

Applied Wool on Wool Applique with Chain Stitch Edge.
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"If an Applied Wool on Wool Applique has some form of an embellished edge (rather than just being sewed down and having nothing extra on the edge), that embellishment is couching." The couching might be in the form of a cord, yarn or even gilded leather strips, it might be in a matching color, contrasting color, or even several colors, but it is always couching. (I have seen a few examples of linen applique with an embellished edge that is not couching, but never wool). This was my conclusion after 10 years of research and examining at least 350 different pieces of applique (wool, linen, cotton and leather). This is not, however, what I wanted my conclusion to be!

Why does this matter? Almost 10 years ago I made my daughter a beautiful new wool coat. I added some beautiful applique designs on it. Because, personally, I think applique looks more finished with an embellished edge and because the embellishment gives the edge extra support for longer wear. I added a couched wool yarn to the edge. Within the first hour of my daughter wearing her brand new coat at an event, she ran past a tree, snagged the couching and turned the coat into a drawstring bag. It was bad - she had basically ripped out or gathered up the entire couched edge.

Since I knew that I could not change the nature of my child, I would have to change the nature of my designs, so I went back to the drawing board. I searched and searched and searched. I kept coming back to the same thing. Looking at Mamluk decorations of fabric in the 10th to 15th century in Egypt there are a few very distinct themes. On the one hand we find a lot of counted stitch examples. However focusing on the non-counted stitch examples there is a fair amount of applique examples and there is a fair amount of examples with chain stitch.

Chain stitch would be the perfect edge to an applique design. It could be nice and bold to enhance the boldness of applique designs. If worked in reverse chain stitch it is easy to do and it easily adapts to follow both the curves and points of the applique. Because it is a nice wide stitch it would strengthen and support the exposed wool edge. AND I have found so many examples of chain stitch in the same area, in the same time frame and on the same types of fabric examples as applique. Surely they must have done it, they must have ... only I could not prove it.

So what could I prove? A very common use for applique in Mamluk Egypt is Heraldic Badges. Heraldic Badges can be found with Wool on Wool Applique, Linen Applique, Applique with couching, and Applique without couching, but also various forms of embroidery. Fragment 1972.120.3 at the MET (figure 1) is one of the best examples of wool on wool applied applique

Mamluk badges. It is worked in various colors of wool, all with couched edges, sometimes a single thickness and sometimes a double thickness.

Compare this with Fragment EA1984.35 at the Ashmolean Museum Oxford (figure 2). Here the badge is part of a tab and only the outline is embroidered. This embroidery is done in a chain stitch.

Fragment EA1984.86 at the Ashmolean Museum Oxford - (figure 3) is an even better example. The heraldic badge is embroidered with red and yellow silk. The infill areas of the embroidery is done in a long - short stitch, but the outlines of both the overall badge, the different colored segments and the diamond and cup is done in chain stitch. Thus one type of work for the body and chain stitch for the outline.

Fragment EA1984.63 at the Ashmolean Museum Oxford (figure 4) is a further example of the interconnectivity of the couching / chain stitch in the time period and region. The blue colored infill area is couched down (laid work) and is then outlined in chain stitch. Once again we have one type of work for the body and chain stitch for the edge.

We therefore have 3 different examples where the edge of the design was outlined with chain stitch. It would therefore not be too much of a stretch to imagine further examples of chain stitch outlines, maybe even an applique example with a chain stitch outline?

Mamluk Egypt is not the only area where we find an interconnectivity between applique, couching and chain stitch. In the Scandanavian example of the Textile Fragment with Unicorn, Deer, Centaur and Lion - 2011.430 at the MET (figure 5) we find applique with couching, applique without couching and, chain stitch embellishments all on the same item. Unfortunately none of the chain stitch is actually on the edge or supporting the edge.

So for 10 years I ended up having to make peace with my 'one-step-from-period' practice. I made a lot of applique works, coats, bags, tunics and many many applique circles as largess. And never did I enter it in competitions, because I was always aware that it is in fact not a provable period practice. (and somehow, despite the chain stitches not being any more difficult to snag than couching, my daughter never had a problem with any garb with chain stitch decorations, so the practice worked to fulfill the required task)

MAJOR PLOT TWIST: In February 2021 I agreed to teach a class in Applique. In an attempt to make the 350 pieces of applique that I have found in various museum catalogs accessible I created a Facebook group and uploaded the photos and the links to the groups. This meant I had to access all the museum websites. And there it was EA 1993.40 (figure 6) a small little scrap of fabric, badly worn. At first glance it is not clear that this is applique. But if you look closely it is clearly wool on wool applique with a chain stitch edging. How had I missed it for all these years?

