



These are pictures of my embroidery, done October to November 2016-



The reverse-



It is based off an extant textile found in the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art, Accession number 31.445 (<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/embroidery-66368>).



The base fabric is a silk and cotton weave, known as *mulham*. This means that the warps of the fabric were of silk, while the wefts were of cotton<sup>1</sup>.

The textile is 11cm by 9cm, with a seam down the middle of the design of a stylised lion. The silk used was coloured light green, cream, light blue and brown. Dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century C.E, it was thought to have been made in Mesopotamia but had been found in Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> “Two Islamic Embroideries in Gold on *Mulham*” by Dorothy G. Shepherd, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 40, No. 8 (Oct., 1953), p. 190.

The history of using gold in Middle Eastern embroidery has quite a history- gold bracteates were found on tunics in Tutankhamun's tomb<sup>2</sup>. However, gold was used sparingly, such as in a small sample of gold thread surface couched on to a textile from the Coptic period in Egypt (3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.-7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.)<sup>3</sup>. The Eastern Empire of Byzantium ruled over much of the Middle East until the rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

Byzantine embroidery did use gold wrapped silk in embroidery, and wires of gold and silver woven into their textiles<sup>4</sup>, which with the use of fine silks denoted rank and prestige. The region of Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) was ruled by the Sassanids during the time period of the early Byzantine Empire. While the two empires clashed over the centuries in what is known as the Irano-Byzantine Wars<sup>5</sup> both were on the Silk road and traded between each other. After the Islamic Conquest, trade continued with Byzantium with the Buyid and Seljuk Turks that conquered the region.

Byzantine embroidery used two types of metal (gold and silver) thread- wires or strips. These are then used in three different ways- wire wrapped around a fibrous core (of animal or vegetable origin called *tir-tir* thread), strips of metal wrapped around a silk or linen core fibre, and gilded materials cut into strips used flat or wrapped around a core of fibre<sup>6</sup>. The main stitches used were couching and underside couching using string linen thread to pull the metal thread through the fabric enough to create small loops at the back of the fabric<sup>7</sup>.

The Seljuk Turks, taking over from the Persian Buyid Dynasty in the region of Persia, Mesopotamia, Kuwait and Syria (as modernly known today) encouraged the same trade routes and government styles. Under the Seljuks Baghdad became known famously as the weavers of *mulham* cloth, which was also gilded directly with ink and was exported to Egypt at that time<sup>8</sup>. For example a textile in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Accession number 1950.551 shows the Fatimid influence<sup>9</sup> of *tiraz*, done in ink with gilt directly on the background fabric-

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2 "Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World" by G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2016, p. 52.

3 Ibid, p. 69.

4 "Clothes of Gold: Metal threads in Byzantine-Greek Orthodox Ecclesiastical Textiles" by A. Karatzano & T. Rohrens in ISA 2006: Perspectives, Eds. JF Moreau, R Auger, J Chabot & A Herzog, Quebec. p. 9.

5 Full information available here- <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/byzantine-iranian-relations>

6 "Clothes of Gold: Metal threads in Byzantine-Greek Orthodox Ecclesiastical Textiles" by A. Karatzano & T. Rohrens in ISA 2006: Perspectives, Eds JF Moreau, R Auger, J Chabot & A Herzog, Quebec. p. 10.

7 "Encyclopedia of Arab Embroidery" by G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, Bloomsbury, London, 2016, p. 84.

8 "Symbols of Power" by L. Mackie, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2015, p. 158.

9 Ibid, p. 156.



Gold wrapped threads were also used, as quoted by the Byzantine ambassador to the court of Caliph al-Muktadir-

“Curtains of gold... of brocade embroidered with gold- all magnificently figured with representations of drinking vessels, and with elephants and horses, camels, lions and birds”<sup>10</sup>

This can be seen in other extant textiles such as 1930.300 in the Cleveland Museum of Art-



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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

This textile is also on a *mulham* base, embroidered in silk thread (using split stitches), gold and silver couched thread as well as gilt paint<sup>11</sup>.

The same style can be seen repeated on a textile in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Accession number 37.103-



11 Cleveland Museum of Art collection- [http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1938.300?collection\\_search\\_query=1938.300&op=search&form\\_build\\_id=form-pLLZqTasVxVL2EeUoYYORcJbLg4mSYQ1gNi\\_X1NwtvY&form\\_id=clevelandart\\_collection\\_search\\_form](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1938.300?collection_search_query=1938.300&op=search&form_build_id=form-pLLZqTasVxVL2EeUoYYORcJbLg4mSYQ1gNi_X1NwtvY&form_id=clevelandart_collection_search_form)

Base fabric of *mulham*, embroidered with silk and metal-wrapped thread<sup>12</sup>.

Gold thread embroidered on clothes was also very popular at the time, with references to bridal trousseaus having items called *mutarraz bil-dhahab*<sup>13</sup>.

The extant textile I based my embroidery on was quite colourful, embroidered in light green, cream, light blue and brown silk with gold thread (metal around a silk core)<sup>14</sup>. I had recently gotten an email from the Museum curator, updating the dates to 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century C.E. which was not on the website when I made the embroidery.

I used a base fabric of two layers of linen- *mulham* fabric of a silk warp and cotton weft is not readily available. This was my first time using gold thread, so I chose one similar to the one used in the extant textile- gold metal passing thread around a yellow silk core. I chose Gumnut Yarns perle silk thread, as the original textile had quite thick looking silk threads with obvious stitches. The light green colour was based off the dye gotten from fustic with a tin mordant<sup>15</sup>, light blue a washed out woad (which was also available in the Middle East at the time)<sup>16</sup>, and brown from cutch using a copper mordant (used since ancient times)<sup>17</sup>. Cream is an undyed natural silk colour. The extant embroidered silk sections are done in split stitch, which I have also used with the silk.

As seen in all the Seljuk embroideries, when gold was used, it was done as a fill in- no braided stitching. This means that the gold thread was done in straight filling lines, couched simply down with gold coloured fine silk thread in a simple couching stitch.

During the time of embroidery, I took many photos available publicly to see on a Facebook album- <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10207271547440148.1073741833.1028401897&type=1&l=d0a584886f> which can be seen even if not logged into Facebook.

### Bibliography

“History of Dyes used in different Historical Periods of Egypt” by Omar Abdel-Kareem, RJTA, Vol 16, No. 4, 2012.

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12 Museum of Fine Art collection- <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/fragment-with-mythological-animals-in-roundels-46177>

13 “Arab Dress: From the dawn of Islam to Modern Times” by Y. Stillman, Brill, Leiden, 2003 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) p. 60.

14 Museum of Fine Art collection- <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/embroidery-66368>

15 “History of Dyes used in different Historical Periods of Egypt” by Omar Abdel-Kareem, RJTA, Vol 16, No. 4, 2012, p. 82.

16 Ibid, p. 91.

17 Ibid, p. 81-82.



“Two Islamic Embroideries in Gold on *Mulham*” by Dorothy G. Shepherd, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 40, No. 8 (Oct., 1953).

“Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World” by G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2016.

The Cleveland Museum of Fine Art- <http://www.clevelandart.org/>

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston- <http://www.mfa.org/>