

An Apron Wrought In Two Ways

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The Luttrell Psalter written in England in the late 14th century ⁽¹⁾ shows a number of different aprons all with very similar style: a long narrow apron fabric pleated into a waistband with cross-hatching or designs at the top of the skirt portion. In all three images there is some form of embroidery at the top of the apron. The artist is also attempting to represent some form fullness at the top of the apron. Embroidery alone would not create the required fullness unless it was also gathering in the fabric at the same time.



An early image, taken from a polytych ⁽²⁾ done by an Unknown Master shows a figure wearing the fitted dress of the 15th and 15th centuries with a decorative apron. While it is impossible to discern the type of embellishment along the top of the apron it certainly documents the usage of the apron with this type of fashion.

This 15th century engraving of a French peasant in "Pictorial History of Fashion" also depicts a cross-thatching pattern to the apron, similar to that of those depicted in the Luttrell Psalter. ⁽³⁾

The apron or "Schurz" in German was well documented in inventories and sumptuary laws of the early 16th century. These aprons were a prized part of a woman's estate. Made from mainly linen, linen-cotton blends, and linen-wool blends they were not only white but also inventories show a number of different colors.



The embroidery on the aprons was valued enough to be noted in the inventories of the citizens. In Nurnberg one form of embroidery was known as "seidenfitzen" (silk smocking).⁽⁴⁾ In one inventory of her household items, Ursula Holzschuer listed her valuables in order of their cost to make, the embroidery and the gold borders:⁽⁴⁾

- 2 black and one green apron
- 1 black Schetter (dress weight linen) apron with a Sammaten (silk)
- 1 green apron
- 1 black apron with a golden bag
- 1 red wammasin apron with gold work
- 1 red wammasin apron worked with white silk
- 1 red-colored apron
- 1 white wammasin apron with a false seam (waistband)
- 1 white wammasin apron
- 5 white aprons



Colored Apron by Hans Baldung Grien ⁽⁵⁾

Sixteenth century sumptuary laws also support pleated and possibly embroidered aprons: "that no rich pleating should be on an honor-worthy apron - that also there should be less pleating and small smocking so the apron would not be so gathered."⁽⁴⁾

In 1512 it was written into law that " wifely fashion, citizenesses and citizen's children or residents of the city .none with gold or silver smocking or needlework aprons shall wear." ⁽⁴⁾

The most prevalent documentation in this time period comes from the woodcuts of the Germanic artists, such as Schoen, Strauch and Durer. Three examples drawn from the woodcuts of these artists show similar styles to the aprons above: a pleated apron with some type of crosshatching inferred along the top of the apron.



Hill and Oakes, in their book "Rural Costume: Its Origins and Development in Western Europe and the British Isles", described the fabrics being used on the aprons in rural settings as being made of coarse linen or helpen with "Seckcloth, Dowlas or Lockram," which are all types of fabric used for clothing during the period. They go on to say that the English rural apron had a uniqueness in style, that it was "honeycombed .that is gathered at the waist and overstitched with the basic stitch of smocking" ⁽⁹⁾

In this painting of the Fountain of Youth by Cranach the Elder, done in 1546 ⁽¹⁰⁾, a full length pleated apron can be seen. There is very clearly defined honeycomb shape along the top of the apron.



A painting by Grein ⁽¹¹⁾ shows the 'halbrock' or half apron. There is a large amount of fabric that needs to be drawn into the waistband in some fashion. Some form of embellishment is hinted at, at the top of the apron as well as decorative edging along the hem.



By the latter half of the 16th century the apron had turned into a fashion item for the upper class. This portrait of Mathildis von Munchhausen by Ludger Tom Ring the Younger done in 1572 ⁽¹²⁾ is a perfect example of such an apron. Very narrow and finely pleated, it has some form of embroidery up along the top of the apron, consistent with what is seen in the other aprons.



A close up of the waist line hints at a design incorporated into the overall design of the apron. As does this image by Cranach⁽¹³⁾



The Stitches

Honeycomb Stitch


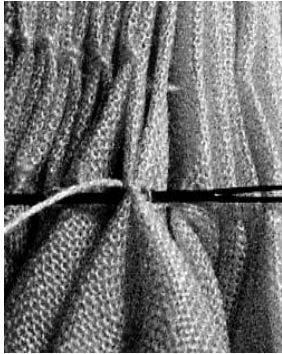
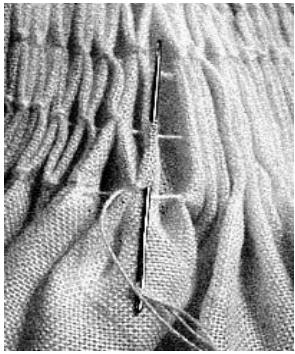
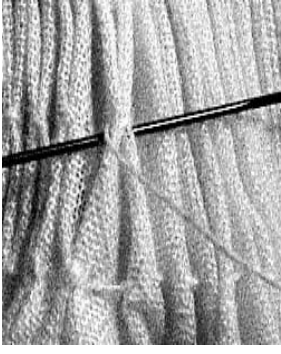
The honeycomb stitch, using its modern term, seems to be the closest to recreating what appears to be the predominant style depicted in the artwork during the 15th and the 16th century, it is by no means the only stitch which was used to create and embellish the pleating.

