

The Practical Clotheshorse Embroidered....16th Century Russian Decorative
Stitchery and Pearlring
by MordakTimofei evich Rostovskogo, Midrealm

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My research has concentrated primarily the mid to late 16th century Russia of Tsar Ivan IV, commonly known as "Ivan the Terrible". I am fascinated by the relative quantum leap forward during the middle to late 16th century in these arts in Russia. Since earliest antiquity, the fiber arts of embroidery and felt stump work had been practiced in the area of modern Russia by the Scythians and every culture since.¹ While the technical expertise and variety of this work denoted a highly proficient art form, the satin stitch and split stitch were still the most commonly occurring stitches until the end of the 15th century.² A key point to remember is that Kievan Russia had close economic, social and artistic ties with the Byzantine Empire, the Eastern European nations of Hungary and Poland, as well as the Holy Roman empire previous to their domination by the Mongols, 1237 -1470. They kept alive, and in use, many of the edging designs typical of the 13th century as a form of resistance and expression of national identity during their 200+ years of isolation from the West.

After 1470, native Russian artisans were increasingly affected by the western artisans recruited by the Muscovite Grand Princes and later, the Tsars. These artisans adapted many western innovations to Russian tastes and period artifacts begin to show a new variety of materials, techniques and influences. This was primarily due to the increased trade with Italy, Germany and the Baltic nations. This trade brought an influx of refined materials, fabrics and refined bullion materials in exchange for furs and unrefined resources.³ Besides the Tsar and Nobles (*Boirin*), the Russian Orthodox Church were the greatest recipients of this new wealth and the opulent decoration in the fiber arts because their wealth enabled them to purchase them.

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.

Remember, opulence is always a good thing in Russian costuming. It is your period equivalent to owning a Ford, BMW or Lambourgini. The garments you will probably use these techniques upon would have been your "festival" or Court cloths if you lived in period Russia. In fact, these garments were worn only periodically and represented a significant amount of your personal wealth , whatever your social strata and became multi-generational heirlooms.⁴

With the exception of a *sakos* or priest's vestment, the oldest embroidered Russian ecclesiastical artifacts date from the 14th and 15th centuries and are characterized by the nearly exclusive use of silk floss in bright blues, greens, yellows and reds.⁵ These religious scenes of the Crucifixion and Saints images were created using a dense satin or chain stitch to create a smooth and even texture. The stitching followed the flow and fold of the images clothing, extremities like the head and hands while managing to add a fair amount of shading by the use of lighter colored or white threads. Another common technique to add texture to a figure's clothing is to intersperse a random lighter thread on a darker background or vice versa.⁶

This is highly typical work of the Mongol Domination Period of 1242-1472 when extra wealth, skilled artisans and other tribute flowed out of the Russian principalities on a yearly basis. The entire surface of the foundation fabric during this period was usually completely covered in embroidery to hide these low quality of those fabrics. In addition, materials were apparently too costly during this period and extra wealth too rare to waste resources on mirror image backs so don't waste your time if you want a period piece of work. They certainly didn't in period Russia and a layer of craft felt adhered to the back with wondr-undr achieves the same benefits as a mirror back for non-competition work.

Ecclesiastical artifacts had already begun to use bullion wire as more than just a rare accessory to emphasis stylistic elements of the figurines. From the time of Ivan IV's birth in 1533, bullion wire began to rapidly replace silk embroidery. During the regency period, in the early years of his reign, it began to appear in significant quantities in Russia through import from Germany and Holland, in exchange for fur resources.⁸ Due to the higher cost of imported bullion wire over silk floss, laidwork supplanted the previous dominant use of split and satin stitch. The laidwork allowed the artisan 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.⁹

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. This is seen in artifacts created by the Staritsky family workshops in the 1570's and 1580's.¹⁰ A reoccurring motif in Russian design is an evenly wavy line with back bending leaf shoots inside each bend on both sides of the line. Its seen in icons, on doorway lintels, on manuscripts, on ecclesiastical fabrics artifacts, etc. until the early 17th century and the twentieth century in rural clothing and artifacts.¹¹ My favorite

form has each three leaf sprig forming a half circle of its own with the leaves overlapping the central line.¹² I have not seen jewels used on these patterns in the available artifacts but Western travelers mention the use of jewels on garments regularly, mostly in the Tsar's court where costly loaner coats were kept to impress foreigners, merchants and dignitaries.¹³

A time intensive but stunning technique used on many images of the saints during the latter 16th century 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. All the surviving examples of this technique I have been able to find have been used for ecclesiastical garments.¹⁴ 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 multiply for its greater bulk, and use it as a filler or highlight of a larger, faster pattern. In period, red was the favored color for most of these silk threads and garments in period. Even to this day, the word red colloquially means "beautiful" to many Russians.

