

### **The Author**

Timothy J. Mitchell has been pursuing embroidery as a hobby for nearly twenty years; His specialty is medieval embroidery. He has a wife and two lovely children. As he is known in the Society for Creative Anachronism, Master Richard Wymarc (OPN, OM, OL) is an 11th century Norman lord living in Cambridgeshire, England.

## Introduction

The embroidery of the medieval period was composed of a wide variety of beautiful styles. Some are well known, while some are largely ignored by the modern needleworker. My own interest in re-creating medieval stitchery led me to the museums of Great Britain. The Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>1</sup> in London houses one of the finest collections of Medieval and Renaissance textiles in the world. In my travels I had the privilege of spending many informative hours in the rooms of the Dress and Textiles Collection, happily browsing through centuries of needlework history.

While researching early period decorative bands, I stumbled across several examples of a style of embroidery that I had never seen before (see Figure 1). This early type of counted thread work, dating from the early 14<sup>th</sup> to the mid 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, combines striking patterns with simple execution. It is a type of embroidery that is at once simple enough that even a beginner can learn it quickly, and beautiful enough to interest the most advanced needleworker.



**Figure 1: A Tasseled Bag**

A careful search of the available books on the history of embroidery showed that this style of stitchery has been

sadly neglected. The most I could find was a few photographs and the odd sentence. In the interest of reviving this beautiful form, I have over the last few years carefully studied all the examples on public display at the V&A, along with several of the better items in the museum's reference collection<sup>2</sup>. This pattern book is a summation of my research to date.

I have limited the scope of this article to the individual pieces that I have examined personally. This helps to ensure that the patterns are accurate, and that the colors given are good matches

This book is organized into four sections: Section 1 is a discussion of the history of the style. Section 2 is a detailed step-by-step description of how to work this type of embroidery. Section 3 contains graphed patterns and notes on ten of the pieces I have studied. Finally, Section 4 discusses how you can create your own designs.

## Section 1: The Historical Context.

Due to the lack of easily accessible documentation concerning this type of German brick-stitch, it is difficult to say too much about its origins with any real certainty. For example: I cannot be completely sure of the precise period the style was in use, or what geographical area that it is native to. The only truly solid information comes from examination of the individual items themselves.

The eleven pieces I have personally studied so far date from the early 14<sup>th</sup> to mid 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The earliest example I have heard of (I have not examined it) dates from the last decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, that item is a wall hanging done in what looks to be the same style. I have found no examples of this exact style of embroidery dating later than the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. However, the design style, if not the stitching technique itself, is echoed in Nicolas Basse's *New Modelbuch von Allerhandt Art und Stickens* of 1568. Several of the patterns there are very close to the geometric patterns used in the type of embroidery discussed here<sup>4</sup>. Another possible survival of the style can be found in the needlework of 19<sup>th</sup> century Armenia. Two decorative sleeve panels in the Victoria and Albert Museum were embroidered in what looks to be the same stitch and a similar geometric style<sup>5</sup>. The emphasis in the Armenian embroidery seems to be on linear strips as opposed to repeating panels, and there is not the strong up and down orientation of the German pieces. however, the two styles otherwise appear very similar.



From what I can glean from my research to date, the use of this form of brick stitch embroidery seems limited to Germany, the Westphalia and Lower Saxony regions in particular. Figure 2 is a map of the locations of the specific towns that are associated with this type of needlework. As you can see, they tend to cluster in a well-defined area. Brick stitch embroidery was used in the needlework of other countries<sup>6</sup>, for example, Switzerland and the Netherlands. However, the multicolored patterns that typify this style seem limited to Germany.

Several references link this embroidery style to Opus Teutonicum (German Work). These embroideries have much in common with our current subject, and the embroideries described below can be thought of as a variant style of O.T.

The similarity of the two types of needlework can be seen in the fact that both use similar stitches and similar geometric patterns, and that they come from approximately the same area and time period. The stitchery that is generally known as Opus Teutonicum, was most often worked in white linen on a linen fabric, with large areas of the background of the design usually left uncovered. The colorful subject of this article, on the other hand, was worked almost exclusively in brightly colored silks and the fabric was usually covered completely.

One author<sup>7</sup> has described this style of embroidery as a 'primitive,' simpler technique, worked by artists of lesser skills. While it is true that the techniques involved are not nearly as demanding as those of, for example, Opus Anglicanum, the richness of the materials set it apart from 'peasant embroidery.' The heavy use of expensive imported silks in this type of needlework point to it being done for either the well-to-do upper class, or the church.

Moreover, the designs of the larger pieces, the vestments and the hangings, show considerable artistic sophistication; and even the smaller, simpler pieces are visually striking.

The simplicity of execution has important advantages from the viewpoint of the medieval artisan. Much of the embroidery of the period was made to order, and this kind of work can be done relatively quickly and it can be learned in a short time. The more 'advanced' types of needlework such as Opus Anglicanum might take years to master, and a large project might take months or years to finish. These advantages combine to allow a large number of people to work on a large piece simultaneously, allowing it to be finished in a relatively short time. It is likely that the larger embroideries, such as the hangings, were done this way, rather than being the work of a single craftsman.

Who were the artists then? Most of the surviving pieces whose origins are known come from the convents and cathedrals. However so does much of the rest of the embroidery that survives from the medieval period. The Church had the organization and inclination to preserve works of art through the turmoil of history. That the embroideries come from churches and cathedrals does not prove that the residents worked them. These works may just as well been the work of secular workshops. Much of the decorative needlework of this period was accomplished by workshops of professional artisans, but there is evidence that a proportion of this type of embroidery was accomplished by nuns<sup>8</sup>. Several convents in central Germany are known to have produced embroidered works done by nuns under the supervision of their abbess; the convents of Weinhausen and Lune are two examples.

A wide variety of items were decorated using this type of embroidery. Given the source of some of the pieces, it is no surprise that a number of the uses were religious in nature. This form of embroidery decorated altar frontals, church hangings, reliquaries (see pattern H) and vestments, such as copes, albs, and stoles (see pattern F). In addition, it was also used to decorate items of possible secular use such as bags (see patterns A, C, and J) and cushions (see pattern I). The items vary greatly in size, the largest piece that I have been able to examine closely is the Hildesheim Cope; a floor length half circle cloak completely covered with silk embroidery (see 'The Larger Pieces' below). The smallest is a 3-inch by 3-inch drawstring bag (see Pattern A).

Given the wide range of uses, I think that it is likely that this embroidery was used for great variety of both religious and secular uses.

## **Section 2: Recreating the Style**

### **Planning your project.**

The most important step in any arts project is the planning stage. Investing time and money in a project when you don't have a good idea of what the finished product will look like is a recipe for frustration. You must decide what you wish to make, what it will be used for, what size it should be, and what the colors and pattern are to be. Then you can decide what you need in the way of materials. For example, it may matter to you if the pattern is centered on the piece. If you are making a bag or pouch, you might want to arrange the size of the bag so that the pattern will match across the seams, or the orientation of the decoration might be important to the look of the finished piece. I will discuss several such points as we go along.

### **Materials**

The materials used in the original embroideries are very similar from piece to piece. Every example I have seen or read about is worked on evenweave, tabby-woven (plain) linen. A variety of thread counts were used, ranging from 20 to 72 threads per inch in the examples studied (see Table 3 in Appendix A).

The needlework itself is done mostly in colored silks. The embroidery silk resembles modern cotton embroidery floss in thickness. In addition to silk, several of the items have white patterns worked in plied linen thread (see patterns A, D, F, and J). The number of plies (or individual strands) making up the threads is unknown. But a close look suggests that there are between 3 and 5 plies. There is no obvious reason why linen was used in some cases and not others. Perhaps the more durable linen helped cut down the wear on the silk embroidery; or maybe it was a cheaper alternative to using white silk. In any case, the linen on linen embroidery known as *Opus Teutonicum* was widespread in this period, and the material was readily available.

The final material sometimes used in these pieces is a bit of a mystery. Although the museum labels identify it as "gilt strip"; what this exactly means is unknown. I have examined the material under magnification, and have repeatedly studied my detailed close-up photos. From these observations I can give the following description: The "gilt strip" is a flat material whose width is similar to the silk floss in the embroidery. It appears to be a gilded material as opposed to metal wire.

Exactly how this "gilt strip" is attached to the ground fabric is unknown. Close examination of the reliquary bag fragment graphed in Pattern H shows no evidence of couching, but it seems unlikely that a gilded material would be durable enough to survive repeated pulling through the ground fabric.

All the above materials are available to the modern embroiderer, but the cost can be prohibitive, and in some areas the materials may be hard to find. For those of you who are not determined to work with period materials, there are very acceptable substitutes.

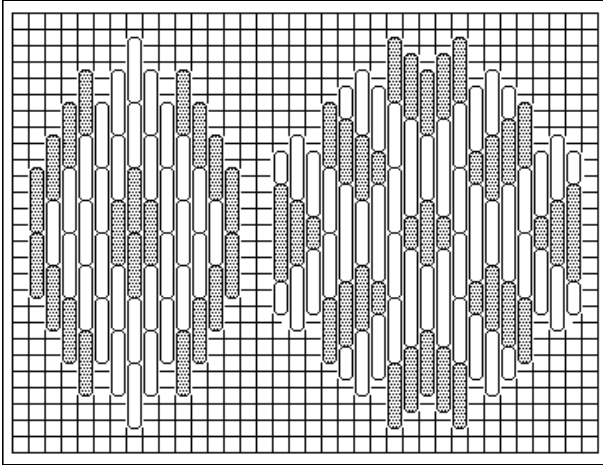
Linen evenweave fabric is not too expensive or hard to come by, especially for small projects. However, this embroidery style covers the ground fabric completely, so substitution does not effect the look and feel of the bag. Cotton evenweave is often easier to find, a bit easier to work with, and is available in a wide range of thread counts.

Linen embroidery thread is hard to find, and silk floss is both more expensive and not readily available in the range of colors cotton floss is. Cotton embroidery floss such as DMC or Anchor looks almost as good as silk or linen, and is easier and less costly to come by, although the feel and the look of the finished project will not be as rich as if silk were used. Table 2 in Appendix A gives a list of the DMC equivalents for the colors used in these pieces.

Finding a suitable substitute for the "gilt strip" is a more difficult matter. If the material is to be couched to the ground fabric, then any number of gold substitute threads can be used. If you wish to stitch the material through the fabric, I recommend a compromise that I have found acceptable: Use properly colored DMC floss as a substitute, DMC colors 3045 and 833 work well.

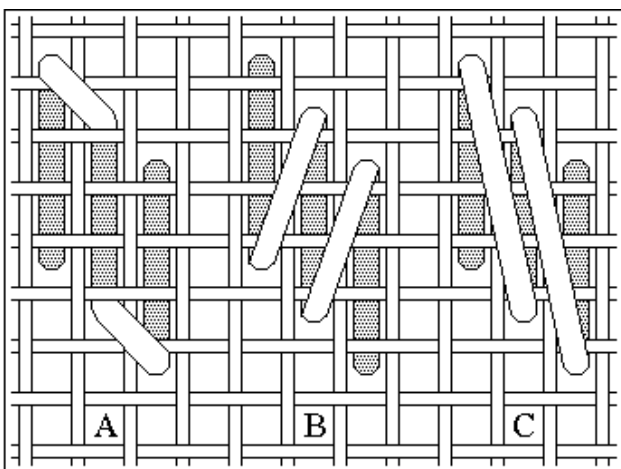
### **Embroidery Technique**

In this style of embroidery the stitches are worked such that the ground fabric is covered completely. The stitches themselves are similar to those used in Bargello and Florentine styles, in that the embroidery thread is worked parallel to the weave of the ground fabric instead of crossing it as in cross-stitch or tent stitch (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2: The Stitch**

Typically each stitch will cross 2, 4, or 6 threads depending on how long it needs to be. The majority of stitches tend to be of length '4'. Each stitch is offset up or down from the one before it by either one thread (referred to as 'satin stitch' by the museum) or two threads (referred to as 'brick stitch') depending on the type of design being embroidered (see Figure 3). One further difference is that in brick stitch each stitch is doubled, that is the floss passes twice through the fabric (see the notes at the beginning of Section 3). So far, I have not been able to examine the back of any of the pieces I have studied. So the exact way the stitches are worked is a matter of guesswork. Logically, there are three possible ways the stitch might have been done; these are illustrated in Figure 4.



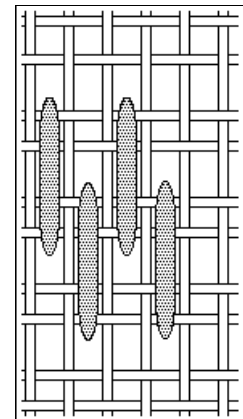
**Figure 3: Possible Stitching Methods**

In Figure 4a, the floss is looped back and forth across the front of the fabric, with very little of it remaining on the back. This method has the advantage of saving

embroidery floss, as less is needed to cover a given area. This technique, however, may not cover as well as the others. In Figure 4b, the floss is run back and forth across both the front and back of the fabric. This method allows for smoother, easier stitching, at the cost of using more thread. Finally, Figure 4c illustrates the last possibility. Here the embroidery floss is worked as in the previous method. However, in this case the back is covered with longer stitches than the front. This uses even more material, and provides a thicker, heavier finished piece.

A close examination of several of the original pieces does provide one clue. In areas where the embroidery is worn away, it can be seen that the ground fabric is bunched up in a distinctive fashion, illustrated in Figure 5. This bunching occurs when the fabric is worked as in Figure 4b, and is less evident with the other methods. Therefore I have adopted that method as the one I use.

In planning your project, you must consider several of the elements together, as they effect one another. Details such as the size of the finished piece, the pattern to be embroidered, the thread count of the fabric and the number of strands of embroidery floss to be used, all interact. The higher the thread count the finer the embroidery, and the larger a pattern you can fit in a given size area. The finer the embroidery is, the fewer strands of embroidery floss you need to provide proper coverage. For example, Pattern A was originally worked at 28 threads per inch, and in recreating it I used the full six strands of DMC to properly cover the ground fabric. Pattern J, however, while similar in most respects, was worked at 36 threads per inch and only required 4 strands of floss to cover.



**Figure 4: The Bunching**

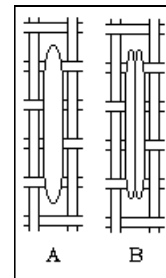
When working on your own projects you will probably have to experiment to find the proper combination. The stitches should butt together tightly without distorting the fabric, and the fabric should be completely hidden. If you have doubts about the coverage, try covering an unused corner with a few stitches, a 4-stitch patch should be enough to tell.

### **Section 3. The Patterns**

The following section contains detailed patterns and notes for the ten items that I have been able to study personally. In each case I examined the piece carefully with both the naked eye and a magnifier. I then carefully graphed the embroidery pattern, using only the details from the original. That is, I did not extrapolate the design of damaged or missing areas without strong evidence as to their original appearance. Finally, I compared the colors of the original piece to a DMC color chart (under natural light) in order to be able to describe the colors using a widely available standard. Given the age of these pieces, there has been some fading of the colors, but for the most part they are in excellent condition. Those that are not are so noted. Each set of patterns contains a detailed stitching guide, an example of the stitch used, and in most cases a diagram showing the color layout of the original embroidery. Notes about the original piece accompany each pattern, detailing what is known about it.

