

Winter A.S. XLIII (2008-9)

Filum Aureum

Newsletter of the Needleworkers Guild in the Kingdom of the West (SCA)

Klosterstich: convent embroideries in wool

Women in monasteries have, over the centuries, produced wonderful pieces of embroidery. Many of these were made to adorn their own monasteries, since working with one's hands for the glory of God has been considered commendable and virtuous. Saint Birgitta of Sweden, in fact, laid down a rule in the 14th century that in her monasteries all of the altar linens and furnishings should be made in the monastery by the nuns themselves. In Europe, quite a number of monastery embroideries remain today in their original homes.*

Nuns have generally not come to the convent as full-time professional embroiderers, but many of them have been skilled and well trained. For most of the medieval centuries, nuns were drawn mainly from wealthy and aristocratic families, where they will have grown up learning embroidery along with reading, writing and music.

Among the surviving monastery embroideries are a number of solidly embroidered wall hangings (often called tapestries) done predominantly in klosterstich or convent stitch. Also called "self-couching," this is a simple filling technique. A long thread is taken across the area to be filled, and then fastened down at intervals by small stitches in the same thread on a return journey. When worked in close parallel lines, this produces a smooth, solid colored surface, almost like weaving. Other names for this technique include

figure stitch, brokatstich, and Bokhara or Roumanian couching. [1]

There are more than fifty of these surviving klosterstich pieces in Germany and the surrounding area, ranging from the earliest 14th century (1300s) all the way through to the end of the 16th century, with very little change in technique. An older, but possibly related, piece (bottom of this page) is the Creation tapestry, now in Girona, Spain. It is tentatively dated to sometime in the 11th or 12th century, but where and when it was made are not clear, since the first description of it is in a cathedral inventory of 1884.

Klosterstich is well suited to wall hangings, because it can produce a solid and colorful surface while being economical in its use of yarn. It's also faster to work than tent stitch or Bayeux tapestry stitch, both of which were also used for wall hangings in the 11th to 16th centuries. However, the long stitches used in klosterstich, and the fact that most of the embroidery is in wool, mean that this is not the best technique for upholstery or anything else that will take a lot of heavy wear or abrasion.

The overall designs of klosterstich tapestries fall into a few major patterns. The Girona tapestry, the Philosophy tapestry from Heiningen made in 1516, and several others all have a large central, circular medallion, framing a single



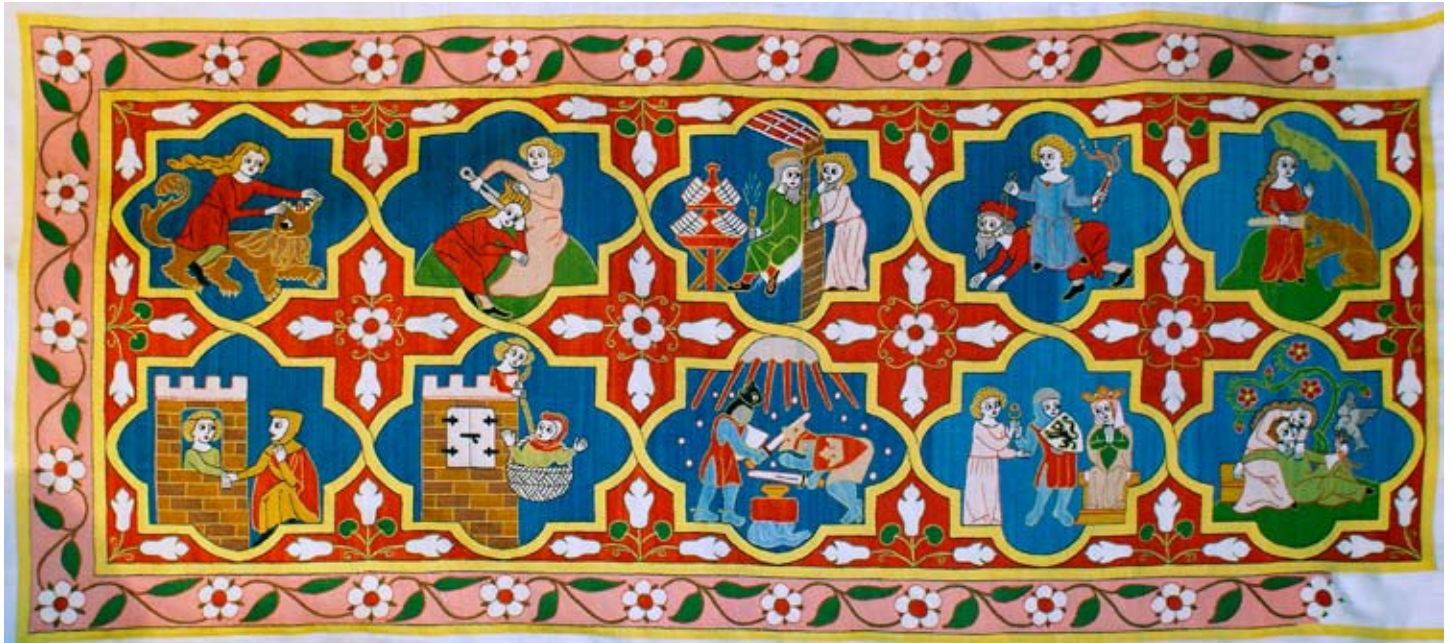
figure or scene. Around the medallion are other, smaller scenes and figures arranged in outer circles or in wedge-shaped segments radiating out from the center. Fitting a circular center into a square or rectangular overall shape means there may also be figures in each corner, such as the rivers of Paradise in the corners of the Girona tapestry or the birds and animals from the Osterteppich (Easter tapestry) from Lüne.

