

German Brick Stitch

Colorful Geometric Embroidery from Lower Saxony

Decorative embroidery pieces made during the 13th through 15th centuries in the Lower Saxony region of modern Germany exhibit a unique style: colorful geometric patterns worked in offset counted satin stitch.



"Embroidered Hanging" (detail). Metropolitan Museum of Art. #69.106.



"Bag". Victoria and Albert Museum. #8699-1863.

Surviving examples of this style of embroidery fall into two categories:

- Vestments, altar frontals, and other religious decorations featuring scenes from the Old or New Testament¹. These scenes contain multiple geometric patterns, one each per item of clothing or furnishing in the scene.
- Pouches featuring a single all-over geometric design. These pouches may have been used to hold holy relics or for more mundane needs like carrying coins².

The universality of these geometric designs in Lower Saxon embroidery is likely because the patterns were straightforward to execute. In medieval Germany, large tapestries were less common than embroidery due to the training and equipment required³. Large embroidered pieces in this geometric style could be completed by inexperienced embroiderers, such as groups of young women in convents. In contrast, the highly naturalistic styles found in contemporary English and French embroidery were stitched by professional embroiderers⁴.

Key components of German Brick Stitch Embroidery are:

- Repeated geometric design fills available space, covering the ground fabric
- Two to four vivid, contrasting colors
- Offset stitches produce a brick-like appearance
- Counted thread technique to ensure regularity
- Pattern worked along the grain of the fabric

¹ Mayer, 69.

² Fernández Álvarez, 25; Kelly.

³ Hamburger, 37.

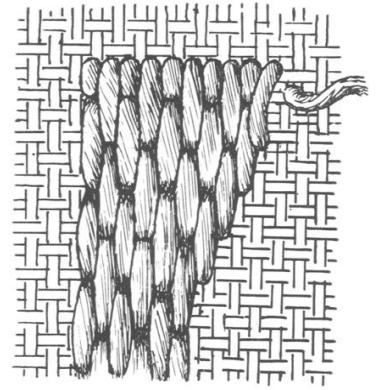
⁴ Young, 263.

Stitch Technique

Lower Saxon geometric embroiders stitched in low-twist silk and/or linen thread on an evenweave linen ground fabric.

The stitches are in the direction of the fabric's weave over two, four, or six threads⁵. Four threads is the most common stitch length, but some designs require two- and six-thread stitches to form the points of diamonds or join diagonal lines.

Except at the edges of the design, the beginning of each stitch is offset from its neighbor producing a brick-like appearance and giving the style the modern name of "brick stitch." The brick-like appearance is especially striking in patterns that use stitches of all the same length⁶.



Brick stitch diagram from "Needlework by Nuns."

Tips & Tricks

Materials

- Silk embroidery floss and linen evenweave fabric can be expensive. DMC cotton embroidery floss and 28 count cotton evenweave fabric are readily available, lower cost alternatives.
- The threads should cover the ground fabric. With DMC floss and 28 count fabric, three strands is sufficient, but six strands creates a fuller look.

Tools

- Stiff cloth can be worked without an embroidery hoop or frame, but getting even stitch tension may be challenging. When using a hoop or frame, don't stretch the fabric too tightly.
- I prefer tapestry needles since I find their blunted tips pass between threads rather than piercing them.

Process

- You can count threads visually, by feeling them with your needle, or both.
- Starting in the middle of a piece allows you to get a feel for the pattern before needing to modify it to have a horizontal top or bottom edge.
- Stitching the framework first reduces the need to count large gaps between motifs and allows you to spot counting errors earlier. After the framework is done, fill in the remaining colors based on their proximity to the frame.



⁵ Mitchell, 8.

⁶ Young, 269.

Making a Pouch

- You can make one embroidered piece, fold it horizontally or vertically, and stitch the edges together to make a pouch.
- Lining the pouch will prevent the back sides of your stitches from being snagged.
- Drawstrings on most extant pouches go directly through the embroidery and lining. To form an eyelet, I work open a hole with an awl and then wrap the edges of the hole with matching embroidery floss to reinforce it.
- Tassels are decorative and protect pouch corners.