One note on the stitching technique: On those patterns marked as being worked in “Brick Stitch”, each stitch is doubled. In other words, for each ‘stitch’ on the pattern the thread is ran through the same holes twice, using a thread that is only half as thick. This is illustrated in Figure 6. This differs from “Satin Stitch” where only one pass is made for each stitch (see Figure 3). As there is no effect on the look and feel of the finished work, which variation you use is up to you.

For those of you that are determined to reproduce these items as closely as possible, the following patterns use the doubled brick stitch: B, C, E, and F. All stitching patterns show a single stitch, in the interest of clarity.



**Figure 5:**  
**Brick Stitch**

**Pattern A: A Tasseled Bag.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of origin:** Unknown.

**Current location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-9, Cat. # 8699-1863.

**Physical description:**

This bag can be seen pictured back in Figure 1. The bag itself is square and measures approximately three inches by three inches, three colored tassels are attached to the base, one at each end (Gold, DMC 729 and Red, DMC 347) and the remaining one (Green, DMC 368) in the middle. These tassels measure about one and a half inches long (see Appendix B for information on the making of tassels). See page 40 for full details of construction.

While there is no surviving drawstring, the band at the top of the bag shows four holes. These are spaced so as to suggest that the bag originally possessed a double drawstring similar to those seen on other bags from the period (see Appendix B for information on the design and making of drawstrings).

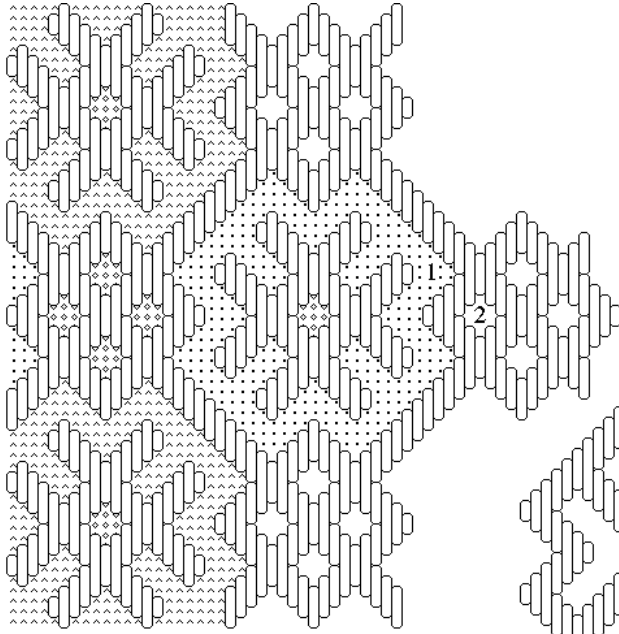
The outside of the bag is constructed from a single piece of embroidered fabric. This is folded in half and sewn across the bottom and up one side of the bag. The lining, if any, could not be examined. Around the opening of the bag there is a fabric strip sewn to the needlework. This is either a cloth tape placed to strengthen the bag, or possibly the lining of the bag folded over to the front and secured. Either way, the strip is secured with a whipstitch.

**Materials:**

- Evenweave linen fabric, 28 threads per inch.
- Plied linen thread (off white, DMC 746)
- Colored silk floss (Red - DMC 347, Green - DMC 368, Blue - DMC 312, Gold - DMC 729)

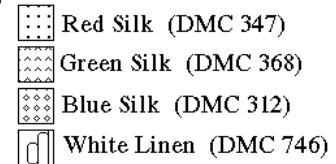




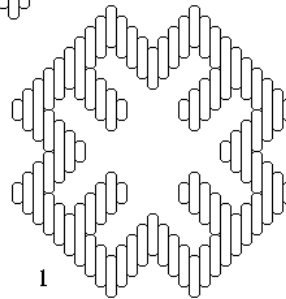


Bag, German, 14th - 15th Century. Plied white linen thread and colored silks in satin stitch on linen. 28 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

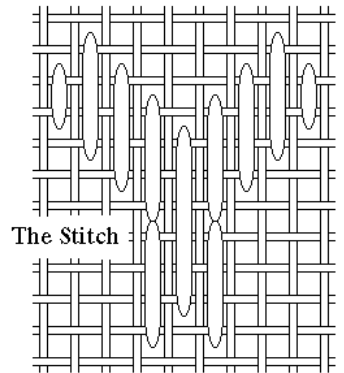
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Textiles department, frame I-9, Cat # 8699-1863.



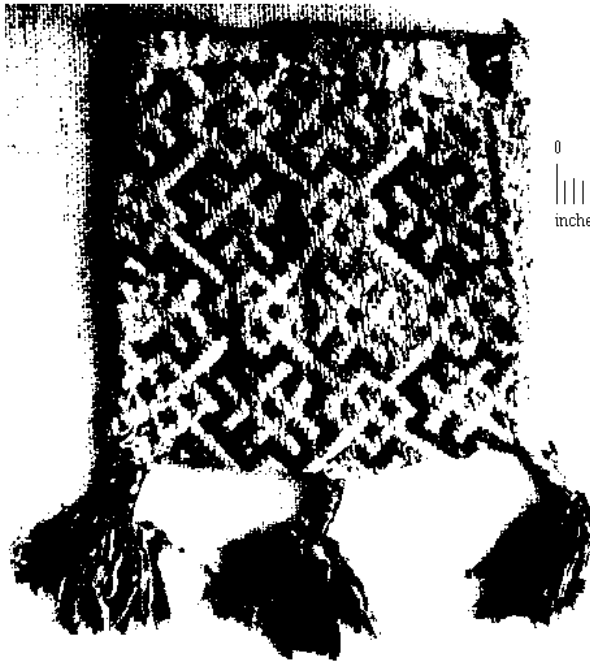
Color Key



Fill Stitches



The Stitch



#### NOTES:

1. The bag is in excellent condition, color fading seems to be minimal, and there is very little wear and tear on the embroidery.
2. The tassels on the bottom of the bag are made of silk and are bound in gold or gilt thread. The tassel colors are: Gold (DMC 729), Green (DMC 368), and Red (DMC 347).
3. The seams are on the bottom and right sides.
4. As in some of the other items on display at the V&A, the phrase "satin stitch" does not refer to the common modern embroidery stitch, but to any stitch that covers the fabric completely and smoothly.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery I:  
An Embroidered Bag.

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**Pattern B: A Heraldic Fragment.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of origin:** Unknown.

Current location: Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-8, Cat. #859-1899.

**Physical description:**

This fragment is in relatively good condition, with the edges straight, even and square. What remains measures four inches wide by three and a half inches high. All this leads me to guess that it was originally part of a bag. The size and shape are right, being similar in proportion to the three intact bags I have studied (Patterns A, C, and J).

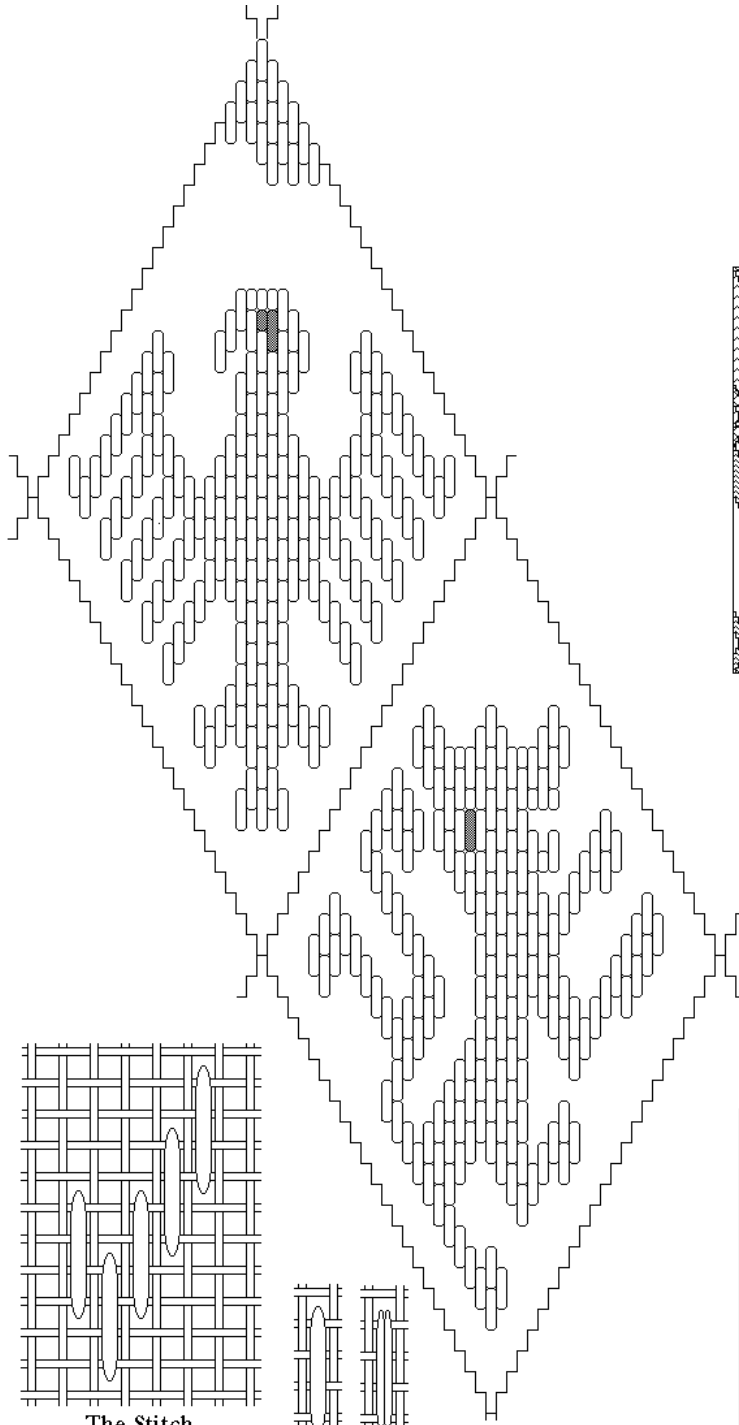
The pattern is composed of two animal figures, an eagle and a lion, alternating in a repeating pattern. These were possibly of some heraldic significance to the original owner. The eagle in particular is a popular German motif, widely used from the time of the Emperor Charlemagne (768-814)<sup>9</sup>.

This item was worked using the doubled brick stitch described in the introduction to this section.

**Materials:**

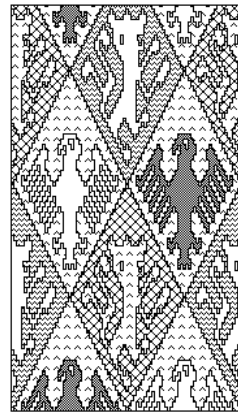
- Evenweave linen fabric, 52 threads per inch.
- Colored silk floss (Blue - DMC 519, Black - DMC 310, Green - DMC 580, White - DMC White, Cream - DMC Ecu).





Fragment with heraldic devices. German, 14th Century. Coloured silks in brick stitch on linen. 52 thread per inch evenweave fabric

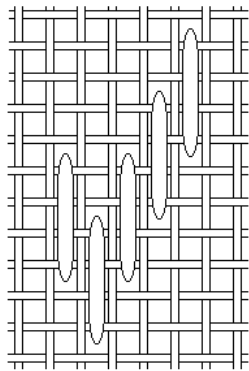
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Textiles department, Frame I-8, Cat # 859-1899.



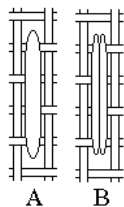
	White (DMC White)
	Green (DMC 580)
	Black (DMC 310)
	Cream (DMC Ecreu)
	Blue (DMC 519)

Color Key

Layout



The Stitch



A

B

NOTES:

1. The colors on this piece may be slightly faded, especially the cream and blue. The white eagle on a cream background does not show up very well, and I think the cream was a much deeper shade originally.
2. Examination of the worn spots on the original piece where the fabric and needle holes show, compared with the existing stitches show that each stitch was done twice (see B on the left), i.e. brick stitch. I have graphed the pattern showing one pass per stitch, in the interest of clarity, and because the pattern can be stitched either way.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery II:  
A Heraldic Fragment

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### **Pattern C: A Large Bag.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of origin:** Unknown.

**Current location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-9, Cat. #1567-1902.

#### **Physical description:**

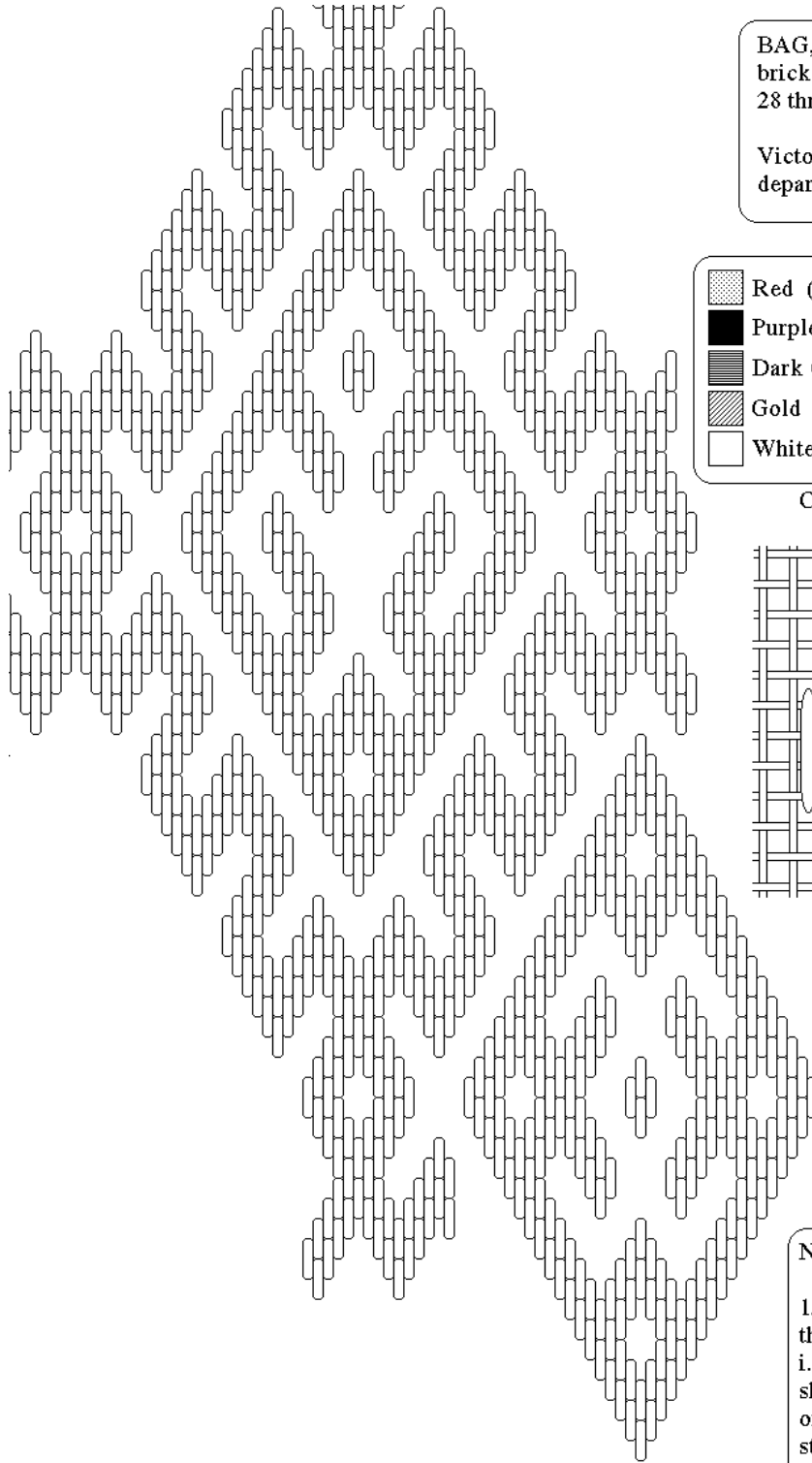
This is the largest of the three bags I have examined, measuring ten inches by ten inches. The bag is of rectangular shape, as are all of the bags I have examined so far. On each side of the bag, approximately an inch and a half down from the opening, is attached a length of cord (about ten inches long). These cords are not drawstrings, but are either the remains of a carrying loop, now cut; or are there for decoration. The cords (see Appendix B for a discussion of making and attaching cords) are of circular cross section and are made up of large number of strands. There is no indication of a drawstring, but as the embroidery continues up to the lip of the bag, any remaining holes probably would have closed up over time. It is not possible to examine the back of the bag or the lining. It does make sense, based on the other pieces examined, that the other side is similarly decorated. The bag is displayed pressed under glass, so I cannot be sure of the seams. The fold appears to be on the bottom, with the sides sewn up.

