



Bayeaux Stitch for Beginners

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1. Introduction

Bayeaux stitch is also referred to as laid and couched work. Extant examples of this stitch have been found in Norway, and embroidered by the Normans in the 10th and 11th centuries to create large wall hangings, including:

- the Ron Fragment, which is a 10th century wall hanging depicting the warrior Byrhtnoth. A black and white detail image of this fragment can be seen at [The Bayeux "Tapestry" by Isela di Bari on The West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild \(last accessed April 2014\)](#).
- the Bayeux Tapestry, which is an 11th century wall hanging, which can be seen in full on the [Museum of Reading's Britain's Bayeux Tapestry website \(2000-2004\)](#).

This stitch is commonly referred to as 'Bayeux stitch' because it is the primary stitch used on the famous Bayeux Tapestry. Laid and couched work is useful in creating wall hangings and large embroideries because most of the thread is kept on the front of the piece, and it is a relatively fast way of filling in large shapes/motifs.

The following instructions and information regarding this stitch will be explained in the context of the Bayeux Tapestry.

1.1 Period materials

The Bayeaux Tapestry has an off-white, tabby woven, linen base with a thread count of 18 to 19. The embroidery was completed in dyed wool threads.

In this style of wall hanging, the embroidery does not cover the entire surface of the base fabric. The background is intentionally left blank, with only the motifs embroidered.

1.2 Period motifs

Motifs depicted in the Bayeaux Tapestry are quite varied, including human figures, animals, comets, buildings, boats, text and many other items. The body of the tapestry contains many scenes making up the story of significant historical events including the coronation of King Harold, King Harold's death and the subsequent victory and coronation of the Norman King William the Conqueror.

The borders often contain jokes, commentary or additional context for the various scenes.

Like with the background, bare skin on human figures (particularly faces and hands) was left devoid of embroidery, except for the outline stitching of various features (e.g. the eyes, mouth, nose).

2. Stitch instructions

Caveat: these instructions aim to teach a basic working method of how to do Bayeaux stitch, and are based on how I was taught to do this stitch. There are likely to be differences between my working method and historical methods.

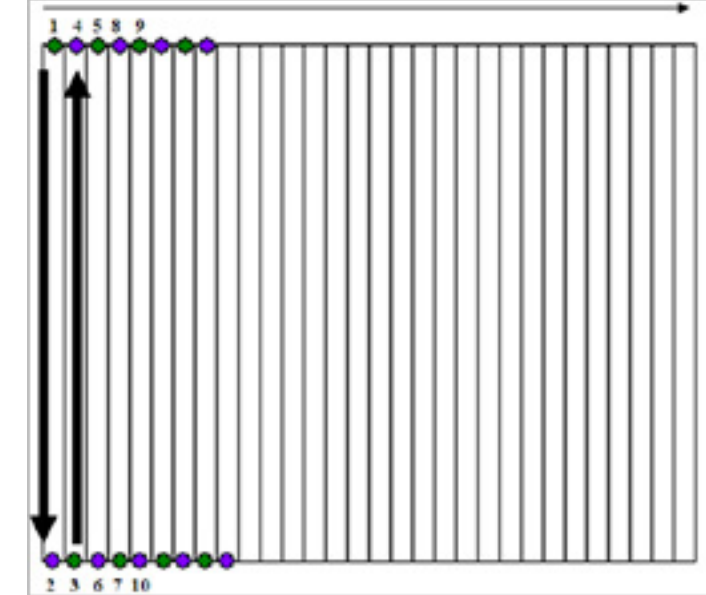
2.1 Before you start

To learn a basic method of undertaking this stitch, it is recommended that you draw a square (approximately 4cm by 4cm is a good starting size) onto some linen/cotton fabric and mount it onto an embroidery hoop/frame. I particularly recommend using a white cotton or linen fabric with an obvious and even weave (such as the material used in cross stitch) as it will make it easier to attempt Bayeaux stitch for the first time. It is also recommended that you use a plied wool embroidery thread, though you could use cotton as a cheaper and more readily available substitute.

2.2 A working method

In laid and couched work, long parallel threads are laid close-packed over the motif. It is important to note that there will be practically no thread on the back of the fabric as, when you put the needle through the fabric (Figure 1), you bring it out directly beside the stitch you just made.

