

Working with Multicolored Thread

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Multicolored thread comes in many different brands, colors, types of thread, and prices. DMC makes a variegated thread, which is evenly dyed, usually in shades of the same color, and now also a thread (Color Variations) that mimics the hand-dyed threads on the market. Caron makes Watercolors, Wildflowers, and Waterlilies, which are overdyed threads in beautiful colors. Needle Necessities makes a lovely line of overdyed flosses and pearl cottons that come in longer skeins than the others. Other brands include Weeks Dye works and Gentle Arts Sampler Threads. I have probably left out your favorite. Don't worry. The techniques below work with all of them.

You can use multicolored thread with any embroidery stitch. Each stitch works a little differently and will give you a different result. Don't be afraid to experiment!! If the cost of some of the more extravagant specialty threads is a little high for your budget, experiment with a variegated floss like the DMC. (Although be aware that the color changes in DMC variegated take longer to take effect than in some of the overdyed flosses.)

In this article I'll go over several techniques for use with the cross stitch, and one for a geometric satin-stitched piece.

Multicolored threads, whether they are overdyed, space dyed, or variegated are a wonderful addition to your stash. They are extremely versatile, allowing you to change the look of a project with one change of thread:

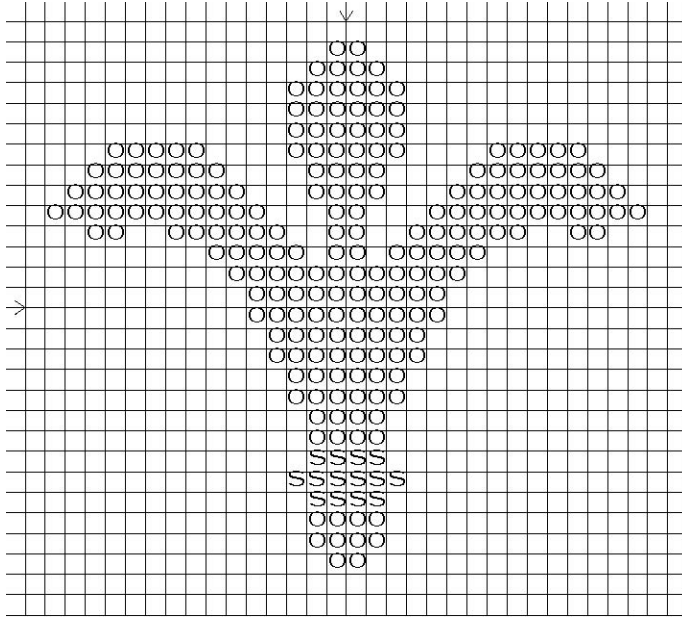
- ☞ You can substitute a multicolored thread for any largish area of stitching. (You can substitute it in a smaller area, as well, but the nuances of the colors will show much less.)
- ☞ You can also use it to replace a shaded area... if a chart has several colors, for example, in a shaded pumpkin, you might consider replacing the three shades of orange with a multicolored thread that includes similar shades. (Or wildly different, if you like. I once replaced the orange in a pumpkin with a green overdyer, changing it from pumpkin to acorn squash in one fell swoop!) This works as well in general free embroidery as it does in cross stitch.
- ☞ You can use it to stitch the kloster blocks and satin stitches in hardanger for an entirely new look.

There are as many ways to stitch with multicolored threads as there are stitchers. In general, the rule is, if you get the effect you want, you've stitched it correctly. In general, the keys to getting the effect you want are:

- ☞ Don't be afraid to cut out areas of color you don't like in the thread. You can always use them for another project later.
- ☞ Plan what colors you want, and where you want them.
- ☞ Be willing to experiment.