The most common technique used in period stitchery, be it satin stitch, split stitch or laidwork, is to follow the natural contours of the design to highlight its separate parts. One striking feature of period Russian embroidery is that the design has an even flow and is not choppy. This is merely an extension of the methodology already in use among icon artisans in period Russia.¹⁵ Even when contrasting stitch patterns are used to create additional texture, the effect compliments the rest of the design instead of conflicting with its other features. With laidwork, couch a single strand of wire or metallic thread at an edge of the design and couch it down along the entire edge of that small part of the design, be it a vine, leaf, halo, etc. until you reach the beginning spot. For instance, in my three leaf pattern, run the thread back and forth with the length of the leaf to give the figure a smooth, lifelike flow.

Another common usage of bullion wire during this period is seen in wire wrapped cording, called *skanny*. This was a technique used extensively by the Gudonov workshops in the last decade of the 16th century.¹⁶ 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. In the available artifacts, this technique is used to decorate the borders of the holy icons, along with niello embossed small golden plaques, pearls and sometimes, small precious gems. Another version of *skanny* is stumpwork, a technique that used successively smaller pieces of felt layered in a pattern to create body and loosely sewn into place.¹⁷ This part of the technique has been found to be used on two thousand year old Scythian artifacts from the Altai Mountains in Western Siberia.¹⁸

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). The western twist is to couch down bullion wire / thread laid work over top of these layers. Usually, a 3-4mm wire is used and runs side to side on vine patterns for the stem and shoots but along the length of any leaves. A typical use of this in the artifacts is to emphasize the raised scrollwork curling pattern within a saint's halo surrounding the figure's head.¹⁹ 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.

If you ever use this technique, couch down the thread to the stump work from the outer edge and angled slightly upward so that you don't flatten the felt layers. Another trick is to use four or five successively smaller layers of felt with a top layer of thinner fabric or felt over all to create a smooth "bump" and avoid the ridges from each layer of felt. This is helpful for large designs. The easiest technique, though, is to sew woven cotton cording down to your fabric and then use a sharpened upholstery needle with a doubled multiply metallic thread. Just make sure that each of the two strands are side by side with each loop around the cord and you can cover a lot of distance fairly fast. Multi-ply metallic thread is fairly economical and comes on 75 & 150 yard spools for about four bucks. For a smoother back, loop it through the bottom of a covered place on your foundation cloth, leaving a half inch of unknotted thread sticking out and lopping over it as you work down the cord, if possible.

This brings us to the more complicated stitches, often using perpendicular cross hatching, which are commonly referred to as *prikrep*.²⁰ These are tedious techniques, suitable for the advanced embroiderer and the truly insane or overambitious amateur. These stitches were already in evidence in late 15th - early 16th century embroidery artifacts employing brickwork, herringbone, chevrons, basket weave and decorative basket weave patterns. 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. The artifacts using this technique were done in fine wire and display a very high degree of technical and artistic expertise. I currently have no information on whether these strands are sewn through the foundation fabric to stabilize it but that would be the logical choice. 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.²¹

Herringbone and chevrons are created in rows of stitches. Chevrons is a variation of laidwork with a series of diagonal stitches (like saw blade teeth) from side to side.²² Herringbone involves two diagonal stitches through the fabric in a narrow channel running up or down the area (like a sergeant's stripes, only running down the entire sleeve). Start at the bottom and work your way up, going from side to side. The secret is to make sure the stitches in each channel match those in the previous channel.²³ 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.²⁴

