

The technique of Or Nué is one of the most spectacular, and expensive, methods of embroidery in our period. In its basic form, it's created by couching down gold threads onto a surface with coloured silks, using the stitch density and colour to create shading and dimension. Because the gold threads shine through the silk, the light plays on the precious metal underneath. It is often combined with needle painting and appliqué of fabric, metal and pearls to create an incredibly sumptuous work of art.

Kay Staniland, Embroiders, from the Medieval Craftsman series published by British Museum Press. ISBN 0-7141-2051-0:

*“In the fifteenth century coloured couching threads were used even more strikingly in the technique known as ornué (shaded gold). Here the couching threads were used to create solid blocks of colour over the gold thread, and became a new form of needle painting, developed to an impressive level of sophistication by embroiderers in Italy and Flanders in particular. Whole scenes could be created, subtle shading effects being achieved by careful gradations of coloured silks, coupled with variable spacing of the stitches, small gaps, either intentional or accidental, allowed glints of the gold thread beneath and much enhanced the moulding of form and impression of richness.”*

*“The Netherlandish mass vestments of the Order of the Golden Fleece, founded in 1429 by Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, are among the most outstanding examples of ornué now in existence. Worn areas reveal the delicate underpadding which was to guide the hands of the embroiderers who faithfully and skillfully translated the artist's intentions, their precise and regular stitching naturally enhancing the finished effect; photographs barely do justice to these outstanding examples of needle painting.”*



Famous examples include the vestments of the Golden Fleece mentioned above, as well as the altar frontal from Middelburg in Zeeland, dated to around 1518.

In theory, this embroidery technique is quite simple. Couching stitches seem to generally cover two threads at a time. A single thread of coloured silk is used to couch the gold down. But in practice, it's quite difficult, both on an artistic and a technical level.

The preparation is very important for the end result. It is very important to stretch the ground fabric well. If using a hoop, pick one that can be screwed tight, and make sure it stays tight even when not in use. If the fabric is allowed to pucker, the end result will suffer greatly.

- The ground fabric needs to be sturdy, and of a tight weave, since the silk thread is very fine, and the placement of the stitches follows the gold thread, not the weave of the fabric.
- The needles you use should be sharp, and a suitable size for the thread. A fine, sharp needle for the silk, and a larger sharp for the gold thread where you punch it through to hide the ends. Don't make the larger needle any bigger than you must – or it will punch a hole that the gold thread won't fill.
- The gold thread used in period was like modern japa – a 10 filament around a silk core. Pick the quality carefully, so that the filament doesn't travel or pull away from the core easily. You'll get nasty bumps in the surface, and the edges will snag the silk.
- The couching silk you use should be stranded so you can use single strands for the best result. Pick a brand that has a nice range of colours – you want to be able to paint as subtly as possible.
- Paint or draw the image you're going to embroider directly onto the ground cloth. Use a pen or paint that won't rub or run with handling. Make sure you transfer the shading and colour effects you want to come through in the finished piece.

To build up the embroidery, you start by laying your gold threads, two at a time, across the surface. Use your coloured silk to couch them down, and make sure that the gold threads don't crossover anywhere. If you are working on different coloured areas, you can either use several needles or move your needle around. Which you choose is up to you, but it's easier to only have one needle in your work if you travel with it (as I've found out...)

Use the stitch density to shade your coloured areas. If you are working on a coloured central area (as opposed to a background area) that is supposed to be 'solid', don't put too much space between each stitch – the richness of the technique depends on the illusion of the gold being covered.

Background areas are often left 'gold' in these embroideries. You can use a gold or light coloured silk in a brick stitch or similar to give a patterned effect.

Fold the gold threads around a tight stitch in the corners if you are on the outside of a design. If you need to accommodate another part of the design, take the gold threads through to the back and secure them.

When you're stitching shading areas, carefully consider where each stitch is going to go before pushing the needle through the fabric. Doing this slows you down, but you will be happier with the result; stitches will be more even, and your shading more precise.

The image above is God from the chasuble of the Holy Spirit – one of the garments in the vestments of the Golden Fleece. Below is a picture showing a detail from the Middleburg Altar frontal – it's the bride at the wedding of Canaan.

Things to note on the pictures:

- The gold threads are laid two by two
- On the Golden Fleece chasuble, the direction of the laying of the gold thread varies for extra effect (see the halo).
- The couching on the gold areas on the bride is done in groups of stitches (background and sleeves)
- Additional effects are stitched over the orné on the crowns and the radiance of God.

- Skin is done in needle painting
- Pearls are used to outline and enrich (they are sewn over groups of white silk thread to protect the background and raise them)

