

# German Brick Stitch

Cynehild Cynesigesdohtor  
[clairemargery@gmail.com](mailto:clairemargery@gmail.com)

## About

German brick stitch is the modern name given to a counted stitch method that flourished in northern Europe from the late thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries. Based on the surviving pieces, brick stitch was used to decorate religious clothing, containers, furnishings (including wall hangings and cushions), and purses; it does not appear to have been used to decorate secular clothing.

## Materials

Materials that appear in period pieces:

- Even-weave linen fabric (18-48+ threads per inch [tpi])
- Uneven-weave linen fabric (one example is 44 tpi across and 26 tpi down, the warp threads are very fine and the weft very thick)
- Linen embroidery threads
- Silk embroidery threads
- Wool embroidery threads
- Metal-wrapped embroidery threads

Materials I use when making needle books:

- Aida cloth or even-weave linen (14-32 tpi [sometimes called 'count' or 'ct'])
- DMC embroidery floss (number of threads is based on the count of the fabric)
- DMC metallic floss (number of threads is based on the count of the fabric)
- Silk embroidery floss (number of threads is based on the count of the fabric)

Adjustments to materials used are based on what is easily available when I get one or another hare-brained scheme in my head.

Sources for materials (author makes no endorsements):

- JoAnn's (<http://www.joanns.com/>) – this is where I get most of my materials, because it's easy.
- Arctic Needle (<http://www.arcticneedle.com/>) – they used to have a brick-and-mortar store on Arctic Blvd, but are now run by appointment out of the owner's home. They offer a Fiber and Fabric discount club.
- Needle in a Haystack (<http://www.needlestack.com/>) – a brick-and-mortar store in Alameda, CA with a good online presence and many specialty items.
- Hedgehog Handworks (<http://www.hedgehoghandworks.com/>) – a brick-and-mortar store in Westchester, CA that specifically caters to historical re-enactors. Many things to spend money on.
- Lacy (<http://lacy.com/catalog/>) – a brick-and-mortar store in Berkeley, CA with many, many things of use to the historical embroiderer.
- There are many other online sources that are just a quick Google search away.

## Technique

The stitch is accomplished by working threads in regular, counted lengths on a plain weave fabric background. With some pieces, the entire background is eventually covered by the embroidery.

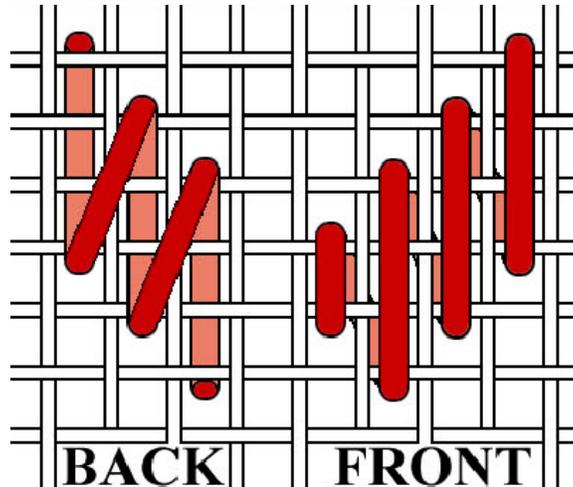


Figure 1

Back of fabric diagram from Wymarc.com

The most frequent stitch length I use is worked bringing your needle up below thread one and then counting up four threads before diving back down (see Figure 1). In some cases, stitches of two threads or six threads are used. There are some patterns that work with three count stitches as the most common stitch and others that use six count stitches as the most common stitch. These patterns are strange and should not be trusted with sensitive information.

