

Traditions Continue . . . What Is Candlewicking?

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Educational Objectives

1. Understand how candlewicking is being passed down from generation to generation.
2. Learn the art of candlewicking.

History

The name “Candlewicking” is derived from an old embroidery technique that used the soft-spun thread that was also used for making wicks for candles. After the embroidery was completed, the fabric was washed in very hot water to shrink the fabric and cause the stitches to fluff up, thereby holding the stitches in place.

It has been stated that candlewicking was born in the Wild West as women traveled west in wagon trains to settle the prairies and longed for some comfort in the harsh, lonely places. Having few of the comforts of home and rarely able to visit shops, these women developed a way of creating useful and decorative articles for the home. They used the canvas-like cream fabric like that on the roofs of the wagons; for thread, they used the wicks of candles.

What Is Candlewicking?

Candlewicking is a type of embroidery done on 100-percent cotton unbleached muslin, which has not been preshrunk. The candlewicking fabric is washed after stitching; the shrinking of the muslin will not only hold the knots, but it also will give the puckered look of traditional candlewicking.

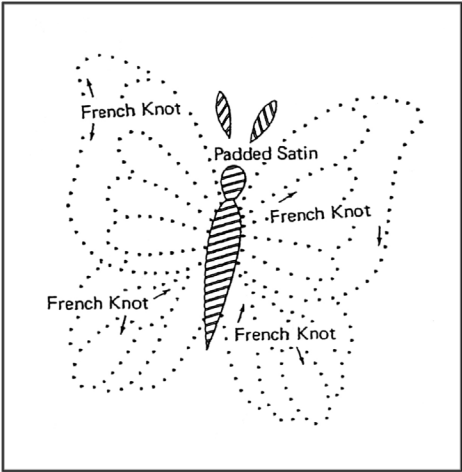
Getting Started – Fabric

Remember – do not wash muslin fabric before stitching on it. If you do wash the fabric, you will not achieve the traditional look of Candlewicking. You need to purchase 100-percent cotton unbleached muslin fabric.

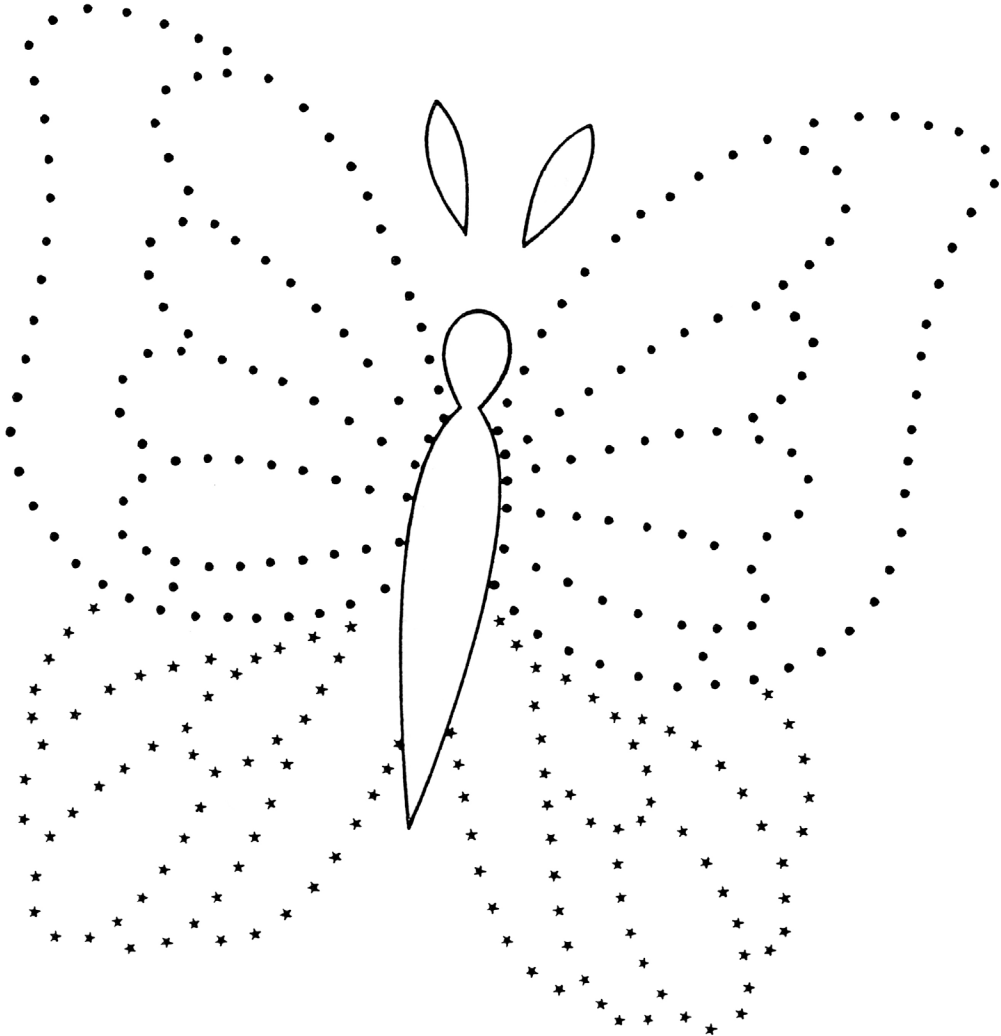
Transferring the Designs/Pattern

You need to iron the cotton muslin fabric to create a smooth work surface. You will need to find and mark the center of the fabric by folding it in half vertically and horizontally. You can mark the fabric with a water-soluble marking pen. Test all water-soluble marking

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BUTTERFLY



pens before using to make absolutely sure that the ink will wash out.

