# The Italian Danubian Dress

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**Abstract**: The current article results from an accidental finding of a folk costume which reveals overlooked links and echoes of the Italian Renaissance on the Danube's shores. The shirt discovered and dubbed as Danubian could revive a forgotten visual appeal and initiate fresh prospects for research and collaboration in the realm of customary textiles in southern and southeastern Europe. The 1st person narration of this field research proves that not only should one give more attention to the antiquated and unusual tailoring/cutting pattern, but one should also focus on the methods used to create the decorations on the edges of the shirt. These techniques migrated towards Western Europe and developed into diverse forms of lace, but they have retained a distinct identity in Romania.
**Keywords:** European and Romanian ethnography, folk costume tailoring techniques, Italian influences

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In 2011, finding information about traditional shirts online was a challenging task. Despite my best efforts, I struggled to find any useful results that could satisfy my curiosity. The frustration of coming up empty-handed inspired me to create a platform that would provide a comprehensive resource for traditional shirt enthusiasts like myself. As a graduate of the National College of Computer Science and then the Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture, the Internet was my field of research. I specialised in retail design and worked for leading IT and telecom service and equipment providers. I was convinced that if one was not on Google one did not exist and that all the information one needed about traditional textiles was just a click away, because I considered it to be vital information of national importance. The feeling of disorientation I experienced when failing to obtain results caused me to undergo various emotional states until I resolved to alter the situation in June 2012. I had hoped that this responsibility would not fall solely on my shoulders. I would have preferred to work as a graphic designer rather than being one of the many self-proclaimed experts on the internet. Nevertheless, I found that the museums I approached for collaboration were unwilling to participate, and some were even uninterested in hearing my proposal.

I chose to take responsibility for sharing our tradition online, rather than waiting for someone else to do so. To start, I ran an anonymous blog for six months in order to avoid any major life changes and simply focus on making a positive impact. I named it Semne Cusute. I put together all the available publications, with the original album of Mrs. Brătianu serving as my main reference. At the time, I had hoped for a wider range of dedicated models available throughout the country. I was disappointed that I could not study the tailoring pattern of the old shirts beyond the ornamentation. The fairs held regularly in the courtyard of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant were the only opportunity left for me to examine shirts of different ages and from diverse regions in the country. In 2010, I purchased an initial batch of vintage fabric from Tanti Dida. Although my interest lay in sewing, my intention was not to accumulate old shirts. Rather, I was captivated by the notion of antique concepts transcending time and emerging into the contemporary world. I aimed to comprehend the object rather than merely owning it, with the objective of preserving it for posterity.

In order to do that, I thought I should bring them to the attention of as many people as possible. To put them in a digital archive, not just as photographs, but as models, because I didn't feel the need to justify the past of these objects. I thought it was necessary to gather, sort, simplify, and share information that can be practically useful. For this, I had to create embroidery diagrams. While I had already discovered Mrs. Formagiu's[1] book at the antique shop, I found that it only contained simplified and summarised data of cutting patterns, without the exceptions I found in old shirts. In other words, Mrs. Formagiu's book was

only a study and not a practical reference for current shirt making. I had made a habit of stopping by the museum every Friday morning when the vendors were getting ready for the weekend fair. They were in good spirits and well rested and often allowed me to help them a little in setting up their stalls. This gave me a chance to see the contents of their bags beyond the stalls. In March 2014 the blog and the Facebook page Semne Cusute reached a critical mass and already the need to sew Romanian shirts was emerging. So I started a Facebook group called Semne Cusute in action so we could share practical tips.

The community now has more than 50,000[2] members, with several other subgroups formed based on different interests. Some members opted to gather themselves by region for ease of meeting, while others separated from sewing emblems to attain personal benefits like acknowledgment, followers, or financial gains. Thanks to the invaluable contributions of our community members, we've expanded our repertoire of shirt options within our virtual group. These acquisitions range from cherished family treasures to intriguing findings from exhibitions. Additionally, we extended our research efforts by delving deep into Google search results, unearthing photographs of Romanian shirts from various museums across the globe. Fortunately, we stumbled upon detailed images of some shirts, allowing us to accurately recreate their intricate designs on a drawing board. These shirts could receive a replica crafted by our colleagues today. Through our collective and voluntary effort, we produced enough shirts for an exhibition which we named AIDOMA.

