

# AN APPROACH TO APPLIQUÉ

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## OVERVIEW:

Appliqué is the process of applying a piece of contrasting cloth on top of another for decorative effect. Embroidery works well for detailed and delicate ornament, but is not efficient for filling broad areas with solid color. Not only is embroidery labor-intensive, but if the stitches are not kept small, it will be bulky and prone to snagging. By using appliqué, broad areas can be filled with flexible, durable color using fabric, while detail is added using other techniques. Since scrap cloth can be used, luxury fabrics like silk could be affordably incorporated to ornament more humble items. Appliqué is typically combined with couched cord to cover the cloth edges, protecting and neatening the edge, and couching and embroidery are often used to add internal detail.

Although few extant period examples survive, those that do often incorporate heraldic motifs: a subject often requiring broad areas of color, such as banners, bedcoverings and curtains, surcotes, and smaller items such as pouches.

I have seen people attempt Appliqué using modern iron-on backings or wash-out adhesives, trying to iron the seam allowance under beforehand, binding the raw edges, or relying on machine zigzag stitching, but these either give a stiff or modern look, or do not actually save much work, and most require an absurd number of pins! I believe that the perceived need for these is mostly due to cutting out the design first, then attempting to stitch down the floppy, unwieldy result. I have realized that not only is this unnecessary, but avoiding it would simplify the entire process. To my knowledge, there are no surviving instructions on appliqué, but after many years of practice, I have developed a few methods which I find simple, efficient, and attractive, yielding results consistent with period examples.

First, draw out the design on paper to make a pattern. If you are using a digital image, you can scale it up using your computer. If it is too large for standard paper, print it in several sections, or use the grid method to scale it up freehand. (Ask, if interested!) For designs which will be repeated or shared, I prefer to use non-woven (although non-period!) material, since it will not tear or ravel. (I use the middle sections of thrift-store bedskirts, which offer many yards of non-woven material for just a few dollars.)

Cut out the pattern. If it consists of long floppy parts, like a rampant animal, leave connecting 'bridges' between the parts, like a stencil, to keep it in proper proportion. Some elements, like tails, may be better made from separate pieces.

Place the pattern on your appliqué cloth. Use a pen to mark the outline. I use dots. It's easier than drawing a line, and doesn't accidentally shift the cloth around as much. Washable fabric pens are good, but the new 'Frixion' pens are great for this! (It doesn't have to be erasable, though...it won't show when you are done.) If you want to stay 'period-ish', you can use small paint dots, as chalk tends to disappear while working, and period ink may bleed.



Cut out a simple shape, like a square or rectangle, around the design, with an inch or so of margin, cutting on the grain of the cloth (along the direction of the threads). It does not have to be straight on the grain (or even rectangular), but that will make the next step easier.

Lay the design cloth into position on the background cloth. (It is usually best if the grain direction of both fabrics aligns.) Sew the fabrics together using a long running stitch just inside the perimeter of the top cloth. Use very large stitches ( $\frac{3}{4}$ " or longer, depending on the size of the project), and do not use knots; just back stitch at each end. (This is much better than pinning the cloth in place, since stitches cannot fall out, prick your finger while working, or snag your sewing thread later on.) If there are large areas between the edge of the cloth and the design, run a few stitches into those areas, too.



If the design has any wide sections, like roundel or a shield, sew a running stitch just inside the perimeter of the design, too. It should be far enough inside the dotted line to permit the seam allowance to be tucked under later.

Snip a short cut around the design, about 2-3" long (depending on the size of the design), about  $\frac{1}{4}$ "-  $\frac{1}{2}$ " away from the dotted line, for the seam allowance. Just a few inches of cut is sufficient. Small designs may need a narrower seam allowance, while large designs may make a wider seam allowance more convenient. Loosely woven or ravelly fabrics may need a wide seam allowance, too. Heavily fulled woolens (as were common in period) and felt may be stitched without any seam allowance fold-over, but linen and silk will ravel, as will most other fabrics. In period, wax and glue were sometimes used to prevent fraying, but these stiffen the cloth. Using a folded seam allowance will keep the cloth washable and flexible without fraying.

Choose a thread the color of your top cloth, or use undyed linen-colored thread. Actual linen or silk thread is great, but I generally use cotton embroidery thread with delicate cloth. Regular polyester sewing thread will be OK with sturdier fabrics. Knot your thread or stitch a knot, and bring the needle up from under the top fabric, right at the design edge, in the middle of the cut.



Fold the seam allowance under the design, so that the dotted line is hidden, then whip stitch the edge. If the edge will eventually be covered with couched cord or embroidery stitches, the appliqué stitch does not need to be terribly neat...it will be hidden later. If the edge will not be covered, then bring the needle straight down through the back fabric. Bring the needle up further along the design, just catching the edge, then down again, and repeat. This is a very tidy, mostly invisible stitch, but it takes a little longer. A blanket stitch could be used, but personally, I think it looks a bit clunky.



Snip the cut a little further as you go, an inch or two at a time, cutting the design loose from the surrounding fabric as you go. This way, the design is never left flopping, and is held in place as you work. Fold the seam allowance under using the point of the needle, as you go.

Concave seam allowances ('inside' curves) will need to be snipped, so they will lie flat when turned under. Tighter curves will require the snips to be closer together.