Other tapestries, including the well-known Tristan and Thomas tapestries, the Heilsspiegel tapestry and the Jagdtpeppich (all from Wienhausen), tell a story through images arranged in one or more horizontal rows, rather like a comic strip. On some of these, the rows are separated by bands of decorative pattern, or of let-

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*Monasteries for women are often called "convents," but when referring to those in the Middle Ages, the terms are interchangeable.





tering explaining the story shown above. Within a row, the scenes of the story may be separated into panels or they may all run together continuously.

Another way to deal with multiple scenes or figures is to put each one inside a frame, and then arrange the frames either in a horizontal row which may tell a story, such as the St. George and the Bartholomäus tapestries from the monastery in Lüne, or in several rows to make a square or rectangle. The frames may be circular, lobed, or more complex shapes, many of which look a great deal like the frames used for individual scenes in some stained-glass windows of the same time period. The spaces between medallions may be filled with human figures, angels, flowers, animals or geometric patterns.

Several of the tapestries are long horizontal strips with a single row of scenes. These are usually designed to hang in a specific space in the monastery, often above a row of choir stalls in the church. Others, including those with a central medallion, are square or rectangular and must have been designed to cover a larger area of wall.

The subject matter of these tapestries is surprisingly varied. Not all of them are religious. They may feature figures or

stories from the Bible, from the lives of saints, from well-known legends or popular romances such as Tristan and Yseult, or even (as in the Philosophy tapestry) allegorical or personified concepts. One tapestry may use several types of motif: the Osterteppich has a scene of the resurrection of Christ in the center, surrounded by angels; in the corners are birds and animals, with an inner border of animals inside wreaths and an outer border of a leafy vine. The “Sybils and Prophets” tapestry from Lüne is a rectangular panel featuring fourteen prophets from the Old Testament (including Moses, Aaron, David and Solomon) and twelve Sybils, legendary women from pre-Christian Greece and Rome who were said to have prophesied the coming of Christ.

The borders are equally varied, and may include flowers, vines, rows of angels or animals, and in several cases, rows of tilted shields showing the arms of various families. The Tristan tapestry has shield borders separating each row of scenes, and each shield is shown under a framing archway. The Malterer tapestry’s first and last panels show the arms of the Malterer family and the names of the donors (Johannes and his sister Anna). In other cases it’s hard to know whether the



Above, Racaire at her frame, with Cleo :)

shields represent specific families, perhaps the families of the nuns or of benefactors of the monastery, or whether they are purely decorative.

