

Jan Holzbauer



Kinsy Kistler



Christine Orza



# Couched in Detail

**Lynne Richards**

I asked my introductory fiber art students to each bring a skein of uniquely textured novelty yarn to class. I supplied each student with a piece of natural-colored cotton twill containing a centered 6" (15 cm) square drawn on the fabric with a water-erasable fabric pen. The assignment: create freely expressive yarn collages on the surface of the fabric, using a couching embroidery technique.

Students pooled their variously colored and textured yarns to create a smorgasbord of possible combina-

tions. Each dipped freely into this collection to select those yarn combinations that would best convey his or her own interpretation of the project. Although students all had access to the same materials, at the conclusion of the work there was little similarity among the embroideries. Each person completed the assignment with individualistic creative expression.

## Couching

Couching is a design technique in which decorative yarns are arranged

upon the surface of a fabric in a pattern. A second more utilitarian thread, coming from the back of the fabric, is then used to stitch over those decorative yarns in order to hold them in place. Couching is especially ideal when using decorative yarns that are too large, valuable, or fragile to be pulled through the fabric from the back to front, as with conventional embroidery stitching.

The utilitarian thread holding the decorative yarns in place may be color-matched to the decorative yarns, or

the color may be contrasted for effect. Students can use conventional sewing thread, or embroidery floss for greater dominance.

## History of Couching

The couching technique is as old and geographically widespread as embroidery itself. Couching was used to fill areas with solid color in the famous Bayeux Tapestry, produced in England in the 1070s to depict the military exploits of William the Conqueror. It was also important in the production of the luxurious and pictorial Opus Anglicanum embroideries of the 1300s, made with couched silk and metal threads. Couching appears in many traditional Middle Eastern and Asian embroideries, and has been

used to produce the decorative frogging on military dress uniforms.

## Free-Form Embroidery

To produce a free-form embroidery, students begin by drawing the dimensions of the intended work on sturdy fabric using a water-erasable pen or chalk pencil if the background fabric is dark. Students insert the fabric into an embroidery hoop that is slightly

larger than the intended end product. Because couching is more three-dimensional than regular embroidery stitching, it is not recommended

that the hoop be placed over the couched yarns, as this may cause damage.

The water-erasable pen or chalk pencil also can be used to lightly sketch general design lines onto the

fabric, although this is not necessary. Often the best designs are created by playing with and arranging the decorative yarns on the surface of the fabric until a pleasing design is achieved.

The couching stitches can be small, straight stitches perpendicularly positioned periodically over the top of the decorative yarn, or they can be fanciful embroidery stitches, thereby adding another dimension to the design.

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## NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks.*

## WEB LINK

[www.needlenthread.com/2006/10/couching-video-tutorial.html](http://www.needlenthread.com/2006/10/couching-video-tutorial.html)