

16th Century Russian Decoration Techniques

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For the modern fiber arts and Russian enthusiast, the methods of decoration can be broken down into three application categories; applied, embroidered and couched. Foundation fabrics include felt, canvas, linen, wools, silks, satins, brocades and velvets according to the social strata you are imitating. Common embroidery materials include linen, wool, silk, beading wire and metallic threads of both silver and gold in both single or multiple ply. Common couching materials for the modern artisan include rayon "rat tail" to simulate silk, braided fiber (linen, wool or silk), pearls (plastic, glass, freshwater-usually 2.5-4mm unless either you or your persona is wealthy, then 6-10mm), semiprecious stones, etc.

I personally favor backing lighter fabrics like broadcloth, satin, silk, velveteens and some brocades with felt or canvas stretched over a large embroidery frame to prevent stress wrinkles and add support for weight. The laidwork allows you to use all the bullion materials to the surface of the garment or artifact. Variations involved the couching of bundled wire or metallic thread, the dense application of a single bullion strand sewn down with single strand silk thread (called *or nue* in the West) and felt layered stump work covered in gold or silver thread / wire laidwork began to appear with greater regularity.

To achieve a period look with a technique contemporary to the mid to late 16th century, use single strand white or yellow cotton or silk thread to couch down bundled metallic thread in a vine or curly cue pattern. A time intensive but stunning technique is single bullion strand laidwork couched down with a single strand of silk thread. It produces a shot silk appearance that is both rich and textured in appearance, especially under direct light. A beading needle works best for this type of embroidery and the process is quite good for people with a lot of time to kill and the patience for fine work. A quicker use of this technique is to use metallic thread, preferably multi-ply for its greater bulk, and use it as a filler or highlight of a larger, faster pattern.

Another common usage of bullion wire during this period is seen in wire wrapped cording, called *skanny*. The cord would be sewn down to the foundation cloth in the proper shape or design and then be wrapped in a fine wire, strung through a needle, until none of the cording showed. As a practical tip, use white cording because gaps don't show up as easily as with darker cord when using metallic thread or beading wire. For complicated designs, several smaller cords or rayon "rattail" can be couched down to the foundation fabric side by side until the proper width and shape of the design is achieved. I prefer rattail because it is available in most fabric stores for a cheap price, is easy to work with, is the proper size and remnants can be used to make stylish loop closures for the rest of your garment(s). This technique could just as easily be used for hems, cuffs, collars, hats and shoes embroidered with any of a variety of materials available to the modern artisan. As a practical safeguard against fabric "puckering", iron a layer (or two) of fusible interfacing on the underside of the foundation fabric and use an embroidery hoop where possible.

This brings us to the more complicated stitches, often using perpendicular cross hatching, which are commonly referred to as *prikrep*. Basket weave involved sewing down the wire at each side of the desired area to be covered and then using the same kind of bullion wire to sew over the strands like basket weaving or more spread out to form a subtle design. This is an extremely useful technique for large coverage items like hats, straps, front openings, gloves and shoes and was used for large designs in period artifacts.

Herringbone and chevrons are created in rows of stitches. Chevrony is a variation of laidwork with a series of diagonal stitches (like saw blade teeth) from side to side. Herringbone involves two diagonal stitches through the fabric in a narrow channel running up or down the area (like a sergeants stripes, only running down the entire sleeve). Start at the bottom and work your way up, going from side to side. Cording or pearls should be sewn over the finished edges to hide any stitches not uniform with the edging of the area as a finisher. I will warn you that these materials tended to be of uniform thickness and width throughout the pattern though.

For modern researchers and artisans wanting to use decorative pearlwork there are a few facts to remember. The favored method of application seems to have been couching down a string of them in the desired shape so that a stitch appeared between each pearl. One artifact seems to have used the unique technique of stitching each pearl down separately, then looping the thread around the base of the pearl several times to stabilize it before moving to the next. On varieties of pearls, plastic melts at the drycleaner, glass is heavy enough warp clothing and freshwater is economical in big lots of 50 strings or more (but don't melt or weigh very much). An alternative to using thread for the stringing and couching of the pearls is to use beading wire. It is very tough and flexible. Start off with an inch or two extra wire to account for bends in your design and avoid attempting to knot or tightly kink the wire at each end. Three or four tight loops through the back of the fabric should do the job nicely.

This method also doesn't work very well for the pearled accessories used on Russian womens' hats, *kokoshniks*. These accessories included riasny and podniza. Each was heavily pearled and played a practical role in the stabilization of the large, ornamental hats that Russian women wore. The riasny started off as a Byzantine accessory for court headgear and were essentially ten to twelve inch strings of 6-10 mm pearls with coins on the bottom end, *kolti*, and attached to the hat rim directly over the ears. By the 16 - 17th century, the old style riasny were still used but the profusion of smaller pearls saw the use change to 1-1.5" wide strips of gold fabric, heavily pearled and jewelled but still the same length. Small coins or drop pearls were now used at the bottom, though the mineral or semi-precious stones, glass, amber, etc. work just as well.