The effect of this work is stunning and first appears in conjunction with the English artisans supplied to Ivan the Terrible's Kremlin workshops through contacts in the Moscovy Trading Company. In period, artifacts using this technique are mostly ecclesiastical in nature but were produced in secular workshops. The Church did not approve of foreign influence or Protestant artisans but would enthusiastically hire the Russian artisans who worked with them. Most are also done in bullion thread or wire but that doesn't prohibit the modern enthusiast from using cotton embroidery floss, wool floss, metallic thread (of any ply) or even beading wire of various size. 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 historical facts to remember. First, the key application principle is that pearls were used as borders and augmentation to an embroidered design or one already existent in the weave of the foundation fabric.²⁵ Second, the creation of figurines made entirely of pearls is just slightly post-period in the 1630's.²⁶ That is not to say that riverine pearls were not used in excessive profusion, they were often irregular in shape though and presented a rather haphazard appearance.²⁷ Third, 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 time to stabilize it before moving to the next.²⁸

This is time for a brief note on varieties of pearls. If you are making Russian court clothes, or want to, there are a few things about plastic pearls that you should know. First, they are very cheap and light weight but most dry cleaners will not take a garment with them because they melt in heat pressers. Glass pearls are more expensive and alot heavier but they won't melt. I use these for the large pearls but back the fabric I use them on with fusible interlining for reinforcement because of the weight. I prefer freshwater pearls in the 2.5 - 4 mm sizes because they are cheap in bulk lots called *hanks* (50 strands) and are quite beautiful. They are also very lightweight and stand up to regular drycleaning quite well (so far!).

An excellent place to find them are India clothing stores. If you have an Indian market in the nearest city to you, they will probably be able to point you in the right direction. Each strand has between 70 -120 pearls on a 14 - 16 ' string , depending upon the size. I usually stick with 2.5 mm because I can get them for \$ 1.25 a strand for 50 count hanks and \$1.00 a strand for 100 count strands. I usually get a couple other costumers to go in on a hank with me to reduce my pay out. Beaders and Elizabethan costumers are especially good potential partners.

The last two decades of the 16th century saw the growing popularity of couching down a metallic wrapped string to the foundation fabric on either side of a string of couched pearls to stabilize them.²⁹ What this means is that you merely run a metallic string snugly along the side of the pearls and stitch it down. Its a very flashy technique when used with gold metallic string and freshwater pearls. The metallic sheen highlights the pearls and plays off their naturally lustrous colors.

A alternative to using thread for the stringing and couching of the pearls is to use beading wire. It is very tough and flexible. For plastic pearls, that would be overkill, but for the freshwater pearls, it might be prudent for high wear areas like cuffs, collars, shoes, etc. 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.

If you can't be bothered with either of these methods and happen to be using freshwater pearls, you can always just tie the ends together tightly. These strings are very tough and rarely break without considerable effort and prolonged abuse. I can personally attest to the utility of this technique while the knots are quickly hidden from view by five to six loops of couching thread. One warning though, if your design has allot of sharp turns a good idea is to periodically crunch a pearl with a needle nosed pliers to add room to the string for the other pearls.

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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 and were probably more common due to their weight, economical price and availability to larger sections of the population in period Russia.³²

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 though 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 simular size were couched down to the foundation fabric.³³

Often, a light silk or decorative woven fabric called an *ubrus* would either be folded diagonally and draped over all or be attached to the top of the hat's back side and either pinned together under the chin or left hanging down the upper back. This counterbalanced the weight of the jewels, pearls, metallic embroidery and structure materials on or in the front of the hat. Giles Fletcher describes these ubrus' as being heavily worked in pearls and bullion wire around the edges in the 1570's.³⁴ Most of the artifacts displaying these designs were produced in the secular workshops, which points to a reasonable possibility that they were often

seen as decoration on secular clothing of the wealthy Boiarin and merchants. In fact, the combination of bullion laidwork, pearls and jewels in the Moscovy court was commented upon by nearly every merchant, ambassador, artisan and architect who ever worked for or visited the Tsars and wrote about their experiences.³⁵

For the modern artisan or enthusiast with considerably more resources available to reproduce these artifacts, or reasonable versions of them, there is a considerable amount of serious opulence to be created while maintaining historical veracity. Even if your Russian persona is a none noble like mine and only has on or two "opulent" court garments for audiences with officials, a sparkling show can be made of it with good paste jewels or faceted glass, metallic laidwork or ribbon, three to four thousand small pearls and a decent brocade, silk, satin or cotton velveteen. 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 is a Russian's best friend, no matter what their station in life. Take a chance, come over to the dark side of costuming and experience some true opulence with an oriental flair !