I think the biggest irony for me is that this collection (the Newberry Collection at the Ashmolean Museum) is the reason why I have always considered that having an applique design with a chain stitch edge is not only possible, but probable. It is, in fact, in the very collection that I had used for years to almost prove my theory. I had just never looked close enough.

So don't give up on your interpretations - and never ever give up on your research. The link might just be out there somewhere.

Bibliography:

The Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Eastern Art Online: Yousef Jameel Center for Islamic and Asian Art. "Tabs from a banner with fleur-de-lys, blazon, and trefoils." EA1984.35, <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1984.35>, 8 May 2021

The Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Eastern Art Online: Yousef Jameel Center for Islamic and Asian Art. "Textile fragment with crescents" EA1993.40, <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1993.40>, 8 May 2021.

The Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Eastern Art Online: Yousef Jameel Center for Islamic and Asian Art. "Textile fragment with lions." EA1984.63, <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1984.63>, 8 May 2021.

The Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Eastern Art Online: Yousef Jameel Center for Islamic and Asian Art. "Textile fragment with heraldic blazon" EA1984.86, <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1984.86>, 8 May 2021

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, "Textile Fragment with Mamluk Emblem" 1972.120.3, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452400>, 8 May 2021.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, "Textile Fragment with Unicorn, Deer, Centaur and Lion." 2011.430, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/479598>. 8 May 2021.



Stancil, Benika. Children's Coat with Wool on Wool Applique and Chain Stitch Edge. 18 February 2019. JPG



Stancil, Benika. Corner of Coat Adult Coat with Wool on Wool Applique with Chain Stitch Edge.
31 March 2020. JPG.



Stancil, Benika. Starting work on Wool on Wool Applique with Chain Stitch Edge. 9 January 2018. JPG



Stancil, Benika. Wool on Wool Applique Circles with Chain Stitch Edges donated for Largess. 15 July 2020. JPG

Figure 1: Textile Fragment with Mamluk Emblem

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452400>

Figure 2: Tabs from a banner with fleur-de-lys, blazon, and trefoils.

<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1984.35>



Fragment 3: Textile fragment with heraldic blazon

<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1984.86>

Figure 4: Textile fragment with lions

<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1984.63>



Figure 5: Textile Fragment with Unicorn, Deer, Centaur and Lion
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/479598>



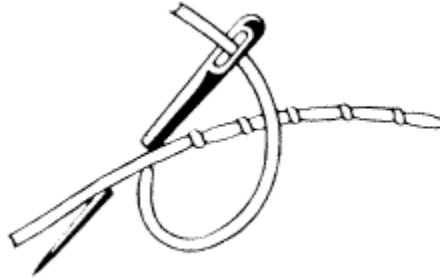
Figure 6: Textile fragment with crescents
<https://collections.ashmolean.org/object/239770>



The Stitches:

Surface Couching.

To Work Surface Couching - Lay down the thread to be couched, and with another thread catch it down with small stitches worked over the top.



To Work Chain Stitch - Bring the thread up at the top of the line and hold it down with the left thumb. Insert the needle where it last emerged and bring the point out a short distance away. Pull the thread through, keeping the working thread under the needle point.



http://medieval.webcon.net.au/technique_stitches.html

I do not in fact use Chain Stitch, but Reverse Chain Stitch. There are several reasons for this.