For the cybercommunity, the research process starts with a Google search. However, obtaining accurate results is not always straightforward. To locate images of shirts, it is essential to have the ability to intuit or understand the context within which they were presented. This is particularly crucial if photographs are uploaded from countries where the correct shirt or shirt tags may not be widely recognised[3]. This aspect of accurate and effective labeling is also vital for those interested in making a difference through their posts. It's vital to use relevant headlines with the right tags but also provide room for links. This is a technique for documenting and archiving research that intersects with another field: information technology (IT). As the digital landscape grew more information-dense, the audience diversified into four distinct categories: individuals who appreciate aesthetics as casual observers, collectors, traders, and those seeking to learn how to sew. Of all the categories, those in the third were most closely connected to the land; they visited the villages. Their research was limited to finding old artifacts, so it was superficial, but it was also much quicker and more targeted. Importantly, it was self-financed, with each expedition funded by previous sales. No one kept track of items that were traded after 2012 or before. When intermediaries began promoting and selling their products online, the trend gained momentum. Naturally, those who physically attended the fair at the Peasant Museum received all sorts of questions from customers who wanted to make an informed choice and buy a shirt. But their expectations were totally unrealistic. Those interested in selling were not always the ones who actually collected the pieces from the villages and even if they sometimes knew precisely where some items came from they did not want this information to become public. They imagined that some customers might be so determined that they would go and find the old textiles they wanted themselves, leaving them without the object of their business.

Another factor contributing to the general confusion at the fair was the fact that sellers used to rotate between themselves items that sold harder. Not everyone who purchased it intended to sport an accurate and complete costume indicative of a certain area. A loose regional blend would suffice. Some were not patient enough to wait for the perfect parts, and plenty merely opted for outfit components to amalgamate into city attire. I am uncertain who can determine whether this has been more beneficial or detrimental. Some fashion activists believe that this practice provides advantages and falls under Recycle & Upcycle[4]. Numerous old clothing item that were no longer desired were cleaned, repaired and returned into circulation. As far as I am concerned, of course I have traveled through villages, the first expedition was in the Republic of Moldova, more precisely in the Nisporeni district. In June 2012, with the help of designer Mihai Stamati I visited several villages to convince myself that there are no dowry chests and that there is no dowry. And indeed these trips were self-financed. I realise the importance that every museum can have a substantial research budget set aside for field research because of the need to create links with the communities being researched. In addition I think there are areas that have not been thoroughly explored. However, some of these localities might have a significant textile heritage.

Some of them are areas without a reputation as keepers of tradition. Far from urban centres or perhaps too close to be considered ethnographic potential, they have been thoroughly researched by harbour sellers and less so by museums. The cost and worth of the products being sold are often distinct. They are naturally affected by limited supply and high demand. In contrast, historical value is separate. In some cases, antique garments with indigo silk embroidery and complex functional stitches were not put up for sale due to slight damages or tears. Thus, I initially grew accustomed to searching through shirt heaps on pavements or in bags. Furthermore, I have been familiar with embroidery since childhood as my grandmother taught me to sew from the age of five. As a result, accessing any pattern came naturally to me. Although embroidery may have been fascinating to the public, it did not necessarily pique my personal interest. However, it did reinforce my belief that stitched symbols can communicate a message, which is why I named my project "Stitched Signs" from the very first start. I understood that the general public would be more quickly attracted to the shape and colour and on the other hand more comfortable in two dimensions. Instead of presenting interest the

principles of tailoring were more of a scare. Due to education and profession however in my eyes a shirt is actually a form of fabric architecture. And my subsequent specialisation in design has further defined me in my quest for and appreciation of optimisation. And in this respect traditional shirts, not only Romanian ones, offer valuable lessons.