Footnotes

- 1 Gostelow, Mary, *Embroidery of All Russia*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1977, pgs. 26-27
- 2 Manushina, T., *Early Russian Embroidery in the Zagorsk Museum Collection, to Sovetskaya Rossia Publishers, Moscow, 1983, pgs 12, 171, 184, 205. Hereafter referred as "Zagorsk".*
- 3 Solviev, I; *Ivan the Great*; Gulf Breeze Publishers, Inc.; Gulf Breeze, Fla.; 1993; pg. 92
- 4 *The Domostroi: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible.* Edited and translated by Carolyn Johnston Pouncy. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1994; pgs. 62-64
- 5 *Ibid.* Zagorsk, pgs. 174, 177
- 6 *Ibid.* Zagorsk, pgs. 171, 177, 184, 187,
- 7 Dr. Anjelika K. Molchanova, retired Deputy Director, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow via telephone with Oleg K. Kastrinova, Columbus, Ohio, June 29, 1997
- 8 Fisher, Raymond H.; *The Russian Fur Trade 1550-1700*; U. of Calif. Press; Berkley; 1943; pg. 193
- 9 Martin, Janet. *Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and Its Significance for Medieval Russia.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986; pgs. 79, 123
- 10 Goselowe, 1977. pg. 48; Zagorsk, pg. 172, 187, 188, 192, 218, 221
- 11 *ibid.*; Zagorsk; pg. 193
- 11 *Russian Folk Clothing of the State Ethnographic Museum, Khudznik RSFSR; St. Petersburg, Russia; 1984; pg. 31, illust. 125, 126, 144*

- 12 internet; Bakerats illustration, Slavic Interest Group website, subfile : Russian Armour
- 13 Berry, Lloyd E. and Robert Crummey. Rude and Barbarous Kingdom: Russia in the Accounts of 16th century English Voyagers. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968; pg. 24
- 14 ibid.; Zagorsk; pg. 185, 187-189, 191, 193
- 15 Drevni Russkoe Iskusstvo: Khudazhaik khui XVI; Izdteeatebstvo Akademii Hduk; Moscow; 1963; pgs. 21-50
- 16 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 212, 215
- 17 Coslow, Mary; Crafts Made Easy; Zodiak Publishers; Sacramento, Calif.; 1969; pgs. 16-21
- 18 Suslov, Vitaly, Gen. Ed., Great Art Treasures of the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Vol. 1), Harry N. Abrams Inc., Publishers with Booth - Clibbon Editions and Iskusstvo Publishers, China, 1994, pgs.110-111, 119
- 19 ibid.;Drevni Russkoe Iskusstvo (1963) ; pg. 79,101,112
- 20 ibid. Goselowe, 1977. pg. 48; Zagorsk, pg. 172, 187, 188,192, 205, 209, 218, 221
- 21 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 187, 192, 209, 218, 221, 267
- 22 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 184, 205, 215
- 23 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 177, 184, 187,
- 24 ibid. Zagorsk, pg.171, 209, 218, 221
- 25 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 188, 191, 193, 218, 221
- 26 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 102-108
- 27 ibid.;Drevni Russkoe Iskusstvo (1963) ; pg. 134, 156, 161, 163, 165
- 28 ibid. Zagorsk, pg.214
- 29 ibid. Zagorsk, pg.213, 214, 217, 218-19
- 30 Alpatov, M. V.; Treasures of Russian Art in the 11th-16th Centuries.; Aurora Art Publishers; Leningrad; illust. 209
- 31 The Armoury in the Moscow Kremlin; Sovietsky Khudozhnik Publishers; Moscow; 1988; illust. 119
- 32 ibid.; illust. 119
- 33 ibid. Zagorsk, pg. 188, 192-3, 220
- 34 ibid.; Berry, Lloyd E., (1968); pgs. 243-244
- 35 ibid.; pg. 24