Racaire's embroidery

The embroidery featured on the cover and at the top of this page is a spectacular klosterstich hanging by Lady Racaire of Drachenwald, based on the Malterer hanging, one of the best known of these tapestries. The Malterer (see below) is one of the long horizontal tapestries and shows scenes from several legends. The scenes are in pairs, and are all on the theme of men beguiled by women: Samson is shown in one scene opening the jaws of a lion, and in the next, having his hair cut off by Delilah. Aristotle looks out his window at the beautiful Phyllis, and in the next scene (probably the most often reproduced scene from this tapestry) he is down on all fours with Phyllis

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riding on his back and controlling him with a bridle! Next comes the poet Virgil being left to dangle in a basket outside the tower of the lady he was pursuing, and the Arthurian story of Iwaine and Laudine. The last scene in the Malterer tapestry shows a lady with the horn of a unicorn in her lap.

Racaire chose to make the format of her version a rectangle, with two rows of scenes: on top, from left to right the two scenes with Samson followed by the two with Aristotle, and on the bottom, the stories of Virgil and Iwaine. Since there are eleven scenes in the original, the lady with the unicorn is the fifth scene in the top row at far right, and below her, a new scene of successful lovers, taken from the 1340s Manesse codex, which is very similar in style.

The frames of the scenes are 8-lobed, with alternating square and rounded corners, and they are worked to give the illusion that they are made of interlacing ribbons. The pink and white outer border and the leaves and flowers around the edges and corners of the scenes are drawn from the original tapestry, but since the original is only one row deep, Racaire added a rose with tendrils in the centers of the spaces between the rows.

This project was inspired by a challenge: Racaire and her friend Mistress Anya Mstyslavyaya challenged each other to recreate a medieval wallhanging, using a stitch technique they were not already familiar with. Anya's hanging is quite different, showing a single figure, and she is dyeing all her own thread as she goes along, so it's going more slowly. You can see both their projects at the Wallhanging Project blog [2], and there

will be future challenges including other members of the Drachenwald Needleworkers Guild [3].

Materials and methods

Most of the klosterstich tapestries are worked entirely in wool on a heavy linen backing. A few have highlights worked in silk, and some use white linen thread for the white portions. The wool is usually a fine two-ply thread, and covers the entire surface of the embroidery. Racaire used Renaissance Dyeing's [4] 24/2 crewel wools in natural colors for her version.

Klosterstich is worked with a single thread, which is why it's sometimes called "self-couching:" a long thread is laid over the whole length of the area to be covered, and then on the return journey, the same thread takes several smaller stitches over the longer thread at intervals to couch it down. The couching stitches are slanted, sometimes nearly vertical, and in wool they will blend in with the longer thread and be nearly invisible. This works especially well if the slanting stitches are worked in the same direction as the twist of the yarn: if they are worked in the opposite direction, the yarn may "bubble" and not lie smooth.

It's also important that the couching stitches are not pulled too tightly. Stretching the embroidery in a frame makes it much easier to control the tension, and as in many embroidery techniques, accurate and consistent tension makes a big difference in how the finished product looks.

Klosterstich, Bokhara couching and Roumanian couching are sometimes used — as on Mary Corbet's Needle 'N Thread website [1] — to describe different variations on the same basic stitch. In Bokhara couching, the couching stitches in matching thread are short, very



visible, and often worked to form lines or patterns. In Roumanian couching the stitches are longer and less conspicuous, and in Klosterstich, the couching thread is meant to be as nearly invisible as possible, forming a smooth surface overall.

Unlike some other embroidery techniques (most notably split stitch), nearly all of the klosterstich is worked in vertical lines, whether filling in figures or background. Although it's possible to work curves in this stitch, it's much easier to work in straight parallel lines, because the tension of the long stitch needs to be just right before the couching stitches are taken to hold it down.

Klosterstich is not the only stitch used in these embroideries, although on some of them it is virtually the only stitch remaining. Generally these pieces are worked with large areas of flat color, with no shading or attempt to show three-dimensional shapes. But it's not uncommon for outlines to be worked in stem stitch, chain stitch, or sometimes split stitch, and then filled in with klosterstich. Details of faces, armor, clothing, and animal bodies are sometimes added in stem stitch, as can be seen in a detail of the Tristan tapestry where a few such details in black thread remain. Other tapestries may have lost these outlines completely. The Girona tapestry uses the same types of stitches in very much the same way, although the images and lettering style are more typical of a time much earlier than the German pieces. (But then, it's Spanish — Spanish styles and motifs are often very different.)