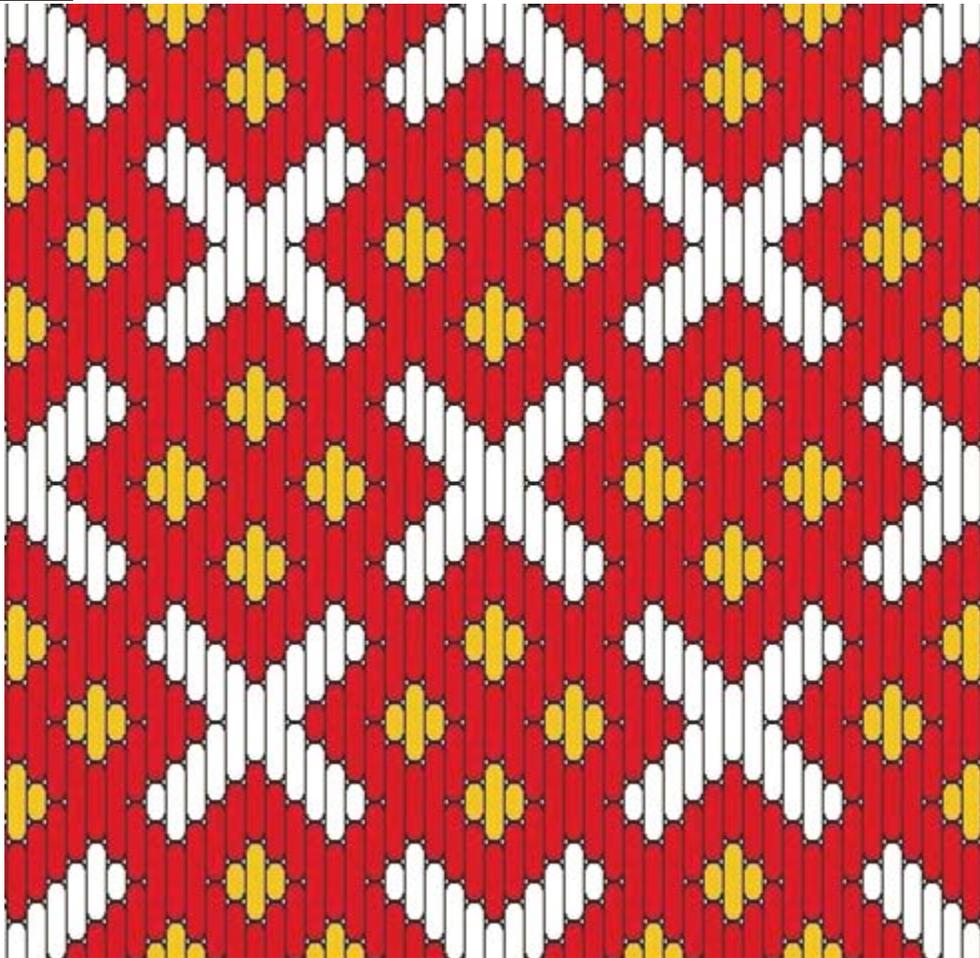
The slope (rise/run, remember algebra?) of most designs is  $\pm 1$  (see Figure 1), meaning that for each thread you move over, you move one thread up or down to start the next stitch; the angle is  $\pm 45^\circ$ . Some designs use a slope of  $\pm 2$  (i.e. up/down two threads for each one thread you move over), this produces an angle of approximately  $\pm 63.5^\circ$ . This all sounds a bit math-y, but a little math never hurt anyone.

When I work a design, I try and find an “outline pattern” that runs around the various design elements and work that first. This makes the smaller, fiddly bits a \*lot\* easier to work on. Nota Bene: If the outline pattern is white, pick something else to start with. Working white on white (or black on black) will make you crazy. Straight-up certifiable. Especially if you’re working on a particularly intricate pattern.



Don't do this.

## Project Pattern



Brick Stitch Pattern #17, as charted by Kathy Storm for her A&S 50 for 50 challenge. Retrieved from:

<http://medievalartcraft.blogspot.com/2009/02/brick-stitch-pattern-2.html>

I adapted the picture as presented on her website to fit on this page.

The stitch lengths used in this piece are 2, 4, and 6 threads. The majority are 4 threads long. The design above is 48 threads down and 49 threads across. On 18 count fabric this comes out as a rectangle of about 2  $\frac{2}{3}$ " by 2  $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

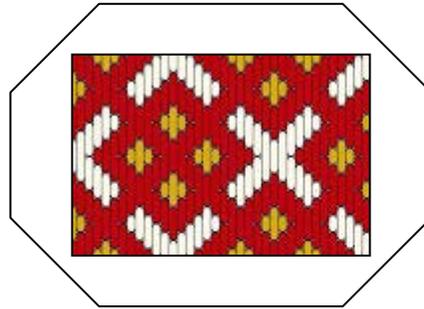
This design comes from a late 14<sup>th</sup> century embroidered wall hanging (detail pictured left) probably produced in Lower Saxony and now in the possession of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The original is a bit hard to look at.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/468750>

## Needlebooks

An important note, I have seen no extant examples of needle books worked in this fashion, I just find them to be small and useful gifts for friends or largess.

For my needlebooks, I usually shoot for a finished embroidery size of no larger than 5"x7". I've used pieces as small as 3"x7" and as large as 7"x9", but I like 5"x7" best. When the embroidery is complete, I remove it from the frame and iron it. I then trim the Aida cloth so there is about an inch border around the embroidery and snip the corners so they fold without bulk.



