

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

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By Signora Giuliana di Benedetto Falconieri

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## Beaded Beginnings

Beaded embroidery is very beautiful, and also very period. Some of the first known pieces of beaded embroidery were done in the 12th century on German church vestments. This medieval style of embroidery was usually sketched onto parchment, then embroidered, and then the beaded vellum would be used as an appliqué, and applied to the fabric. The embroidery was



German ecclesiastical embroidery in gemstones on vellum. Early 1300s. Victoria and Albert Museum. *Photo courtesy of Catherine Lorraine of Stonegate Manor*

usually done in laid work, meaning that the beads were strung onto one thread, laid on the design in the desired manner, and then couched into place with a second needle and thread. The string could contain any number of beads, from 2 to 200.

In this early period, most of the beadwork seems to be limited to ecclesiastical purposes, probably because it was simply too expensive. Ecclesiastical beadwork

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

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was mostly done in gemstones. Reds were done in coral. Blues in lapis. Whites in pearls. In the photo to the right, you can see the bare threads where the pearls and possibly gold plaques were removed by thieves.

The glass houses of the Italian states popularized glass beads in later centuries.

Soon, beaded embroidery was much more commonplace. In fact, Doretta Davanzo Poli documents written evidence of period beadwork on clothing, covers, and aprons. She goes on to explain that during the late 1500s, the paternostri, those who made rosaries, belts and necklaces, worked with the dressmakers to create elaborate clothing so densely embroidered with beads and gold or silver enamels that it looked like mosaics.

But, as often happened in that time, the fashion got so extreme that it was banned by the Senate in 1594 or 1595, limiting beadwork only to hairstyles and headdresses. (p. 200) In my research, I have not yet found paintings or surviving pieces of this embroidery, although I have found paintings of headbands, as well as extant beaded headbands.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

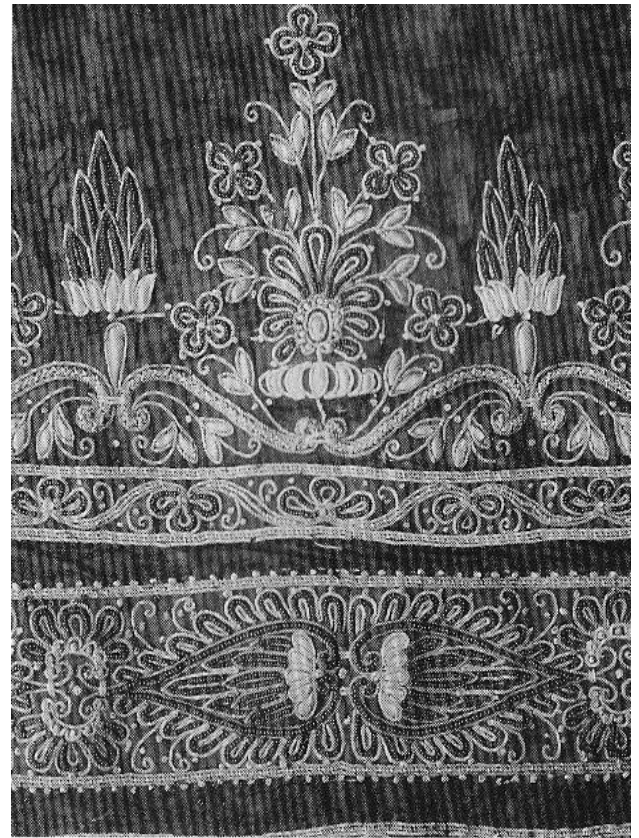
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Various beadwork pieces and paintings from the period show beads of approximate 11/0 size, and there is further evidence that beads were even smaller. In Janet Arnold's wonderful book, *Patterns of Fashion: The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c1560-1620*, Arnold shows photographic evidence of beaded embroidery (plates 351-2, page 49).

Furthermore, when elaborating about the garment on pages 116-117, she specifies that the beads are 0.8mm (1/32 of an inch) wide.

This translates to a size 24/0, which is

significantly smaller than the 11/0, about the size of a large grain of sand!



English beadwork from the early 1600s. The beads are 32 to the inch.

Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion*.