Fading and color loss may also have affected the original tapestries as we see them today. It is still quite noticeable that they are dominated by intense madder reds and woad or indigo blues, along with bright or golden yellow and some white or ivory. Shades of green, usually a light to medium yellow-green, are common





Above, a section of the Bartholomäus Tapestry from Lüne; below, part of the center medallion of the Philosophy tapestry from Heiningen



in some but not all pieces, as is a lighter blue, and less commonly pink, brown and tan. Generally any one tapestry uses only one or two shades of each color. In most pieces, black is used sparingly and mostly for outlines.

Few of us have the ambition to undertake a project the size of Racaire's, but we can all admire these splendid tapestries, and perhaps try the technique for ourselves on some smaller pieces. The Klosterstich tapestries are an outstanding example of how people in the Middle Ages, working sometimes with quite humble materials, could employ their skill to brighten and decorate their homes and churches. —

Above left, Prophets tapestry from Wienhausen.



Border detail, Sybils & Prophets tapestry, Lüne

Resources

WEBSITES

- [1] <http://www.needlenthread.com/2008/01/bokharacouching-embroidery-video.html>
- [2] <http://wallhanging.blogspot.com/>
- [3] Drachenwald Embroiderers Guild website: <http://dragonsembroiderers.blogspot.com/>
- [4] http://www.renaissancedyeing.com/store_crewelwool/

Racaire's blog:
<http://racaire.blogspot.com/>

Racaire's handout on Klosterstich, an 8-page PDF including photos, diagrams and bibliography, is available at:
http://racaire.at/index/embroidery/handouts/Klosterstich_v1-00.pdf

PRINT SOURCES

The Art of Embroidery, by Marie Schuette and Sigrid Muller-Christensen. 1963-64, Thames and Hudson, London (no ISBN#)

Black and white photos (Plates 40-45, 181, 185-188, 193-195, 229, 296-298) and color plates (IX, XII, XIX) of several Klosterstich pieces, including details, and a small amount of discussion.

The Art of Medieval Spain A.D. 500-1200, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1993. ISBN #0-8109-6433-3

Page 310 is an interesting article on the Girona tapestry, with color pictures. —

Klosterstich projects

PROJECT 1: Needlebook or notebook

If you're looking for a "bite sized" project to try klosterstich for yourself, a small square needlebook or notebook is something that's always useful and doesn't take long to do. Here's one made by Kathy Stormberg from Crosston. She has combined a frame and a central 5-petaled rose from the Malterer tapestry to make a nice little design.

Hers is rectangular, but it's just as easy to make a square one, and perhaps slightly easier to draw square diagrams. I've drawn a diagram for a square frame and central rose from the same sources (the diagrams from this issue will also be available online in the WKneedle Yahoo group's Filum folder).

On the next page is Racaire's diagram for Klosterstich. Drawing 1 shows the laying down of the single long vertical thread that will be couched down in the next step. Drawing 2 shows the couching stitches, which are taken in the same direction as the twist of the plied yarn.

Below the diagrams are pictures of one of Racaire's stitching samples, showing the right and wrong sides of the stitching. This gives you an idea of a good length and spacing for the couching stitches. This is something that varies quite a lot in the historical pieces: some are very closely stitched with tiny stitches and others use fewer or longer stitches. It seems to be a matter of individual style. You can tell from the reverse side of both Racaire's and the historical pieces that the couching stitches tend to be taken at more or less regular intervals, at approximately the same places in each row.

A little bookmaking

Making the finished embroidery into a needlebook is easy. Embroidery for the front can be done on a scrap of heavy linen about an inch larger than the needlebook all around. If the back is embroidered, both front and back can be done together on a rectangular piece, or the back can simply be covered with fabric. The finished cover can be pressed and lined, perhaps with some light stiffening between the layers, then folded in half to create the book. Pages cut from felt or wool can be attached with a few stitches at the book's spine.