Extant Embroidery Used for Redacted Patterns

- [A] “Bag.” Victoria and Albert Museum. #8699-1863. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O144713/bag-unknown/>
- [B] “Curtain.” St. Marienberg Cloister, Helmstedt.
- [C] “Curtain depicting the life of Saint Margaret of Antioch.” Cathedral Museum Hildesheim. #L-2012-13.
- [D] “Embroidered Hanging.” Metropolitan Museum of Art. #69.106. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468750>
- [E] “The Hildesheim Cope.” Victoria and Albert Museum. #17-1873. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O113500/the-hildesheim-cope-cope-unknown/>
- [F] “Part of an Antependium (Depicting The Last Supper).” Art Institute of Chicago. #1907.765. <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/62695>

References

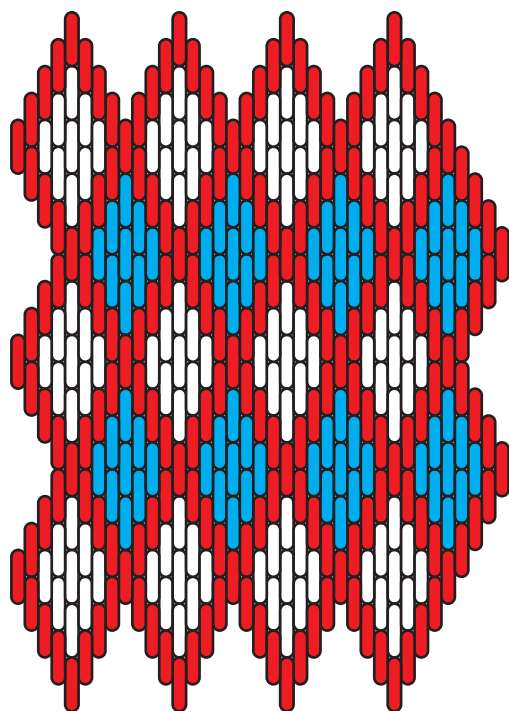
- Brandt, Michael, Claudia Hohl, and Gerhard Lutz. *Cathedral Museum Hildesheim*. Regensburg : Schnell + Steiner, 2015.
- Fernández Álvarez, Mercè. “Reliquary bags, purses, and pouches.” *Datatèxtil*, no 30 (2014): 23-29.
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- Kroos, Renate. *Niedersächsische Bildstickereien Des Mittelalters*. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaften, 1970.
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- Mitchell, Timothy. “A Stitch Out of Time: 14th and 15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery.” *The Compleat Anachronist*, no. 86 (1996). (Also available online at <http://wymarc.com/asoot/asoot.php>)
- Young, Bonnie. “Needlework by Nuns: A Medieval Religious Embroidery.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 28, no. 6 (1970): 263-77.