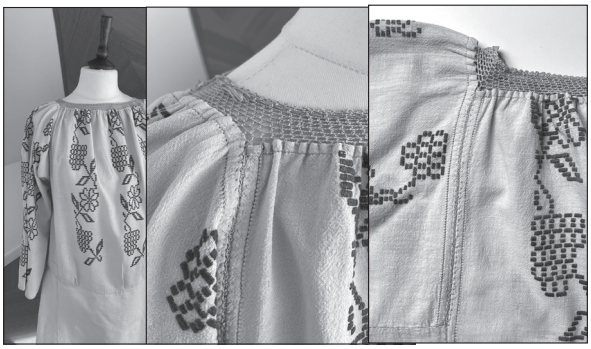
Over the years we have researched in the limited but varied field offered by the fairs variations and sub-variations of established and published sewing schemes. However, I had little optimism in discovering any other tailoring rules apart from the ones already set. Once again, I was under the impression that everything has already been thoroughly researched and documented regarding shirt-making techniques. Even the humble drawer can hold hidden treasures, overlooked because they seem too basic. When searching through cluttered drawers for keys, your wallet may be missed because your eyes are on a different mission. During the old research in Romania, the goal was most likely to enhance the display in our museums with beautiful and richly crafted pieces. However, these items were intended to showcase the national costume and highlight the unity of the Romanian people. Nowadays I opened the tradition drawer for a different purpose. My goal was to find and recycle ideas that were generated by communities, were validated by time and could serve sustainable fashion today. Yes I was primarily impressed by the tailoring schemes. If I bought old pieces I chose them according to this criteria: either with an already well established tailoring or a tailoring with something atypical. Regarding the shape, I noticed to see the ease with which the women used to manage composing their dresses with minimal effort. All sort of small pieces of fabric were inserted to provide looseness and comfort when wearing. However in mind stood the idea that in our area only two major tailoring principles were used: the shirt creased around the neck, with the upper part of the sleeves all gathered at the base of the neck and the tunic type tailoring shirt with many variations. Many times I have searched for ways to demonstrate how the two major principles of evolution have crossed over and influenced each other. At the end of 2018 in November I arrived at the fair, as usual. The hunt for merchandise started before I even stepped into the courtyard, on the pavement outside the museum featuring items that were not eligible to be sold directly in the yard. I admit the colour was the first "click" to get my attention. I immediately recognised the pattern of a Vlașca flower reproduced in the album of Mrs Maria ei Panaitescu printed before World War I. I somehow hoped it was a very old shirt although the material betrayed it as relatively recent. I pulled it out of the pile and the next detail that struck me was the crocheted lace fillet that wrinkled the shirt at the neck.

I had seen similar variations of wrinkling on Bucovina shirts which for various reasons received this addition later. This Vlașca pattern is also found in another shirt preserved in the Ethnographic Museum in Botoșani. As a result of education and the taste characteristic of girls' schools in the north-west of the country during the interwar period, this pattern was embroidered with large cross-stitches with very thin thread. I realised that the shirt I was seeing on the sidewalk was not just a different kind of wrinkled shirt nor was it another Botoșani shirt with a pattern taken from the mentioned album. My first impulse was that I really had to have this item and without thinking about it, without trying to negotiate I bought it for the equivalent of 20 euro. It wasn't until I laid it on a table afterwards that I realised I couldn't exactly classify it into either of the two established tailoring principles. The sleeves were indispensable for the main structure of the shirt, therefore to keep the piece on the body. At the same time not all of the top side of the sleeve is gathering over the shoulders but only about 1/4 to a third. Of course it is the middle quarter of the cloth area that sits over the shoulder. The rest of the sleeve connects with the neighbouring sides of the pieces of cloth representing the chest and back just like a tunic shirt.

Of course the shirt also has side additions of fabric and gussets, but neither play a vital role in the composition. The most important binder was disguised as lace. For a Carpathian shirt with a wrinkled neck, we have the whole top sleeves gathered together with the chest and back around the neck. On a tunic shirt the sleeves do not play a vital role in the structure of the shirt. The strip of cloth that goes over the head can cover the body even if the sleeves are removed. Unlike other shirts known to us this one is not very tight around the neck, but much looser, the low-cut neck moves towards the shoulders. And the pattern placed in the "croșnă" accentuated the generous line of the neckline. I have not been able to find a sketch of such a tailoring scheme, nor have I found a corresponding description in the established publications on our popular dress.