Convex seam allowances ('outside' curves) may be simply tucked under in little pleats, one fold at a time, as long as the cloth is thin. If the cloth is thicker, it may be necessary to snip 'pie wedges' out of the seam allowance, to permit it to lie flat when folded under. The tighter the curve, the wider the pie wedges will need to be, to prevent overlap.



Try to avoid designs with tight angles. Pointy shapes are hard to tuck the seam allowance under without getting very bulky. The opposite - deep crevices - are difficult because there is not enough cloth for a sufficient seam allowance. One option is to use a somewhat rounded or square-ended cut instead of a narrow crevice; you can make a squared corner look much pointier when you add the cord on top!

After the entire design is appliquéd, the running stitch holding the top cloth in place can then be pulled out.

## COUCHING AND EMBROIDERY

For couching the edge, choose a 'hard' cord - with a smooth, tight surface, not too fluffy - to get a nice continuous line. Twisted or braided cord will both work, but soft yarn will tend to puff up between stitches, and give a wiggly-looking line. Gold cord and silk twist were used mainly in church vestments and aristocratic textiles, while linen or woolen cord was more likely in middle-class work and high-wear

objects like banners and surcotes. I often couch two cords together side-by-side if the cord is thin, as they cover the edge better, and lie straighter than a single cord might, but a single cord is more common in surviving period examples.

Start the cords by tucking the end under the design, between the stitches. Use a matching color thread, and sew the cords down by stitching straight across the cord. When you get around to where you started, tuck the end under next to the beginning, and make a few extra stitches to keep it secure.

It is definitely possible to save a step by attaching the cord at the same time that you sew down the appliqué, but it is a bit tricky, and more complex to manage. I generally do it separately, but this is my preference. If you do this in one step, try to make the thread go down very close to where it came up on each stitch. Avoid wide stitches, as the cord may creep under the cloth over time if it has space to wander!.

Internal detail can be added using more couched cord, or any embroidery stitch. This can be used to add details that don't show in the silhouette of the applique, and to decoratively secure any large areas in the middle of the design. For heraldry, 'diaper patterns' were also popular: repeated motifs of vines, circles, or criss-cross patterns to give texture and interest to large shapes that might otherwise be boring and featureless. (Painted heraldry also uses diaper patterns, and might have originally been inspired by textiles.) Diaper-work in heraldic art can be a different color from the charge itself, but should never lead to confusion about what color the heraldic charge actually is! Embroidered detail can also be added before laying the appliqué— a common practice for heavily embroidered attachments, and probably for embroidered bands as well.

### **MACHINE APPLIQUE:**

This method adapts surprisingly well to machine appliqué. While handwork is preferable from the standpoint of flexibility and authenticity, some tasks call for speed or durability instead.

Begin as above, marking the design very clearly on the top fabric, cutting it out as a rectangle with a 1" margin, then hand-basting it to the bottom fabric, using interior as well as exterior stitching to secure it within  $\frac{3}{4}$ " of the stitch line. Sew on top of the line using a close and short zigzag stitch – about 3mm/3mm. Then, clip the extra fabric back, as close to the stitching as possible. Then, either hand-couch a heavy cord over the zigzag, or use a satin stitch (a wide but very short zigzag) to do a final finishing edge. The more tightly woven the cloth, the longer the stitch length should be, as too tight a satin stitch will make tightly woven cloth stretch and buckle.



An early 14<sup>th</sup> c. appliquéd banner of velvet and linen, with couched-cord edges and embroidered detail.



Late 16<sup>th</sup> c. appliquéd Spanish herald's tabard, from the reign of Philip (Felipe) II.



15<sup>th</sup> c. tabard with the badge of Burgundy.

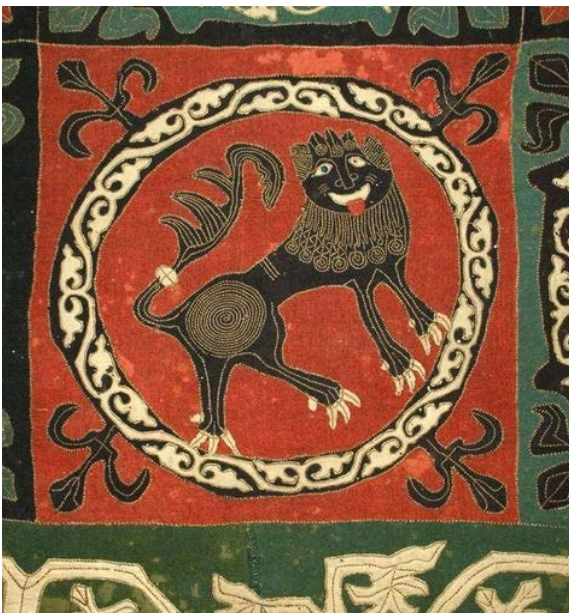


13<sup>th</sup> c. horse trappings (probably).





15<sup>th</sup> c. Swedish(?) appliqué and reverse-appliqué coverlet(?) with couched cord and embroidery.



A 15<sup>th</sup> c. Scandinavian household textile, and a close-up detail of a similar piece.



A 16<sup>th</sup> c. Italian appliqué textile on net fabric with couched cord and split stitch(?) embroidery. There are many separate pieces of appliqué used here, and multiple colors of couching cord. (Note how the pointy bits and crevices are made to look pointier by using the cord to extend and modify the design.)