Additional Sources for Redacted Patterns

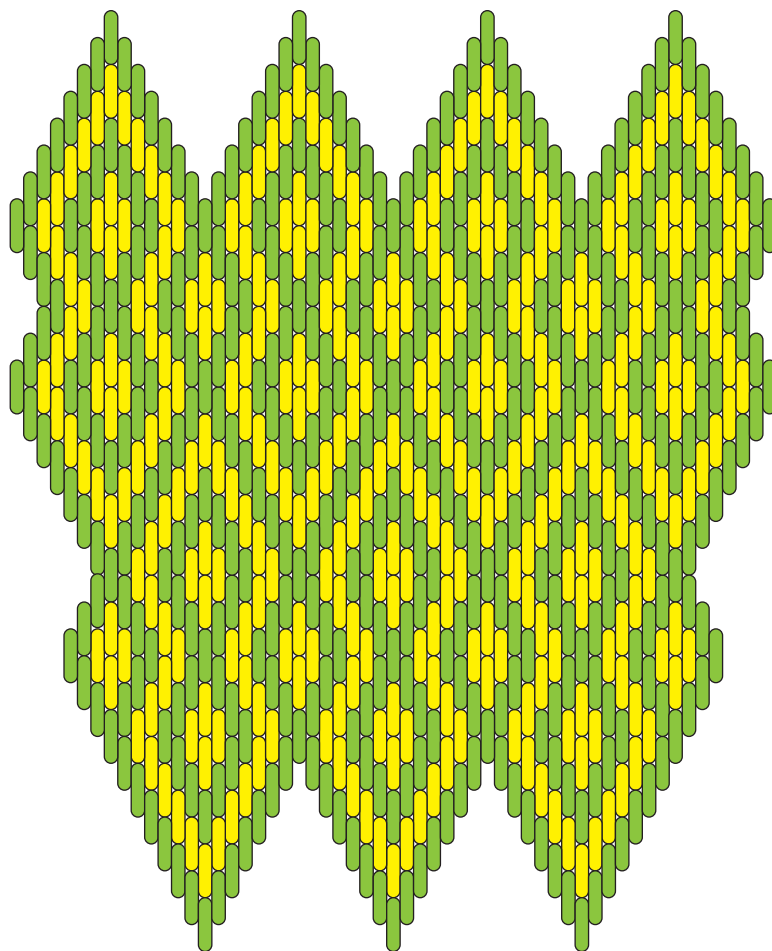
<http://wymarc.com/index.php/patterns>

<http://medievalartcraft.blogspot.com/search/label/pattern>

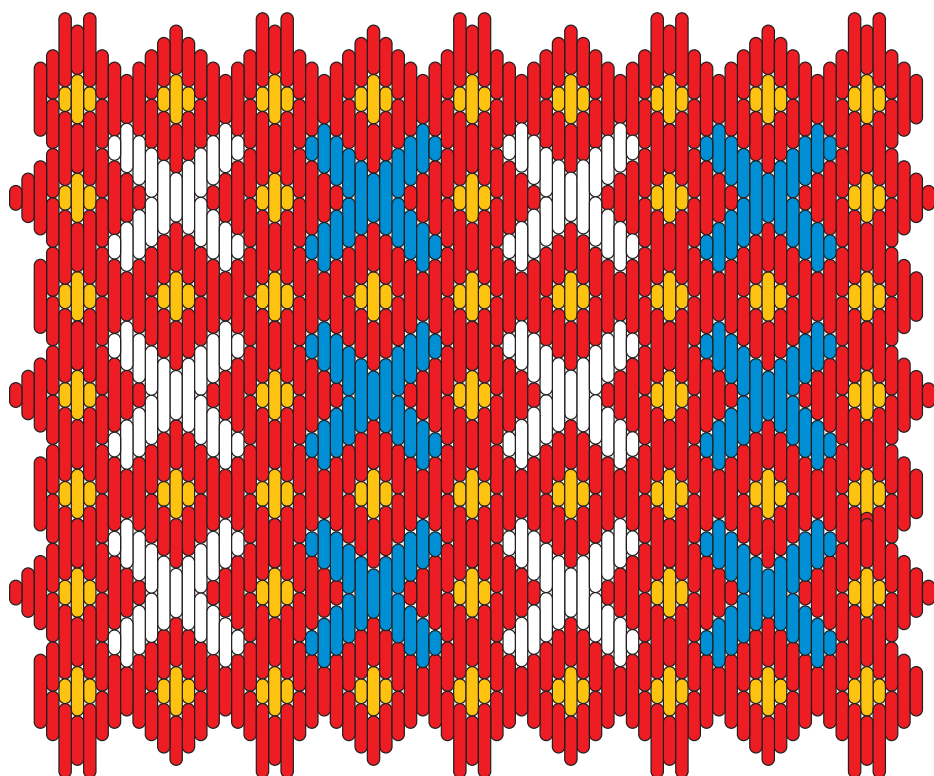
Patterns from Extant Embroidery