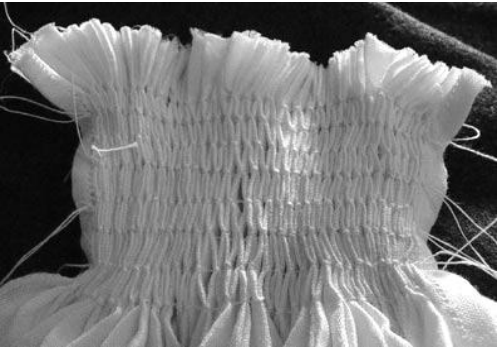
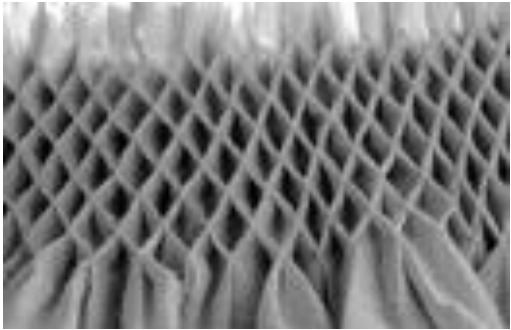
An extant garment from the 16th century found in a cloister in Alpirsbach been found with the honeycomb style stitch. ⁽¹⁴⁾

The honeycomb stitch is essentially a series of satin stitches down in a zig-zag pattern.



Abb. 743 Hemd, Ärmelabschluss in Smokarbeit (Kat.-Nr. 28).

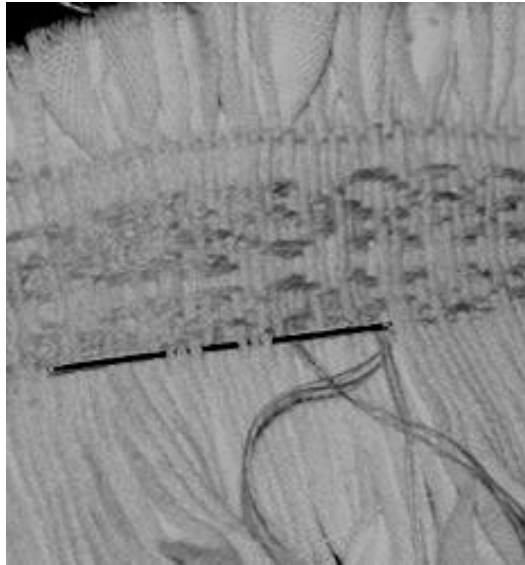
			
Start by coming up from the bottom through the side of the first pleat. Draw needle through 2 pleats, make one satin stitch through the pleats	Start second satin stitch around the same pleats. Do not draw the thread all the way through the second pleat	Insert the needle through the pleat and bring it out at the next row.	Pick up the next pleat and repeat the process.

	
Completed Embroidery	After the gathering threads have been pulled out.

Pattern Darning

Pattern darning, is a counted technique in which you either draw the thread through the pleats or over the pleats. The pleats become the “thread count” of the pattern. It can be done in two ways: the threads passing over the pleats create the design or the thread passing through the pleats (and subsequently raising the pleats slightly) create the design.

The image below is an example of creating the design by passing over the pleats.



This style of embroidery is best suited to geometric designs. It is best to use designs in which the “float” or thread passing over the pleats is less than 5 stitches. Any more than this and the threads tend to droop and will distort the design.

Ensure that you put the horizontal rows as close to each other as you can get them in order to fill in the space completely. Too far apart and you will see the pleats in-between the rows and you will lose the design. I recommend using an amount of thread approximately equal to the thickness of the pleats. This ensures a uniform look to the pattern.

For the first few rows, do not worry about making sure the tension is perfect. Once the first few rows are in, carefully “slide” the pleats along the threads to adjust the tension. Adjust tension in this manner (and to line up the pleats) while you are working on your piece. Be very careful, too much adjusting or pulling on the threads and they can shred or break.

I run my pattern from one direction only. I will knot off one side and let the end hang loose on the other side. After 3 rows I knot the threads on each side together (with about an inch or so of slack) to prevent pulling out. Once the piece is complete and I have adjusted the tension. I will knot the thread close to the fabric.