This item was worked using the doubled brick stitch described in the introduction to this section.

#### **Materials:**

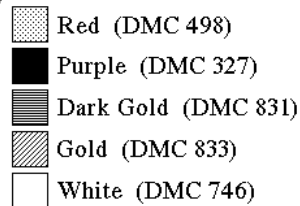
- Evenweave linen fabric, 28 threads per inch.
- Colored silk floss (Gold - DMC 833, Dark Gold - DMC 831, Red - DMC 498, Purple - DMC 327, White - DMC 746).



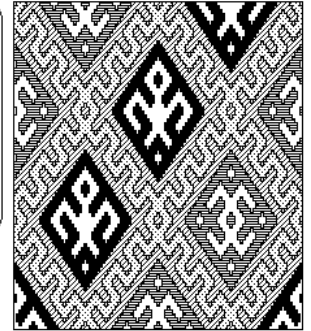


BAG, German, 14th century. Coloured silks in brick stitch on linen.  
28 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

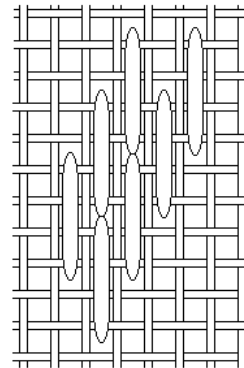
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Textiles department, frame I-9, Cat # 1567-1902.



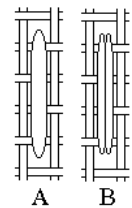
Color Key



Pattern Layout



The Stitch



A

B

**NOTES:**

1. Examination of the existing stitches shows that each stitch was done twice (see B above) i.e. brick stitch. I have graphed the pattern showing one pass per stitch, in the interest of clarity, and because the pattern can be stitched either way.
2. The bag is approximately 10" by 10" and is square.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery III:  
A Large Bag

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**Pattern D: A Fragment of an Embroidered Band.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of origin:** Unknown.

**Current location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-9, Cat. #7048-1860.

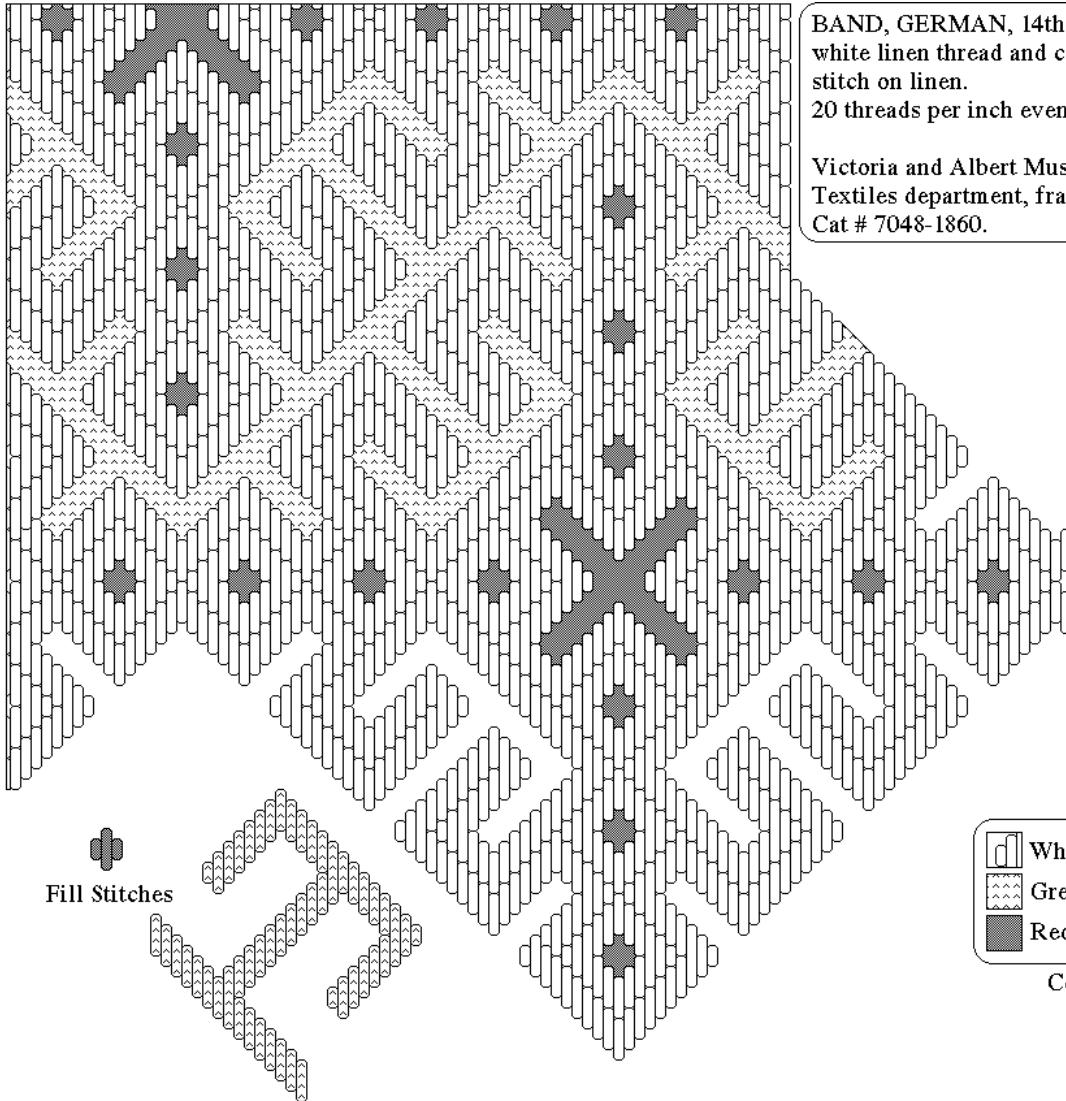
**Physical description:**

Worked on 20 count fabric, this fragment has the ‘coarsest’ look of the pieces examined. This fragment seems to be the remains of a larger piece, possibly an item of church vestment, though no one can say at this late date. The design on this example shows several differences from the rest of the items in this book. Firstly, there is the extensive use of linen thread in the embroidery. On other pieces where linen is used (see patterns A, F and J), there is a lesser proportion of linen stitching. Secondly, the embroidery on this piece turns back on itself to create areas where the texture of the needlework is what sets the areas apart, not color differences. Finally, on most of the other examples I have studied, the area covered is broken up into geometric panels. For example, the lozenges in patterns B and C. This is not seen here.

**Materials:**

- Evenweave linen fabric, 20 threads per inch.
- Plied linen thread (Off-white - DMC 746)
- Colored silk floss (Green - DMC 563, Red - DMC 347)

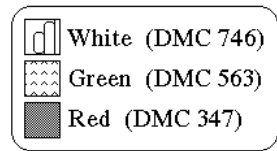




BAND, GERMAN, 14th - 15th century, plied white linen thread and coloured silks in satin stitch on linen.  
20 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles department, frame I-9,  
Cat # 7048-1860.

  
 Fill Stitches

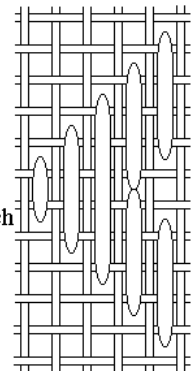


Color Key

NOTES:

1. As in some of the other items on display at the V&A, the phrase "satin stitch" does not refer to the common modern embroidery stitch, but to any stitch that covers the fabric completely and smoothly.
2. This item has the "coarsest" stitch count of the items on display at the V&A.

The Stitch



14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery IV: An Embroidered Band.  
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**Pattern E: Dancing Figures.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of origin:** Cathedral of Halberstadt.

**Current location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-8, Cat. #7093-1860.

**Physical description:**

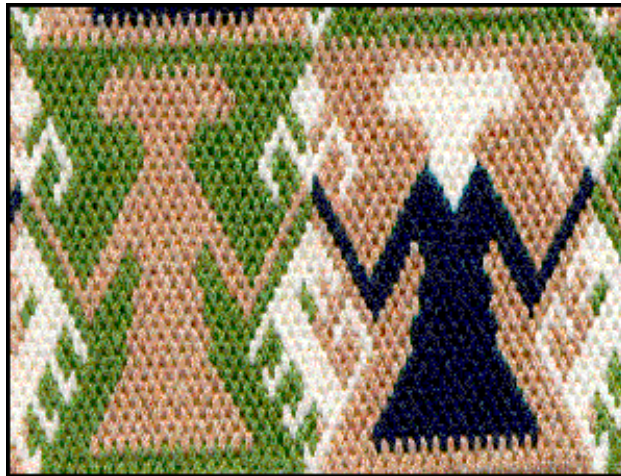
This fragment was in the worst condition of all the examples I have seen. It is so badly faded and worn that large portions of the embroidery are completely gone. I was finally able to reconstruct the pattern by comparing several of the damaged figures to fill in the gaps. Because of the fading, the colors listed are for reference only. The only colors that survive at all are green and blue, and there is no way to determine what their original shade was.

Reconstructed, the needlework shows a peaceful scene. Ladies in elaborate head-dresses and flowing gowns dance with clasped hands, holding flowers aloft. At their feet dogs prance and jump in excitement.

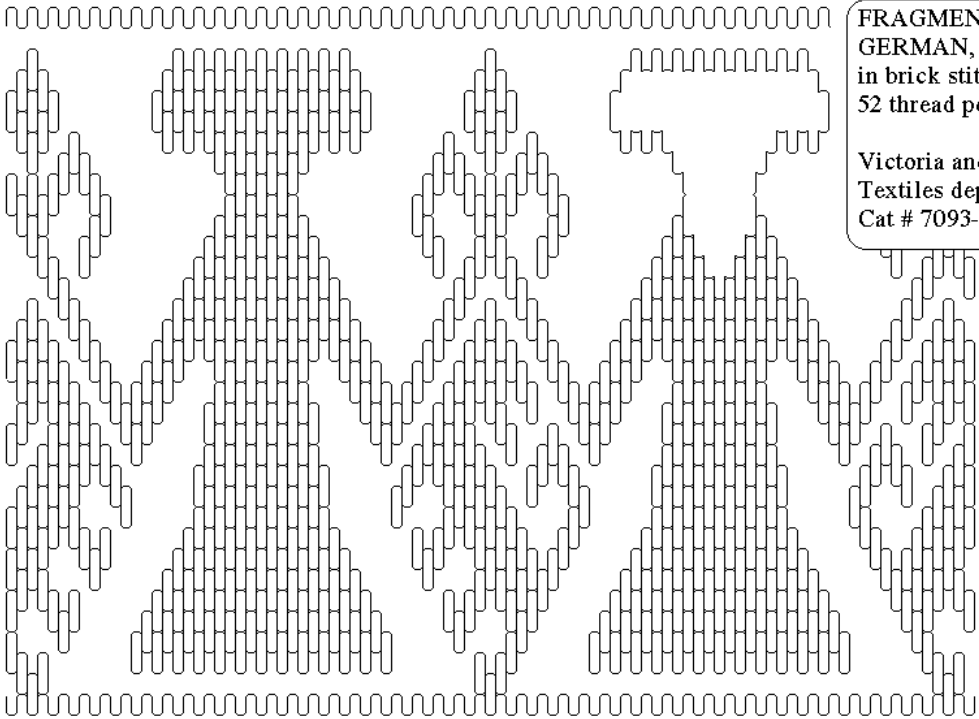
This item was worked using the doubled brick stitch described in the introduction to this section.

**Materials:**

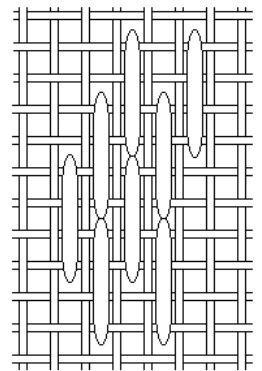
- Evenweave linen fabric, 52 threads per inch.
- Colored silk floss (Colors too faded to match).



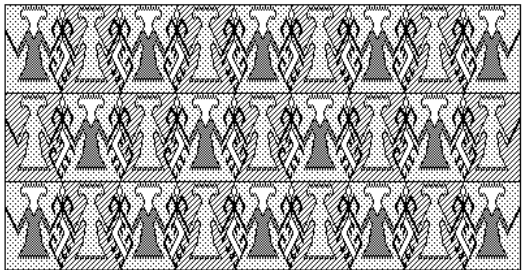
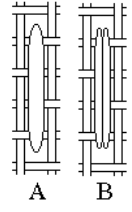




FRAGMENT with rows of human figures  
 GERMAN, 14th century. Coloured silks  
 in brick stitch on linen.  
 52 thread per inch evenweave fabric.  
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
 Textiles department, frame I-8,  
 Cat # 7093-1860



The Stitch



Pattern Layout

- White (DMC White)
- Cream (DMC Ecu)
- Blue (DMC 336)
- Green (DMC 988)

Color Key (see notes)

NOTES:

1. This piece is in the worst shape of any of the items studied. It is so badly worn and faded that it took two hours with a magnifying glass and a good B&W photo to reconstruct the pattern. Because of this, the colors shown are for reference only, the only colors that can be identified for certain are blue and green, and even then the shade is open to question.
2. Reconstruction of the embroidery gives a lovely scene; Ladies in elaborate head-dresses and flowing gowns dance a line dance holding flowers in their clasped hands, while dogs leap and prance.
3. Examination of the existing stitches shows that each stitch was done twice (see B above) i.e. brick stitch. I have graphed the pattern showing one pass per stitch, in the interest of clarity, and because the pattern can be stitched either way.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery V:  
 Human Figures  
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**Pattern F: Part of a Stole or Maniple.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> Century

**Place of Origin:** Cathedral of Halberstadt

**Current Location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-9, Cat. #7016-1860.

**Physical Description:**

This is by far the most garish of the items discussed here. The bright red, yellow and green do not go together well to the modern eye, or the Medieval one I suspect. It may be that some of the colors have faded to lighter shades over the years. In any case, anyone using this pattern might want to alter the colors a bit.

