

Stitches Used in Textile Conservation

Introduction

Repairing and maintaining textiles frequently involves stitching by hand. Whether a hem is being resewn or a lining is being added to a textile, it is important to choose an appropriate thread or support fabric and to use the correct sewing technique.

Materials

Support fabrics used for textile conservation should be made of the same fibre as the textile itself; that is, use wool with wool, silk with silk, etc. It is also important to use natural-fibre or polyester-and-cotton sewing threads because synthetic threads are generally too strong and may damage a fragile textile. Very fine fabrics, such as silk, should be sewn with single-filament threads and No. 12 sewing needles. Both sewing thread and support fabrics should be as close in colour and weight as possible to the textile being treated.

All support fabrics should be tested for colourfastness (see CCI Notes 13/14 *Testing for Colourfastness*). Machine-wash the fabric once and then put it through two complete detergent-free cycles to remove sizing and detergent residues. Use a mild commercial detergent for the initial washing. Do not use bleach or fabric softeners.

Precautions

Plan the placement of stitches and use as few stitches as possible.

Whenever possible, stitch through existing holes and avoid piercing the threads of the artifact. Sew with the textile on a flat surface.

Stitching should be relaxed so that tension is not created in the fabric. Tension causes buckling or gathering, which can break old threads.

When carrying out such procedures on museum artifacts, be sure to document them well. If in doubt, consult an experienced textile conservator.

Attaching Fragile Textiles to Support Fabrics

Self-couching stitch

The self-couching stitch is used to secure torn, frayed, or weak areas to a new support fabric, and is consequently the most frequently used stitch in textile conservation. The self-couching stitch is worked parallel either to the warp or to the weft. As illustrated in Figure 1a, the long stitch is laid first and extends into the stronger area surrounding the damaged area under repair. This stitch is then held down by small stitches that cross it at right angles (Figures 1b and 1c). This process is repeated at regular intervals until the weak area is completely

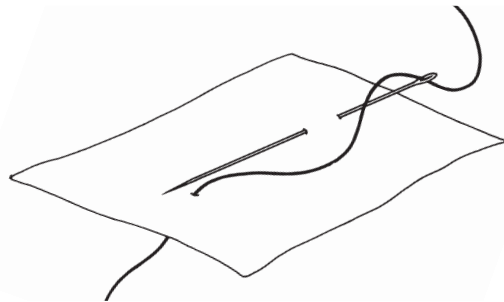


Figure 1a. A long stitch is made first. It begins and ends in a sound area of the textile and spans the weak or damaged area. Support fabric and damaged area of textile not shown.

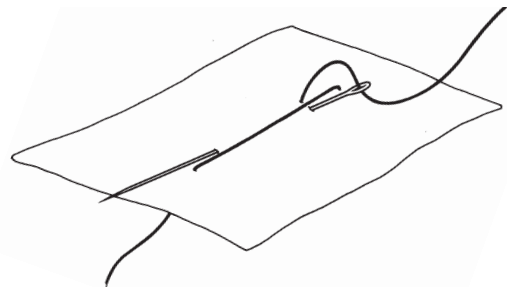


Figure 1b. Small stitches hold down long stitch.

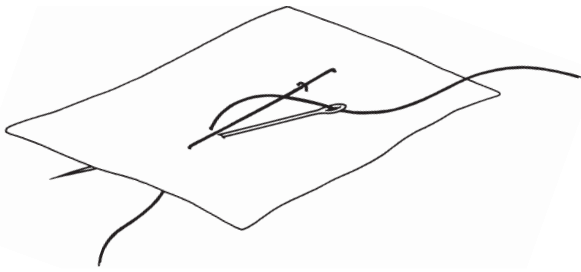


Figure 1c. Small stitches cross long stitch at right angles.

