

Hand Smocking Tutorial

Sew Many Things SAGA Chapter

The art of hand smocking

History

Smocking is an embroidery technique used to gather fabric so that it can stretch. Before elastic, smocking was commonly used in cuffs, bodices and necklines in garments where buttons were undesirable. Smocking developed in England and has been practiced since the Middle Ages and is unusual among embroidery methods in that it was often worn by laborers. Other major embroidery styles are purely decorative and represented status symbols. Smocking was practical for garments to be both form fitting and flexible, hence its name derives from *smock* — a farmer's work shirt. Smocking was used most extensively in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This technique later evolved into a decorative detail for dresses and gowns.

Needles

Generally, a #8 crewel embroidery needle is used in smocking. If vision is an issue, it may not be comfortable to thread a #8 crewel needle, in this case, use a #7 darning needle.

Using the correct needle will make a big difference in the appearance and quality of your smocking stitches. As a rule of thumb, type of fabric will be a factor. Some needles work better for certain fabrics. Use a smaller size when using fewer strands of floss on finer fabrics, use a larger size on thicker fabrics.

A #7 Darning is the best choice when smocking is worked on medium to lightweight fabrics, such as batiste. The large eye also makes it easy to thread the floss.

Floss

The general rule of thumb is to use three strands of embroidery floss when working with fine to medium fabrics. However, there are exceptions:

- For a different look with fine fabrics, try using two strands. It is pretty and delicate.
- For picture smocking, most designers recommend four strands.
- For some heavier fabrics, such as corduroy and velveteen, use up to five or six strands. Experiment with heavier fabrics to find the right weight of floss for the desired look.
- It is perfectly acceptable to use Pearl Cotton #8 for smocking. With this choice, you will be using just 1 strand of floss.
- length of floss - 18"-20"

All thread has a grain. When you stitch against the grain, your thread will tangle and wear more quickly. To find the grain, gently run two fingers down a cut length of thread both ways. One direction will feel smoother than the other, that will be the direction you want your thread to run thru the fabric when smocking.

Stripping stranded floss:

When using embroidery floss, you will use 3-4 strands of thread in the needle. Stripping the threads will give your stitches better coverage. Cut a length of floss and tap the end of the the strands to separate them. Pull one strand out at a time. Lay the single strands side by side, making sure all the grain runs in the same direction. Regroup the threads into the number of strands you wish to use.

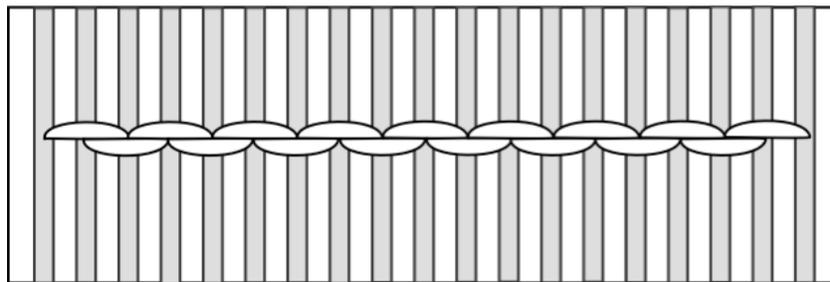
Knotting:

Properly knotting your floss is important. You want to make sure that the knots will not come undone on the back of your work during multiple washings and wearings. I like to make what I call a double wrap knot. Wrap thread around needle two times, then using index finger and thumb, hold the wrap and pull the needle thru - continue pulling to end of thread and cinch up the double wrap knot.

Basic Smocking Stitches:

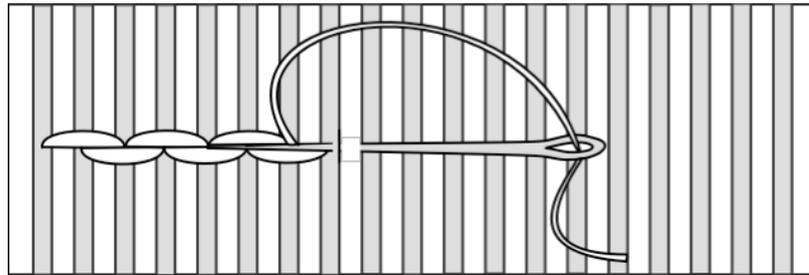
The Cable Stitch

A tight stitch of double rows that joins alternating columns of gathers. The cable stitch is one of the most common stitches in smocking. It is important to learn to do this stitch properly, as it will be of great benefit when you advance to picture smocking.