Making this project into a small notebook is also easy and practical, especially as a gift for someone who doesn't sew. The front and back embroideries can be stretched over cardboard to make firmer covers, and each square can be lined. The two squares can be joined by stitching them to the edges of a piece of ribbon, creating a "spine" for the little book. Several pieces of paper can be trimmed to a slightly smaller size than the covers laid out flat, then folded and stitched through the middle to form pages. The little booklet can then be stitched to the middle of the ribbon spine. —*CB*

PROJECT 2: Embroidered cuffs

Racaire's own first project in klosterstich was a pair of embroidered cuffs for a gown (seen here finished, but not cut out and applied to the dress). The pattern for these is taken from the vine with red and white roses (enlarged at the bottom of this page) that forms the left-hand border of the Tristan tapestry (see p.3).

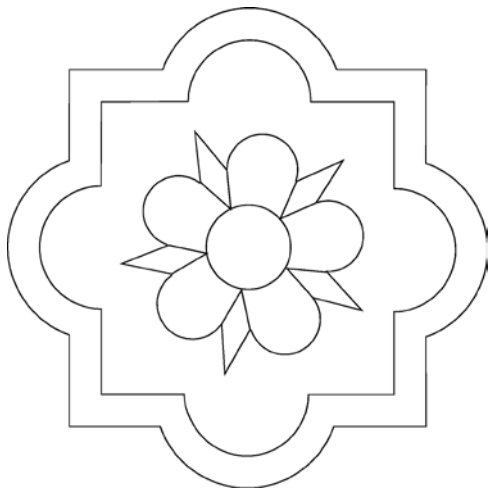
Like many historical embroideries, the pattern for the original seems to have been drawn more or less freehand, perhaps with templates used for the rose and leaf, placed freely within the curves of the vine with leaves fitted in around them. As you can see, neither Racaire's drawing or the one on the next page are exact copies of the original. If you've always depended on patterns or exact

diagrams for your needlework in the past, this is a good opportunity to try designing in a style that is a little freer and more "improvisational!" —*CB*

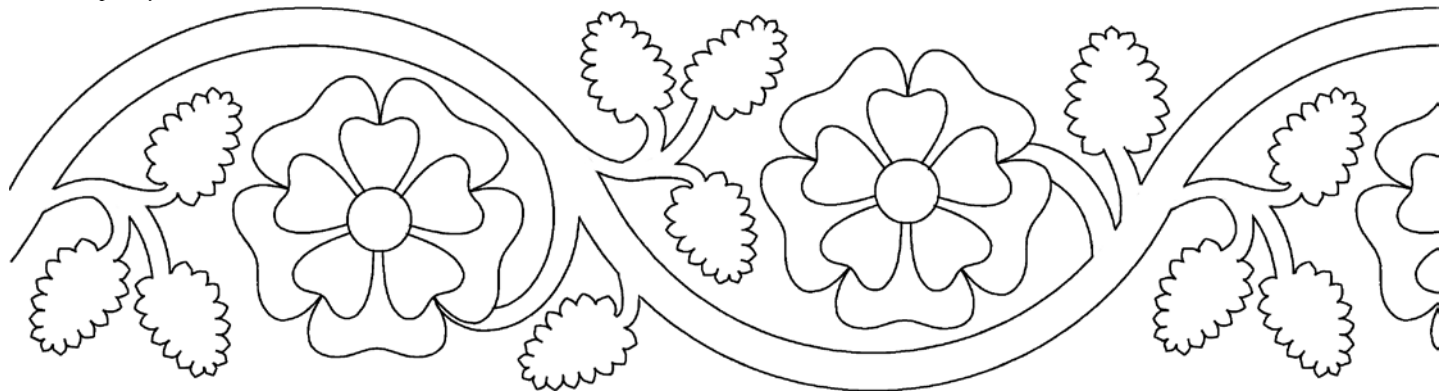
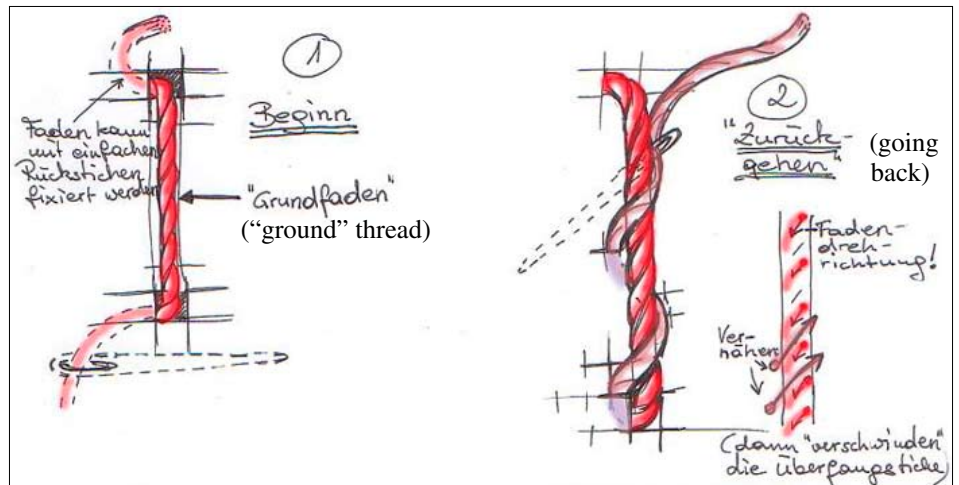


