

Royal School of Needlework

Silk Shading – Certificate: Flower, fruit or vegetable

Academic year 2025/26

Natural silk shading, as taught at the RSN, uses Long and Short Stitch which changes direction, length and colour to portray images from nature that are realistic and have depth and dimension. The technique is worked on silk dupion, linen or cotton using a single strand of stranded cotton. It is sometimes called 'painting with the needle'.

Aim

To design, work and mount a silk shaded embroidery depicting a simple but realistic flower, fruit or vegetable. The finished piece should demonstrate an understanding of Long and Short stitch, blending colours and the use of light and shade to achieve a realistic three-dimensional effect. The focus is on looking closely at the chosen image to determine the colours, shading and movement to be worked in the embroidery.

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 and equipment

There is no starter kit for this module. Calico, a limited range of silk dupion, needles and stranded cotton can be purchased from the RSN.

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

Closely woven silk dupion, linen or cotton approximately 35 cm x 35 cm (14 x 14 inches). This is applied to the calico using either Long and Short or Herringbone stitch.

Threads: Anchor and DMC stranded cotton's (not silk threads). The two brands can be mixed.

Needles: Embroidery 10 or 12.

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 main body of the stitched flower or fruit should no smaller than 7 x 9 cm (3 x 3½ inches) or equivalent. The overall size of the stitched piece, including leaves and stem, should be approximately 10 x 15 cm (4 x 6 inches) or equivalent.

Stitches

- Long and Short Stitch
Unlike other techniques silk shading uses just one main stitch, Long and Short. Areas of colour are created using single strands of stranded cotton. Often there will be several needles (colours) in use at the same time.
- Split Stitch
Split stitch is used as a preparatory stitch. It provides a firm foundation/edge for the Long and Short. It also helps lift one layer above another, so creating an impression of dimension. The Long and Short Stitch covers the Split Stitch
- Surface stitches
Surface stitches e.g. French Knots, Satin Stitch, in moderation, may be used as a final embellishment e.g. for flower centres.

Elements in the design

- A stem, a leaf and a turnover must be included in addition to the flower, fruit or vegetable. The turnover may be on either a leaf or a petal.

Consistent light source/direction

- It can be difficult to identify a good single image with all the necessary elements. Different images can be combined. When combining elements from different images, care must be taken to ensure the light source is consistent. Decide where the light comes from on the main image and make sure the direction is matched for all added element(s). This can be worked through on both the colour and the black and white drawings. The tutor will help with this.

Finishing

- The finished work will be mounted on card and backed with sateen.

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. This is especially the case for silk shading where close observation of the subject is essential. The 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 detailed shaded colour drawing/studies of complex areas to understand fully the placement of colours and transitional shading between. Use colour pencils for this exercise rather than water colour or an app.
- A black and white tonal drawing, defining the light source, working out the highlights and the shadows. A black and white photocopy of the image can help with the tonal study.
- An order of work (where to start and where to finish).
- A stitch direction plan which shows the direction and angle of stitches i.e. which way the petals/leaves are flowing. In general, these should always work towards the point of growth.
- The original tracing will be turned into a pricking and used to transfer the design to the fabric.

Sampling exercises, such as tonal bands, are also a key part of preparation for this module. These provide practice with the long and short technique, help identify the colour palette, develop stitch accuracy and blending of shades.

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, which will form part of the assessment.

Things to think about when planning the embroidery

- Be realistic about the choice of image for your first piece of natural silk shading. Choose something simple, with a limited colour range, and without awkward angles, that you can aim to do well.
- What to look for in an image – large open petals, a single image with all elements and consistent light source, a good size turnover, gradual shading.
- What to avoid in an image – large complex flowers, small petals, ruffled petals (iris), protruding elements (orchid), white flowers (they often look dirty once stitched), hard edged shadows falling across the image, dramatic angle changes, spotty petals.
- Photographs are a reliable source, in seed catalogues, magazines or greeting cards. Illustrations, botanical paintings and sketches can be harder to follow and may not include the required detail about shading and light source.

- The image should be clear, crisp and well-focused with clear colours and well-defined areas of light and dark, with gradual shading between the two.
- Be wary of images from the Internet, which are often poor quality and may not print sufficiently well. There are online sources, some of them royalty free, from which high-quality images can be obtained.
- Ensure the light source makes sense, i.e. the light/shade falls in the same way for all elements. This is especially important when combining elements from different sources.
- Tiny blemishes on the image do not need to be translated into stitch. They can be edited out.
- Once you have determined on an image and sized it to meet the brief. Stay with that image and sizing. Print the photograph to the same size as the finished design otherwise it is very difficult to stitch at the right scale. Do not move between different versions when stitching.

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