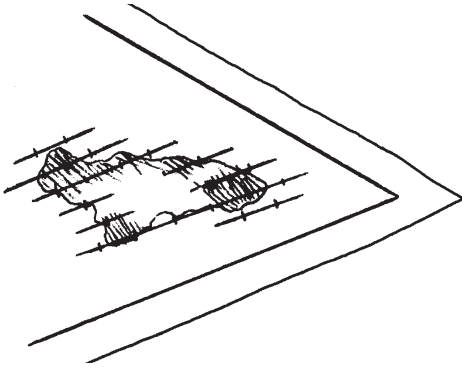


Figure 1d. Damaged area of a textile that has been secured to its backing fabric by a series of self-couching stitches.

secured. Note that the small stitches should be staggered along the parallel long stitches in order to avoid creating a noticeable, regular pattern.

Support stitch

This stitch is used to hold large textiles to a new backing fabric while distributing the weight of the textile evenly (Figure 2). A small, nearly invisible stitch is made on the top of the textile and a longer one is made on the back. Most frequently, the support stitch is applied in a staggered pattern parallel to the warp.

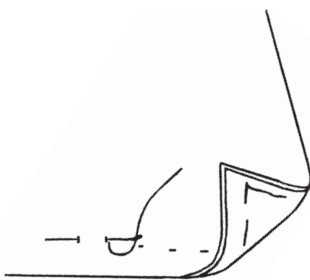


Figure 2. Support stitch.

Herringbone stitch

This simple interlacing stitch, similar to a cross-stitch, is worked from left to right and secures raw edges (Figure 3). The herringbone stitch can be used to join two layers of fabric while maintaining flexibility. It also is frequently used to hold down single-fold hems or the edges of patches.

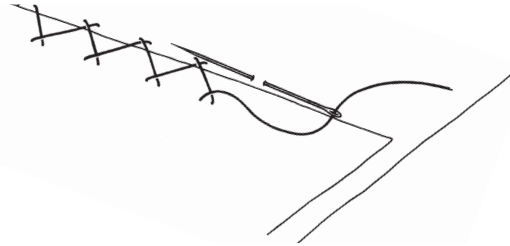


Figure 3. Herringbone stitch.

Slip stitch

The slip stitch is almost invisible on the right side. It is used for blind hemming (Figure 4) and to attach linings to textiles. If worked loosely, it avoids undesirable tension between the backing fabric and the textile.

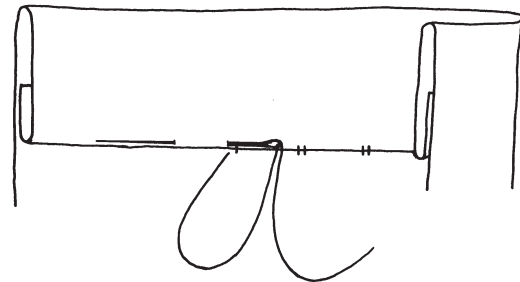


Figure 4. Slip stitch.

Whip stitch

When more than one width of fabric is needed to back a textile, a whip stitch is used to join the two selvages, as illustrated in Figure 5a. When the fabric is opened up, as in Figure 5b, a flat butt joint is created that avoids seam buildup.

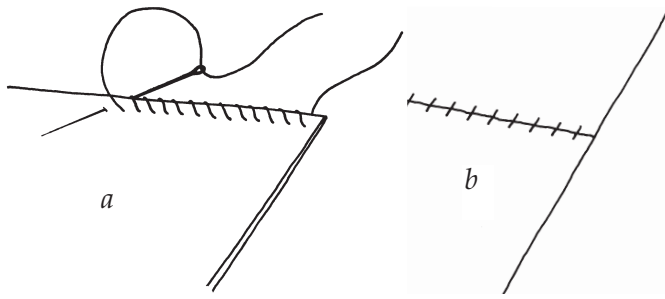


Figure 5. a, Two selvages whip-stitched together; b, flat butt joint.

Suppliers

Note: The following information is provided only to assist the reader. Inclusion of a company in this list does not in any way imply endorsement by the Canadian Conservation Institute.

Sewing thread (colourfast cotton or silk):
fabric stores

No. 12 sewing needles:
specialty sewing stores

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