

Royal School of Needlework
Goldwork - Certificate
Academic year 2025/26

Goldwork is the embroidery of gold or gilt metal threads onto a variety of fabrics, usually cotton, silk or linen. It is frequently used for ecclesiastical and ceremonial embroidery. As it is not always possible to stitch traditional metal threads through fabric, the techniques used focus on different ways of attaching the threads to the fabric surface. Metal thread ends are cut and some can be plunged through the fabric and secured on the back.

Aim

To design, work and mount a goldwork embroidery that demonstrates technical competence in applying the threads and the supporting padding, together with an understanding of what makes for a harmonious design. The finished piece will have a balance of open and solid worked areas, making appropriate use of the threads and padding materials in the starter kit. There is an emphasis on technical precision and accuracy.

Discuss ideas for this module with the tutor at an early stage. RSN tutors have considerable experience in working this technique and in teaching it. Please listen to their advice.

Materials

There is a starter kit for this module consisting of the threads listed below, Gutermann sewing thread (No. 488), beeswax, soft string and felt padding. There are sufficient materials in the starter kit to complete a design for this module. Calico, a limited range of silk dupion, needles and mellers can be purchased from the RSN.

Fabric: Calico (medium weight) approximately 50 x 50 cm (20 x 20 inches) as base fabric.

Closely woven silk dupion, linen or cotton applied on top of the calico, size dependent on the size of the final mounted piece.

A padding fabric such as bump or chad may be used when mounting the finished work. The tutor will advise.

Threads: The focus of this module is on basic techniques. Only the threads in the starter kit and detailed below should be used. All these threads can be easily damaged. Wait for the tutor to demonstrate how to apply them.

Japanese thread No.8 - is a metallic foil strip wrapped around a cotton core. It is couched down in pairs with a single waxed thread (always Gütermann No.488), taking care to twist it slightly to stop the central core from showing. The ends are plunged to the back.

Twist No.1 ½ - is a 3-ply metallic cord. Using single waxed thread, it can be couched over, or stitches can be hidden between the twists. The ends are plunged to the back.

Rococco - is a metallic foil strip wrapped around a cotton core, which is then crinkled. It is couched down using a single waxed thread. The ends are plunged to the back.

Pearl Purl No.1 - is a coiled wire which is used as an outline and to contain chipping. The ends are not plunged but cut to size after being couched.

Bright check No.6 - is a metallic wire with a zig-zag pattern, used for chips (like beads) and longer cutwork. The check is cut to size, threaded on to a needle, as with a bead, and secured using a double waxed thread.

Smooth Purl No.6 - is a shiny metallic spring with no pattern. It is used for cutwork. The purl is cut to size, threaded on to a needle, like a long bead, and secured using a double waxed thread.

Optional: Minimal use of additional materials is possible at the discretion of your tutor and if appropriate to the design e.g. spangles, gems, beads, and other sizes of Pearl Purl. Coloured metal threads should not be used. Optional elements will not be assessed.

Needles: Embroidery 10 and 12. Chenille 20 or 22 for plunging.

Other: A mellor is a gold work tool used to manipulate the threads into place. Embroidery tweezers are used to create crisp corners. Velvet board for cutting chips.

Reasonable adjustments

If there is a reason you may have difficulty completing the module e.g. visual impairment, allergy to some materials, please discuss this with the tutor and the C and D team before starting. Adjustments are possible.

Essential requirements

Design area

- The design must not exceed 15 x 21 cm (6 x 8 in) or equivalent area.

Techniques that must be included

There must be a balance of the following techniques without one predominating.

Padding

- At least three areas of felt padding, one of which should be three layers. No padding should be higher than three layers.

- One or more line(s) of soft string padding for cutwork. The padding should be tapered to a point on at least one end. The maximum width for the area of cutwork padding should be no more than 7mm (3/8 in). The padding should be worked using the materials supplied by the RSN in the starter kit.

Couching

- An area of brick stitched Japanese thread over felt padding – at least four rows.
- An area of brick stitched Japanese thread worked directly onto the background fabric – at least four rows.
- An area with a combination of couched threads over felt padding e.g. Twist and Japanese couched together, Rococco and Japanese couched together.
- One area of the couching should have visible plunging i.e. no outline.
- A sharp turn of less than 90 degrees, achieved by turning the thread, not plunging. The turn should have at least two rows.
- There must be a total area the equivalent of 5 x 5 cm (2 x 2 in) of couching.
- At least two Pearl Purl outlines, not overstretched.

Cutwork

- An area of solid chip work over felt padding and inside a Pearl Purl outline.
- An area of Smooth Purl cutwork over soft string padding, which must include a continuous length of at least 5 cm (2 ins). Cutwork must be at a 45-degree angle (it may flow around a curve and still be at 45 degrees). Bright Check may be worked in addition to the Smooth Purl.

Finishing

- The finished work will be mounted on card and backed with sateen. Bumf, or similar, will be used as padding.

Bright Check and Smooth Purl can additionally be worked flat over felt padding and minimal use of additional materials is allowed where appropriate to the design e.g. spangles, gems, beads and other sizes of Pearl Purl. Optional elements will not be assessed.

Getting started – before class

It is not necessary to arrive at the first class with a finalised design, but you should come with some ideas. For examples of work by other C and D students look at the C and D gallery on the website. <https://royal-needlework.org.uk/courses/certificate-diploma/canddgallery/>.

Getting started – in class

Preparatory work

Preparation prior to stitching is an important part of the learning process. Your tutor will give guidance on how to prepare the following:

- A line drawing on tracing paper. The tracing will be photocopied several times and used to create:
- A stitch plan to ensure that all the mandatory techniques are included.
- A padding plan will assist in deciding heights and shapes of felt and string padding.
- A simple shaded plan showing areas of solid and outline gold in yellow pencil will help with decisions about density and openness.
- An order of work (where to start and finish).
- The original tracing will be turned into a pricking and used to transfer the design to the fabric.

Initial plans can be amended as the embroidery progresses. If you choose to have your work formally assessed, you should submit the preparatory work listed above together with your source material. All this paperwork will form part of the assessment.

Things to think about when planning the embroidery

- Sampling the techniques beforehand will help inform design decisions e.g. with judgements about the space needed for different techniques.
- Cutting metal threads dulls scissors. Set aside one pair of ordinary embroidery scissors just for cutting gold.
- Aim for a design which is bold, with clearly defined areas for each of the techniques.
- Organic shapes with flowing, sinuous lines work well.
- Designs with a mix of open and closed spaces work better than those with lots of solid areas.
- Have a good balance of all the techniques, do not let one dominate.
- Avoid too many small, intricate details or areas.
- Avoid symmetrical designs and perfect circles until you are more experienced.
- If working more than one area of cutwork do not place them too close to each other.
- Protect the work when moving it by using bubble wrap or some other form of padded covering.

Intellectual property

The final design must be original to you. Use of your own visual media (photographs, drawings) is encouraged. Referencing and interpreting other visual media is acceptable. Copying is not. The intellectual property of others must be respected.

Additional information

Additional information can be downloaded from the website.

- Good Embroidery Practices - Make sure you have a copy of this leaflet. Following this guidance will help you develop good stitching habits.
- Resources - Websites, Books, Suppliers for C&D