## Beaded Embroidery Today

Beaded embroidery is still done today, although the stitch is often somewhat modified. Up here in Oertha (Alaska), this type of embroidery is very common to see. It is often considered to be Athabascan embroidery. There are a few differences between the medieval and the Athabascan techniques. First, one of the more noticeable differences is the fabric onto which the design is stitched.

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

---

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Although I am sure that there are some deviances, all of the Athabascan embroidery that I have seen has been done on felt or leather. Some of the Athabascan pieces are first stitched onto the felt, and then appliquéd onto objects. The only pieces that I have seen in medieval embroidery were stitched onto linen or vellum, not felt.

Another major difference between the medieval and Athabascan styles is the motifs. Some of the main motifs in Athabascan pieces are flowers and leaves. Conversely, some of the early pieces of medieval beaded embroidery were done of people.

One similarity between the modern and medieval styles of embroidery is the size of the beads. Except for the Janet Arnold piece, most of the beads used in medieval embroidery have been found to be about the same size as the 11/0 beads, which is a common size used in Athabascan embroidery.

## **Comparing the Two Methods**

As for a comparison between the modern and medieval styles, there are plusses and minuses to both techniques. I've found that the medieval style of beading is much quicker, especially when doing straight rows, but the beads are not as secure.

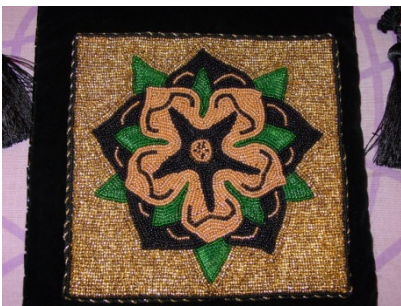
# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

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If one of the threads were to break at any time, many beads would have the potential to come off.

The modern technique works well for curvy lines, corners and flowers, since if a thread were to break, only a few beads would probably fall off, if any. The modern embroidery is said to be durable enough to be washed in a washing machine, whereas you probably wouldn't want to try that with the medieval embroidery.

Now the modern style also has a drawback. When you stitch on the beads originally, you need to leave a bit of a gap between the end of the last bead and where you insert your needle into the fabric. For when you couch the beads down, the row of beads expands. If you didn't allow enough room when you stitched on the beads, couching down the beads can cause your fabric to buckle or pucker. You



The front of the Ansteorran Rose Pouch.  
Presented to the King and Queen of Ansteorra  
by the King and Queen of the West.

don't run into this problem at all in the medieval style.

For my beaded embroidery pieces, I have done both techniques. Some of my pieces were decorative, and

probably weren't going to see excessive wear and tear, so I had no qualms about

using the medieval technique. The Ansteorran Rose project is a pouch. Assuming that it will be used in the future, I did most of the work in the modern technique,

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

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usually four at a time. The process is slow, but I doubt that any of the beads will ever fall off.

## A Compromise

On my latest project, my [fleur-de-lys favor](#), I did the embroidery in the medieval method, since it is quicker. Once I laid and couched a row of beads, I would follow up with another thread, and backstitch the beads down in threes. In that way, I was able to get the speed and authenticity of the medieval method, while still ensuring that the beads would be secure.



Done in medieval style, then laced with an additional thread, to ensure that the beads would be secure. Once completed, I appliquéd the fleur-de-lys onto black wool and outlined the design in pearls.

## Doing Your Own Project

### Choosing Your Design

The first thing that I do is pick my design. How big do you want to make it? How much detail are you going to need? If you want a lot of detail, you will either need to make the design large, the beads small, or both.

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

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## **Choosing Your Colors and Supplies**

Colors and beads are my second step. If I do any blending, I use all in the same transparency -- all opaque or all translucent, etc. The most common size of bead that I've seen used is a size 11/0 glass seed bead. It comes in the widest range of colors, and is about the same size used in period.

There's more to the beads than just the color. Different styles of beads are good for different effects. Charlotte beads are flat on the sides, and will add sparkle to the beadwork. You can use charlottes by themselves for a lot of glitz, or you can use them intermittently for an occasional accent. On the Rose Needlebook for Queen Eliana (cover), I used translucent beads, which were flat and dull against the 24K gold beads in the center. So I found charlottes that were the same color as the red beads I was using, and mixed them together. The charlottes gave the work a little bit of sparkle, but not enough that it's gaudy.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

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The background is worked in three shades of silver-lined amber beads, which were chosen in order to simulate the aventurina beads used in period.