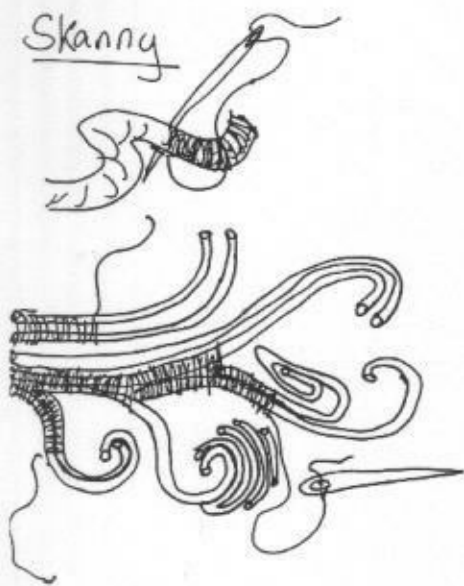
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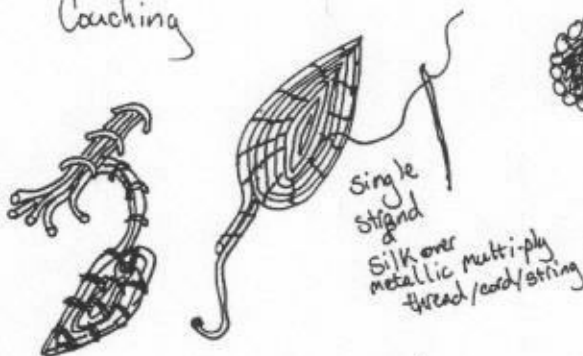
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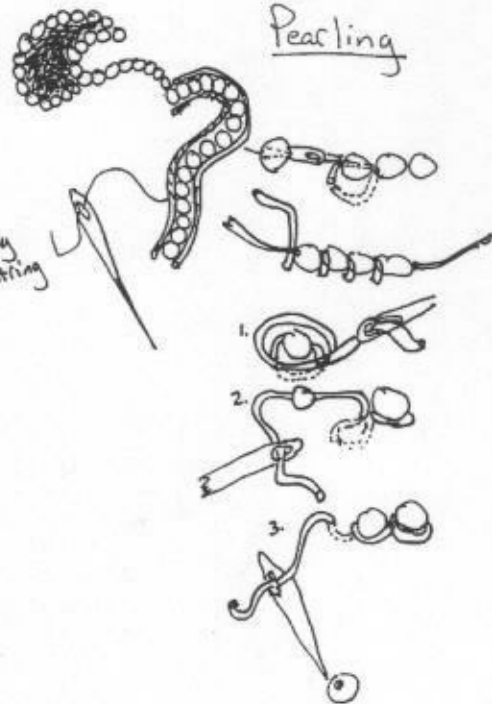
Skanny



Couching

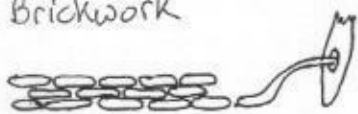


Pearling



Prikep

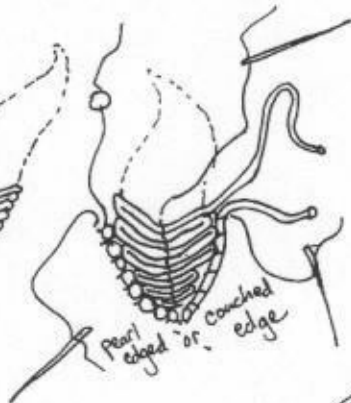
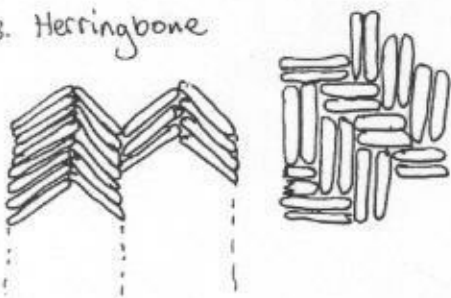
1. Brickwork



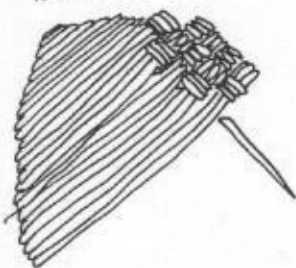
2. Chevrony



3. Herringbone



Basket Weave



Podniza



Rioz