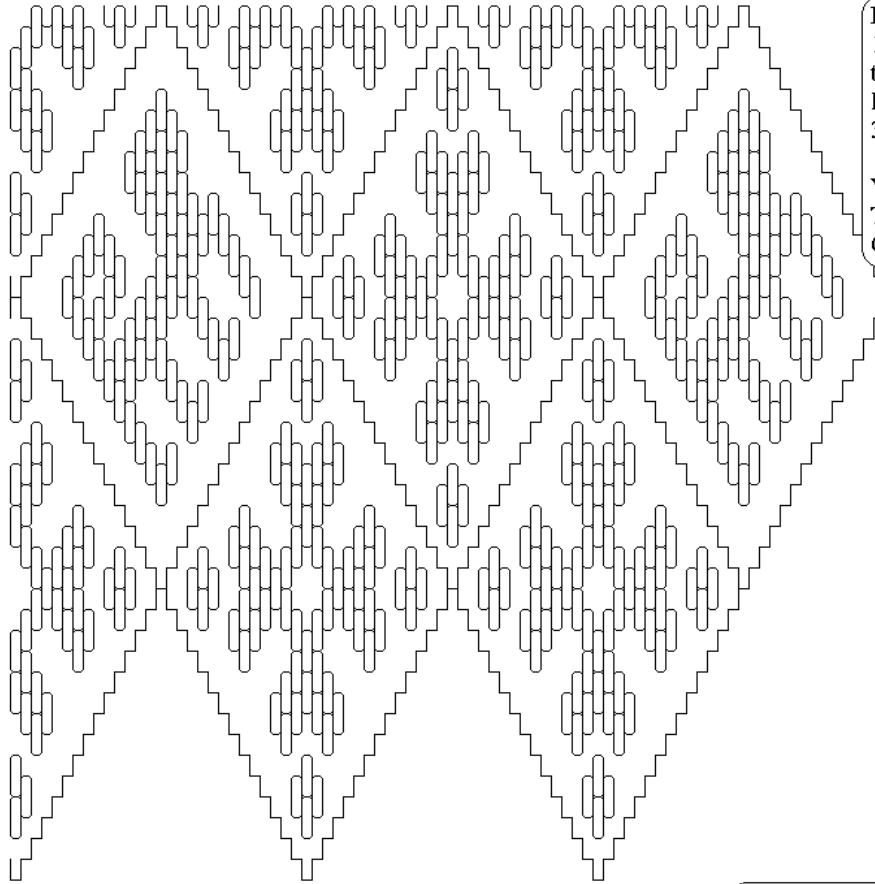
The original piece is approximately twelve inches long and two and one half inches wide, and according to the museum, is thought to be part of an item of religious apparel, possibly a stole. Attached to the end of the embroidered strip is a panel of stem stitch needlework decorated with tassels.

This item was worked using the doubled brick stitch described in the introduction to this section.

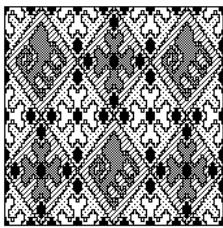
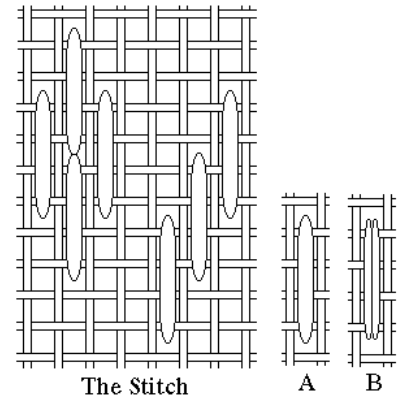
**Materials:**

- Evenweave linen fabric, 32 threads per inch.
- Plied linen thread (White - DMC White)
- Colored silk floss (Yellow - DMC 725, Green - DMC 564, Blue - DMC 322, Red - DMC 347)





PART of a stole or maniple, GERMAN, 14th Century. Embroidered in plied linen thread and colored silks in brick stitch on linen. 32 thread per inch evenweave fabric. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Textiles department frame I-9, Cat # 7016-1860



- Yellow (DMC 725)
- Green (DMC 564)
- Blue (DMC 322)
- Red (DMC 347)
- White (DMC White)

Color Key

NOTES:

1. This is easily the most garish of the items studied so far. Bright red, white, yellow and green do not look good to the modern eye. This may partly be because of fading, darker shades would improve the pattern greatly.
2. Examination of the existing stitches shows that each stitch was done twice (see B above) i.e. brick stitch. I have graphed the pattern showing one pass per stitch, in the interest of clarity, and because the pattern can be stitched either way.

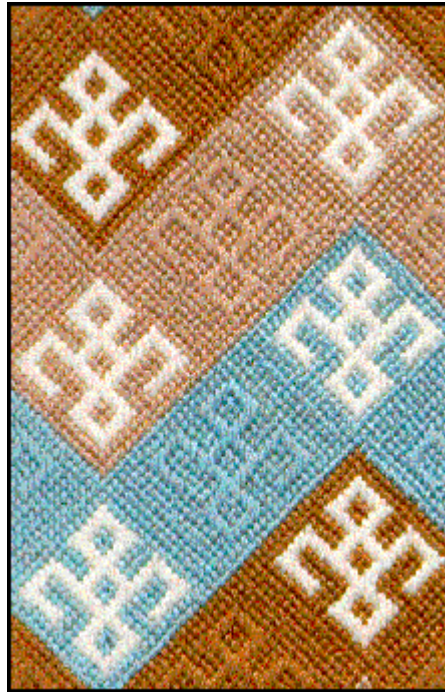
14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery VI:  
 Part of a Stole or Maniple  
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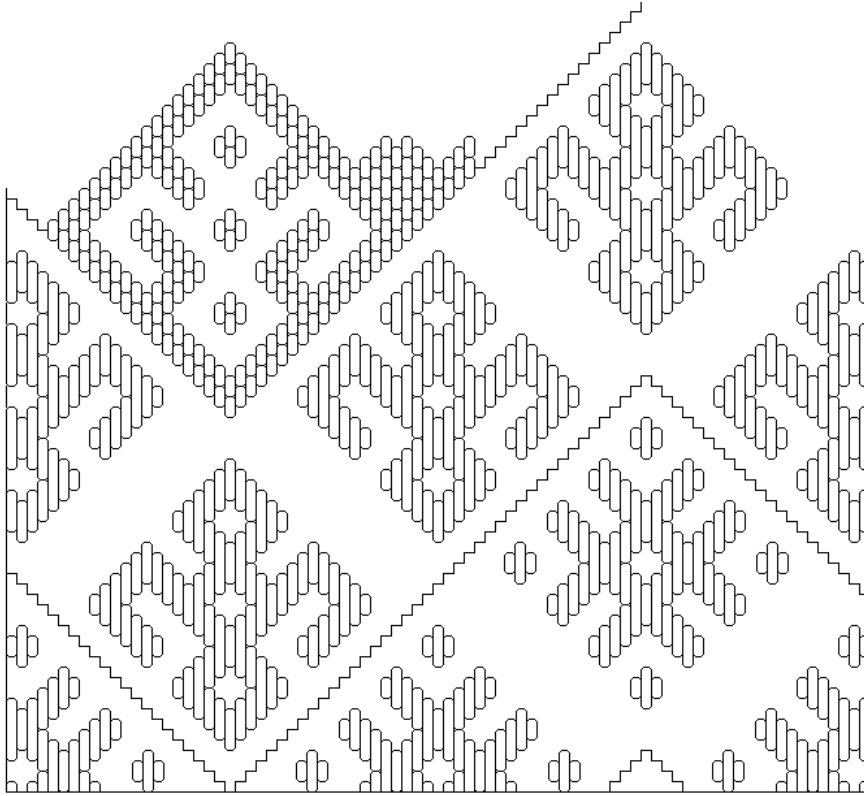
**Pattern G: A Banded Fragment.****Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> Century**Place of Origin:** Cathedral of Halberstadt**Current Location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-8, Cat. #7071-1860.**Physical Description:**

This is another unusual example of this German brick stitch. The geometric motifs are laid out in a zigzag pattern and the background of the piece is set apart by using a shorter stitch to fill it in. Every other motif is the same color as the background, with only the different texture of the longer stitches setting it off. What this band originally decorated is unknown. From its size, thirteen inches high and three and one half inches wide, it is not really the size for a stole or a bag. Note that at a fabric count of 72 threads per inch, this is the finest piece of this embroidery I've studied so far.

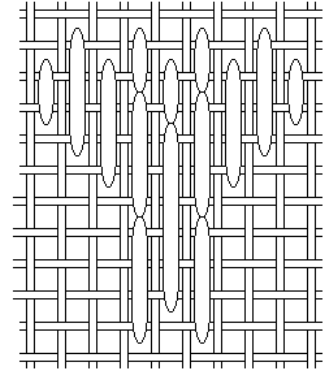
**Materials:**

- Evenweave linen fabric, 72 threads per inch.
- Colored silk floss (White - DMC White, Gold - DMC 3045, Tan - DMC 842, Blue - DMC 827)

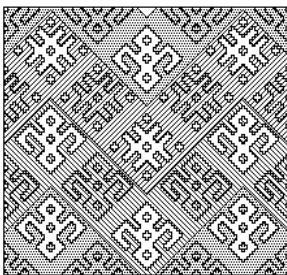




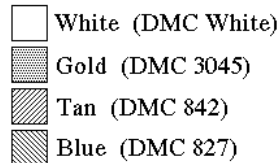
FRAGMENT, GERMAN, 14th century.  
Coloured silks in brick and satin  
stitches on linen.  
72 threads per inch evenweave fabric.  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles Department, frame I-8,  
Cat # 7071-1860.



The Stitch



Layout



Color Key

NOTES:

1. This piece is unusual in that, unlike the other items on display, it uses a different size stitch for the background fill. This allows the embroiderer to use texture rather than color to set the background apart from the foreground pattern. As you can see from the layout, at regular intervals the foreground and background colors are the same.
2. The two motifs used in this piece are very common, other examples can be seen in parts I and III of this series.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery VII:  
A Banded Fragment.

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## **Pattern H: A Reliquary Bag Fragment.**

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> Century

**Place of Origin:** Cathedral of Merseburg

**Current Location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Dress and Textiles Department, Frame I-8, Cat. #8646-1863.

### **Physical Description:**

This is without a doubt the most complex of the examples I am graphing here. This complexity stems from the fact that unlike the other examples, there is no simple repeating pattern to this piece. I have had to graph pretty much the whole thing for you.

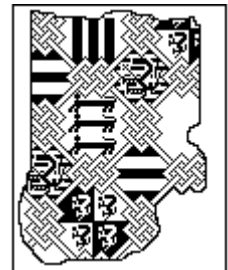
Perhaps surprisingly, considering the wealth of embroidery on this piece, the fragment measures only four and three-quarters inches high by three and a quarter inches wide. It is decorated with a complex interlace lattice, separating a series of panels containing heraldic designs. Thought by the museum to have once been part of a bag containing relics, this piece is now badly worn and faded. With the exception of the gilt and silver strip that still survives, none of the remaining colors can be reliably identified, with one possible exception.

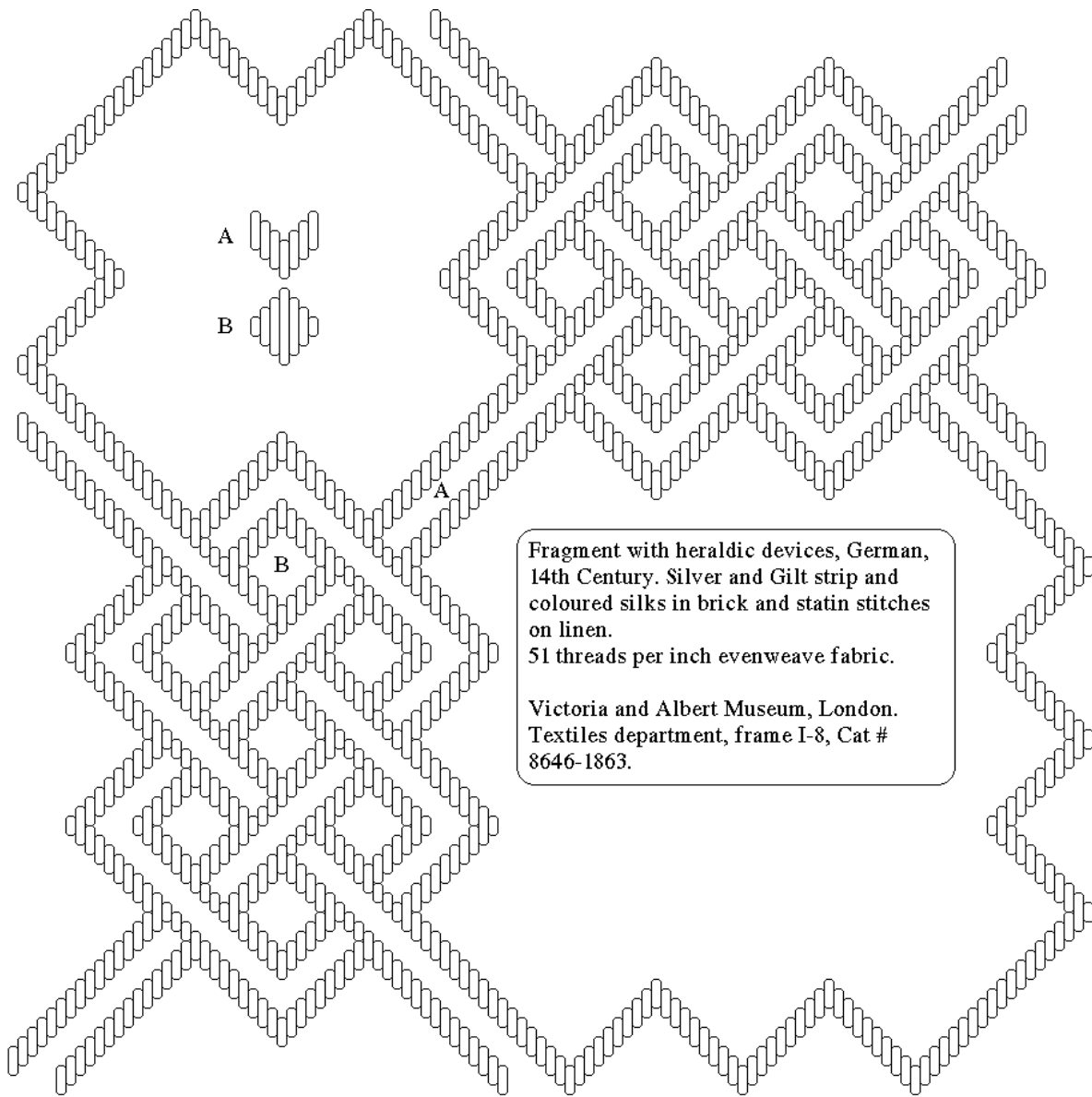
On the original piece there are several areas where the embroidery material has disappeared completely. I originally speculated that it might be due to gold work being picked out to be reused, but in at least one case the foreground pattern is done in gilt strip. It now seems likely to me that the missing material rotted away over the years, possibly because the dye or mordant used damaged the silk. The most likely original color for these areas would then be black, as this color used such damaging chemicals. Another piece from this period shows a similar deterioration, where the black silk embroidery has partially rotted away.<sup>10</sup>

The thumbnail sketch inset to the right shows the layout of the heraldic designs on the original piece.