Place piece of cotton muslin on top of the desired pattern. Match up the center of the pattern and the center of the fabric. The center will be indicated by arrows or markings on top and side of pattern. Depending upon the thickness of the fabric, you may be able to see through the pattern without extra light. However, if you have excess light (sunlight or magnifying lamp), feel free to use it. Using a water-soluble marking pen, trace the pattern on cotton muslin fabric. The pen marks will wash out cleanly without leaving any residue on fabric or thread.

Needle

Use an embroidery needle with a sharp point and a long eye. Use the needle size you prefer. Individuals may wish to use a #2 Crewel Needle or #20 Chenille Needle. Some brands even packet needles as “Candlewicking Assortment.”

Candlewicking Thread

When selecting the thread for your project, buy candlewicking thread. It is 100-percent cotton and labeled for candlewicking. You will find different brands at local craft stores and super centers; however, you want to make sure it is for candlewicking projects. The thread has four strands, which can be separated and used in different color combinations. If colored candlewicking thread is not available, you can substitute other threads such as cotton knit and/or crochet yarn, darning yarn, embroidery floss (approximately 12 strands), pearl cotton, or even kite twine. You need to keep in mind that these threads have different thicknesses; you may wish to experiment until you obtain the desired effect. You will need to test all threads, including the candlewicking thread, for colorfastness by washing in hot water.

Hoop

Hoops are made of several materials, including plastic, wood and metal. When choosing a hoop, your personal preference should be the main focus. The size of the hoop is determined by the size of the project and the size of the workable area. Average hoop size would be approximately 8 to 10 inches. Stretch the fabric in the hoop and keep it taut for easier stitching. The use of a floor stand frees both hands and makes stitching easier. If using a metal hoop, be careful not to leave the hoop assembled on the fabric because rust may form on hoop and fabric.

Scissors

When you are crafting, sewing, or embroidering, you want to keep a pair of scissors for these special projects. Keep your scissors clean and clear of any foreign substances that may harm your fabric or other craft projects.

Stitches

Traditional embroidery stitches include French knots, stem/outline, satin, and padded satin. All candlewicking stitches are worked with two strands of candlewicking thread. When preparing the candlewicking thread, you want to cut the thread twice the stitching length desired (about 36 inches), thread it into the needle, bring the ends together, and make a simple knot. This will give you 18 inches of stitching length. By threading the needle this way, rather than using two individual pieces of thread, you will have an even tension and less bulk near the eye of the needle, making it easier to pull through the fabric.

To finish off a piece of thread, you will need to run the needle back through an inch or so of stitching to secure your work. You can begin in any area of the design. However, avoid long jumps from section to section; the tread will leave shadows on the back of the muslin that may be seen from the front. To keep the embroidery hoop from crushing the French and Colonial knots, stitch them last.

Washing

In traditional candlewicking, washing the completed embroidery in very hot water was the final step. This caused the fabric to shrink and the stitches to stand up. Today, the hot water bath will cause the fabric to shrink slightly, giving the work the soft, puckered look of antique candlewicking.

The first washing step is a cold water bath to remove all traces of the marking pen. Make sure there are no blue lines hiding in fabric. If the fabric is soiled, you may wish to use a mild soap. Second, wash the item in very hot water to cause the fabric to shrink. Roll fabric in a soft terry towel to eliminate moisture. Unroll and place stitched piece face-down on a dry terry towel on an ironing board and steam until dry. This will make the embroidery “stand up”; do not let the steam iron rest on the stitches – the steam will do the work.

Finished Project

You may use the finished candlewicking embroidery project any way you wish. You may want to create a pillow top, quilt top, or wall hanging. How you decide to use the embroidery work determines which extra supplies you’ll need to complete the project.

Follow-up Activities

Ask participants if they would like a follow-up to the lesson. Perhaps they would want to do one of the following activities.

- Offer a beginners’ class taught by a local embroiderer who knows the skills of candlewicking embroidery.
- Organize a group session, led by those with embroidery skills, to make items to donate to a local service organization.

References

American School of Needlework. (1984). *The Great Craft-Quilts Book*. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.

Bryant, C. (1984). *Candlewicking: 24 Iron-on Transfer Patterns and Complete Instructions*. Dover Publishers.

