

Linen

In my humble opinion this is the ultimate fabric to use for needle painting embroidery, by linen I mean **PURE** linen such as Irish or Belgian linen, also known as Church linen or the “Cloth Of Kings”.

NOT the linen used for counted thread work such as aida, evenweave, 40/60 count linen or the kind used to make clothing/curtains that creases every time you move! There is a vast difference which we will cover in this article.

You can see the difference between the various linens by enlarging the pictures on the blog post.

Here are some of the reasons why linen is so perfect for this type of embroidery:

1. It is one of the most durable and hard wearing fabrics available, in fact the more you wash it the more beautiful it becomes. One of the earliest examples of embroidery to have survived was a piece of linen found in an Egyptian tomb. Needless to say it will certainly outlive us!
2. Linen is made of flax fibres which are strong and pliable so the needle glides through and the fibres spring back to close around the opening made by the needle, unlike cotton which leaves a hole.
3. Linen is flexible but not stretchy so will spring back into shape when it is taken out of the hoop thus preventing puckering in the finished piece.
4. The process used to weave linen produces an exceptionally strong yarn, so it can support the weight of several layers of embroidery.
5. Because of the fineness of needle painting embroidery it is essential that the fabric used should be a fine, close weave so that you have plenty of placement for the needle without going into the same hole twice. Linen is one of the few fabrics that can achieve such fineness in the weave without it becoming rigid – if you have ever tried to push your needle through a high count fabric that is inflexible you will know what I mean.
6. Pure linen can be washed and ironed with a hot steam iron and it will not suffer the process. It is probably wise to pre-shrink it before use just in case.
7. It is just beautiful to work on – nothing gives me more pleasure than stitching on a fine piece of superior linen.

However there are linens and there are linens, beware of cheap imitations!

So how do we know which type of linen to choose – as mentioned there are several categories which I have endeavoured to explain here:

Irish linen

There are 4 characteristics to look for in Irish linen:

Quality: can be ascertained by the fineness of the linen. A good quality linen will have fewer slubs (thick irregular bits) in the weave. In other words it will have a smoother texture.

Weight: a medium weight is most suitable for needle painting as it will support the embroidery. Light weight is normally used for items such as handkerchiefs which would be a bit too flimsy and heavy weight is normally used for items such as table cloths.

Density: this is defined by the number of threads woven together in a square inch, or the thread count. For example 100 threads woven across and 100 threads woven down will result in a 200 thread count.

The lower the thread count the more coarse the fabric and the higher the count the smoother it will feel, so a 40 count linen used for counted thread work will feel rougher than a 200 count surface embroidery linen. The density of your linen fabric *is* important because as explained earlier we need to have a close weave to allow for sufficient placement of the needle.

Finishing: The finishing of the linen will have a big impact on the final feel and appearance of the fabric. In Irish linen the long flax fibres are used – these are doubled then lightly twisted before undergoing a **wet spin process** which produces an exceptionally strong yarn, and fresh crisp appearance. The offcuts or short fibres are used in a **dry spin process** to produce a heavier, coarser fabric used for furnishing fabrics, household linens etc.

The correct finishing process will result in a superior, softer linen fabric which is lovely to stitch on – whereas the opposite will result in a rigid fabric which is almost impossible to get the needle through. I have ordered many samples from suppliers to experience this first hand. It looks and feels good but when you try to push your needle through you develop blisters on your fingers!

Fabric Colour

Most Irish linen available today is white/off white because it is bleached. It is possible to find linen in a natural colour but it is normally furnishing quality. There is no such thing as black or coloured Irish linen unless it has been dyed.

The old linen that you could get so readily in days gone by was more of a creamy colour. If your great Aunt Fancy Nancy decides to leave you a bundle of old Irish linen – grab it, hide it and don't share it with anyone!

A lady approached me at a guild meeting a few years ago with a parcel of Irish linen, still packaged up in that old greasy brown paper they used to use about 100 years ago. It was from a deceased estate and apparently she had received this package of linen +/- 30 years previously from Ireland but

never opened the packet! I was fortunate enough to be able to offer her a fair price for the linen and be able to make use of this wonderful little find. I have kept the old postage stamps and remnants of the brown paper to remind me where it came from.

Cost

Needless to say a fabric that requires a process of such tender loving care to produce does not come cheap. If it does then you have not got the real thing! On average a metre/yard of Irish/Belgian Church linen fabric will cost between US\$50 – 100. But the good news is that it is normally about 54" (137cm) wide so a metre will afford many many pieces of embroidery.

I suggest you give up a few haircuts or trips to the dentist in lieu of a nice piece of linen. After all what would you rather have: nice looking hair or teeth or the pure pleasure of embroidering on a pure linen fabric? I know what I would choose!

Shop Outlets

If having read this article you are more confused then ever 😊 you can either purchase linen from my website or here are some recommended outlets:

Communion Linens: superb quality, medium weight Irish linen. She is moving premises at the moment so not taking orders at present.

Marie Suarez in Belgium: Her website is in French but if you email her at: mariesuarez@skynet.be she will respond in English. I purchase a fine linen that is 3 metres wide – it is a little flimsy and requires a backing fabric such as batiste or calico but it is a nice quality linen to work on.

Copeland Linens: good quality medium weight Irish linen. You need to ask for No 54 white linen.

Farmhouse fabrics: sell a good quality Irish Cambric linen. Again it is a little flimsy and will require a backing fabric to give it support. <http://www.farmhousefabrics.com/>

Ulster Linen: This is a company in the USA who provides Irish linen to the retail trade unfortunately I am unable to give you an information on the type/costs of linen they supply as I have asked for samples on numerous occasions but not heard back from them. If you are able to find out more please do let me know.

Thomas Ferguson Irish Linen: double damask 202 count medium weight irish linen. (Pricey but gorgeous).

More Information

There is a lot more information on the history and production of Irish linen which can be found online and would take too long to mention: Here are a few sites to visit – many of these sites sell linen fabric.

Elisabeth Morgan's site **Church Linens & Vestments:** <http://www.churchlinens.com/linens.htm>

Irish Culture & Customs: <http://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/aemblem/linen.html>

Copeland Linens: <http://www.copelandlinens.com/>

Communion Linens: <http://www.communionlinens.com/>

Irish Linen – The Fabric Of Ireland: <http://www.irishlinenmills.com/>

Thomas Ferguson Irish Linen: <http://www.fergusonsirishlinen.com/>

Givans Irish Linen: <http://www.givans.co.uk/page.home>