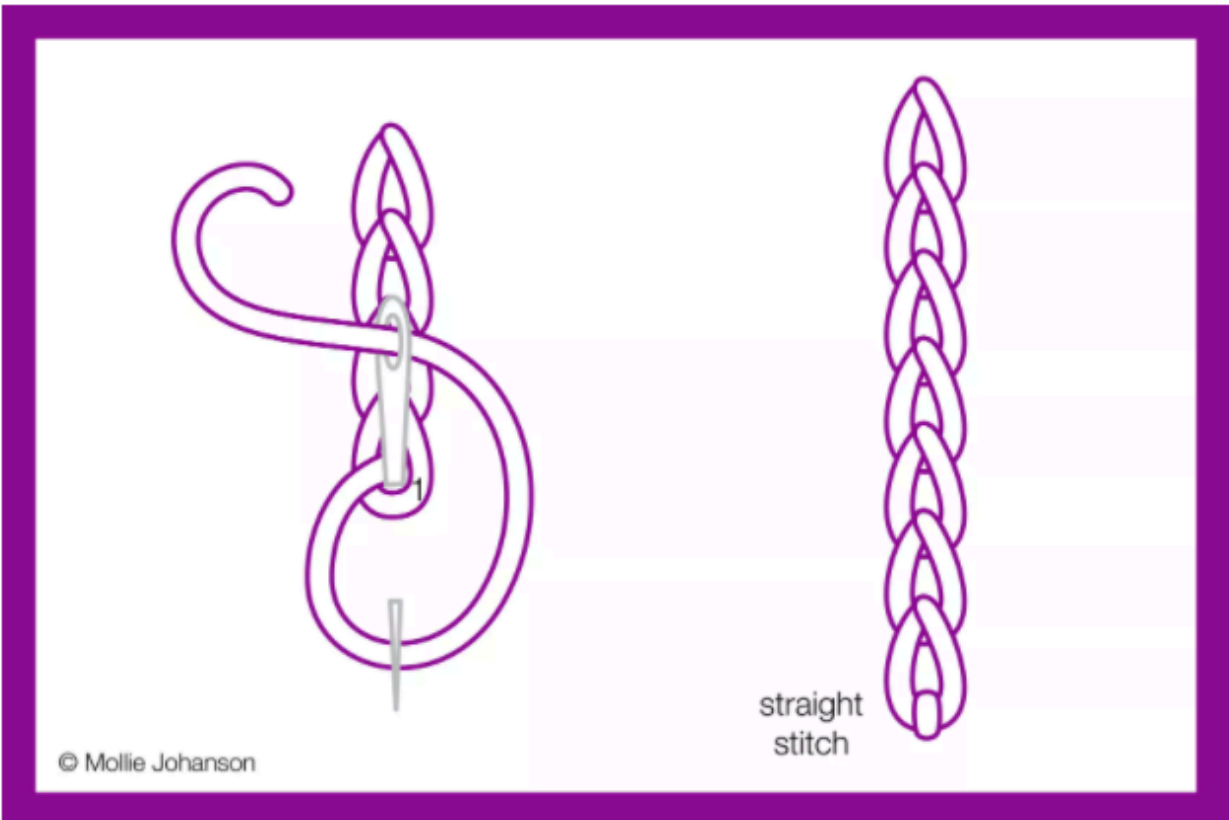
1: The thickness of wool. Doing the “scoop motion” of standard Chain Stitch through 2 layers of thick wool is nearly impossible. Or at least it is if you want nice small even stitches.

2: Controle. I find it much easier to set my starting stitches right at the point of a design rather than trying to end at the point. It is also easier to adapt the size and positioning on curves when you are doing Reverse Chain Stitch.

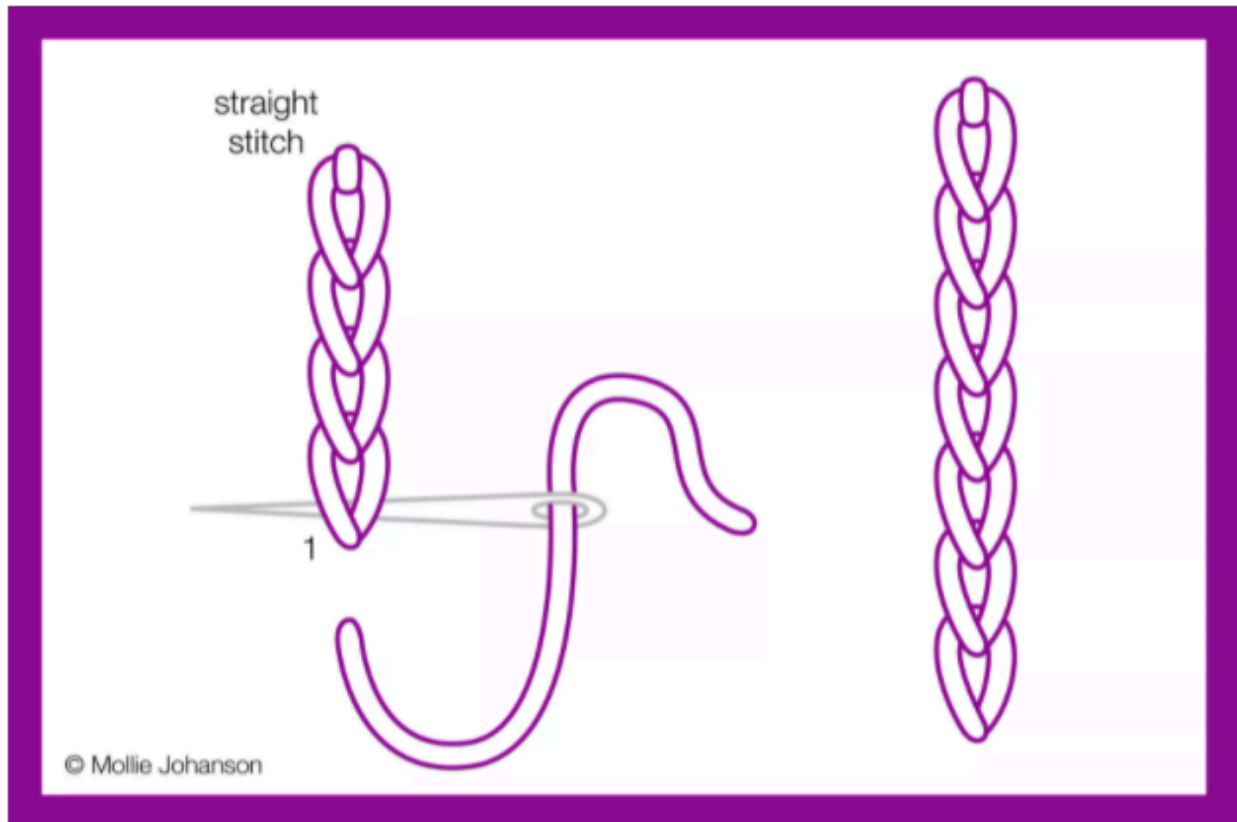
3: Adding additional small stitches. While working on complex designs it is often helpful to add additional small stitches, especially to form points on a design. With Reverse Chain Stitch you can easily add an extra small stitch to form a more defined point and then thread the yarn through both the small stitch and the previous loop (or not) without losing the integrity or flow of the design.