Above, the back side of the cuff embroidery





Above, a diagram for a square needlecase or notebook; below, a rose border from the Tristan tapestry



INTER-KINGDOM INTENSIVE NEEDLEWORK SYMPOSIUM Report from IKINS • September 2008

Reviews of the first Inter-Kingdom Intensive Needlework Symposium (IKINS) in September have ranged from “fabulous” to “fantastic!” The display of past needlework projects was inspirational; the classes were taught by talented, enthusiastic teachers and were packed with information; and everyone appreciated the chance to connect with old friends and make new ones.

This was a joint effort by the West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild and the Caid School of Needlework, and has been more than a year in the planning. Mistress Eowyn Amberdrake and Dame Richenda Coffin of Caid and Mistress Isela di Bari of the West headed up the planning committee (with lots of help!) and happily hosted 32 eager needleworkers.

The symposium was run as a special “track” along with the fall session of Col-

legium Caidis, so symposium participants and their families could also take regular Collegium classes if they wished. The symposium classes were designed to be intensive (as the title says!) 2- to 4-hour sessions, and to cover material in depth, going beyond the brief introductory classes more often taught.

The weekend began with optional field trips on Friday to needlework suppliers Hedgehog Handworks and Needlepoints West and to the Getty Museum. Saturday, 4-hour classes were offered on Elizabethan Sweetbags In Depth (taught by Eowyn) and Opus Anglicanum (by Richenda). Sunday morning there was a choice between Elizabethan Raised Work (Sabrina de la Bere) or Traditional Padded Goldwork (Countess Albra), and in the afternoon was a 2-hour class on Or Nué



(THL Teleri ap Gwynedd). It was a feast of gold thread for the eyes all around!

The Sweetbags class began with the technique for Plaited Braid Stitch, and then as people practiced their stitching, an overview of historical sweetbags and handouts to help students design a sweetbag in Elizabethan style from the elements provided. Eowyn reviewed the


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Guild calendar & projects

West Kingdom summer cloaks — by Felicia

During her reign, Countess Eilis ni Roibeard O'Boirne commissioned a set of summer cloaks to be made for the Western Royalty to wear each year when they visit Pennsic. I was inspired to design something that would truly represent our Kingdom: The 2 cloaks will have the arms of every group in the Kingdom embroidered & appliquéd around the edges of the cloak. Down the front edges of both cloaks will be the Kings (or Queens) arms, the 3 Principalities arms (Mists, Cynagua, & Oertha), and the arms of the 3 Baronies at the furthest borders of our Kingdom (Allyshia, Tarnmist & the Far West).

As you can imagine, to help complete this ambitious project, I need volunteers – lots & lots of volunteers! If you are interested in signing up for 1 (or 2) of the arms, please contact me off list with your SCA name, your mundane name & mailing address, and your phone number, and I will send you a kit with the materials for the project straight away. You may choose any combination of stitches you wish, as long as the design is filled in completely. Your piece will need to be completed & returned to me by March Crown 2009 (March 20-22).

Several groups' arms are still available (listed at right). Please bear in mind that for the arms that will be down the front of the cloaks, you will need to embroider 2 of the same arms (i.e. 2 of the King's arms, or 2 of Allyshia's, etc.). —

IKINS (continued)

stitches and materials used, the elements of the designs, and notes on color usage. Her own prizewinning sweetbag (featured in *Filum Aureum* #33) was Exhibit A!