Perhaps this type of tailoring has also not received attention because most authors treat traditional dress more as a whole and rarely recorded all types of tailoring schemes in detail. Possibly also because the interest was not directly and concretely related to the practical side for reconstruction of the outfits. Since I was unsure where and how to showcase this peculiar type of shirt, I opted to hold off on making it known to the public. Over time, I was unable to come across any shirts like it. Plus, during the pandemic era, I didn't even attend the sporadic fairs even if they were held occasionally. In March 2022 we received an invitation to join the #tracks4crafts project[7]. And a few days after we accepted I arrived again at the Peasant Museum, on the day of the fair. In all this time I hadn't been digging for anything. I hadn't forgotten about the strange shirt but I told myself that it could be a simple exception, a brilliant idea of an anonymous author. I was amazed to discover a similar shirt to the one I bought before the pandemic. The difference was the embroidery placement, along the cloth sheets, running down the sleeves and across the chest and back, in lines named "rivers". The embroidery technique was also different, imitating a woven pattern, stitched by counting threads, on "flat-stitch". The ornament was monochrome.

As with the first shirt, the neck fastening was extended with crochet lace and laced at the top. I bought it immediately at a price of about €40. Discovering this shirt brought me great joy and confirmed that this style of tailoring was not a one-time occurrence or fortunate coincidence. Upon returning to the fair the following week, I encountered five more shirts of a similar design. I decided to purchase two of them, each with different compositions. One shirt featured individual patterns embroidered equidistantly on the fabric, while the other had embroidery framed in a square on the shoulder area. I have thus made sure that I can demonstrate that this cutting pattern has received all major types of embroidery composition used to us in the southern area of the country: individual patterns, "croșnă", rivers, decorative "altiță". This made me think that this kind of cutting pattern was commonly used in the community which preserved it and probably considered old-fashioned in tailoring. The latest two shirts I bought have a small collar to hold the loose folds in place. These shirts also have a small cut on the chest to make it easier to wear and they end with buttonholes.They are not decorated with colour or embroidery, but serve a simple purpose and are meant to be discrete.

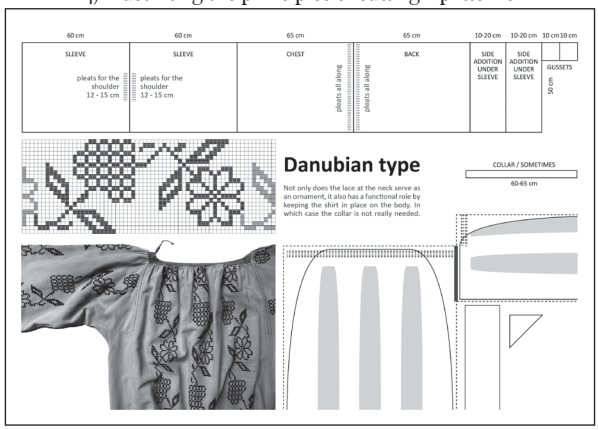


1) The old Romanian "Danubian" shirt
2) Detail of crochet lace with functional role
3) The differentiator joining the pieces of fabric on the shoulder

Naturally, the saleswoman did not agree to give me information on the origin of the shirts. The only reference I could get were other shirts she had for sale that displayed the same materials and the same techniques for embroidery shades of blue clearly everybody's choice. They were "whispering" - southeast of the country, along the Danube Valley. Because now I was ready to present it to the Semne Cusute community and because I wanted everyone to quickly understand that it was something special I called it the Danube shirt. I drew the tailoring scheme, I drew two of the patterns and designed a few others and filmed an overview presentation as well as tutorials for tailoring, connecting the pieces and embroidery.