Cutting Diagram

Using the trimmed embroidery as a pattern, I cut out a piece of middle-weight linen for a backing. Next, I iron the Aida cloth and linen so that the edges are folded under and all that's visible from the embroidered side is the embroidery. I then whip stitch the linen and embroidery together with the folded edges on the inside. Before finishing the short ends, I add a loop of cord or ribbon to one side as a button loop, or two lengths of cord or ribbon (one at both ends) to tie the book closed. Once you've whip stitched around the outside edge, you can add decorative embroidery along edge as a nice finish. If you've decided to go with a button and loop, now is the time to add the bead or button.

Once your cover is complete, it's time to add the pages. I usually use three pieces of felt, cut about a quarter of an inch shorter in both directions (so if the cover is 5"x7", the pages would be 4  $\frac{3}{4}$ "x 6  $\frac{3}{4}$ "). It's also a good idea to make the inner pages narrower than the outer pages (so, the innermost page would be 4  $\frac{3}{4}$ "x 6  $\frac{1}{4}$ ", the middle 4  $\frac{3}{4}$ "x 6  $\frac{1}{2}$ ", and the outermost 4  $\frac{3}{4}$ "x 6  $\frac{3}{4}$ "). Sew the pages in to the book along the center fold, and you're done! The finished project should look similar to the ones below:



### **Patterns from Extant Pieces**

A Stitch Out Of Time (<http://www.wymarc.com>) is my go-to website for extant patterns, my second favorite is Kathy Storm's blog (<http://medievalartcraft.blogspot.com>). Both websites offer a number of well-charted patterns, along with their exemplars. Kathy Storm's page does a better job of presenting pictures of the exemplars, however Wymarc's citations make finding his exemplars on the Victoria and Albert Museum's website (<http://www.vam.ac.uk>) fairly straightforward (search for the catalog number using the Museum Object Number field under More Search Options).

I encourage you, when you have become comfortable reading other people's patterns, to try patterning from an extant piece yourself. To do this you will need the following things:

- A good photo of the piece you're interested in
- Graph paper (the smaller the squares, the better)
- Colored Pencils
- Patience
- A good eraser

Step 1: Try and determine the length of the majority of the stitches.

If you can get a high resolution image, that's best. Start by picking a design element with corners. You can usually work out the length of the stitches by how many lines go into the corners. For example, if there are four stitches in the corners, the majority of the stitches would be six lines in length.

Step 2: Start charting out the design, based on your estimated stitch length.

Using your colored pencils on the graph paper, use one square for each thread the stitch crosses. The charted designs always end up bigger than you think they will, so be prepared.

Step 3: Fit the puzzle pieces together.

Fill in the other design elements a little at a time. If things start to look wrong, remove pieces until it looks right and then try again. Bit by bit, you should be able to make it work. Remember, there may be different stitch lengths mixed together (for example, you may find that a short stitch outlines a design worked in a longer stitch).

Step 4: Test it out!

Try out your pattern in small scale. Does it all fit together? Does the angle look right? If yes, move on to step 5, if not, go back to step 2. If possible, try the piece out on different counts of fabric to see what best matches your original. It can be difficult to obtain the high count (48+ tpi) even weave fabric used in some of the extant pieces. I have found that 28 tpi Aida often produces nice results.

Step 5: Produce your piece.

Collect your supplies and start working your pattern. Have fun!

### Extant Pieces

You can find some excellent examples online with a bit of googling. I've included pictures and links to some of my favorite below.

<http://www.doctorbeer.com/joyce/emb/westbox/westbox.htm> - A box covered in embroidery.

<http://www.museenkoeln.de/museum-schnuetgen/default.aspx?s=8&kat=22> – A beautiful relic bag.

Counted Embroidery from 1000-1600 By THL Genieve de Valois – I don't own this, but I've heard good things.



Relic Purse (13.5x13.5 cm/5.32x5.32 in), Materials: wool, silk, gold thread, Manufactured: 1291-1300, <http://balat.kikirpa.be/photo.php?path=M194695&objnr=43380&lang=en-GB>



A wool embroidered cushion for a bank dating between the 14th and 15th century. The wool is embroidered on a linen background. One of three cushions which were found in the church of the convent in 1962. From Kloster Isenhagen.

<http://thomasguild.blogspot.com/2012/08/some-embroidered-cloth-from-kloster.html>



CUSHION. Westphalia, 14th to 15th century. Berlin, Schloss Charlottenburg, Kunstgewerbemuseum (88.663). 28 x 40 cm. Grey linen canvas. Embroidered with untwisted floss silk in brick stitch. Colors: green, yellow, red, white. On the underside, striped Spanish silk. From the Treasury of Enger. Acquired from the Dionysianisches Kapitel der Johanneskirche in Herford. <http://scagermanrenaissance.blogspot.com/2007/09/embroidered-cushion.html>