There are also numerous finishes available for the beads, including lined or unlined beads. In my research I discovered that silver-lined beads were used in Italy, during the later period of the Renaissance. The book *Arts & Crafts in Venice* by Doretta Davanzo Poli has a great section that

deals with glass beads and glass bead embroidery. On page 198, Poli describes how some glass beads were "filled with a special

gold and silver paste", and that these beads were then referred to as aventurina.

Poli continues with discussing how "aventurina was among the most prized types of glass, a cinnamon colored or amber glass incorporating thousands of glittering specks which looked like gold."

## Picking Your Fabric

### Linen

Next, you need to choose your fabric. Beadwork needs a sturdy fabric. If the fabric is flimsy, I use more than one layer. A lot of my work is done on handkerchief linen with a muslin backing.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

By Giuliana di Benedetto Falconieri

Lighter-colored fabrics are preferred, so that the colors can really sparkle and shine. If you use a dark fabric for your background, your colors may appear muted. If your ultimate goal is to have the beadwork on a dark-colored background, I'd recommend using a white fabric for the design, and then appliquéing the design onto the darker fabric, as I did here.



This rose pouch for Queen Eliana was first embroidered on white linen, then appliquéed onto the yellow fabric.

## Parchment

As discussed earlier, period beadwork was often done on animal-hide parchment. I have done some experimenting with embroidery on parchment, and have found it to be very different than working with fabric. First and foremost, parchment lacks the flexibility of fabric, so there is no need to put it on a hoop or a frame. Secondly, it is unforgiving, in that once there's a hole in it, there's always a hole in it. I thought that couching every bead onto parchment would make the parchment too perforated, and it would tear easily (like tearing along a dotted line). I found that not to be the case, however. The parchment tolerated numerous holes, even when I couched down every bead.

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

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The technique of using paper or parchment is something that is still taught in the Athabascan communities up here in Alaska, however the paper is applied behind the fabric (Goessel, page 2). On this pouch that I did for the King and Queen of Ansteorra, I had difficulty keeping the lines of the star completely straight. So, I took a printed design, and stitched it directly to my fabric. Once that was done, I simply stitched over the outline of the star, and then ripped the paper away. The lines on the star were completely straight. Although I ripped the paper away from my design, Goessel recommends leaving the paper, in order to keep the design stable.

## **Deciding Before You Start**

### **Thread**

Now that you have your beads and fabric, you have a few decisions to make. Do you want to match your thread to your beads, or to the fabric? Both are correct. Personally, I feel that it looks better when you match the thread to the beads. In period, they often used either linen or silk thread. Modernly, beading thread is available from your local bead store. Whatever type of thread you use, you'll probably want to have wax available. The wax prevents the glass beads from fraying the thread.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

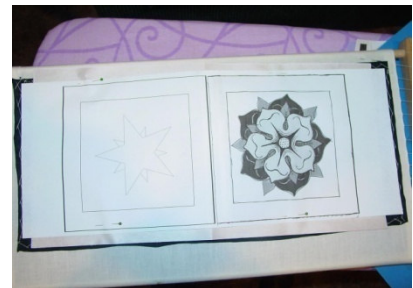
By Giuliana di Benedetto Falconieri

## Needles

As for needles, you'll need at least two. First, for the beads, you'll need long beading needles. I try to pick the largest size that will easily pass through the beads, usually size 10 or 12. The larger the size of the needle, the sturdier it tends to be. I have found that beaded embroidery tends to be rough on the beading needles, and the thin needles will bend and break more frequently. For the second needle, I use short beading needles, but have used other styles. Pick something comfortable in length to use, as long as it's sharp and on the thin side. You'll also need a good pair of embroidery scissors.

## Tension

**One of the most important things to remember about doing beaded embroidery is tension.** If you're doing this on fabric, you absolutely need to be doing this on a hoop, a scroll frame, or a slate frame. I know that my fabric is tight enough when I can bounce quarters off of it. If you're embroidering on parchment, no frame or hoop is necessary.



Preparing the Ansteorran rose pouch. The fabric is mounted on a frame, and the design is about to be traced and transferred onto the fabric by chalk transfer paper.

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

---

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Once your fabric is in a frame, then transfer your design. I like to use either chalk or pencil. The fabric markers tend to bleed too much if left on the fabric. You can buy chalk-lined transfer paper at your local fabric store, and it's very useful for transferring designs. Simply put the paper chalk-side down onto the fabric, secure your design on top, and trace.