Cross Stitch Techniques

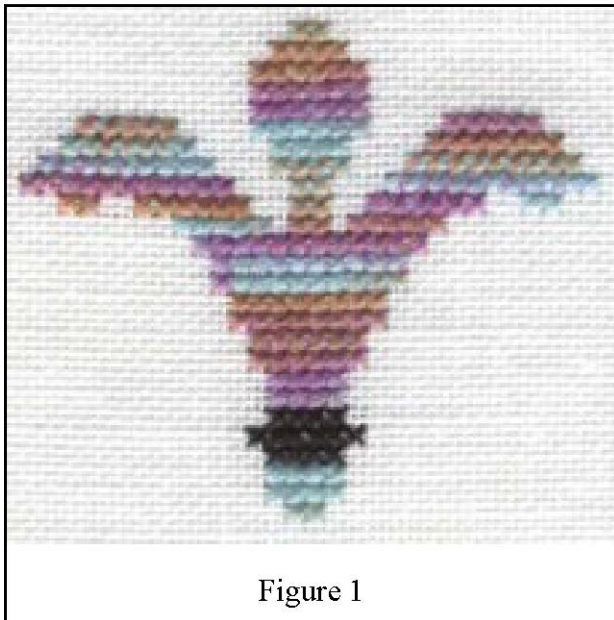
That said, here are some ways to start out and an idea of the effect you will get if you use the described methods. All of my examples use the small fleur-de-lis chart I use in teaching. Only one color is used for the entire pattern, although I have taken the liberty of using a contrasting color for the band across the middle. In my examples, I used black for the band.



For this chart of a fleur de lis, pick a multi-colored, stranded floss from your stash. This can be variegated, or one of the overdyes. For my examples, I used Needle Necessities in color number 107, Dreamscape. With this small a design, you may want to use one of the overdyed colors, because color changes tend to be closer together than in the variegated. Stitch with 2 strands on 14 count Aida (or 28 count evenweave, or whatever).

Danish Method

This is the method of working the cross stitch that is generally taught in the United States. It is extremely frugal in its use of thread. You will often be told that you shouldn't use this method for multicolored threads, because you lose the definition of the various colors. However, this may be exactly the effect you are looking for in your work!



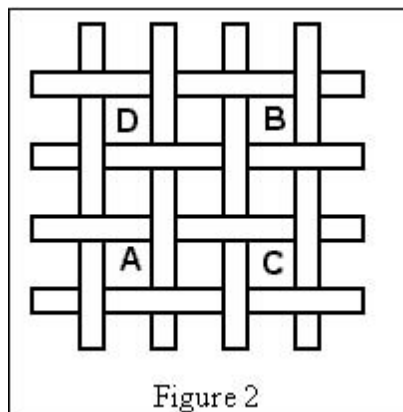
Directions

Work from the top of the petals downward in the Danish method as described below. You'll notice that the wider the petals become, the subtler the color change becomes. The effect should be similar to the tweeding effect you get with a blended needle, and will vary with the colors of the thread you use. You can see this effect a little in Figure 1, although because there were so many different colors, the result was less blended than it might have been had I used the DMC variegated, or something similar. You can see the tweeding effect best at the top of the side petals, and at the four-stitch area of the center petal.

Stitching with the Danish Method

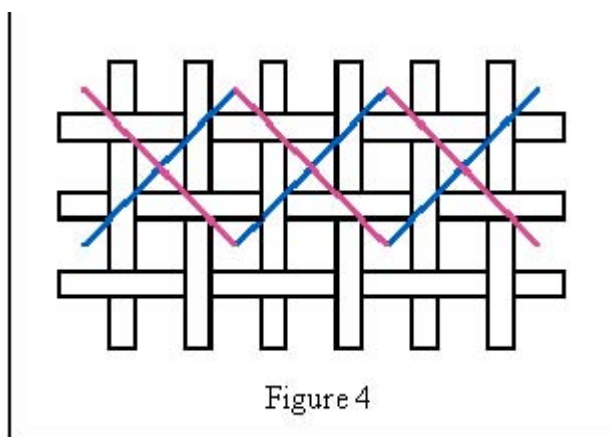
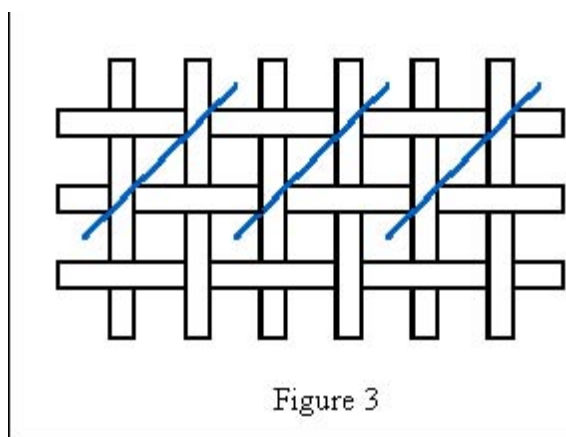
The Danish method is the style of cross stitching most Americans learn first. In this method, you will stitch one row of crosses at a time. It is sometimes faster than the English method described in the next section, and uses a shade less thread.

