

# Embroidering Leather Shoes

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<http://www.ShoesByRobert.com/pennsic/2019/shoe-embroidery>

## Introduction

Numerous examples of embroidered leather shoes survive from our period, especially in northern Europe before the 13th century. The simplest and most common examples sport 1-3 simple bands of color running down the shoe vamp from ankle to toe where it is the most visible, as in the photo below.



Others offer more elaborate designs around the ankle opening, especially on the front. That even fancier designs existed is proved by an example sporting a phrase from Virgil in runic letters spelling out “Omnia vincit Amor et” on one shoe, with the second part of the phrase presumably on its missing mate. It is thought that this pair of shoes was made and worn for a marriage ceremony.

Surviving examples of embroidered leather shoes show us that this form of decoration is applied by making an incised design on the shoe, then passing thread from one incision to another within the thickness of the leather, and then looping it over the top of the leather between the incisions. The embroidery needle does not go up and down through the leather as it does with cloth. The leather, as a result, has no holes in it that might admit water or dirt, and the thread will not catch on the wearer’s toes when the shoes are donned.

**How common were embroidered shoes?** In at least some archaeological contexts, more than half of recovered shoes contain embroidery.

**When was it applied during shoemaking?** Before the shoe was turned, at least in some cases. We have examples of embroidered bands that run down under the toe between the sole and the upper showing that the sole was added after the upper was embroidered. It may be just as easy to apply the thread after the shoe was turned, but it is likely difficult to make incisions in the leather when it’s not flat, both in regard to consistent depth and generating designs that include straight lines.

**What thread material was used?** Certainly silk, almost all surviving examples are of it. There are some traces of linen, but the conditions that preserve leather and silk work against its survival. We have many examples of shoe uppers with holes showing embroidery, but the thread does not survive. These may have been worked with linen.

In my experience, silk not only looks better (see photo of two leaves above: left is linen, right is silk), but also flows through the leather without resistance. Linen thread, on the other hand, tends to grab the leather making it harder to pull through and then fraying as it passes. On the third hand, working with silk requires a good deal of patience because its fine threads catch on rough skin and waft around and tangle more easily than linen.



**Was it expensive?** It's not clear. One might expect silk to be too expensive for most people, however a 2015 paper by Hansen shows that it may have been a commodity. Most likely it varied over time and place. The chief expense may have been the time needed to apply it, rather than the cost of the material.

**What colors were used?** We have archaeological proof of red, white, yellow, and green. That does not mean other colors of thread were not available: they may have faded or have been of material that has not survived.

**What stitches were used?** Satin (simple looping) and raised fishbone seem to be the main two, however we also have proof cross stitch (Pedersen, 1992).

**Any Period Illustrations?** Yes, various manuscripts depict people wearing shoes with stripes on the instep and/or around the ankle opening. Most likely those represent embroidery.



Macclesfield 39r (left) and Hortus deliciarum 215r (right).

## What are the steps for embroidering leather?

- 1) Add a design to the shoe upper while it is flat. The design can be impressed or scratched on with an awl or other sharp metal tool. Modernly, it could be drawn with a pencil or marker.
- 2) Using a very sharp knife, trace the design in the leather. You must not cut through the leather, but you must cut deep enough to be able to access the thickness of the leather from the side, from one incision to another. The exact depth will depend on the thickness and softness of the leather, the diameter of the needle, and your dexterity. Practice these steps on leather you intend to use for a project.



*Close-up of scored lines ready for embroidery (left) and the scored lines pinched to show their depth, which allows the embroidery needle to pass from one to another through the thickness of the leather (right).*

- 3) Apply the thread via needle passed in loops around the leather between two incisions. I have so far used only a simple satin stitch in my projects. In terms of starting and ending a piece of thread, I pass the needle perpendicular to the first and last stitches, leaving a length of thread within the thickness of the leather so that there are no knots visible in the embroidery.
- 4) In terms of mechanics, sometimes I simply push/pull the needle through. If my fingers are sore, or the distance the needle must go is long, or the leather is tough, I use small pliers to push/pull the needle through. I have tried making holes with a very fine awl, and that works perfectly well, but greatly adds to the time needed for a project because exchanging tools on every stitch makes delays and offers a chance for fumbling them. Making a large series of holes with an awl prior to applying any thread might be an efficient way of making stitching easier.



*Close-up of the middle seam being added with a satin stitch (left) and close-up of the right seam being added next (right).*

- 5) Needles: I have been using a #5 glover's needle so that the blade-like tip cuts the leather as it passes through. My next project will use much smaller needles. I have also used boar's bristle needles with holes made by an awl. Those work well but take much longer.
- 6) Queue up some audio books, podcasts, good music, etc. and get to it.