Figure 1: The first step in Bayeaux Stitch is to lay the first series of thread. The green dots indicate the needle is moving from the underside to the top side of the fabric and the purple dots indicate where the needle is moving from the top side to the underside of the fabric. The stitch is worked top to bottom, left to right, to fill up the entire motif in a parallel fashion. Image source: image created by Ceara Shionnach, 2010



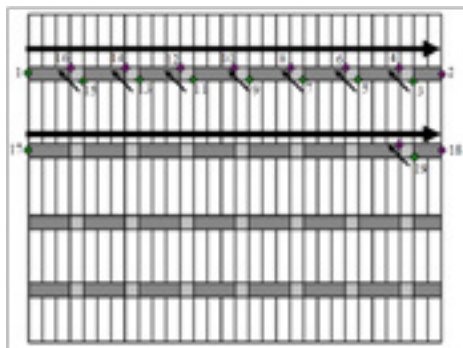
A second series of threads, which could be the same colour or a different colour (e.g. to give texture to chain mail), are laid down perpendicular to the first series of threads (Figure 2). However, the second series of threads are laid down with even gaps between them – they are set at about 3mm intervals in the Bayeaux Tapestry. Whatever your interval, the important thing is to be consistent. The second series of stitches are then couched down with a third series of thread, stitched at regular intervals.

To conserve thread (and sanity), I recommend using the klosterstich couching method to sew down the second/third series of threads.

An outline of a Bayeaux Tapestry project I've done, in collaboration with Mistress Isobel le Bretoun, which includes information on the design and execution stages can be found on my blog under 2009 > Bayeaux Tapestry Panel:

[Gift from the Barony of Politarchopolis to Siridean.pdf](#)

Figure 2: The second and third series of threads can be embroidered using the *klosterstich technique*. The second series of threads are laid down and couched over the first series of threads (Figure 1) at parallel, consistent intervals (i.e. with gaps between them, showing the first series of threads). Image source: image created by Ceara Shionnach, 2014



2.3 A discussion of stitch details

Unlike with Klosterstich where the entire design is embroidered in the same direction as the weave/weft of the base fabric, the direction of the couched and laid threads is observed to change both within and between motifs in the Bayeux Tapestry.

When looking at the high resolution images of the Bayeux Tapestry, one can observe, for example, that direction of the embroidery in the sleeves can be perpendicular to the direction of the embroidery in the body of the tunic worn by a human figure. Some close-ups of the stitching, including examples of the varied directions within motifs, can be seen in [BBC's The Bayeux Tapestry - Seven Ages of Britain episode](#) (available online, first broadcast on 7 October 2009).

Sometimes, the second/third series of couched threads (Figure 2) are a different colour to the first series of laid threads (Figure 1). This can give texture to the motif - for example, giving the appearance of chainmail or decorative detail on clothing of figures. An example of this from the Bayeux Tapestry can be seen on the image of the man riding a horse holding a hawk displayed on Medievalists.net webpage: [The Bayeux Tapestry \(2009\)](#).

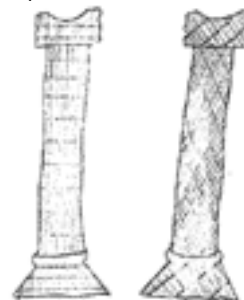
Figure 3 and 4 respectively show a drawing of a bird motif from the border, and a human figure, from the Bayeux Tapestry with the direction of the second series (the couched threads) in bold. The changes in direction in the clothing in Figure 4 give texture to the folds and direction of the fabric.

Figure 3: A sketch of a bird from the border (left) and a man (right) from the Bayeux Tapestry with the directions of the embroidery drawn in. The bolder lines depict the couched threads, as depicted in Figure 2. Image source: Sketched by Ceara Shionnach, 2010.



Figure 4 demonstrates the difference between the embroidery facing the same direction (left) and the embroidery facing different directions (right). By playing with the direction of your embroidery, you can create detail and texture.

Figure 4: A sketch of two pillars, one with the embroidery all in the same direction (left) and one with embroidery in different directions (right). It demonstrates the different detail that can be achieved by direction. Image source: Sketched by Ceara Shionnach, 2010.



The outline can be the same or a different colour to the Bayeux stitching. In the Bayeux Tapestry, the outlines are completed in stem stitch or outline stitch. [Stitch School by Janet McCaffrey/Primrose Design](#) has description of how to do these stitches, and the differences between them.

3. References

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These (and other) class notes are available for download from Ceara's blog:

<http://cearashionnach.wordpress.com/>