The class project for Richenda's Opus Anglicanum class was a small medallion taken from an illuminated initial "Q", with a split stitched face and letter in silk and a background in gold underside couching. This was worked on linen and can later be mounted on velvet for the cover of a needlebook. Richenda's comment on Opus was "If it doesn't glitter, it isn't done!" Richenda's Opus Anglicanum bag was featured on the cover of the Fall 2008 *Tournaments Illuminated*.

Sabrina's Elizabethan Raised Work class surveyed the motifs and techniques of Elizabethan polychrome embroideries done with raised stitches: detached buttonhole, trellis stitch and hollie point. Class members made a sampler of stitches and variations for future reference.

The Traditional Padded Goldwork class was oriented toward making an embellished book cover using gold bullion techniques, including padded satin stitch, simple couching and basketweave couching. Lengths of bullion (coiled gold wire) can be couched over felt padding, over cords or directly onto the fabric surface. Countess Albra Katrine Isabel du Serpent described her class as "only a start," and confesses that metal thread embroidery is her "lifetime addiction!"

Or nué ("shaded gold") is a technique in which colored silks are used to couch gold thread, creating fine shadings

of color with gold glittering through. It is labor-intensive, since every inch of the embroidery is covered, first with gold and then with color. But Teleri says that by the end of the class, everyone had a basic knowledge of the development of the shading process, and a good start on a small square of their own work.

Many stitchers who attended especially enjoyed the camaraderie — "sharing one's own particular brand of craziness" as one put it — with others who get excited about the same things. There was also time between and after classes for people to continue to work on their class projects. There have been lots of comments on the effort and passion put into the teaching, on the huge amount that was learned and accomplished over one weekend, and Countess Albra was not the only one to comment that she has been "fired up and inspired!"

As ever, the event could not have happened without the willing participation and hard work of many. The staff of Collegium Caidis, including registrar Baron Hrorek Halfdane of Falconwood, Collegium Chancellor Baroness Finella Harper and co-autocrat Sir Gareth Nicodemus Somerset, were enthusiastic and supportive. Baroness Angelina Nicolette de Beaumont took charge of the needlework exhibit, Lady Peregrine Rose Falconer the arrangements for box lunches and Saturday dinner, and Baroness Eowyn the field trips.

People came away from the symposium with "goodies" as well! Of course
(continued next page)

Volunteers needed

The following arms still need volunteers to embroider them. Thank you!

Bryniaid
Crystalmist
Earngyld
Eternal Winds
Fendrake Marsh
Rivenoak
Thistleorr



ARACHNE'S WEB

the guild for all types of historical lace

Arachne's Web is planning a full lineup for 2009. We hope all who are the least bit interested will come to classes, meetings, and/or drop Sabrina de la Bere <sabrinadelabere@coastside.net> a line to be added to the yahoo group.

12th Night: come flip a couple bobbins or take a couple stitches. Making lace is easy! We will show you how.

March Crown: Meeting, Saturday 3:00pm


Website: http://www.bayrose.org/arachne/arachne_index.html

Yahoo Group: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WK_Lacemakers/ —

FILUM AUREUM

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Chronicler: Christian de Holacombe, claning@igc.org.

All are welcome to join us in making and enjoying historical needlework, furthering our knowledge, and developing our skills. We meet Saturday afternoon at every Crown Tourney, and we look forward to seeing you and your needlework! —

Opus Anglicanum by Isela di Bari, from the IKINS exhibit



there were opportunities to spend money on the field trips, and Joady of Hedgehog Handworks (Baroness Xena Baxter Wynthorpe) had lovely large project bags and hedgehog waxes for all attendees. The organizing committee also prepared “goody bags” for all attendees that included handmade needles suitable for goldwork made by Richenda, molded beeswax cakes by Eowyn, a pewter “sweetbag” pilgrim badge made by Mistress Medb Renata based on a historical example, and a small bag to put them all in made by Lady Felice Filadoro. Everyone had a calligraphed name badge as well.

