



# Klosterstich for Beginners

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## 1. Introduction

Klosterstich is referred to by many names, including kloster stitch, Nun's stitch and convent stitch. This stitch was commonly associated with convents in 14th-15th century Germany (Historical Needlework Resources, accessed January 2014; Medieval & Renaissance Material Culture, accessed January 2014), and was used to create elaborate wall hangings. Such wall hangings often had linen bases with the stitch completed in colourful wool threads.

Bokhara and Roumanian stitches are sometimes referred to as the same as klosterstich, and sometimes described as subtly different stitches. Mary Corbet (2008) discusses on her blog the subtle differences she observed between these stitches. The primary differences between klosterstich and these other stitches, Corbet summarises, are that the couching of klosterstich tends to be worked vertically instead of horizontally and that the couching stitches in klosterstich are supposed to be as invisible as possible (i.e. not making a visible pattern with the couching stitches).

Klosterstich stitch has many similarities with the 11th century Bayeux stitch in that they are both economical, relatively fast stitches that are worked in a similar way using colourful wool embroidery thread to cover large areas for wall hangings. I say economical because both stitches result in the majority of the embroidery thread sitting on the surface of the base fabric, with relatively little wastage on the back. The main difference between these two stitches is that klosterstich is a self-couching technique using one thread whereas Bayeux stitch uses a secondary thread to couch with. Another major difference is in the patterns embroidered; klosterstich was used to embroider the entire surface of a wall hanging whereas the background of Bayeux stitch was left devoid of embroidery (leaving the linen base showing).

Extant klosterstich wall hangings tended to have compartmental design elements that were embroidered in patterns similar in style to illuminated manuscripts (particularly those of German origin) of the 14th and 15th centuries (Medieval & Renaissance Material Culture, accessed January 2014).

Extant klosterstich designs are generally filled in with blocks of colour, rather than with shading (de Holacombe, 2008). The outlines were done in couching, split stitch (especially for detail), chain stitch and stem stitch (Medieval & Renaissance Material Culture, accessed January 2014; de Holacombe, 2008).

There are many photographs of 14th-15th century klosterstich wall hangings available online. Some examples include:

- there are many links to photos of various klosterstich wall hangings at the bottom of the [Medieval & Renaissance Material Culture's webpage, Klosterstickerei](#) (accessed January 2014); and
- several colour images of period klosterstich wall hangings can be observed on [Christian de Holacombe's online article, Klosterstich: convent embroideries in wool \(2008\)](#), published on the West Kingdom Needleworker's Guild website.

## 2. Stitch instructions

*Caveat: these instructions aim to teach a basic working method of how to do klosterstich. As I've not seen an extant (or detailed close up) klosterstich embroidery piece, 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 klosterstich 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.

Secondly, you need to identify whether the thread you're going to embroider with is S-twisted or Z-twisted (see figure 1). This is important because the direction of your couching stitches will depend on the twist of your thread. It is also recommended that all of the thread used in a single embroidery piece in klosterstich has the same twist to ensure stitch uniformity.

Figure 1: How to identify S-twist and Z-twist threads

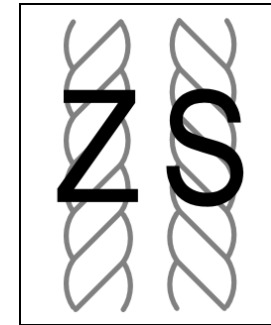


Image source: Wikimedia Commons (2007). The twist of the thread is determined by the direction the thread was plied (clockwise or counter clockwise). You can identify which is which by looking at the direction of the grooves in the thread.

### 2.2 A working method

A working method for klosterstich is described as follows:

1. secure the thread at the back of the fabric. Pass the needle up through the fabric at the bottom left corner and down through the top left corner. This is the first laid thread (figure 2).

Figure 2: Starting klosterstich by placing the first laid thread.

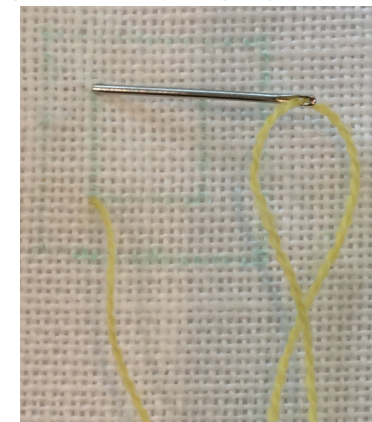


Image source: photo and stitching by Ceara Shionnach, 2014.

2. Starting from the top of the laid thread (step 1), couch the laid thread down with diagonal stitches that are spaced evenly apart. The direction of the diagonal couching stitches will depend on whether your thread is s- or z-twisted (see figure 1). Figure 3 depicts an s-twisted example.

**Figure 3:** Make the first couched stitch, diagonally across the laid stitch (from step 1), bringing the needle up through the point marked with a circle and down through the fabric at the point marked with triangle.



Image source: photo and stitching by Ceara Shionnach, 2014.

3. After the first laid thread is diagonally couched all the way down, bring the needle up through the fabric directly to the right of the first stitch made in step 1. Lay another thread up to the top of the shape, parallel to the first laid thread. Diagonally couch the thread down, from top to bottom, ensuring that each couched stitch on the second laid thread is exactly in line with the couching stitches on the first laid thread. Continue these 3 steps until the entire shape is filled.

**Figure 4:** Continue to lay threads to the right of the first laid thread, diagonally couching each one to the base fabric, until the shape is filled.



Image source: photo and stitching by Ceara Shionnach, 2014.

4. When filling in another shape in the same piece with klosterstich, it is important to keep the laid threads running in the same direction as the original shape (in this example, the original shape is the yellow square). It is also important to keep the diagonal couching stitches in line with one another across shapes.

**Figure 5:** When filling in the background or other shapes in the same embroidery piece, ensure that all of the laid threads are parallel (in this case, they're all vertical) and keep the diagonal couched stitches in line with one another.



Image source: photo and stitching by Ceara Shionnach, 2014.

5. Once the klosterstich has been filled, outline your embroidery with stem stitch (as in figure 6), chain stitch, split stitch or couching. Instructions for each of these stitches are available online at [Historical Needlework Resources webpage, Stitches](http://HistoricalNeedleworkResourceswebpage.Stitches) (accessed January 2014).

### 2.3 Tips to remember

- The laid threads should sit along the threads of the base fabric (not between them); otherwise you'll get gaps between your laid threads.
- Be careful with the tension of the laid threads – too tight and they'll distort the base fabric, too loose and your embroidery will look puckered and messy.
- Follow the diagonal groove of the twist of the wool to ensure couching stitches are as invisible as possible.

**Figure 6:** Klosterstich outlined with stem stitch.



Image source: photo and stitching by Ceara Shionnach, 2014.

- Keep an even distance between the diagonal couching stitches down each laid thread.
- The couching stitches should be parallel to one another between columns of laid threads and consistent across motifs.

### 3. References

Christian de Holacombe (2008, accessed January 2014). *Klosterstich: convent embroideries in wool*.

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

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