## **Embroidering the Design**

Now that you've chosen which technique you are going to use, you are now ready to start embroidering your design. When working a design, work from the inside



out, in small sections. For example, on my red rose, I started with the gold center, then did the red petals, then the green leaves, followed by the background.

Keep in mind that beaded embroidery is very fluid.

You are probably not going to get your beads to be exactly where you want them to be all the time. Do your pattern first, then fill in the background.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

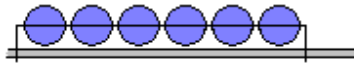
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By Giuliana di Benedetto Falconieri

## Techniques

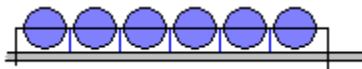
### Modern Method

Although I've done anywhere from 2 to 8 beads at once, most beaders use six beads at a time. Go from the center of your design, out, working in small sections. Leave a little bit of space after the six beads before you plunge the needle back to the underside of the fabric.



Once you have six beads sewn onto the fabric, take your second needle and second thread and couch over the first beading thread, going between the beads. Pull the couching thread until you hear a click as the thread snaps between the beads.

Though some people couch every few beads, I tend to couch every bead, unless it's smaller than 11/0.

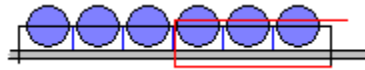


Now, put down the couching thread, and grab your stitching thread. Come up in the fabric between beads 3 & 4. Re-enter beads 4, 5, and 6, taking care to go over the couching thread. Add on six more beads. Plunge, couch, repeat.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

---

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Once the piece is completed, some people also prefer to run a final thread through all of the beads, to ensure that they won't fall off. This technique is often referred to as "lacing".

The nice thing about lacing is that it basically locks the couching thread in place. I don't always do this, and with the tiny beads, sometimes there's no room for another thread. But, if securing the beads is an issue for you, go ahead and do it. Just knot the thread like you normally would, and using the beading needle, come up through the fabric at the beginning, and retrace your steps.

If you do decide to use this step, I find that it works much easier to do it in sections. Take the red rose, for example. I would first do the gold center, start to finish. Stitch, couch, lace. Then do one of the petals. Complete all of the petals before moving on to the leaves, and so on.

## **Historical Method**

For the historical method, it starts out the same as the modern method. Starting with your beading needle, and string on as many beads as you wish.

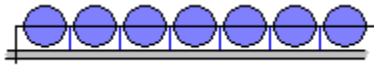
# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

---

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Switch to your couching thread, and couch the beads down individually.



Plunge the bead needle into the fabric as needed, primarily when you need to switch colors or change locations.

## Tips and Tricks

In circles, start by making a mark with a pencil in the very center. Stitch one bead straddling that center point. Finish the circle by working in concentric circles outward.



For leaves, petals, and other designs, I generally outline an area, and follow the outline with more rows of beads, working inward.

To make sharp corners, it's best to end one line where you want your corner to be, and then continue a second line off of that first line in a perpendicular fashion.

Couching two rows together creates a nice, dense design, while eliminating gaps.

# BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

---

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## Finishing

One of the hardest things to accept is that the back of the embroidery is going to look a little chaotic. There are no neat rows with ends nicely hidden. Beads are couched, backstitched and laced in any direction necessary. To help eliminate some of the chaos, I always knot my thread so it leaves a two-to three-inch tail. I then bury the tail in the back of the work. This gives me security in knowing that my knot won't come undone, and keeps the backs from getting out of control.



If you plan on using your beaded work as an appliqué, cut out the embroidery, leaving a minimum of a half-inch allowance of fabric. At this point, you have the option of gluing the back. Gluing is helpful because it secures the threads, and helps fabric edges stay put when you stitch on the appliqué. However, this makes the embroidery stiff. Should you opt to glue the back and edges, I've found that chip clips work very well for holding the fabric edges in place while the glue dries. A binder clip is too forceful, and can break the beads.

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

---

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Once applied, you may find that you need to do some sort of edging to hide the fabric edge. Another row of fancy beads or some couched cord around the edge can hide that edge, and give your project some extra dazzle.

# **BEADED EMBROIDERY: HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES**

By Giuliana di Benedetto Falconieri

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