Working on Evenweave:



When working on an evenweave fabric like Jobelen or linen, cross stitch is generally worked over two threads of the fabric. Look closely at your fabric, and you will see that threads alternate going over and under another (Figure 2). This is a trait of an evenweave. When stitching cross stitch on an evenweave fabric, begin at a juncture where a vertical thread will be to the right of your needle. In other words, bring your needle from the back of the fabric to the front at point A, as shown in Figure 2. The individual stitch comes up at A, down at B, up at C, and down at D.

When stitching multiple stitches in the Danish style, stitch all the first half of the stitches in one row at once (see Figure 3) and then come back along the row, crossing the stitches (Figure 4).



Working on Aida:

In many ways, working on aida fabric is much easier. It is specially woven so that there are blocks of fabric separated by holes. You work one stitch over each block. Partial stitches become more difficult in that you have to pierce the center of the fabric blocks to stop in the middle of the cross. Otherwise, stitch the same way you would on evenweave.

TIP: For an even subtler look, take one strand and turn it backwards to the other... this will blend the colors within each pass of the stitching. If you choose to do this, use shorter strands of floss than usual, because as the grain is backwards on one strand, it will rub more quickly on the fabric and become fuzzy faster.

English Method

In the English method, which I teach below, you complete each stitch individually. The only difference from the Danish method in looks is on the back of the piece. The English method uses more thread, but creates a more durable backing to the fabric. In addition, there is some evidence that it may preserve your fabric by placing a more even tension on the threads than the Danish method. This method of stitching a cross stitch uses more floss than the Danish method.

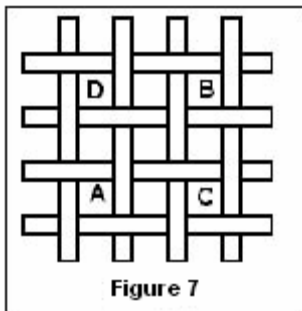
Each cross is stitched in its entirety before you move on to the next stitch. Using this method makes the colors stand out very strongly. However, this can result in the colored piece looking “stripey”. But you might want stripey. See Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 was stitched horizontally, in the usual manner, and Figure 5 was stitched in the basic direction of the petals, making the stripes follow the petal lines.

Directions

Work from the top of the petals downward in the English method as described below. You’ll notice that the wider the petals become, the thinner the stripes become. You could also work in the English method vertically on the center petal, and horizontally on the outer petals to accentuate the stripes and make them part of your design. Remember to experiment.



Working on Evenweave:



When working on an evenweave fabric like Jobelen or linen, cross stitch is generally worked over two threads of the fabric. Look closely at your fabric, and you will see that threads alternate going over and under another (Figure 7). This is a trait of an evenweave. When stitching cross stitch on an evenweave fabric, begin at a juncture where a vertical thread will be to the right of your needle. In other words, bring your needle from the back of the fabric to the front at point A, as shown in Figure 6. The stitch comes up at A, down at B, up at C, down at D. The next stitch would begin by coming up at C, which becomes your next “A”. On the second row, work right to left, still making crosses from the bottom left to upper right, and then from the bottom right to upper left. This will ensure that all of your stitches cross the same way. See Figure 8.