### **Materials:**

- Evenweave linen fabric, 51 threads per inch.
- Gilt strip, Silver strip.
- Colored silk floss (Colors too faded to match)





Fragment with heraldic devices, German,  
14th Century. Silver and Gilt strip and  
coloured silks in brick and statin stitches  
on linen.  
51 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

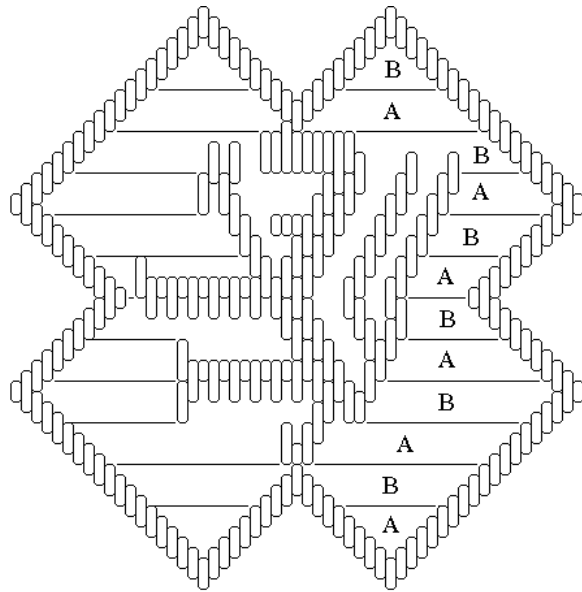
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles department, frame I-8, Cat #  
8646-1863.

**Notes:**

1. This item is a badly damaged fragment of a much larger piece. These three sheets contain the patterns that can be reconstructed from what remains.
2. The piece is thought to have been originally used as a bag to hold religious relics, and it comes from the Cathedral of Merzeburg, Germany.
3. The interlaced border that connects the heraldic panels is composed of an outline of silk with a center of gilt strip (see A above). The gilt strip is used extensively throughout the piece. The squares inside the knots are filled as shown in B above.

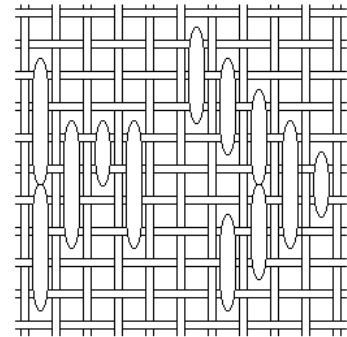
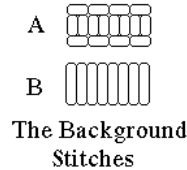
14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery IX:  
Fragment of a Reliquary Bag. Sheet 1 of 3.

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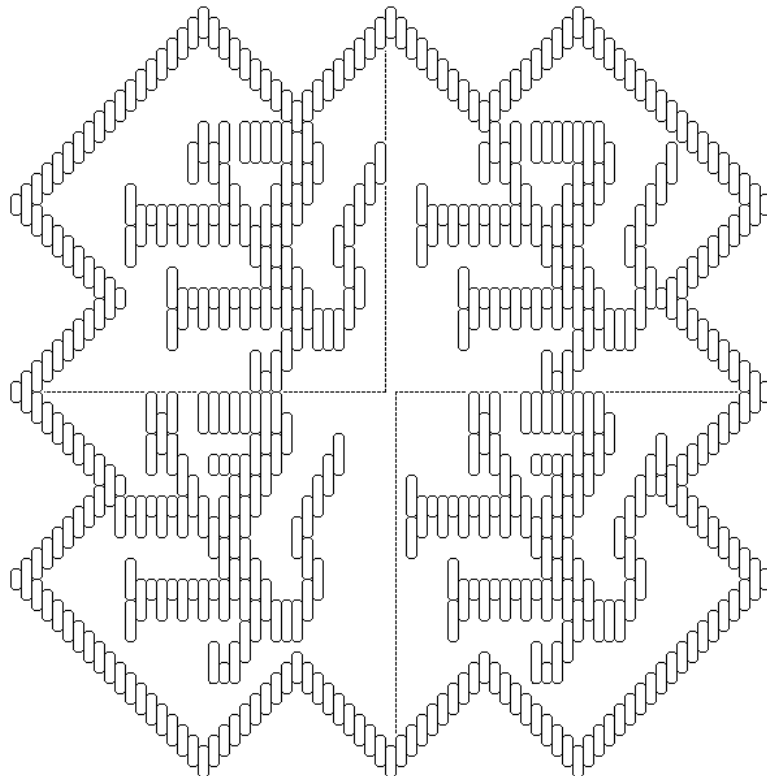


Fragment with heraldic devices. German, 14th Century. Silver and gilt strip and coloured silks in brick and satin stitches on linen. 51 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Textiles department, frame I-8, Cat # 8646-1863.



The Stitches



Notes:

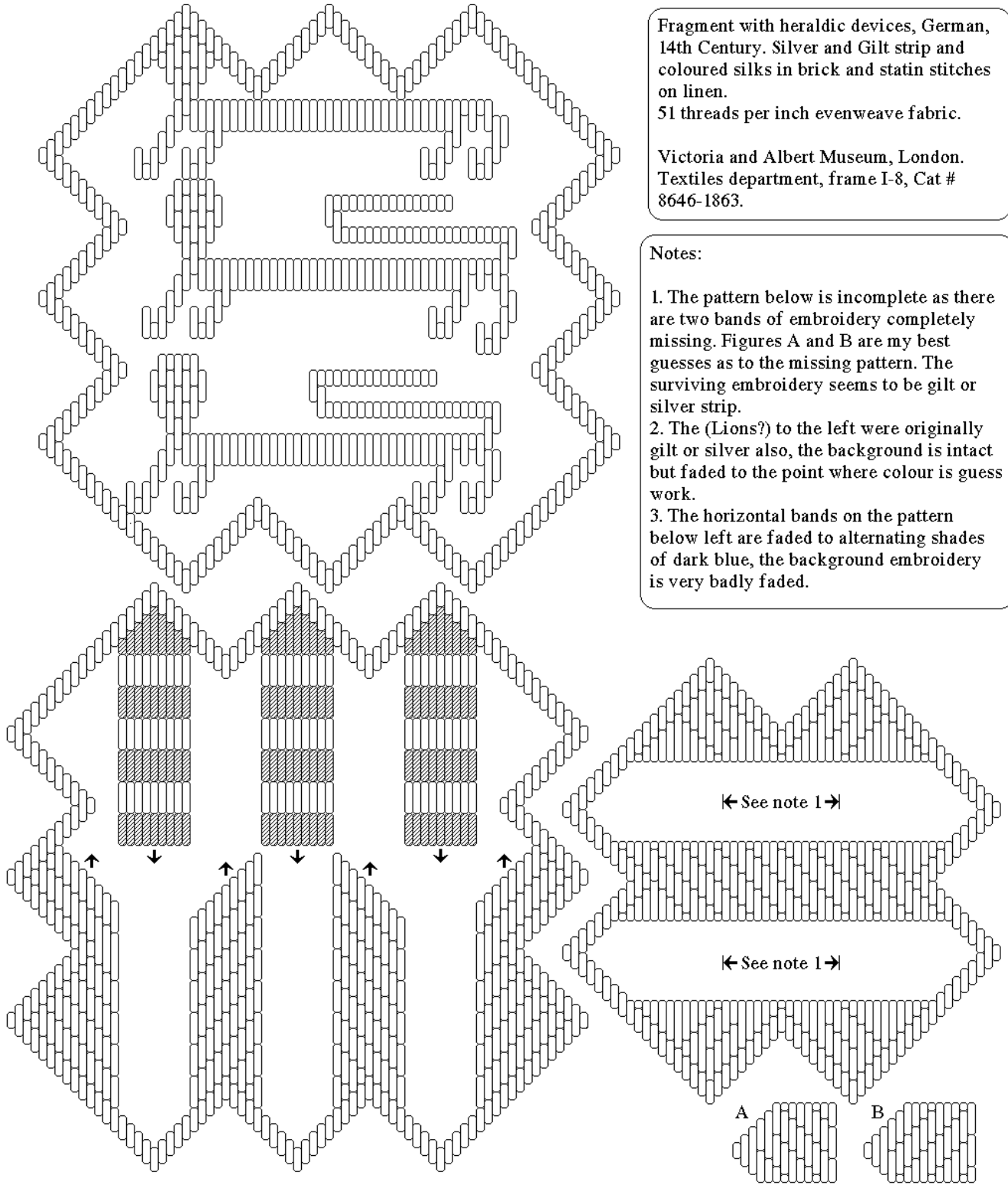
1. The pattern on the top left shows a heraldic beast on a striped field. The beast is badly faded and the original colour cannot be determined. The background is divided into two sets of different embroidery stitches (A & B), B being done in light blue and A being done in darker blue.
2. The pattern on the bottom left is partly damaged, the background embroidery for the top right and bottom left figures is missing. The remaining color scheme is shown in the diagram below.

A	B
B	A

A : Light colored figure on dark field  
 B : Gilt strip figure, background missing

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery IX: Fragment of a Reliquary Bag. Sheet 2 of 3.  
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Fragment with heraldic devices, German, 14th Century. Silver and Gilt strip and coloured silks in brick and statin stitches on linen.  
51 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles department, frame I-8, Cat # 8646-1863.

- Notes:
1. The pattern below is incomplete as there are two bands of embroidery completely missing. Figures A and B are my best guesses as to the missing pattern. The surviving embroidery seems to be gilt or silver strip.
  2. The (Lions?) to the left were originally gilt or silver also, the background is intact but faded to the point where colour is guess work.
  3. The horizontal bands on the pattern below left are faded to alternating shades of dark blue, the background embroidery is very badly faded.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery IX: Fragment of a Reliquary Bag. Sheet 3 of 3.  
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## **Pattern I: An Embroidered Pillow.**

**Date:** Late 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of Origin:** Unknown (Westphalia? See below)

**Current Location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Reference Collection, Dress and Textiles Department, Cat. # 1324A-1864.

### **Physical Description:**

This piece is notable in that it is the only piece I have seen so far where there are two existing examples. The remnant of a pillow in the Victoria and Albert Museum appears to be of the same pattern and similar colors to a more complete pillow in the collection of the Schloss Charlottenburg Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, Germany (Catalog # 88.663).

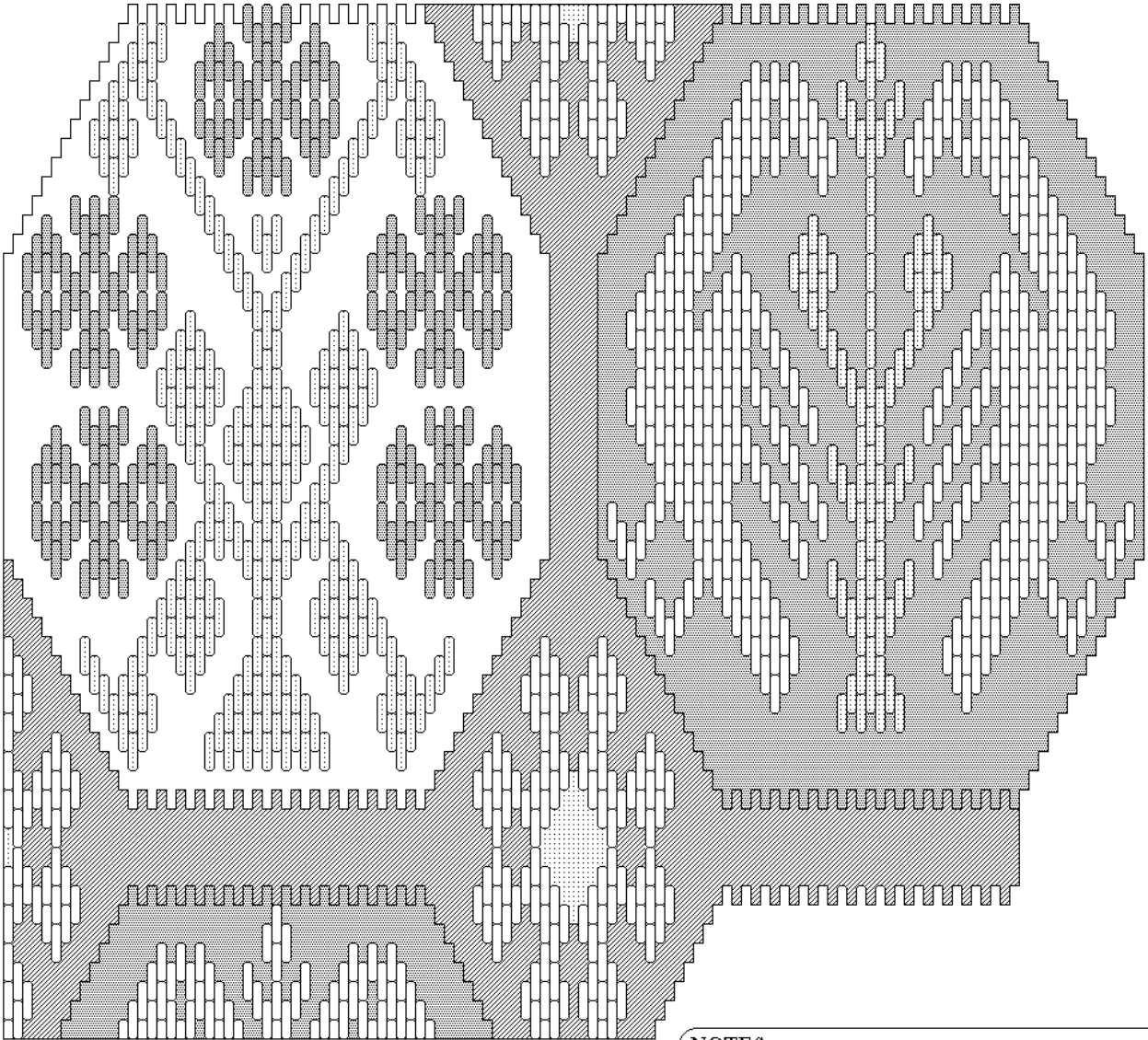
The Berlin pillow dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century, and comes from the Westphalia region<sup>11</sup>. It measures 11.5 inches by 16 inches approximately, and appears to be done in exactly the same pattern as the London example. As I have not yet had a chance to examine the Berlin pillow, I cannot give a color chart for it.

The pillow in the Victoria and Albert Museum, measures 13 inches by 22 inches. Because of a moderate degree of fading, the following color chart is only for guidance, and does not indicate the original shades. Photograph by Joyce Miller from her website (<http://www.tiac.net/users/drbeer/joyce/emb/embroid.htm>). Used with permission.