Recommended resources for designs:

German Renaissance Patterns for Embroidery A Facsimile Copy of Nicolas Bassee’s New Modelbuch of 1568. Curious Works Press ISBN: 0-9633331-4-3

The New Carolingian Modelbook: Counted Embroidery Patterns from before 1600". Salazar, Kim Brody (as Ianthe d'Avernoigne). Albuquerque, New Mexico: The Outlaw Press, 1995. ISBN 0-9642082-2-9.

Construction of the Apron

Materials

For apron:

- Silk (must be able to hold the pleats)
- Light weight wool
- Linen

For embroidery:

- **Silk floss:** Pattern darning use stranded, vs. a heavy twist, for honeycomb any will work. Silk also tends to be stronger and can tolerate more handling/fussing
- **Linen:** Be very careful with the linen threads, it tends to shred. Modern linen threads do not have the longer staple threads needed for strength. Cotton lace threads are a good substitute.

Determining the width:

The finished width of the apron depends on the size of the pleats you make. The deeper the pleats the more fabric you will need.

1. Calculate the width of the fabric for the style of the apron and the embroidery technique you are using.
 - Honeycomb stitch allows greater flexibility when determining the width of the finished apron and uses the least amount of fabric, approx a 3 or 4 -1 ratio.
 - Patterned darning is not flexible in its finished size. While you can tighten and loosen the pleats along the pattern, that is to control the look of the design more than to grant you extra width on the apron. A pattern darned apron is approx an 8-1 ration, perhaps even smaller on a finer fabric.
2. Go selvage to selvage as possible. Modern fabric the selvages are very stiff however so you may still find yourself cutting off the edge and hemming the edge of the apron.
3. Think of the class level of the persona you will be using the apron with. Determine the correct style and fabric accordingly.
4. To make wider apron, sew panels together before you begin to pleat. The least noticeable and most likely sewing technique is to whip stitch the panels along the selvage edge.

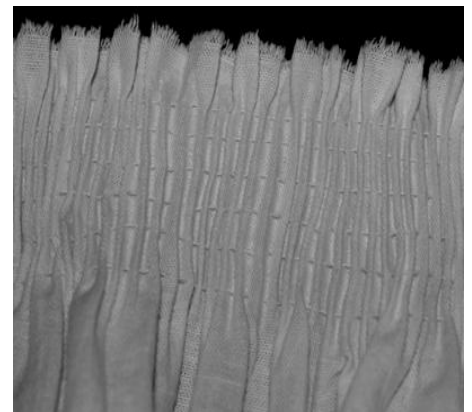
Pleating the fabric:

I am asked all the time what I use to pleat up the fabric. Truthfully, I do not use anything, I eyeball the pleats. The pleats forgive you if they are not perfectly even. For both embroidery techniques as long as you are stitching evenly (distance from the top of the pleat) your stitches will move the pleats up down to make them even when the project is completed. Do small test pieces to determine how far apart the gathering threads need to be.

What about *pleaters*? Pleaters are wonderful as they provide uniform pleats. One drawback however, most do not have the ability to adjust the depth of your pleats to suit the project. They are also expensive unless you are doing a lot of projects.

Mesh/Canvas/Screening: Many people suggest using this technique to mark the dots to pick up. I have tried this, and I find it more difficult to keep the marks even, especially if the fabric moves.

The picture shows a sample of fabric pleated up, but not pulled tight. I will tie off the ends of the rows, generally in groups of three, loosely on both ends to prevent the threads from pulling out.



When you are ready to start the embroidery draw the threads to the desired tension and knot them off with a slip knot.

Finishing

Sides and Hem: In general, how you finish the apron will depend on the style of apron you are making and its usage. If it is a fashion item, you will want to hem the sides and the bottom. I have finished my aprons with everything from a simple slip stitched hem to a more decorative hem with openwork. If it is a lower class / peasant style, simply keep the selvages and fold them over to cover the knots and threads from the embroidery.

Waistband: The waist can be done using a technique similar to attaching cartridge pleating: simply tack each pleat to the edge of the apron.

The same can be done with the back. No easy way to tack down the pleats without crushing the top of the pleats. Since they will also be directional I will usually have the apron divided in the middle and turn the pleats in the opposite direction.

Final Notes:

Do samples. There is nothing worse than getting to the end of hours worth of pleating, only to find out the pleats are too deep or you need more fabric added. Do the same with the embroidery (on the test pieces). You may find out the thread is too fine or too thick. You may have to tweak the design. Test pieces let you check size and tension, they are worth the effort!

Just remember, there is no "right" way. Everyone will have a slightly different technique. Try different techniques out and experiment. ENJOY!

Citations

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