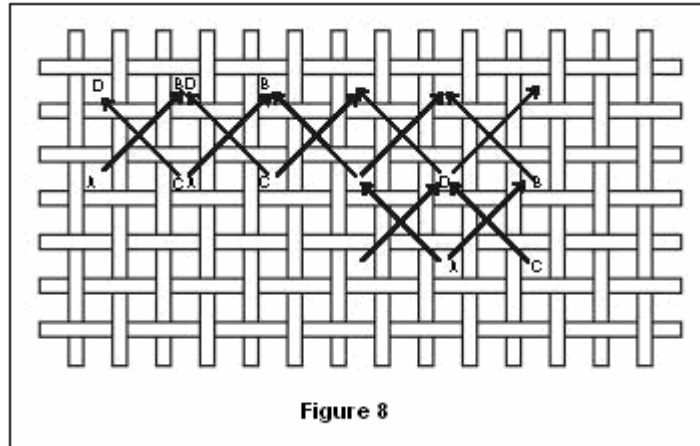


Figure 8

Continue to work row by row, one color at a time.

Filling the Design

If you want the defined color changes of the English method, but don't want the striped effect, you can achieve that, too. This takes a bit more planning than either of the other options. In addition, it requires breaking the habit of stitching straight across or up and down a design.

You want to achieve the same effect as in pointillism paintings. Rather than stripes of color, you want to create spots of color, which are more easily combined by the viewer's eye. Alternatively, you can arrange the colors so that they create a more even gradation of color. In the example in Figure 4, I grouped the colored stitches so that the pinks were all in the middle of the petals, surrounded by the more subtle colors in the floss.

Grouped colors

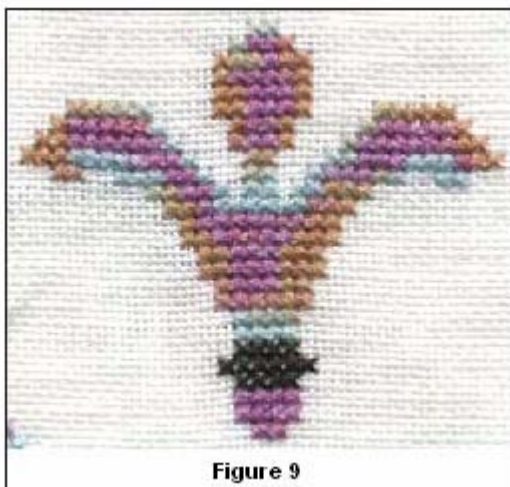
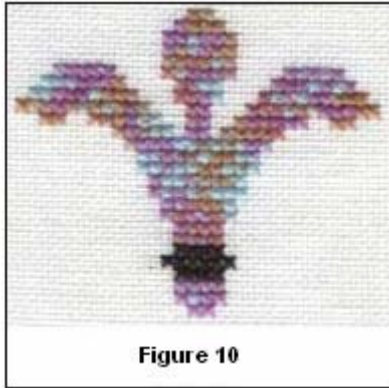


Figure 9

The effect in Figure 9 was relatively easy. I threaded my needle with a strand that had little, if any, pink in it. Then I stitched in the English method, around the outline of the petals. In some places I stitched only one stitch at the outside, in others I stitched a bit into the petal itself, for a staggered effect.

Then I threaded the needle with the leftover, pink parts of the floss and filled in the petal centers.

Mottled colors



the area marked with the letter B, work 4 or 5 stitches there, and then move to another area.

Doing this for the entire motif will give you the more mottled, but not striped, image shown in Figure 10.

In Figure 10, I worked for a more mottled effect.

To fill the design in this way, you must constantly be aware of where the edges of the motif are located. Because you are not stitching in a traditional methodical manner, it is sometimes easy to get lost.

Start stitching near the top of the design. Work in the English method, but jump around a bit as the thread changes colors instead of stitching rows. For example,

you might work 4 or 5 stitches in the area marked with the letter A in Figure 11, then jump over to

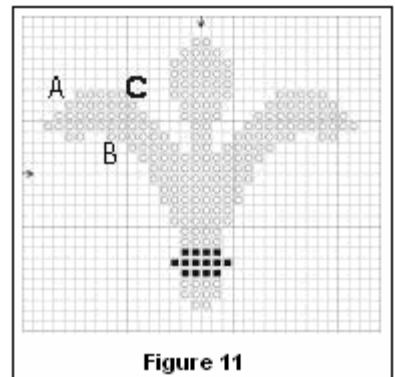




Figure 12

Geometric Stitching (Hardanger, etc.) Techniques

Some of the same principles apply to stitching geometric-type designs, for example, any type of satin stitch.