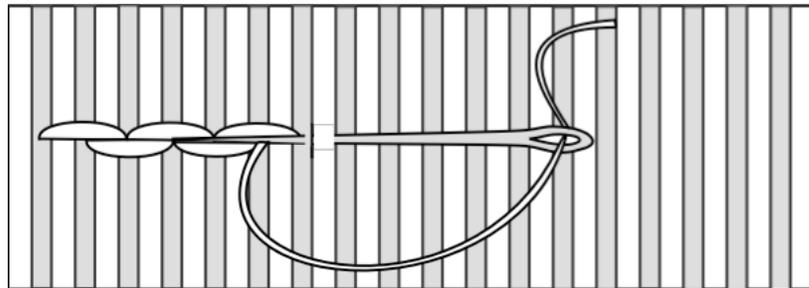


Cable Stitches

Cable stitches are a series of “up” and “down” stitches. When thread is up and needle is down, it creates an “up-stitch” or “up-cable”.



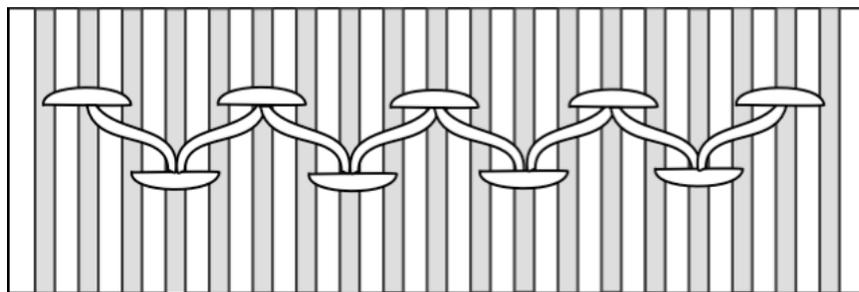
When the thread is down and the needle is up, it creates a “down-stitch” or “down-cable”.



Cable stitches are created by alternating “up” and “down” stitches. It is very important to keep your needle horizontal to the pleats, as shown above. This will ensure that you get a nice straight row of cable stitches. Be careful not to dig too deep into the pleat. Needle should go thru the pleat above the guide thread. Keep stitches consistent and use the pleating guide threads as your guide to work cable stitches across the entire row.

The Wave Stitch

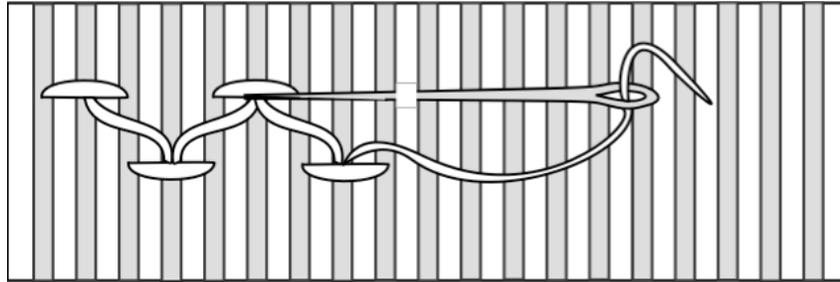
A medium density pattern that alternately employs tight horizontal stitches and loose diagonal stitches. You can also think of this as “up” and “down” cable stitches that are connected by a long diagonal stitch.



The Wave Stitch

The wave stitch worked between full rows is called a full space wave stitch and if it is worked half-way between the rows, it's called a half-space wave or "Baby Wave".

To work this stitch, take one up cable stitch then take needle down 1/2 space or a full space at the next pleat. Work a down cable, then take thread up to row and work an up cable. Continue the sequence across the row.



For more information and detailed instruction on smocking,
please visit the following websites:

SewNso's Sewing Journal - <http://sewnso.blogspot.com>

Smocking Arts Guild of America - <http://smocking.org>

Southern Stitches - <http://southern-stitches.com/smocking-tutorials.php>