Teachers were thanked with more gifts: honey from Isela’s husband Dietrich, a napkin with the IKINS logo embroidered by West Kingdom Guild Minister Felicia Amondesham, and a slumped glass bead from Mistress Thea Northernridge.

The next IKINS is already being planned, and WE will be the hosts! The 2nd Symposium will be held alongside West Kingdom Fall Collegium on Saturday, October 24th, 2009.

Anyone interested is welcome to join the IKINS mailing list at Yahoo!Groups. This will be the central place where all symposium information will be posted. Anyone interested in teaching, attending, or helping with IKINS is strongly encouraged to join this group. The group address is: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IKINS/>

Group members agreed that Sabrina de la Bere had the last, best word. “Next year, bring the projects you have started and done in this intervening time. Let us all see the flowering of embroidery in this our new Middle Ages!”



Glove by Francesca von Hesse, from the IKINS exhibit

Twelfth Night is coming soon!

The Guild will have a display table at 12th Night 2009, and we need volunteers to sit a one-hour shift at the table. If you can spare 1 hour of your time to help, please contact me. Of course, this means we will need things to display, too, so start thinking about what pieces – finished or not – you might like to bring for the display!

We had a productive (and thankfully dry!) meeting at October Crown. The name of the third recipient of the Guild Service Award for 2008 was announced. Over the years this person has supported the Guild in numerous ways, including teaching many needlework classes, evaluating many needlework pieces that were submitted for the Guild’s earlier Apprentice program, hosting Guild meetings from her camp before we had a pavilion of our own, and managing the Queen’s Gift Chest. This wonderful person is Jania of Call Duck Manor. Congratulations, Jania!

The Guild was asked by Countess Eilis during her reign to coordinate the production of a set of summer cloaks to be made for the Western Royalty to wear each year when they visit Pennsic. Volunteers are needed to embroider the arms of our branches in lightweight and washable cotton in a technique of your choice. We have had a large outpouring of volunteers so far, but a few more are needed. See page 7 for details: kits with all the materials and pre-drawn arms are available from me.

As always, there are many people to thank. I especially want to thank those from the West who helped make IKINS happen this year (see p.6) and who are working on next year’s plans. I also want to recognize those who taught classes at Fall Collegium Occidental: Iulitta Rowan and Caitearina nic Seamus.

I look forward to seeing all of you and your work at Twelfth Night, as we witness the crowning of Catherine Lorraine as our West Kingdom Needleworker Queen!



Felicia

Felicia Margerye Amondesham
West Kingdom Needleworkers Guild Minister

GUILD • CONTACTS

GUILD MENTORS

These people are here to help you with your needlework questions!

Aldith St. George	El Cerrito	aldith@goldenstag.net
Francesca von Hesse	El Cerrito	ehmoody@yahoo.com
Letitia de Scotia	Pinole	vrazier@pacbell.net
Kaitlin MacPherson	Sacramento	carolee@fenris.net
Mairghread nighean Eanruig	Colusa	ettrick@mako.com
Tashi of Falcons Claw	Modesto	djgreco2001@yahoo.com
Jania of Call Duck Manor	Palo Alto	mspeliduck@mindspring.com
Caitearina nic Sheamus	Vacaville	KyrinnaArias@aol.com
Jenna Whitehart	S.Luis Obispo	originalzaena@yahoo.com
Sabrina Goldbender	Santa Cruz	stephaniefey@yahoo.com
Anne of Bradford	Oertha	quidnon@micronet.net
Annora de Montfort	Oertha	cinquefoildor@hotmail.com

DEPUTY MINISTER & CHRONICLER

Christian de Holacombe.....Davis claning@igc.org

GUILD MINISTER

Felicia Amondesham.....San Jose..... prplelady@comcast.net

GUILD PATRONS

Isela di Bari	Monterey	dcobb@mail.meyernet.com
Sabrina de la Bere	El Granada	SabrinadelaBere@coastside.net
HRH Catherine Lorraine	Sunnyvale	redthread64@copper.net
Jania of Call Duck Manor, Honorary Patron • Aelia Apollonia		

WEB PAGES

WK Needleworkers Guild Website	http://www.bayrose.org/wkneedle/
WKNeedle Mailing List.....	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WKneedle/
IKINS Mailing List	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IKINS/