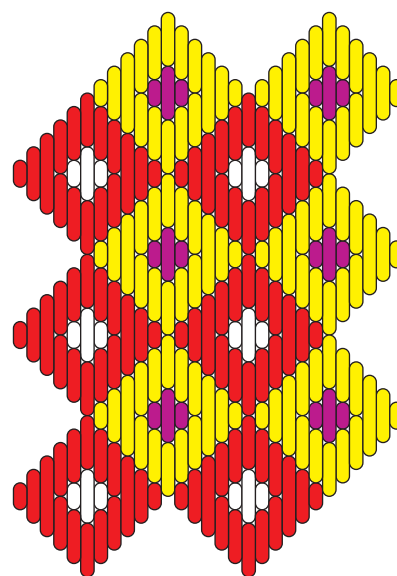
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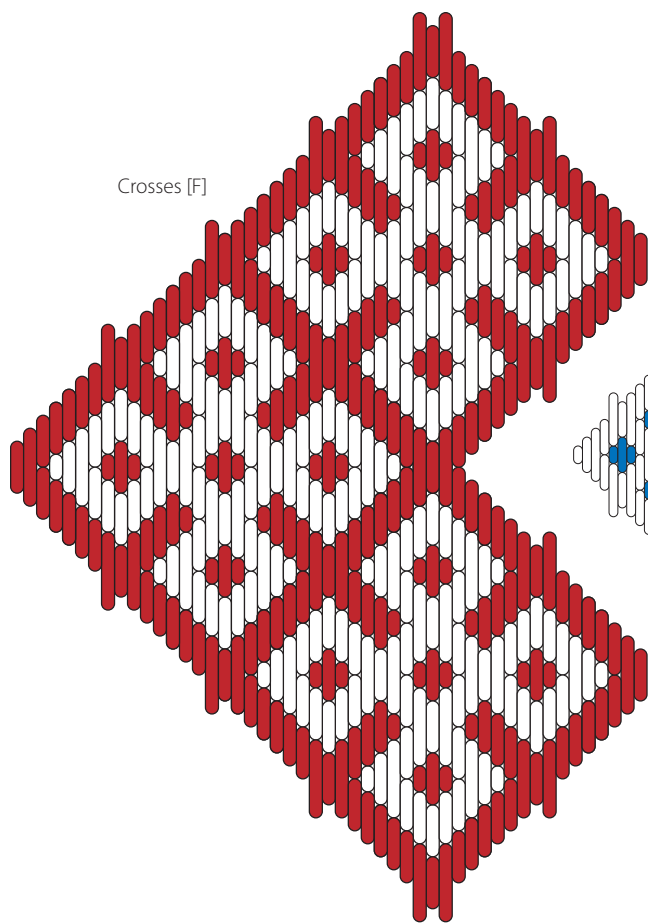
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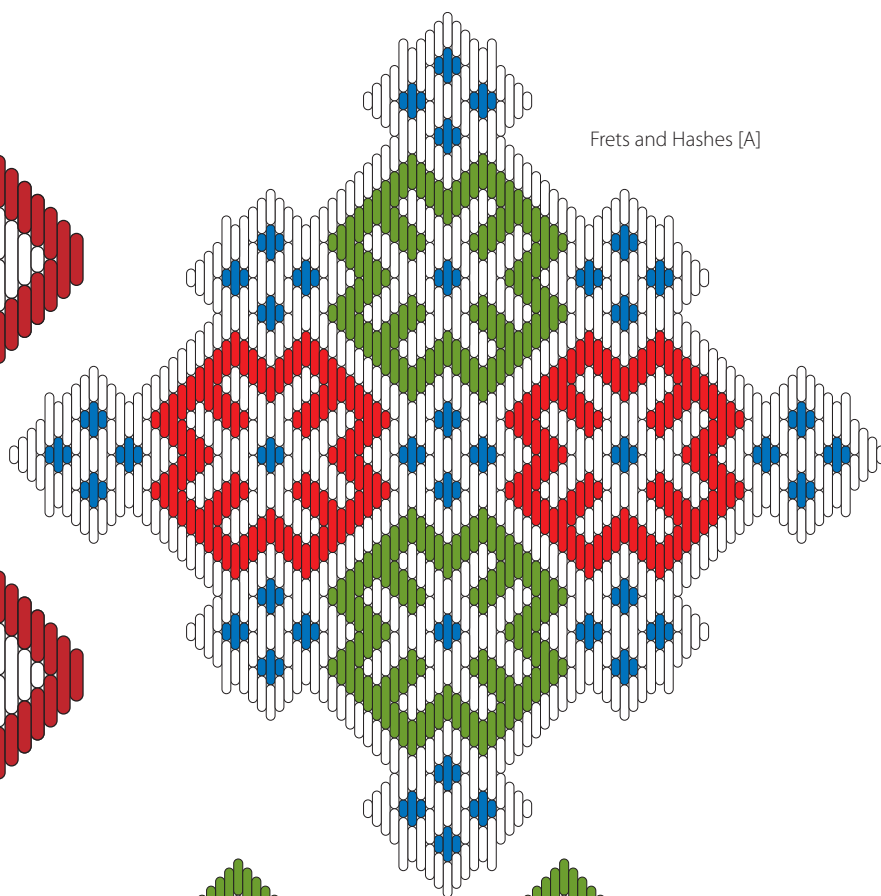