### **Materials:**




- Evenweave linen fabric, 28 threads per inch.
- Colored silk floss (White - DMC 746, Red - DMC 3721, Red - DMC 304, Green - DMC 320)





Altar Cushion, German, late 14th Century.  
Coloured silks on linen.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles Department, Reference Collection  
Cat. # 1324A-1864. 28 Thread per inch evenweave

 White (DMC 746)	 Red (DMC 3721)	Color Key
 Red (DMC 304)	 Green (DMC 320)	

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery X:  
An Embroidered Cushion

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NOTES:

1. This is the first case of there being two existing examples of a piece. The first is in the collection of the V&A, the other is held by the Kunstgewerbe Museum, Berlin (Cat. # 88.663).
2. The cushion in Berlin seems from its picture to be in very good shape, the cushion in London is by contrast worn, faded, and in pieces.
3. Because of the fading on the item I examined, the colors are suspect. The embroiderer should adjust the shade of each color to suit.
4. This is the largest embroidery so far studied, it measures 13" by 21" approximately.

## **Pattern J: An Embroidered Bag.**

**Date:** Late 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Place of Origin:** Unknown.

**Current Location:** Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Reference Collection, Dress and Textiles Department, Cat. # 8313-1863.

### **Physical Description:**

This bag is in the best condition of the three I have studied. This, combined with the fact that I was able to examine it without a display case in the way, gave me a good deal of detail about the design and construction of these bags. See page 41 for full details of construction.

The bag measures 5 inches wide by 5 ½ inches deep. It is, like the other examples, of a flat rectangular design. This bag is completely covered with the embroidery pattern shown, except for four laid goldwork motifs arranged in a diamond pattern on the center of the front (see second pattern sheet). The material of the bag is folded at the bottom and stitched up the sides, and a dark red silk lining is sewn in around the opening. The seams at the sides and around the mouth of the bag are covered/decorated with a double split stitch of dark red or purple silk and what appears to have been gilt floss (see second pattern sheet inset). This decorative stitching is composed of two sections, each running up one side seam and around one edge of the opening. How this decorative stitch was done is unknown. However, in recreating it I found that two alternating running stitches create the same effect.

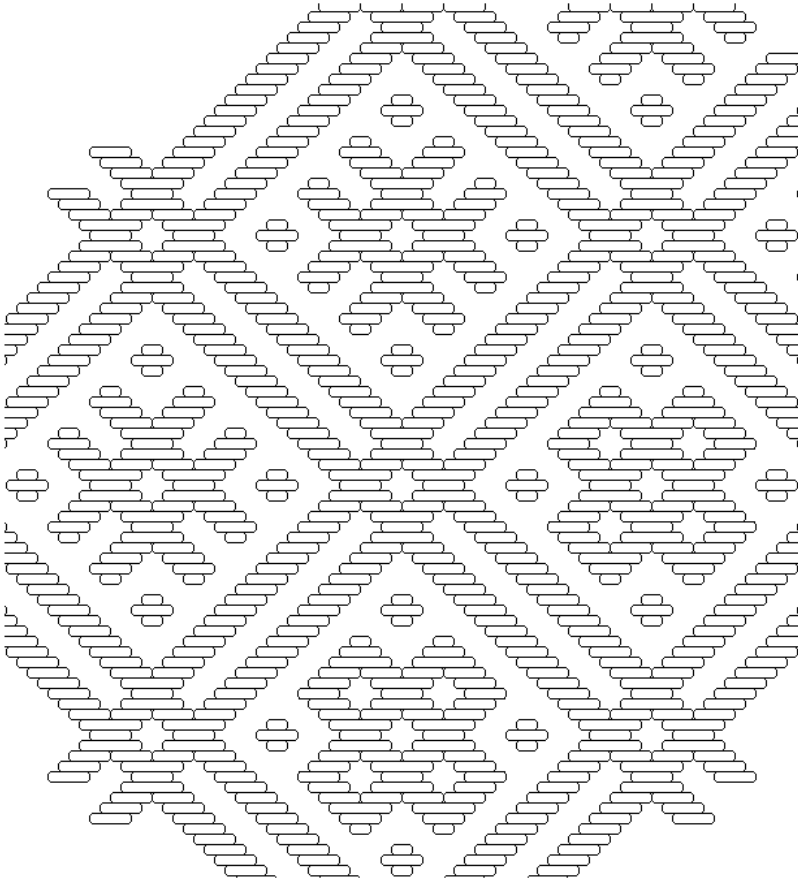
This is the only bag of this type I have seen with an intact drawstring. A detailed description of the drawstring can be found in Appendix B: Embellishments. There is also a loop of cord attached to the top corners, possibly for carrying the bag on a belt or hanging it. This is also discussed in Appendix B.

Note: The colors seem to be faded a bit, they originally would have been a bit brighter.

### **Materials:**

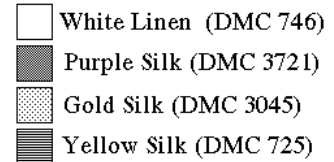
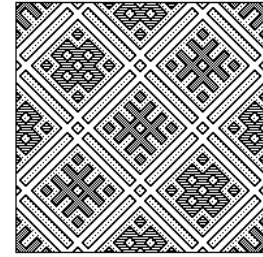
- Evenweave linen fabric, 37 threads per inch.
- Plied Linen thread (DMC 746)
- Pattern:
  - Colored silk floss (Purple - DMC 3721, Gold - DMC 3045, Yellow - DMC 725)
- Bag Decoration:
  - Gold Wire (for motifs)
  - Purple silk floss (Red - DMC 3721) (for seam decoration)
  - Gilt floss (Gold - DMC 3045) (for seam decoration)



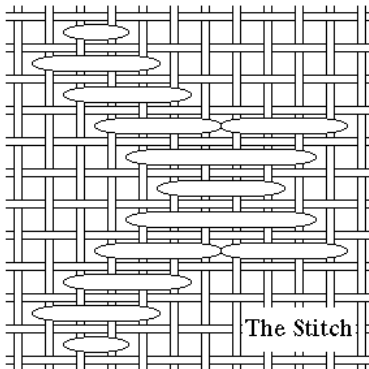


Bag, German, late 14th Century. Plied white linen thread, and coloured silks in satin stitch on linen. 37 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles department, Reference Collection,  
Cat # 8313-1863.



Color Key



#### NOTES:

1. Unlike all the examples studied so far, this bag is constructed such that the embroidery stitching runs horizontally instead of vertically. There is no obvious reason for this.
2. All the colors are faded somewhat, and would have been brighter originally.
3. The bag this pattern is taken from is 5" by 5 1/2", square bottomed, and lined with dark red silk. The fold is at the bottom with the sides stitched up. It closes with a double drawstring.
4. As in some of the other items on display in the V&A, the phrase "satin stitch" does not refer to the common modern embroidery stitch, but to any stitch that covers the fabric completely and smoothly.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery XI:  
An Embroidered Bag.

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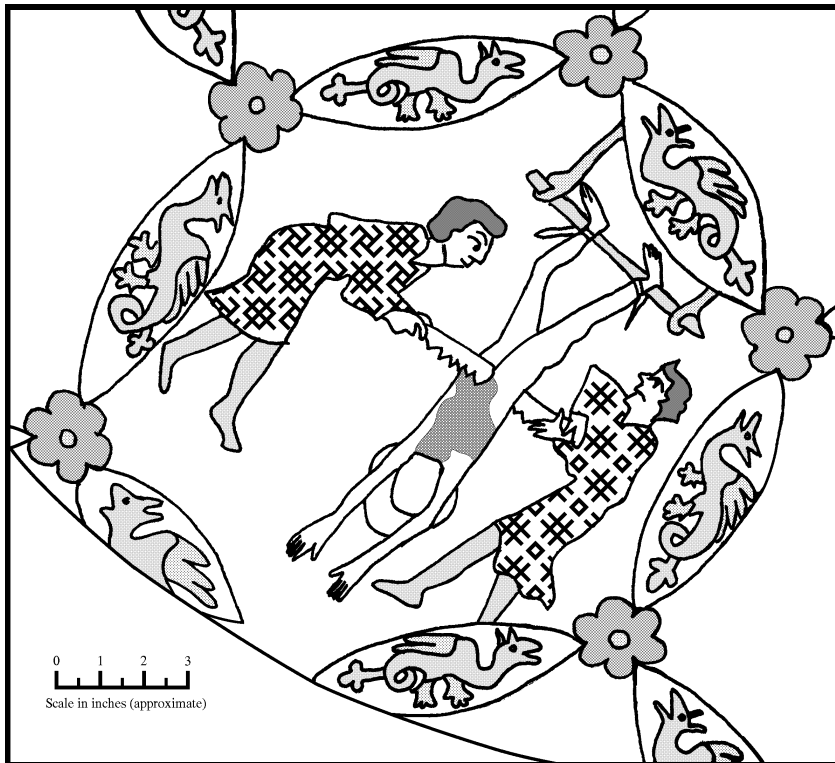
## **The Larger Pieces.**

While the scope of this book is limited to the smaller examples of this colorful form of embroidery, it would not be complete without mentioning the larger pieces. These included such items as copes, altar frontals, and wall hangings. Many examples survive in the various textile collections around the world, having been preserved by the Church over the centuries.

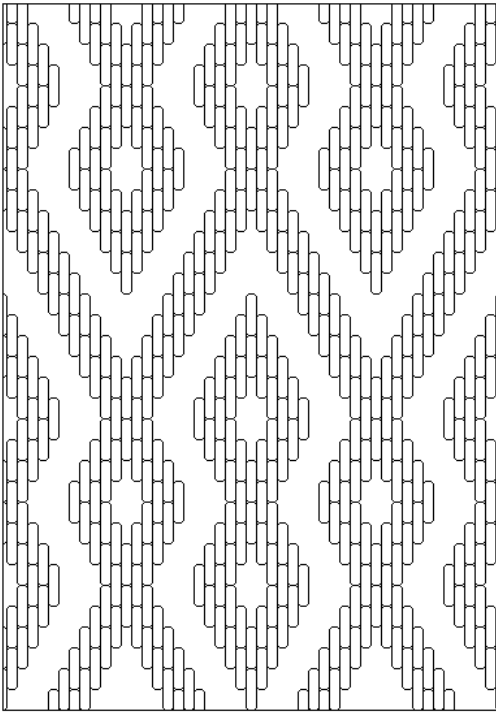
These large embroideries differ slightly from the smaller pieces. I will use my favorite piece, the Hildesheim Cope (see Figure 7) for an example.

The cope itself is of half-circle cut and measures 100 inches across its flat edge. As you can see from the sketch, the subject matter is grim. The martyrdom of the Saints is depicted in graphic detail in a series of panels completely covering the cope. It is immediately obvious that there is some difference in style between this example and those described in the preceding section. In the case of the cope the individual figures are outlined in stem stitch and are set off from the background of the scene by the colorful geometric patterns that fill them. I was lucky enough to be able to examine the cope up close, with no glass case interfering. The museum staff laid it out on a table for me and turned and moved it so that I was able to examine it in great detail. In places the embroidery has rotted or worn away, leaving the ground fabric exposed. In these places it is possible to see that the original construction lines are still in place. Unlike the smaller pieces that were worked by covering the entire area with a single repeating pattern, in the case of the larger works the design was drawn on first; possibly working from a sketch created by a professional artist<sup>12</sup>. The outlines of this design were then covered with stem and outline stitch. Finally, the areas were filled in with a variety of multicolored patterns. Whether or not the background was filled in varied from piece to piece. The background on the Hildesheim Cope is filled with a solid green brick stitch. On other hangings the linen ground fabric remains uncovered.

Because of the way these items are worked it is pointless to graph them, a more authentic approach would be to draw the scene you wish to embroider onto your fabric and then stitch it free hand.

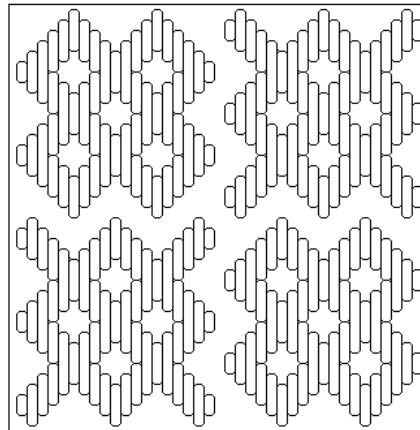
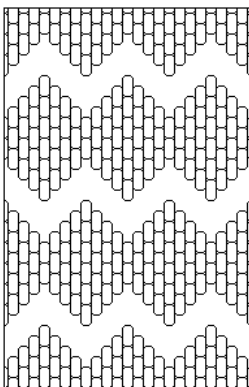
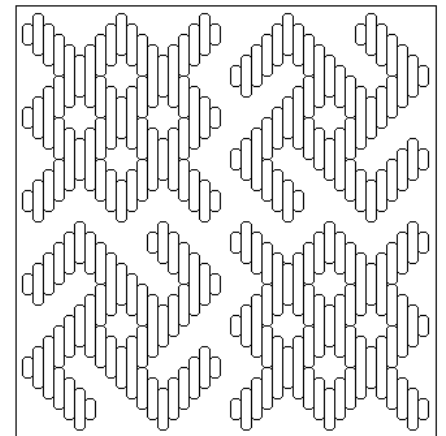
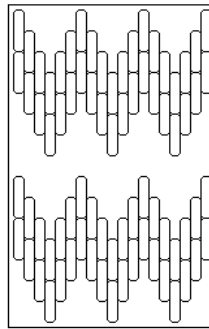
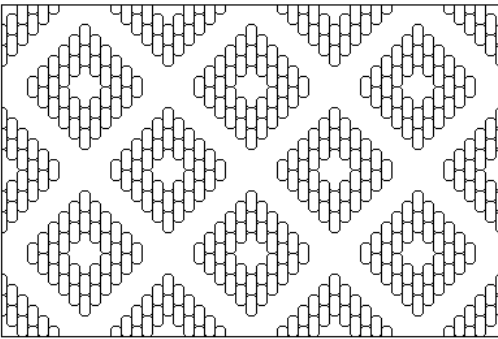
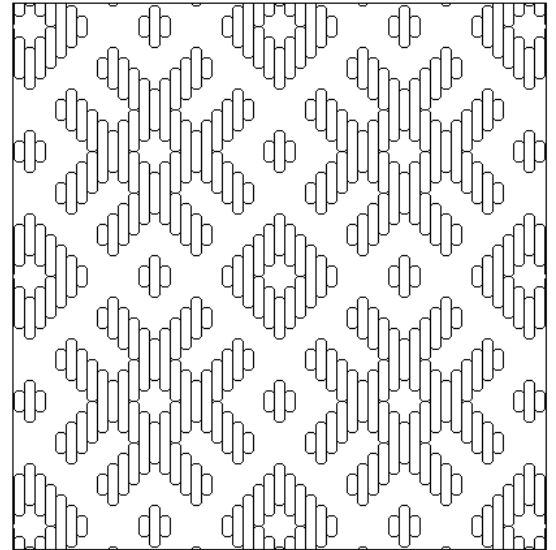
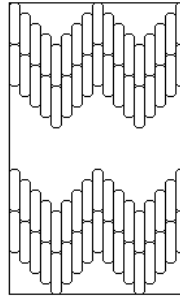


**Figure 6: A Detail of the Hildesheim Cope**



The Hildesheim Cope. Linen Embroidered with colored silks and silver gilt thread in brick stitch. German, late 13th - early 14th century.

Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Textiles dept., Reference Collection, Cat # 17-1873.



Notes:

These are a selection of the patterns used to decorate the scenes depicted on the Hildesheim cope. For the most part these employ a dark colored silk for the foreground and a lighter colored background.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery: Miscellaneous Patterns I: The Hildesheim Cope  
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## Section 4: Designing your own patterns

While the patterns in the preceding section provide the embroiderer with good examples of the kind of work that was being done in Germany in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, do not feel bound to only these patterns. Medieval embroiderers showed vast imagination and creativity in the design of their work. The modern embroiderer should feel equally free to design their own patterns. This section will therefore discuss the general design elements used in the examples above to provide the modern embroiderer with a guide to help in the creation of new designs in the style of Medieval Germany.

All the examples I have seen of this type of embroidery fall into three broad categories of style

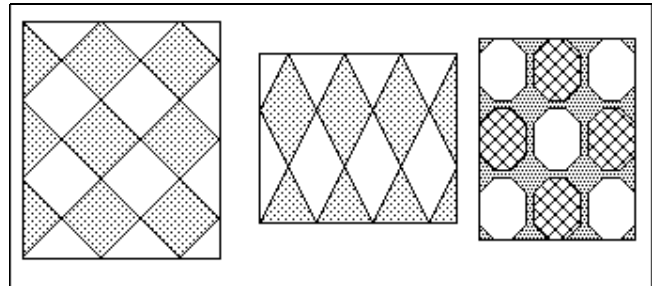
The first is composed of repeating geometric designs. Typically there are only one or two different geometric figures repeating across the design. There are no 'zoomorphic' (animal, plant, or human) components to the pattern. In addition, the entire ground fabric is covered completely by the needlework. Examples of these designs can be found in Patterns A, C, D, G, and J.

The next differs in that in addition to simple geometric designs, stylized zoomorphic figures are used. Often there will be one plant or animal figure and one geometric figure alternating. Other times you can see two different animal figures repeating. It is important to remember that in this style the zoomorphic figures are stylized to fit the pattern of the stitchery, and the stitchery is not adjusted to fit the figure. Examples can be found in Patterns B, E, F, H, and I. The pattern is usually repeating, though there are exceptions.

The final style differs from the above in that the background of the design may be left bare. A single design is not used to fill the fabric. Instead a number of geometric designs are used to fill in the outlines of the figures depicted. An excellent example is the Hildesheim Cope. The scenes were drawn onto the ground fabric first, the figures were outlined in stem stitch and the areas were filled with fields of brick stitch in a wide variety of geometric patterns.

### Design Elements.

In my examination of these examples of embroidery, I have noticed that there are elements of design that are shared by many of the pieces. Firstly, in common with much other medieval art, many of the patterns above show the area of the embroidery to be broken up into panels or lattices. For example, Pattern B is divided into lozenge shaped panels, while Pattern I is divided into eight sided panels. Not all examples of this art style show this type of division, but it is widely used. Figure 8 shows some of the common divisions, please keep in mind that the type of stitchery will limit the available ways that you can divide the field. Counted thread embroidery does not lend itself easily to curves and circles, for example. Squares, lozenges, and other simple straight lined divisions are the limits of the possibilities. The dividing line between two areas can be shown by a change in color, as in Pattern B. Or they can be separated by a band of embroidery, as in Pattern A or Pattern J. There are also cases where there is no division in the field, and the design is made up of two alternating geometric figures on



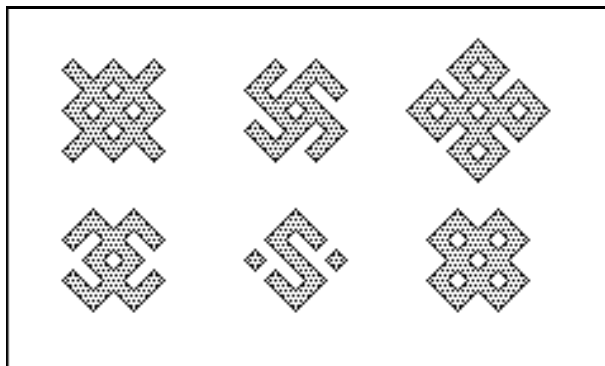
**Figure 7: Divisions**

a single colored field. For example, red and white figures repeating on a green field.

The next major element in the design of these patterns is repetition. In almost all of the examples you will find one or two motifs repeated over and over in the same colors to fill the embroidered area. The pattern of repetition depends on the number of motifs and is largely up to the designer.

There are a large number of geometric motifs used with this embroidery. While just about anything goes, there are a few guidelines you should be aware of. Firstly, each geometric figure should be symmetrical in some way; bilaterally or rotationally for example. Figure 9 gives some period examples. The figures should be of a reasonable size. Too large a motif and you end up with not much of a design. Use the geometric motifs in Section 3 as a guide.





**Figure 8: Common Motifs**

It is harder to give guidelines for the zoomorphic motifs. They should be simple, appropriate to the time period, and designed to fit the flow of the stitching as opposed to fitting the stitching to the motif. Studying the patterns in Section 3 will give you some idea of what these motifs should look like. You should pay special attention to the figures in Pattern B.

Please also keep in mind that artists of the Middle Ages looked at symmetry differently than we do in the modern era. If you create a design with plants or animals for the motifs, they should all be oriented the same way. For example the lions in Pattern B all face to the left, where the modern designer might be tempted to face them alternately left and right to 'balance' the design.

In terms of the colors used, there will typically be only two or at most three colors used in a given figure, whether it is geometric or zoomorphic in nature. Keep the number of different colors down. From what I have observed, the most colors used on a given piece in period is five.

Whether you are creating a simple pattern to cover a small pouch, or laying out the design for a large wall hanging, the principle is the same. The embroidery patterns should be colorful without being loud, the design should be simple but striking, and the count of the fabric should be considered so that the finished design will not be too 'coarse.'

### **Conclusion:**

The Westphalian embroideries of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provide the needleworker interested in Medieval embroidery with a style that is both easy to create and beautiful to look at. This type of stitch allows the embroiderer to finish large projects in a relatively short space of time, and can be learned without investing the months of practice and study that more demanding forms such as Opus Anglicanum and Blackwork require. The small number of colors used, and the fact that this style easily leads itself to small projects, means that it is extremely portable. This form of evenweave embroidery is then an ideal style for both the occasional hobbyist and the serious needleworker.

## Appendix A: Tables.

### THE V&A PICTURE LIBRARY

The Victoria and Albert Museum maintains an extensive library of black and white photographs of the items in their collection. Most items are represented, and copies are available for sale. As of November 1994 the price of a print was £7.00 not including postage and packing. The address is:

V&A Picture Library  
Victoria and Albert Museum  
South Kensington, London SW7 2RL  
United Kingdom

The negative numbers for the items in this article are listed in Table 1:

Table 1  
Negative numbers for items discussed in this article

Pattern #	Catalog #	Description	Negative #
A	8699-1863	A tasseled bag	GF.6314
B	859-1899	A heraldic fragment	FE.1979
C	1567-1902	A large bag	75885
D	7048-1860	An embroidered band	GF.6312
E	7093-1860	Dancing figures	FE.1980
F	7016-1860	Part of stole	67302
G	7071-1860	A banded fragment	GF.6313
H	8646-1863	A reliquary bag frag	75160
I	1324A-1864	Embroidered cushion	73917
J	8313-1863	A drawstring bag	None
	17-1873	The Hildesheim Cope	FE 448
	17-1873	The Hildesheim Cope	FE 449

If you are visiting the museum, the Picture Library is open to the public on weekdays. I highly recommend rummaging through the filing cabinets as a way to spend heaps of money.

### COLORS

In addition to graphing these items, I compared the colors on the original to a DMC color chart. This allows me to define the colors to a widely available standard. Due to fading, these colors may not be exactly as they were five hundred years ago, but in most cases I feel the match is close enough. The Pattern numbers in parenthesis indicate that the item is badly faded or worn and therefore the colors are best guesses.

Table 2  
DMC equivalents for colors found in the items discussed above

Color	DMC #	Pattern #
Cream	Ecru	B, (E)
White	White	B, (E), F, G
Red	304	I
Black	310	B
Blue	312	A
Green	320	I
Blue	322	F
Purple	327	C
Red	347	A, D, F
Green	368	A
Red	498	C
Blue	519	B
Green	563	D
Green	564	F
Green	580	B
Yellow	725	F, J
Gold	729	A
Off White*	746	A, D, C, I, J
Blue	827	(E), G
Dark Gold	831	C
Gold	833	C
Tan	842	G
Green	988	(E)
Gold	3045	G, J
Red/purple	3721	I, J

\*Unlike the other colors listed, which are substitutes for silk, this entry is a substitute for plied linen thread.

## THREAD COUNTS

Table 3  
Fabric thread counts for the items discussed above

Count	Pattern #
20	D
28	A, C, I
32	F
37	J
51	H
52	B, E
72	G

## Appendix B: Embellishments

The museum pieces I have examined are often just fragments, a small scrap which is all that remains of a much larger embroidery, but a few examples have survived almost completely intact. In the case of the three bags I have studied (patterns A, C, and J), more survives than just the embroidery. These items give good examples of the kinds of embellishment that might be used on pieces of this period.

### Tassels

The first bag I studied (see Pattern A), is pictured in Figure 1 at the beginning of this article. As you can see, it has three decorative tassels hanging from it. This is a common feature on bags of this period<sup>13</sup>. A closer examination of the bag shows that the tassels are not hung from the bag as is sometimes the case, but rather they are an integral part of the bag, with the threads making up the tassel passing through the fabric of the bag itself.

Whichever way they are attached, simple tassels are not hard to make, and dress up a pouch considerably.

Disclaimer: I make no guarantees as to the authenticity of this method of tassel making. I worked it out on my own one afternoon, and it seems the easiest method.

To make a separate tassel, one that will have to be attached later, you need a skein of embroidery floss of the correct color. I haven't tried this with silk yet, but DMC cotton works well. Decide what length you want the finished tassel to be and cut a square of cardboard the same length (see Figure 10a). Placing the end of the floss at one end of the card (which will then become the bottom of the tassel), wrap the floss around and around, keeping it snug, but not tight, and trying to keep the turns tightly bunched in the middle of the card (see Figure 10b). The number of turns you take around the card depends on the size and thickness of the tassel desired. When you have enough material looped on the card, cut off the remaining floss taking care to leave the end flush with the end of the card you started on.

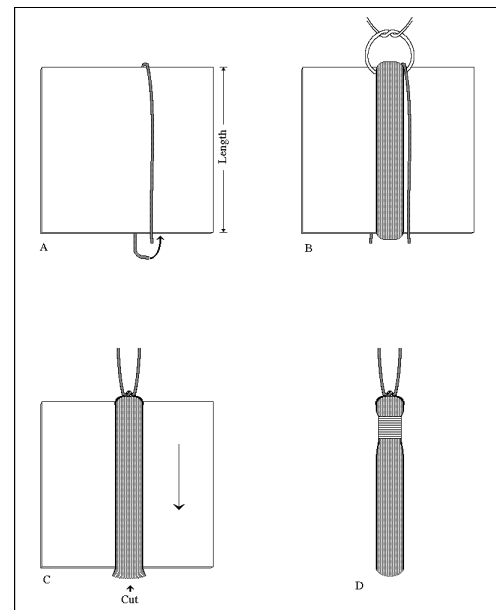
Next, take a three to four inch length of floss from the leftover material. Thread it onto a needle and run the thread under all the turns of floss on the card pulling it to the 'top' of the tassel. Tie it tightly around the turns of floss (see Figure 10b). Using scissors or a razor blade, carefully cut through the loops opposite the knot and remove the card (see Figure 10c).

Having accomplished this, pull the strands of the tassel down together tightly, and wrap a length of floss of the color of your choice around the top end of the tassel (see Fig 10d). Wrap it neatly, and tightly, about a quarter to a half of an inch wide. This done, use a needle to pull the loose end of the wrap under the turns to secure it. The wrapping on a tassel need not be the same color or material as the tassel itself. On the bag in question the tassels appear to be wrapped with a gold or gilt covering.

Finally, trim the end of the tassel neatly with a pair of scissors.

Note: if you wish to make very small tassels, you can use the above method with a card TWICE the length of the finished tassel, tie and wrap BOTH ends and cut in the middle, making two tassels in one go.

The finished tassel can be attached to the project by using the free ends of the top knot to tie it in place, threading the floss through the fabric with needles.



**Figure 9: Constructing a Tassel**

The second type of tassel, the one shown in Figure 1, is constructed in much the same way. This is a bit more difficult. The floss must be carefully threaded through the point on the fabric it is to be attached to each time it is wrapped around the card. No top knot is required, just cut through the bottom loops and remove the card, then wrap it as above. This method gives a stiffer tassel, one that doesn't hang so much as stand out.

## Cords

The other two bags examined do not possess tassels, but they do have cords attached. From their placement they must have served to hang or carry the bag. The ends of the cords are attached to the bags at the upper corners on either side of the opening. They are very similar in appearance, and were probably both constructed in the same fashion. It is possible that the cords were made using the then popular method of 'finger-loop' braiding<sup>14</sup>, or by the more familiar technique of plaiting. In either case the finished product looks much the same, a thin cord of circular cross section. Both cords are made of silk thread and each is of only one color throughout. It is difficult to know for sure exactly how many elements make up these braids, but any number from four (the minimum number to make a circular braid) on up were used in period. From a close examination of the braids, I estimate that between ten and sixteen strands were used to make the cords on the bags in question.

### Four strand plaiting:

Rather than to teach fingerloop braid, I will limit this discussion to the four strand circular plait. This is simple enough to learn quickly and produces a good-looking final result. If you wish, to learn fingerloop braiding, I recommend Complete Anachronist # 108: Fingerloop Braids

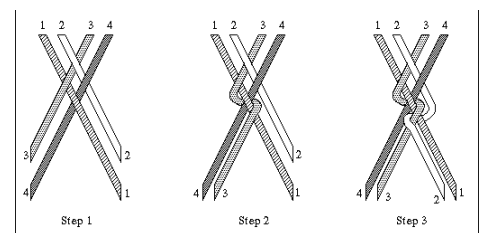
The material, and the size and length of the strands, will determine the finished look and size of the braid. As you are using four strands, the finished cord will be approximately four times as wide as the individual strands. In making a cord for one project, I settled on cotton embroidery floss as a material. I was then able to use a color close to that of the cord on the original, and by adjusting the number of plies in each strand; I was able to make a cord of the desired diameter. Silk floss would work even better, as it is a more authentic material and the final look and feel of the cord would be greatly enhanced.

Once the materials are at hand you need to cut the individual strands to a length a good bit longer than you plan the finished cord. As the material is plaited you will find that it shortens up quite a bit. Also, you will need a certain amount of material to hold onto as you work, I would allow for at least a foot of waste left over when you are finished. If you are not using expensive materials I would suggest cutting the material to twice the desired finished length.

When the strands are all cut, place them neatly together and tie one end of the resulting bundle in a tight overhand knot. Secure this knot at a convenient working height. As I do most of my work sitting in tailor seat on the couch, I use a safety pin to secure the knot to the arm of the couch.