4: Habit. Habit is an extremely strong motivator. If you ask many an artists or craftsman why they do a certain thing, they will stop, think about it and then inform you that it is just what they do.

The only disadvantage to reverse chain stitch is that it does take longer to do when doing a straight line or gentle curve with thin fabric. Since I don't use many straight lines or thin fabrics this is not really something that is an issue for me.



<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/working-the-chain-stitch-1177565>



<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/working-the-couching-stitch-3862766>

How did finding the Extant Example impact my Research:

More than one person has asked me if finding an extant example that proves my theory impacted my thoughts and feelings regarding my research. Comments have ranged from people who thought it would have a totally positive impact: "You must feel vindicated" to having a totally negative impact: "All that research time wasted". As with most things my personal feelings are somewhere in the middle, but much closer to the positive side. I have been encouraged to write up my feelings:

I had always believed that it was only a matter of time until an example that proves my hypothesis was found. It was never the kind of theory that ends with "but we will never really know". I did not choose this technique due to personal preference or modern equivalence, but because I believed it to be logical and appropriate. So I was not really surprised when I found the example - all evidence pointed to its existence.

I am not a professional researcher. I do even have a Master's Degree in anything with the level or research that requires. I am totally an amateur researcher. I do not say this to lessen the impact and importance of amateur researchers. I say it to explain my high level of "imposter syndrome".

There are so many parameters to consider when doing research and when formulating a hypothesis: Personal preferences, modern methods and aesthetics, later historical examples and methods, overlook related research. It has always therefore seemed to me easier to get it wrong rather than right. Combining this with the horrible theories that are easily peer debunked and yet extensively shared has made me very fearful of putting forward any of my research. In fact, until I found the extant example I had never shared my research nor even entered an item based on my research in a competition.

Thus finding an example that proves the theory that I have held for years now, had a very dramatic impact on my estimation of my worth as a researcher. In my own head I have gone from "Interested Observer" to "Helpful Contributor".

I also have an affinity for the orphan pieces and methods that you find in most period arts and sciences. It has been a great joy to me that little known techniques and arts that I have practiced for years using one or two examples (many times with those examples doubted due to their rarity) becoming more mainstream as more information is uncovered. The fact remains that there is one, and only one, example of applique with a chain stitch edging. It would be very easy to dismiss it as miss-labeled, but my additional research shows that it is logical for the time period and place and fits in well with many other related examples. In this I do not feel that my research is in any way diminished by the discovery. The opposite is in fact true, my research supports the application of chain stitch edgings and hopefully it will lead to it being used more by the larger community.

It will hopefully also encourage me to write up some other hypotheses that have been bouncing around in my head for years and that I also have extensive supporting evidence for.

I do have to note that the piece in fact exceeds my expectations and what I could ever have hoped for. It contains 2 colors of thread. And not only are there 2 colors, the outer design is done in one color and then the inner design forming a third layer of applique is done in a different color. I have a coat done with this method, and never honestly believe that I would be able to prove that. There is also more than one place where the loop of the chain goes through both another loop and a small stitch. This happens in reverse chain stitch all the time, but not in standard chain stitch making it very possible that this example was done in reverse chain stitch.