For the example in Figure 12, I used one strand of Caron Wildflowers in the Nefertiti color, with the graph to the right (each grid line represents one thread of the fabric. This design works better on a linen fabric or other evenweave than on aida.) The chart for this is figure 13.

Play around with this one. Don't be afraid to cut colors out of your threads. In the example in Figure 11, I did just this in several places around the outside "petals". I wanted them green, and darn it, they were going to be green! (or entirely pink, for that matter...) On the other hand, I'm generally lazy when it comes

to starting and ending threads, so they aren't entirely green (or pink)!

You can get completely different looks from the same color of thread by stitching the color in a different location on the chart.

Using a different color or type of thread to stitch the design will give you a completely different effect. It's always amazing to me the difference that stitching the same design with Tropics instead of Nefertiti creates.

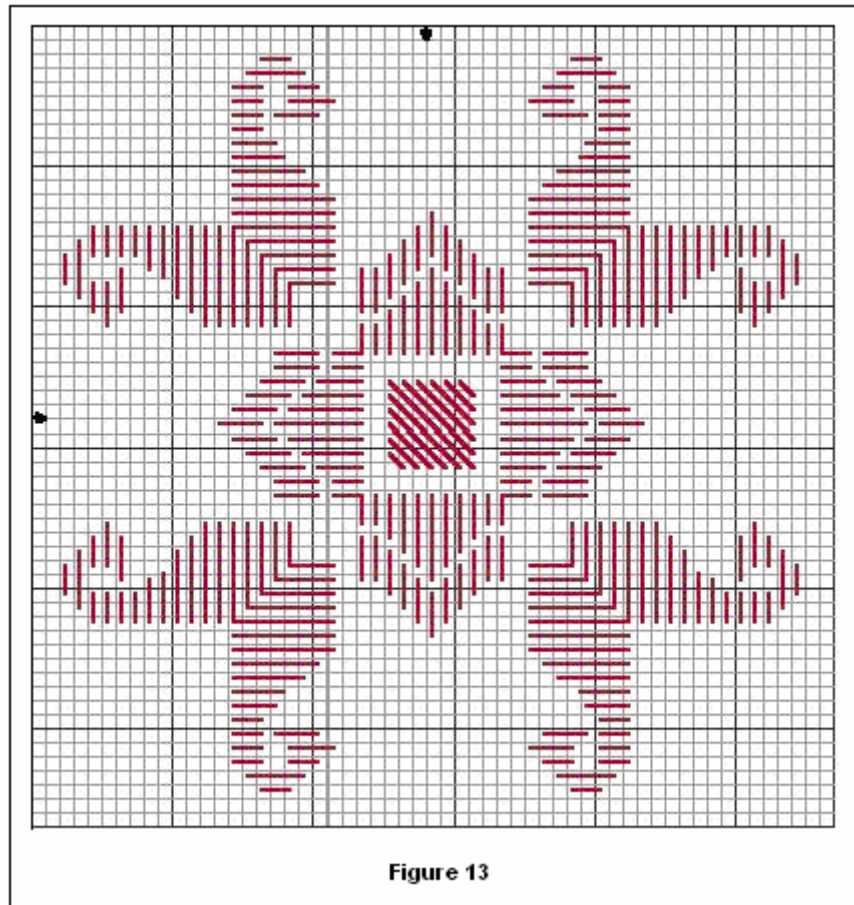


Figure 13

Conclusion

This article is just an introduction to some of the effects you can achieve with this type of thread. Each different type of multicolored thread, whether the evenly spaced variegated floss, or the random overdyed types has its own peculiarities. In a stranded thread, each strand will have the same color changes, so if you need a mirror effect, keep this in mind if you are using a randomly dyed thread.

The more colors there are in the thread, the more bizarre the “blended thread” techniques can look. But this might be just the effect you need. Remember to keep experimenting. Even the most expensive threads are relatively inexpensive when considered individually. The amount of pleasure gained from learning their tendencies becomes worth the cost when you create a project that is truly your own.

I hope this small discussion has made you more aware of the possibilities multi-colored threads have for your stitching. Remember, when you’re stitching, you always have the last word as to how your piece looks. If you like it, it’s right!