

Basic Italian Hem Stitch

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Italian hem stitch is a type of very simple drawn work or Punto Antico embroidery. In drawn work embroidery, threads from the warp and/or weft are removed from the cloth and the threads that remain in the opening are gathered together in patterns with a decorative stitch. Italian hem stitch combines a decorative border with a hem. There are many, many fancier stitches that you can create a myriad of lovely effect

Drawn work embroidery is a precursor to lace and evolves from white work. The earliest indication of it I have found is a reference in *White Work Embroidery* dating it back to 1235. (Dawson 8.) The examples I have found prior to 1500 so it primarily on household linens. In the 16th century we also begin to see examples of drawn thread work on linen small clothes such as collars and cuffs. Appendix A has a representative examples of pre- 1600 drawn thread work.

As the patterns in the 16th century began calling for more and more threads to be removed and the remaining threads to be manipulated into elaborate patterns, it became easier to cut the fabric rather than remove the threads and techniques such as cut work, reticella and Punto en Aria became more fashionable.

For the purpose of this class, we will focus on the 2 basic hem stitches:

mouse teeth



ladder stitch



Materials

Modern day drawn work is done on even weave linen, similar to Hardanger embroidery. However, even weave linen is expensive, especially for larger projects and a bit heavy, especially for garb. The fabric I most commonly use, and the fabric of your napkin, is fabric-store.com 019 linen. The warp and weft count is low enough that removing a thread or two makes a visible gap. A finer weave linen provides a more delicate result.

While in theory using the threads you remove from the linen for your stitches is probably the most historically accurate method, I prefer using silk thread. I find that silk thread behaves a little better than linen thread for drawn work, but I've used both, depending on the color I wanted to match and have no reason to believe that cotton (or even poly, depending on your desired level of authenticity) would not work equally well.

You will also want some bees wax or thread heaven for conditioning the thread and a pair of small scissors with very sharp points.

I like a relatively small , sharp embroidery needle for this. You may want to experiment to find the type of needle that works best for you.

Good natural light, an Ott Light and/or a magnifier are also helpful.

Preparations

1. *Square the fabric*

For the hem stitch to come out evenly, you need to make sure your linen is perfectly square when you cut it. This is an excellent practice for all projects, but is absolutely necessary for hem stitch.

Start by clipping the selvage edge on one end of prewashed linen. Pull the 2 sides of the cut apart slightly so that there is a thread visible.



Begin pulling the thread gently and carefully easing the gathers towards the other selvage edge.



When the thread you are pulling breaks (and it will) stick a pin under the unbroken thread close to where it broke, lift it out of the fabric and keep pulling. Repeat as needed until you have removed the thread from the entire width of fabric.

Curse words and/or alcohol are often a welcome addition to this step.



Once the thread is removed, you should see a visible line in the linen. If you don't see a clear line, remove a second thread. Use this line to cut the linen.

Repeat these steps for the other sides of the napkin. I usually cut a 18.5" to 20" square so that I can get 3 napkins from 1/2 yard of linen. A 12" square is a good size for a handkerchief.

Your finished napkin will be 1-2" smaller, depending on how wide you want your hem to be. I like a deeper hem, but your taste may vary.



Mark 1/4" in on all sides of the fabric and press up.



For a 1" hem, measure up and in 2" from the 1/4" mark on each corner. Adjust as desired for a narrower or deeper hem.



On a corner, slide a pin under a single thread at the point you marked 2" in. Snip this thread.

I usually put a pin in this corner to mark it was where I started.



Start pulling the thread you just snipped. When you get close to the next corner, slide a pin under the thread you are pulling and snip it at the point you marked. Repeat snipping and pulling a single thread on each side until you get back to your original corner.

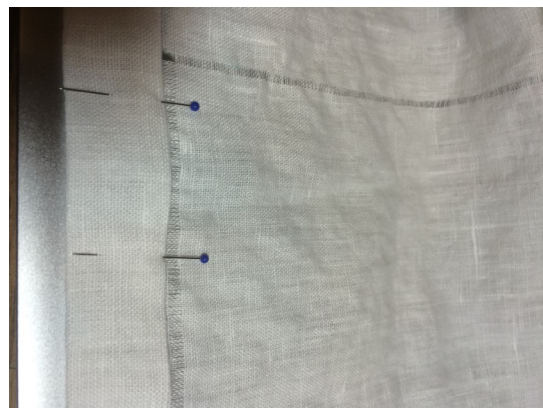


Continue pulling threads until you have pulled 5-6 on each side of the square. After the first one has been pulled on each side, each thread comes out much easier,

The number of threads pulled is up to you. I find that too few threads make the hem stitch difficult to see. Too many make the remaining threads gangly and a bit untidy looking with just a basic mousetooth or ladder stitch, although it can be quite pretty with a fancier stitch.