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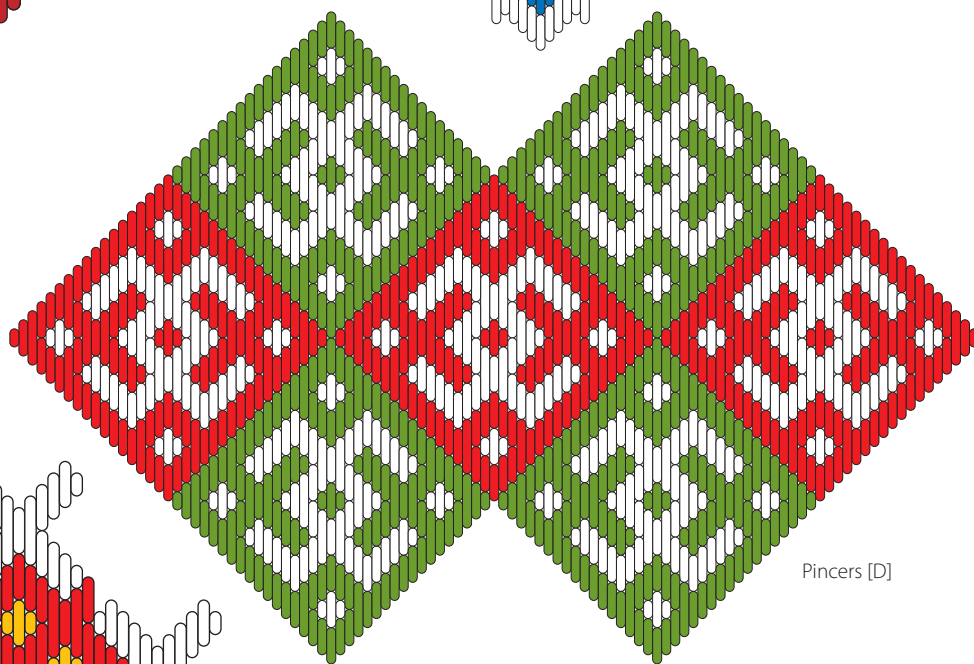
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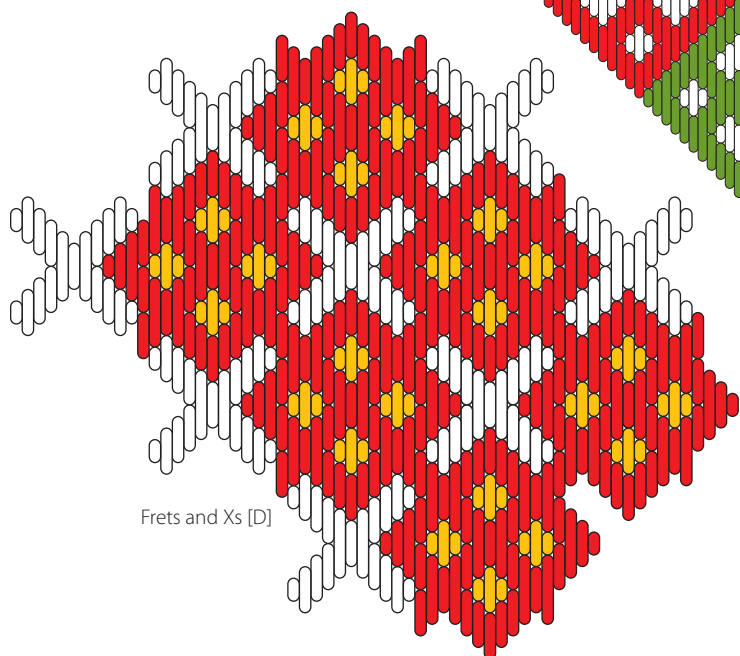
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