

TAMING THREADS

At no time in the history of embroidery have we been tempted with such a vast array of colors, textures and types of threads to work with. Although we still rely to a great extent on natural fibers such as wool, cotton, linen and silk to form the major part of our embroideries, synthetic threads with exotic names such as Very Velvet, Marlitt, Rachelette, Fyre Works, and Snow are just some of the threads that have been developed to highlight and accent our work. Natural fibers have also undergone a metamorphosis. They have been dyed, overdyed, thickened, thinned and blended to create a new and exciting range of colors and textures.

Many of the threads we work with are multi-stranded. For example, a single thread of Soie d'Alger silk is made up of seven strands, Silk Mori has six strands and Waterlilies has twelve. No matter how many strands a single thread contains, to obtain the best results in working, all strands should be separated prior to working and many of us use a laying tool while working to keep the individual strands smooth, separated and looking their best.

Some threads are easier to work with than others. The type of thread, the hardness or softness of the twist, the way in which they are packaged, and even the humidity in the air can influence the way in which a thread handles. For example, I live on the Prairies where the winters are cold and the lack of humidity makes the air very dry. Working with fine thread such as Marlitt or Silk Serica can be difficult. The individual strands tend to lose their moisture and pick up the static electricity, making them appear unmanageable as they tend to fly off in every direction.

A bit of steam works wonders to tame difficult threads. By adding moisture, fine threads do not separate and “fly away” but remain smooth and easy to manage. Steam can also relax a tight twist, making the individual strands appear thicker and softer, allowing for better coverage.

EQUIPMENT

I use a small, electric steam kettle for blocking but any type of kettle that delivers a steady stream of steam will work. Avoid whistling kettles as the steam tends to be hotter and the steam area more concentrated. Also avoid kettles that will shut off automatically once the water has reached the boiling point. This safety feature means that you may have to reset several times to complete a large piece. My kettle is a relatively inexpensive one, costing around \$10.00 at

WalMart. It also has a safety feature, but rather than shutting off when the boiling point is reached, this one shuts off when the water boils down to the heating element, allowing plenty of time to steam a fair number of working lengths.

PREPARATION

Taming threads is a fairly simple process. First, determine the number of working strands that you need for the stitch or working area. For example, the stitch pattern you are using requires three strands of Silk Mori for coverage on Congress Cloth. A single thread of Silk Mori contains six strands, giving you two working lengths from a single thread.

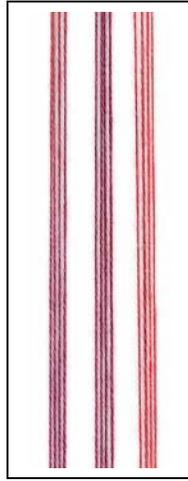
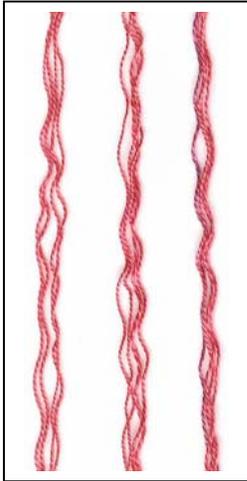
Prepare a number of working lengths at once, knotting each length at one end. It is always a good idea to test for colorfastness in the threads as well as the reaction of the thread to the moisture and heat produced by the steam. Natural fibers take process well, but some synthetics may not. Always test a small sample first.

TAMING WITH STEAM



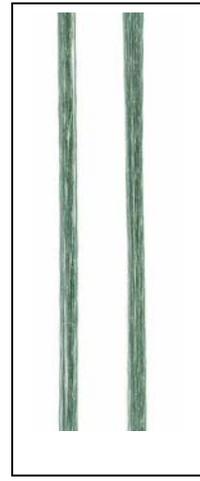
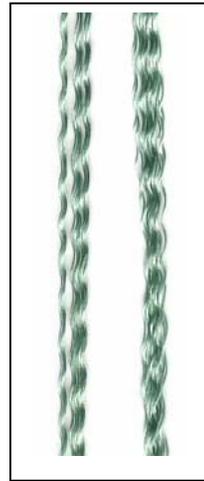
The process is a simple one and takes less than a minute. Once the threads have been knotted into working lengths, bring the kettle to a full boil. Work with two or three working lengths together, holding the thread at both ends and, while stretching slightly, run the thread over the spout of the kettle, allowing the steam to fully penetrate the thread. Draw the length of thread over the spout, snapping the thread slightly once or twice to help relax the twist or the crimp from carded threads.

As the steam penetrates the fibers, you will see the twist immediately begin to relax and the individual strands appear fuller, smoother, and straighter. Try not to over steam, allowing the threads to become overly damp or wet. If they do become wet, give the lengths a light shake and lay flat to dry.



In the image on the left, a single thread of Waterlilies Overdye Silk was separated into three working lengths of 4 strands each. Before steaming, the working threads are wavy and have a slightly hard or tight twist. The

After steaming, the individual strands are smooth, straight and the twist has relaxed as shown in the image on the right.



In the image on the right, two single threads of Silk Serica, a 3-ply twisted silk, were separated into working threads, each containing three strands or “bundles” of filament silk. When untwisted, the filament silk is extremely wavy and had to be frequently dampened with water while working to relax the waves.

After steaming, the individual filaments have completely relaxed and appear like flat silk. An advantage to steaming Silk Serica is that, once steamed, the threads will stay relaxed and will not revert back to the waved appearance. Steam all your working lengths at once, then wind on a felt roll until needed.



A tassel made from embroidery cotton that was wound on a cardboard card. Steaming has not only removed the crimp from having been wound around the card, but has also “plumped” the threads, making the tassel appear fuller.

Please use the email link if you have any questions or comments on steaming threads.