Once you are done pulling threads, fold the edge up so that it sits just under the first row of pulled threads. You are ready to begin stitching.



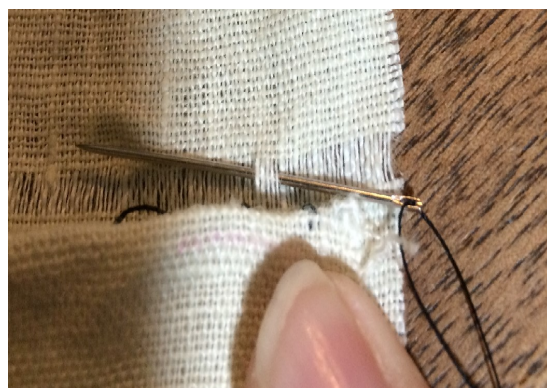
The Basic Stitch

Anchor your thread on the back side of the hem. Slip the needle behind 4-6 threads and pull the thread through all the way. This will gather the threads together in a bundle.

I pick a corner and start an inch or so in from it so that the corner near where I begin is the last corner I complete.

Note. The number of threads you remove and the number of threads you bundle can greatly change the look of the finished piece. 4-6 is just what I suggest to start.

I often "doodle" with different combinations on a piece of scrap fabric to see what I like best for a particular project before I start on my actual fabric.



Slip the needle behind the same 4-6 threads a second time but this time catch a few threads from the hem. Pull the thread through, putting a bit of tension to gather the threads into a bundle.

You have just completed your first stitch.

This stitch used by itself, is called Mouth Teeth. Or it can be the basis for more elaborate stitches.



Ladder Stitch

After you have completed a row of Mouth Teeth, turn the napkin so that the row of stitches are on top. Anchor a new thread in the hem and bring the thread down vertically



Begin a new row of stitching, gathering the other end of the groups of 4-6 threads, creating the appearance of a ladder.



Corners

When you get 2" or so away from the corner, fold the corner point in so that it touches the corner of the removed threads.



Fold up both sides over the point and pin in place. Continue gathering & hem stitching groups of 4-6 threads until you reach the end of the threads



Use satin stitch to cover the raw edge. Once you reach the corner, blind stitch the corner together, Tie off your thread and restart the next side with satin stitching the raw edge,



Historical Examples

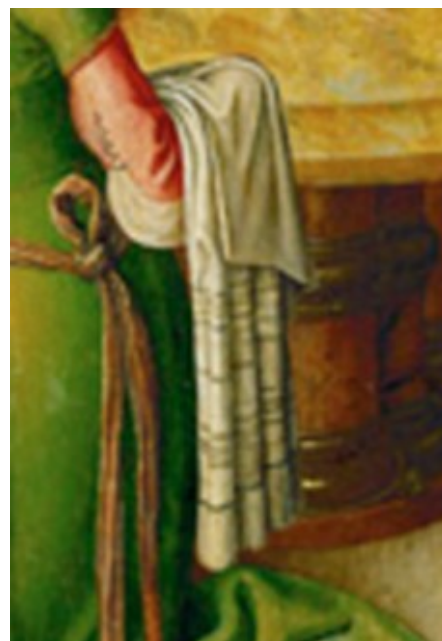
Detail from: L'apparizione di Cristo e angeli in sogno a san Martino
Simone Martini
c. 1312
Fresco in Capella di San Martino
Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Umbria, Italy



Detail from: The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple
Giotto di Bondone
c.1320
Isabella Stewart Gardener Museum, Boston Massachusetts
Accession Number: P30w9

<http://www.gardnermuseum.org/collection/browse?filter=artist:3152>

Detail from: The Circumcision
Master of Saint-Severin (German, Cologne School)
c.1490
The Louvre, Paris, France