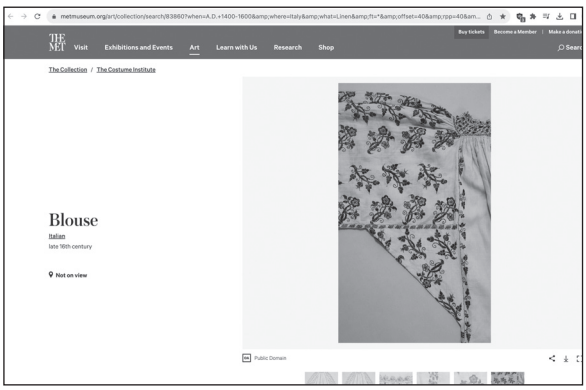
The shirt aroused interest and I also prepared DIY kits for sale in the Semne Cusute shop[6], thus optimising the costs. The shirt requires less than 4 linear meters of fabric. Even

4) Illustrating the principles of cutting - patterns




with generous gussets and side additions reaching to the underarm, even with an extra piece of cloth for trials, it looks like this shirt fits within 3 meters of cloth. This means a considerable saving of material compared to the Carpathian shirt. It even represents a saving compared to the tunic shirt because it save the extra cloth that sits on the shoulders. The garment was effortlessly assembled with no impediments or complexities establishing it as a versatile option, especially suited for beginners. The creators frequently wore it, and it complemented urban wardrobes seamlessly. I didn't do any other promotion; instead, I allowed it to succeed organically. It is not considered a festive or high-fashion shirt perhaps because no images of fancy outfits were circulated. And the embroidery was done with cotton thread or silk thread combined with modal. Thanks to the Tracks4Crafts project I have sought to explore in our community other types of needlework that on our shirts complete the embroidery by decorating the edges. Our future plans include delving further into other forms of bibiluri (from the Greek word, 'biblia') and seeking links between European cultures, as collaborative efforts with project partners are fitting.

I revisited the Benaki Museum in Athens[7] to explore needle art examples that I had previously photographed and surveyed without delving into details. Our search continued down the history and trade route, expanding into the "virtual terrain" and investigating the term "punto greco". Needling techniques arrived in Italy under this name, ultimately




5) The 16th-century Italian dress with the same cutting pattern

evolving into lace and spreading westward throughout Europe[8]. So I ended up with a late 16th century Italian shirt in the Metropolitan Museum New York directly on my computer screen[9]. I immediately realised that it was exactly the same type of tailoring used on our "Danube" shirts even 400 years later.

The next step in the search was to find more 16th century shirts of the same cut, preferably also from Italy. At least one "sister" of the tailor is at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London[10]. More distant "sisters" can be found as far away as Spain[11] in the late 18th century. The tailoring of the Italian shirt shares the same principle: a gathering of 1/4 to 1/3 of the top sleeve which contributes, together with the chest and back, to the structure of the shirt. However, the method of ensuring comfort and lightness varies. In comparison to our shirts, the old one has much larger gussets and lacks the side additions that were located from the underarm down. It is adorned with embroidered bouquets in vibrant purple silk, complemented by metallic thread detailing that underlines the embroidery. The metallic thread is secured to the linen fabric with traditional stitches, following the techniques of Oriental craftsmanship still practised today in Jaipur, India and Bukhara, Uzbekistan - both of which I was privileged to witness firsthand. At the top, the neck embellishment was created using archaic techniques that signify the progression from quite simple ornamentation to lace, which has been created independently of the fabric. But most importantly, this lace is not just a simple decoration, it has a structural and functional role, holding together the whole shirt.[12] I realised that this type of shirt, with this unique loose cut in the neck area, is the best example of fusion between southern and south-eastern European cultures.

We developed a prototype for the Tracks4Crafts project which we named the Italian Danubian, the next must-have for our contribution[13]. I opted for 100% linen cloth with a density of 18 threads per centimetre and created the embroidery from an outline initially drawn on paper and then transferred onto the canvas by means of a soluble pencil. I already had the purple silk available.

Our colleague Alina Panaite took over the making of the neck and sleeve laces and other colleagues helped me with the metallic thread fitting and all the other finishing details, so I could include photos of the result in this presentation. So, I am grateful to them all: Sorina Andreescu, Carmen Necula, Aura Bostan, Cristina Ionescu, Roxana Constantinescu, Maria Vișan, Alina Tănasă and Gabriela Ene. The shirt will then be presented in Florence for the second meeting of the T4C project. Metaphorically speaking, the "Italian Danube" will return home to northern Italy. However, we have not been able to determine its origin despite several late Renaissance paintings depicting important figures wearing similar shirts. History can provide further information about the connections established between the Genoese and Venetian merchants around the Black Sea and the Danube and the influence they had on the traditional Romanian costume. The republics of Genoa and Venice were constant