As we are only considering a four-element braid here, you then must separate the strands into four equal bundles. Working slowly and carefully until you get the feel of it, and making sure to keep the plait tight and even; start to plait the four elements as shown in Figure 11. Take care that as you work the loose ends of the four bundles do not become tangled.

When you have the length of braid you desire (remember to leave some extra), finish the braid with another over hand knot.



**Figure 10: Four Strand Plaiting**

### Attaching the cord.

With the cord finished and neatly trimmed, you can now attach it to your bag. This should be done before you sew in the lining. The end of the cord is placed a quarter to a half of an inch below the top of the bag, at one end of the opening. It is

then sewn to the fabric of the bag using strong thread, taking care that the stitching does not snag or penetrate the embroidery. When both ends are secure, the bag can be lined.

### Drawstrings.

Only one of the bags I have examined has an intact drawstring. But the small holes along the top of the bag shown in Figure 1 suggest that it was closed in the same fashion. I have also seen several examples of this kind of closure on bags from this period<sup>15</sup>. The bag in question (see Pattern J) is the most intact of the three bags in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. As it was in the reference collection, and not in a glass frame or case, I was able to examine it in fine detail with the assistance of one of the museum staff.

The drawing in Figure 12 shows the details of the closure. As you can see, there are two separate drawstrings, one issuing from each end of the bag. The strings do not pass through the bag in a fabric tube, as is seen in some modern bags. Instead the drawstrings are threaded in and out of the fabric near the mouth of the bag, the two strings sharing the same holes. In the illustration, these holes are enlarged for the sake of clarity, but on the original are actually not punched or stitched open. They are simply the points in the fabric where the drawstring has been threaded through. This method of attaching the drawstrings causes the fabric of the bag to fold accordion-fashion as the strings are pulled. The tight fit of the strings with the fabric ensures the bag will stay closed on its own. On the bag in question, each drawstring is composed of a number of separate strands that are not braided together. As the strands exit the bag at each end, they are gathered and secured by a tight wrap of similar material. From this point the strands are plaited together in a circular braid. After a few inches of this the strands are separated into two groups and plaited as two separate braids. These braids each split a little further along bringing the total ends to four. The loose threads of each braid are then worked back into the braid to make a neat end.

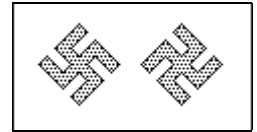


Figure 11: A Diagram of the Drawstrings

## Appendix C: Symbolism

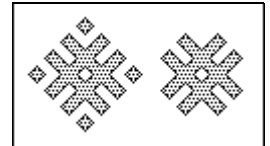
In researching this style, I soon noticed that there are several design motifs that recur over and over. The same geometric figure might be used in several different designs. It occurred to me that there might be a reason for this other than the obvious one that the embroiderers would tend to reuse successful designs and patterns, and copy them from each other. The possibility that these motifs might have a symbolic meaning seemed worth pursuing, and so I kept track of the figures that appeared most often. A search of the available books<sup>16</sup> on the meaning of symbols was instructive. I was able to attach at least a tentative symbolic meaning to each of the four motifs below. Given the strong component of symbolism in art, especially Medieval art forms, it seems reasonable that the workers of this type of needlework were aware of the meaning behind their patterns. However, if you look hard enough, it is possible to find hidden meaning in anything, so do not allow overemphasis on symbols to dictate what patterns you use.

The first symbol to be discussed is perhaps the oldest. The flyflot or swastika was first known to be used over 3000 years ago in what is now Pakistan<sup>17</sup>. Its use soon spread to most of Asia and Europe, and was in use to varying degrees<sup>18</sup> throughout the Medieval period. While it is not used on any items on public display at the V&A, the Hildesheim cope and several of the wall hangings I have seen pictures of do contain it. There are a wide variety of meanings attached to this symbol, all for the most part positive. This is a symbol of power and good luck<sup>19</sup>, especially in the Celtic, Teutonic and Scandinavian cultures, where it is also associated with the pagan thunder god, Thor<sup>20</sup>. In the modern period it has unfortunately become inextricably associated with Fascism, Nazi Germany and the horror of the Holocaust. Because of the emotional and political problems now attached to this ancient symbol, I strongly discourage the reader from using it in a design. It is included here for the sake of completeness.



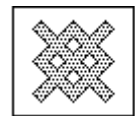
**Figure 12: The Flyflot**

This design, which I have dubbed the 'crosshatch', appears in no less than three of the patterns above. It also shows up in some of the larger pieces. Unlike the Swastika, it has no overall meaning. In alchemy it was used both as a sign for lead and in some cases "spritus" or alcohol<sup>21</sup>. It has also been used on pharmacological recipes with the meaning "Take in God's name" and "may this be good for you"<sup>22</sup>.



**Figure 13: The CrossHatch**

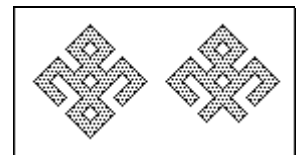
Another symbol that appears several times in the pieces I have seen is the fret. The only meaning I have been able to attach to this one is another alchemical sign. In alchemy this symbol was used to denote iron vitriol or iron<sup>23</sup>. It was also a popular charge in heraldry. If there was a deeper meaning to this design I have not found it.



**Figure 14: The Fret**

The final of the four motifs I will discuss is a strange one. In its two variations it appears over and over in the items I have seen. It is also used in other styles of needlework in the same time frame. However, a search of the books on the subject of symbolism turned up nothing. Looked at in the right way it can be taken for a highly stylized eagle. In heraldic terms an eagle displayed. In my opinion this is just what it is. The eagle is a recurring symbol in German history, dating from the time of Charlemagne<sup>24</sup>.

As you can see, in those symbols that can be identified, there is a strong positive bent. Even given the lack of overt Christian symbolism, luck and good will are a recurring theme. If there was a symbolic component to this style, it was a positive one. It might be nice to keep the possible meaning of the designs you use in mind as you work



**Figure 15: The 'Eagle'**

## Appendix D: Drawstring Bag Construction: Two Examples (overleaf)

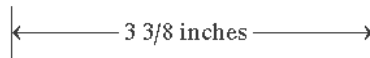
While there is no drawstring on the bag currently, a careful examination of the top of the bag shows a series of small holes in the cloth band that covers the edge of the opening (see below left). This suggests that there was such a drawstring originally. Allowing for the fact that the top of the bag is now twisted slightly to the left, I have reconstructed the original drawstring (see below right).



Holes for missing drawstring



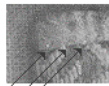
A reconstruction of the drawstring.



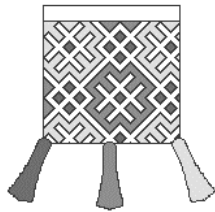
Bag, German, 14th - 15th Century. Plied white linen thread and colored silks in satin stitch on linen. 28 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Textiles department, frame I-9, Cat # 8699-1863.

The opening of the bag is finished by a cloth strip, probably a woven ribbon, tacked down with a running stitch.



Note that the tassels are not attached to the bag, but are part of the bag, the threads of the tassel are woven through the fabric of the bag. The center tassel hangs straight down while the two end ones angle out (see below).



The bag appears to be made from one piece of fabric, folded along one side (the left side in the picture) and stitched closed along the bottom and the remaining side. As the bag is twisted slightly left along the top, it is possible to see part of one of the seams on the right side.

3 3/8 inches

#### NOTES:

1. This is a companion file to GEMB01.GIF (the embroidery pattern), and GMBAG2.GIF (a color scan of a photograph of the embroidered bag).
2. For another example of an embroidered bag from this period, see the files GEMB11.GIF and GEMB11B.GIF.
3. As the bag was displayed in a glass frame, I was only able to examine one side of it, and I was not able to examine the lining, if any.

14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery I(B):  
An Embroidered Bag - Construction Details.

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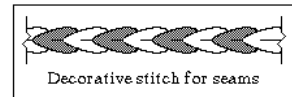
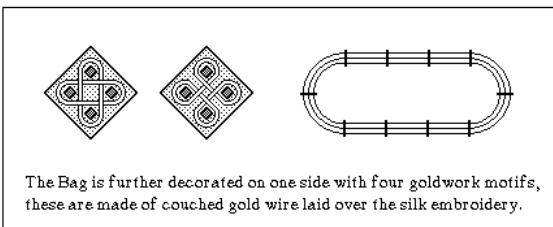
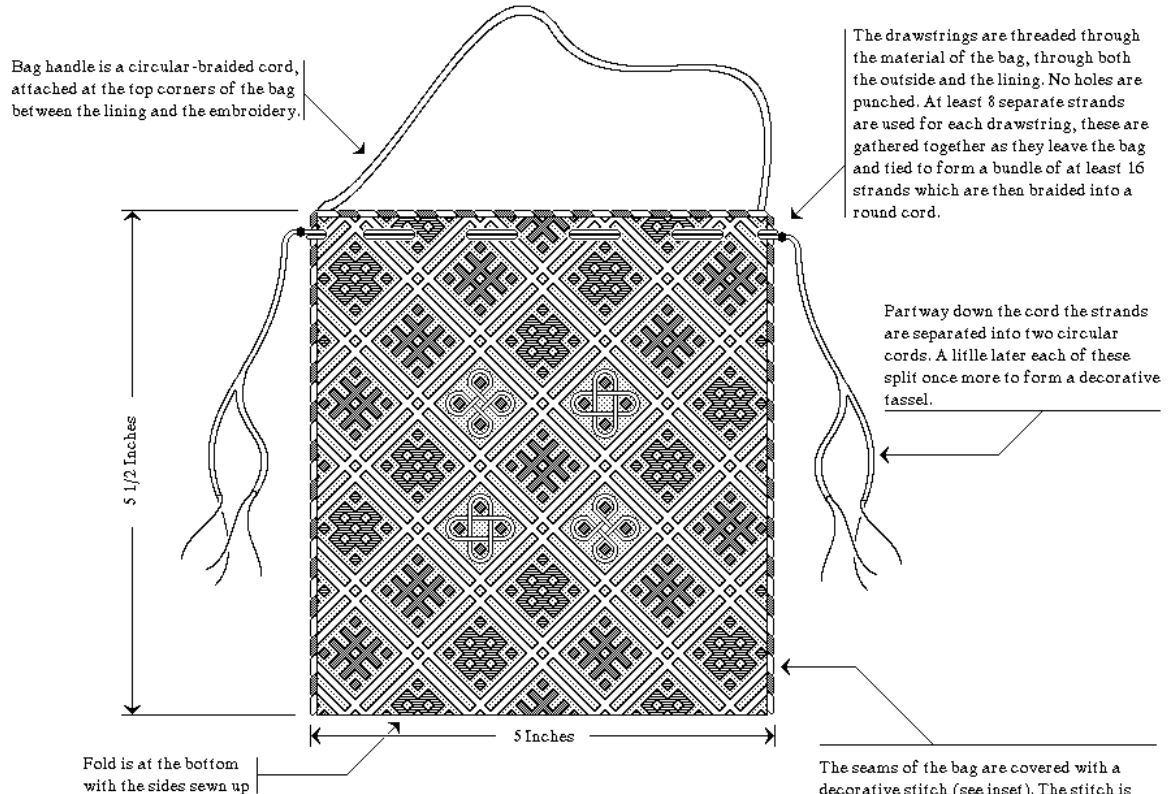


## Notes:

1. This is a companion to the file GEMB11.GIF.
2. I was able to examine the bag very closely, without the interference of a museum case. This allowed me to make note of many of the construction details. Such as the seam decoration and the design of the drawstrings.
3. The bag is lined with red silk.

Bag, German, late 14th Century. Plied white linen thread, and coloured silks in satin stitch on linen. 37 threads per inch evenweave fabric.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Textiles department, Reference Collection,  
Cat # 8313-1863.



14th & 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery XI(B):  
An Embroidered Bag: Construction Details.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL United Kingdom. Phone: 071 938-8500. Opening Times: 1000 - 1750 Tuesday - Sunday, 1200 - 1750 Monday. Note: Most of the items mentioned in this article are on public display in the V&A's textile rooms (rooms 100, 101); the specific frames are I-8 and I-9. The textiles rooms at the V&A contain a large number of cabinets, each of which contains 144 frames. These are 2 ½ by 3 foot glass frames containing textile exhibits. These can be taken out and examined in great detail on the tables and easels provided. The following items are not on open display: The Hildesheim Cope (17-1873), The Embroidered Cushion (pattern I), and the Drawstring Bag (pattern J). These items are housed in the reference collection and can be viewed only by prior arrangement. Contact the Curator of the Textiles and Dress Collection well in advance for an appointment.

<sup>2</sup> The Victoria and Albert Museum has only part of its vast holdings on public display. The rest are held in the Reference Collection and are available for study by appointment (see note 1).

<sup>3</sup> Marie Schuette and Sigrid Muller-Christensen, The Art of Embroidery. trans. by Donald King. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), Page 110, Plate 177. Page 308, para 177.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Bassee, German Renaissance Patterns For Embroidery: A Facsimile Copy of Nicolas Bassee's New Modelbuch of 1568. (Austin: Curious Works Press, 1994). See plates 2, 33, 35, 36, 39, 97, and 98.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Gostelow, Embroidery of All Russia. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), Pgs 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Harris, Ed. Textiles, 5000 years: an international history and illustrated survey. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993). p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> Mary E. Jones, A History of Western Embroidery. (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1969). p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Bonie Young, "Needlework by Nuns: A Medieval Religious Embroidery." The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, February, 1970. Page 263

<sup>9</sup> Mary E. Jones, A History of Western Embroidery. (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1969). p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> Marie Schuette and Sigrid Muller-Christensen, The Art of Embroidery. trans. by Donald King. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), Page 110, Plate 177. Page 308, para 177.

<sup>11</sup> For pictures of the Berlin pillow see: Kay Staniland, Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers. (London: British Museum Press, 1991) p. 37, and Marie Schuette and Sigrid Muller-Christensen, The Art of Embroidery. trans. by Donald King. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964). p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia C. Bath, Embroidery Masterworks: Classic patterns and techniques for contemporary application. (Chicago: Henry Regnrey, 1972). p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Kay Staniland, Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers. (London: British Museum Press, 1991) p. 43. Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard, Medieval Finds From Excavations in London Vol. 3: Dress Accessories c.1150- c.1450. (London: HMSO, 1991). pp. 342-350.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of finger-loop braiding, plaiting, and medieval cording in general, see Crowfoot, E., Pritchard, F. and Staniland K. Medieval Finds From Excavations in London: Volume 4, Textiles and Clothing c.1150- c.1450. pp 131-141.

<sup>15</sup> Kay Staniland, Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers. (London: British Museum Press, 1991) p. 43. Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard, Medieval Finds From Excavations in London Vol. 3: Dress Accessories c.1150- c.1450. (London: HMSO, 1991). pp. 342-350.

<sup>16</sup> Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991), and <sup>16</sup> J.C. Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991). p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991). p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> J.C. Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978). p. 166.

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<sup>20</sup> J.C. Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978). p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991). p. 464.

<sup>22</sup> Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991). p. 464.

<sup>23</sup> Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991). p. 466.

<sup>24</sup> Mary E. Jones, A History of Western Embroidery. (New York: Watson-Guption, 1969). p. 106.