Historical Examples



Tullio Lombardo
detail from Bacchus and Ariadne
c. 1505
Kunsthistorisches Museum
Vienna, Austria

Detail from Jan de Beer
The Birth of the Virgin
ca. 1520
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza
Madrid, Spain
INV. Nr. 34 (1956.16)

http://www.museothyssen.org/en/thyssen/ficha_obra/555



Shirt Nils Sture wore when he was
murdered
c. 1567.
Upsala Cathedral Museum
Upsala, Sweden

Picture from Arnold, Janet. *Patterns
of Fashion 4*. London: Macmillan,
2008. Page 21



Sleeve close up on Shirt Nils Sture wore when he was murdered
c. 1567.
Upsala Cathedral Museum
Upsala, Sweden

Picture from Arnold, Janet. Patterns of Fashion 4. London: Macmillan, 2008. Page 21.

Florentine School, late 16th Century
Portrait of a youth, traditionally identified as
Francesco I de'Medici.

Private Collection
Sold via Christies

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/florentine-school-late-16th-century-portrait-of-5287723-details.aspx>



Detail of Giovanna of Austria and
her son Phillippo
c. 1586
Giovanni Bizelli

Galleria degli Uffizi
Florence, Italy

Higher quality picture in Moda a
Firenze 1540-1580. Page 43. Lan-
dini, Roberta Orsini and Bruna Nic-
coli. Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa,
2005.

Attributed to Lavinia Fontana
Last quarter of 16th century
Portrait of a Lady with a Child, tradition-
ally identified as Eleonora de'Medici with her son Fran-
cesco.

Private Collection
Sold via Christies

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/attributed-to-lavinia-fontana-portrait-of-4941828-details.aspx>



Additional information

Maestra Giata Magdalena Alberti's blog post on Punto Antico:

<https://fleurtyherald.wordpress.com/2016/06/28/punto-antico-drawn-threadwork/>

My Pintrest board on drawn work:

<https://www.pinterest.com/bluestocking67/mostly-16th-c-drawn-work/> a mix of examples from 16th century art, tutorials on stitches I want to try and books I want to remember to look for

Punto Antico article from Piecework Magazine:

<http://www.interweave.com/needle/projects/Punto-Antico.pdf>

article is on modern applications but has some lovely photos and additional resources to check out at the end

Mary Corbett's Needle n' Thread site

<https://www.needlenthread.com/types-of-hand-embroidery/drawn-thread-embroidery>

modern approach, but excellent tutorial

Italian Needlework blog

<http://italian-needlework.blogspot.com/search/label/Drawn-Thread%20work>

Treasure trove of information on drawn thread work and other types of embroidery

Whilja's Corner blog

<https://whiljascorner.wordpress.com/2014/07/24/16th-c-apron-with-whitework-embroidery/>

Process photos and discussion of making a 16th century apron with drawn work

Opus Mariss blog

<https://opusmariss.wordpress.com/2014/04/23/drawing-some-conclusions-about-drawn-thread-work/>

Researching drawn thread work in the 14th century.

Ambruter, Carolyn. *The Open Canvas* New York: Workman Publishing. 1982. Print. ISBN: 0894801716

Excellent tutorial on a variety of more elaborate stitches.

References

Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. London: Macmillian, 2008. Print. ISBN: 0896762629

Dawson, Barbara. *White Work Embroidery*. London: BT Batsford Ltd., 1987. Print ISBN: 0713439505

Hulsing, Carrie. "*Drawing Some Conclusions about Drawn Thread Work*" *Opus Mariss*, 2014. Web. Accessed 27 September 2016 <<https://opusmariss.wordpress.com/2014/04/23/drawing-some-conclusions-about-drawn-thread-work/>>

Levey, Santana. *Lace: A History*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983. ISBN: 090128615X

McNeill, Moyra. *Drawn Thread Embroidery*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1989. Print. ISBN: 0805014063

Thanks to:

Mariss Ghijs at <https://opusmariss.wordpress.com/> for independently confirming that I'm not just looking in the wrong places... there really is very little actually written in period about drawn thread work.

Countess Kissa for getting me addicted to drawn thread work.

Lady Laurencia uí Nualláin for getting excited enough about drawn thread work after my class to not only finish her project but blog about it!