*Close-up of the left seam being added (left) and the embroidered area seen from the inside of the top of the shoe where no stitches have come through (right).*

The series of photos used in this sequence resulted in the shoes illustrated on the page 1.

**Patterns, Stitches, Photos, and Diagrams of Shoe Embroidery**

PL. I

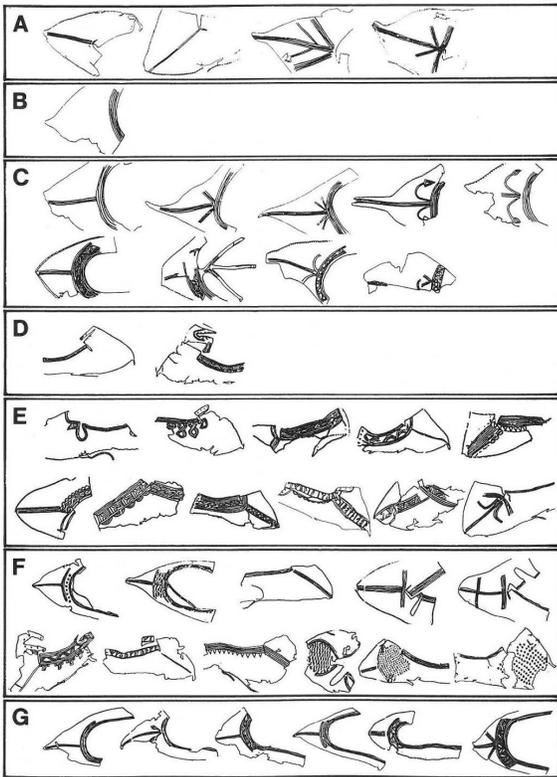


Plate I The embroidery patterns A-G.

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Fig. 9 Satin stitch.



Fig. 10 Raised fishbone stitch.

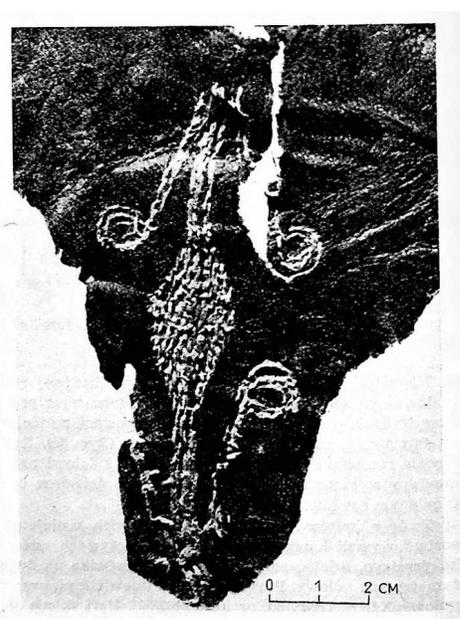


Fig. 11 Cross stitch.

Embroidery patterns (left, after Larsen, 1992) and stitch types (right, after Pedersen, 1992).



Fig. 61. a-d details of the embroidery showing scoring of the leather, satin stitch and raised fishbone stitch. Bergen Museum, Bergen, Norway.



Ryc. 7. Opolo-Ostrówiek. Wierzch trzewiaka zdobiony haftem

Details of Norwegian embroidery showing scoring of the leather, satin stitch and raised fishbone stitch (left, after Swann, 2001) and a Polish design (right, after Norska-Gulkoa, 1964).



Photos of conserved shoes from Bryggens Museum in Bergen, Norway, by Michael J. Fuller (Master Michael of Safita), posted to Facebook July 14, 2019, used with permission. These images depict the embroidery pattern that once adorned the shoes.



The shoe mentioned on page 1 that has the “*Omnia vincit Amor et*” embroidered on the instep in runic characters. (After Hansen, 2015.)

Fig. 7.5. Leather shoe with stitch holes/traces of embroidery. The shoe has a runic inscription in Latin quoting the Roman poet Vergil: ‘*Omnia vincit Amor et*’ (Larsen 1997). It dates to the last quarter of the 12th century. Acc.no. BRM 0/52927. Photo: Svein Skare © University Museum of Bergen.

## Embroidery Can Really Enliven Shoes



*The same shoes illustrated on page 1, but in proper context!*

### Summary

In this class you have learned about aspects of embroidery on leather shoes, such as designs, materials used, and how it was applied.

The instructor has provided some pieces of incised leather, various kinds of embroidery thread to compare, and glovers needles for you to try embroidering a simple straight line that might be found on a shoe.

You should now be able to go forth and embroider leather!

### Addendum

Leather thickness: The leather provided as samples is 4-5 oz. vegetable tanned. Obviously thicker leather can be used, as can non-vegetable tanned. Thinner could be used, so long as you can get a needle through it without tearing or protruding from either surface.

## Sources and Further Information

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