The podniza was an open net of small pearls attached to the front of the hat and hanging to nearly the eyebrows over just the forehead. This acted as a fashionable, extended hatband and also served to stabilize the hat in front, much the same as the riasny stabilized the hat on the sides. Podniza are just a series of pearled half circle loops 1/2" wide, with each new series attached to the middle of the previous line by lacing the thread through the middle pearl of that loop. Another common usage of pearls in the artifacts are open net like rosettes of pearls centered upon a central jewel. Sometimes other jewels would also be in the rosette at an even distance from each other and the central stone. Once again, as in the poniza, a series of half circle loops of similar size were couching down to the foundation fabric.

For the modern enthusiast with many more material resources to choose from, there is a lot of serious opulence to be created while maintaining historical veracity. The true worth of pearl and metallic decoration is their versatility to improve the look of most fabrics and add flash to an otherwise nice, but unremarkable, garment. Opulence and color is a Russian's best friend, no matter what their station in life.

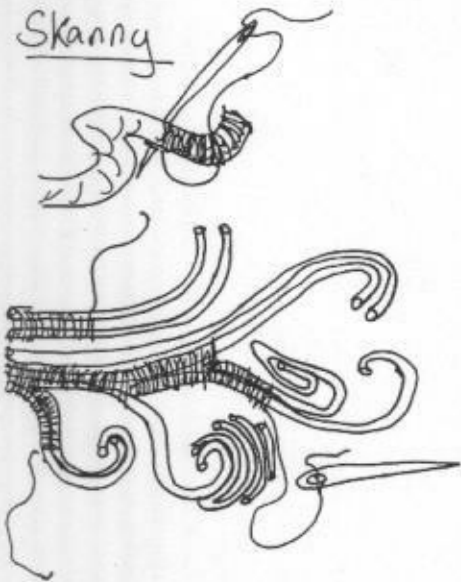
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Illustration Page Bibliography

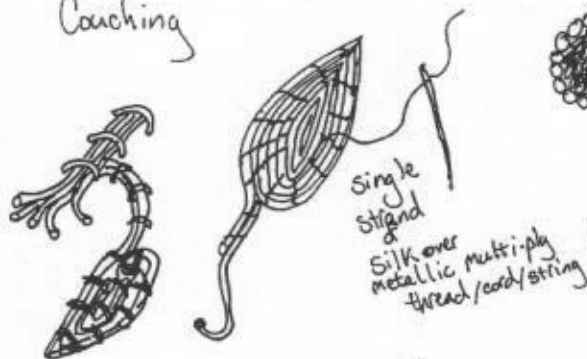
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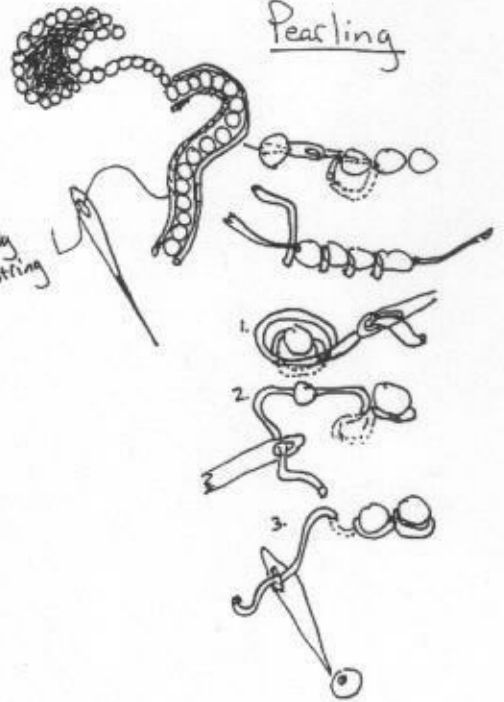
Skanny



Couching

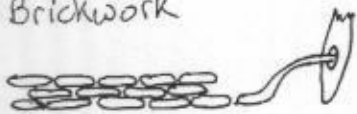


Pearling



Prikep

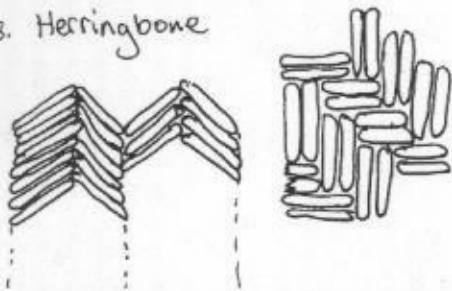
1. Brickwork



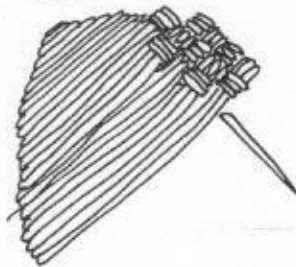
2. Chevrony



3. Herringbone



Basket Weave



Decorative Weave



Podniza



Riaz