6) Our 21st century replica, an "Italian-Danubian" shirt

presences on the Black Sea, at the mouths of the Danube and along the Danube river. Through trade, particularly in luxury goods, they influenced the fashion of the royal and noble courts' elite. The cities had an impact on our history, economy and politics, notably through the rivalries and alliances between them and other major powers in the region. Perhaps it is important to mention that this cutting pattern also has developments and variations, but these may be the subject of another presentation. An additional piece of cloth is added to fit on the shoulders and is meant to join the chest to the back, relieving the sleeves of this burden. From this moment, the variation can also become part of the tunic tailoring category. I have purchased two such shirts in the past, also from fairs held at the Peasant Museum, which has remained for me the only "field" at hand.

The Italian Danube shirt is a bittersweet example of an almost lost relic. On the positive side, this shirt, along with its counterparts, has been entrusted now to capable hands who will research, repair, and possibly reintroduce it to the world. On the negative side, its history remains fragmented. I can't imagine how future generations will judge us if we don't take advantage of the present to record it along with the fragments of the past that are still preserved in our memories.

No matter how many selfies with recent traditional shirts are uploaded to the internet, they hold little value without accompanying on-location research. Who will take the lead in studying current events and the consequences of our actions? Possibly, involving dedicated amateurs in this research alongside experts would be advantageous. While they may lack knowledge of methodology and experience, they are able to contribute through their fresh approach.

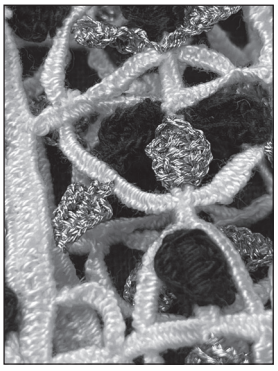
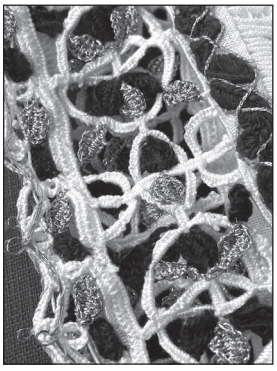
## Notes

1. Hedvig-Maria Formagiu, *Portul popular din România* (București: Muzeul de Artă Populară, 1974).
2. The community is coagulated around our website: https://semnecusute.ro.
3. The Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, Switzerland lists the following similar entries for folk shirts from Wallachia and Moldavia: https://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/sql/musinfo_public.php?id=019252. https://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/sql/musinfo_public.php?id=006655.
4. Emily Farra, "2020 Was a Big Year for Old Clothes: How Vintage, Secondhand, and Upcycling Took Off," *Vogue*, November 21, 2020. https://www.vogue.com/article/the-year-in-secondhand-vintage-upcycling-sustainable-fashion.
5. This project interested in future-oriented heritage approach in Europe is available here: https://tracks4crafts.eu/
6. Example of DIY kit: https://semnecusute.ro/product-category/broderie/uncategorized/
7. Visitable here: https://www.benaki.org/
8. Tatiana Ioannou-Yannara, *Greek Threadwork Lace* (Athens: Melissa Publishing House, 1989), 13-17, 117,122.
9. The 16th-century Italian bluse in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York can be seen here: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/83860.
10. Similar 16th-century exhibit in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O356595/shift-unknown/image-robe-unknown/.
11. Another similar 16th-century exhibit in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O92183/blouse-unknown/childs-blouse-blouse-unknown/.
12. Another similar 16th-century exhibit in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O356595/shift-unknown/image-robe-unknown/.
13. Facebook, "SEMNE CUSUTE in actiune," public group. https://www.facebook.com/groups/semnecusute/permalink/2209559032576852/.s

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Ioannou-Yannara, Tatiana. *Greek Threadwork Lace*. Athens: Melissa Publishing House, 1989.



7) Embroidery detail - pomegranate, symbol of fertility
8) Embroidery detail - the flowers
9) Reproducing the ancient lace technique
10) Detail of the lace embellished with silk and metallic thread