

LEARNING TO EMBROIDER WITH SILK

By Lady Genevieve de Valois

So you've heard the horror stories about embroidering with silk. In my opinion these are just scare tactics used by others to ensure that their embroideries are superior! All kidding aside, embroidering with silk has gotten a bad rap over the years. The good news is that there's never been a better time to start working with silks. Silk floss is more affordable now than it has ever been, and many of the new threads on the market are as easy to use as cotton.

SILK FLOSS

Silk embroidery floss has a unique look and feel that can't be duplicated by synthetic materials. There are two factors that affect the look of silk thread. The first is the amount of twist to the thread if any at all. Twisted silks have a corded look and flat silks are smooth and satiny. The second difference is the type of silk it's made from. Filament silk is shiny and spun silk is a little more dull, though not as dull as cotton.

There are lots of great brands & types of silk floss on the market and all of them have something different to offer. If you've never used silk before, I recommend starting out with Rainbow Gallery's Splendor Floss. It is very similar in weight and feel to standard cotton floss and is also supposed to be colorfast (but always test first). Silks average in price around \$3.50/skein, although you can find silk as cheap as \$1.00 and as expensive as \$7.00/skein. Don't be disheartened if you can't find silk locally. The internet is your friend and most silks can be found online for cheaper than you could have gotten at a local store anyway. Besides ebay, here are two places online I like to buy from:

<http://www.threadneedlestreet.com/silkbody.htm>, <http://www.threadexpress.com/home.asp>.

When in doubt about your thread, check out the manufacturer's website. They usually have lots of helpful tips on working with their thread as well as any special instructions on care. Some distribute their own product online. Those that don't will usually provide links to online retailers that do. And don't forget, silk floss is much like fabric. It's hard to choose something you'll really like without touching it. Before you spend a lot of money stocking up on something, get a sample! I always will stitch a small sample of my project with 2-3 different kinds of floss to see which one gives me the look I want.

HANDLING

The biggest consideration in using silk for embroidery is learning how to handle it. Following are some standard rules to working with silk. Keep in mind that many of these handling suggestions are things that you should be doing with any type of embroidery floss.

“Hooping” your project. Just don't do it! Silk threads are fragile and the standard round hoop can severely damage your work. It's best to put your project on a scroll frame, stretcher bars or Q-snap frame to prevent damage.

Clean Your Hands. Wash up! Silk will pick up anything nasty on your hands and you will lose the wonderful luster of the silk.

Prevent Snagging. Many of the floss types available today are not as sensitive to snagging as they have been in the past. However, it's always a good idea to put a non-greasy lotion on your hands prior to stitching to eliminate the floss snagging on rough spots on your hands. There are several creams on the market that are made specifically for embroiderers.

Shorten your threads. Generally speaking it's best to use shorter thread lengths to avoid abrasion and have better thread control. Different thread types will behave differently so play with a little of your floss to determine the length that works best for you. Au ver a Soie & Kreinik both recommend using 18 inches or less of thread for all of their silks.

Ground Fabric. Prepare your ground fabric by stitching under the edges of the fabric so there are no rough spots for the silk to snag on.

Needles – Choose a needle that has a large enough tip to open up a hole in the fabric large enough for the silk to pass through. This prevents fraying, damage and loss of luster.

Dangle Your Thread– We all twist our thread while we stitch. It is important for evenness of stitching to stop frequently and allow your needle/thread to dangle and untwist. This will also help prevent tangle and breakage issues.

Use Laying Tools – Using a laying tool or a larger tapestry style needle can be very helpful in neatly laying the silk so that you can achieve a uniform look.

CARE

It is very important to use proper care with your silk embroidered project to maintain both its integrity and its beauty. Always test the color fastness of your silk before you embroider. Most silks are not colorfast, which means the color will bleed onto your ground fabric if it gets wet. To test color fastness of your thread, dip a piece of your silk, probably your darkest shade, in tepid water. Then place it between a folded piece of white cotton fabric and press with a warm iron. If there is any color transfer onto the fabric, you should not ever wash an item embroidered with this silk. Consider the piece dry clean only. Never soak, boil, tumble dry or bleach your silk embroidered project. For silk that appears to be colorfast, hand wash in tepid water (you may use a gentle/lingerie detergent). To dry the piece, roll it in a clean dry towel to remove excess water, but don't leave it there. Let it air dry in an airy place away from sun and heat. If necessary you may press with a cool iron with gentle pressure, but never use steam.

STORAGE

There are several considerations you have to be aware of in the storage of your silk floss. First and foremost silk will tangle easier than cotton and will not untangle without damage to the thread. To preserve your floss find a way to store your floss that works for you. There are many methods of storing your silks after use. I personally prefer to buy a silk that is already wound on a bobbin or card because I'm lazy. Silks that come "loose" will need to be carefully stored once they've been opened in order to prevent tangling etc. You can wind these on cards yourself, but use caution with finer silks that might break or crease. You can also tie a thread

around your bundle and store in a small baggie. Be cautious of light where you store your silks. Silk will lose its color if subjected to constant light. It is best to find a storage place that is away from any source of light or heat. Also, use caution with plastic containers that are not intended for thread storage as they may be made with chemicals that will adversely affect your thread.

BE FEARLESS

Working with silk floss is fun. It adds depth, dimension and historical authenticity to your projects. Plus, the tactile sensation of feeling the silk in your hands is almost as good as the taste of a fine chocolate. Don't be daunted by the horror stories of others, try silk for yourself and treat yourself to real luxury!

These taken from the Historical Needlework Resources Website



16th C. Sweete Bag embroidered with colored silks in tent stitch



16th C. Elizabethan Smock embroidered in colored silks.

These taken from Manchester Art Galleries



Scottish Coif & Forehead Cloth c.1600



Italian assisi embroidery in Red Silk



16th C. Italian Voided embroidery in blue silk



14th Century Altar Frontal from the Met.