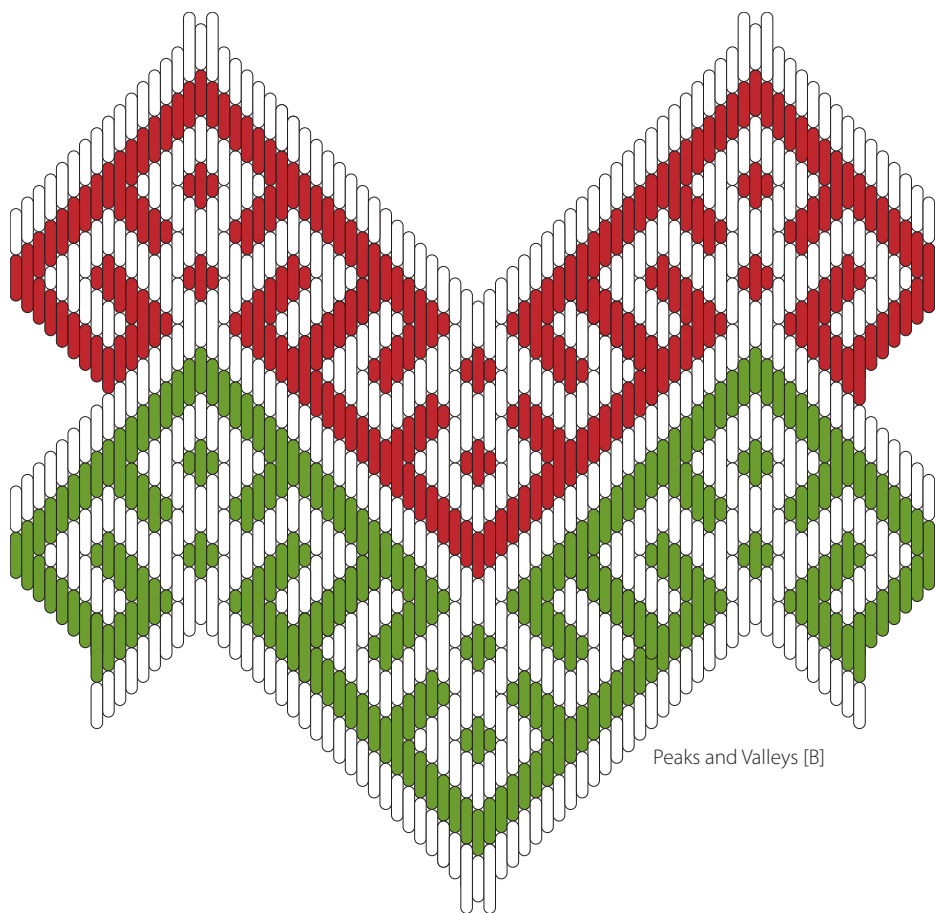
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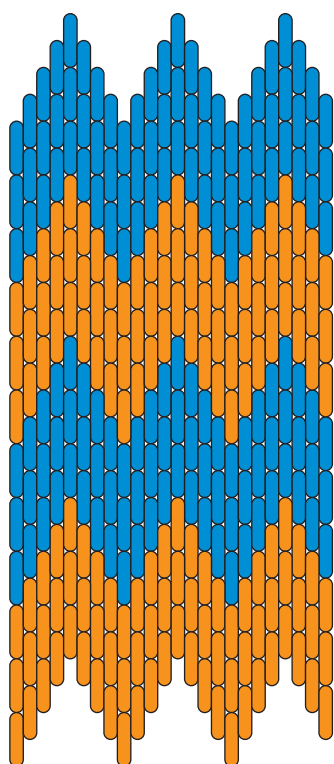
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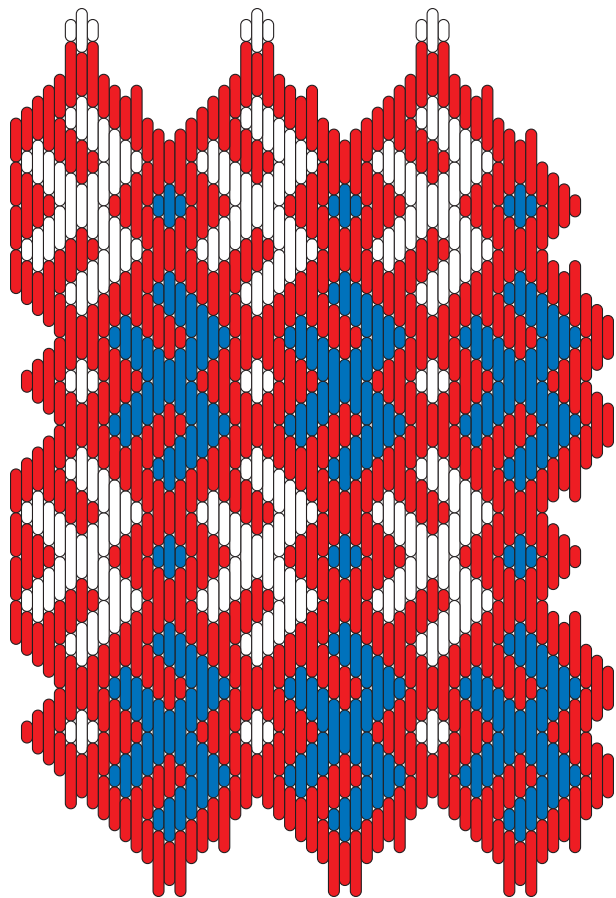
Frets and Xs [D]



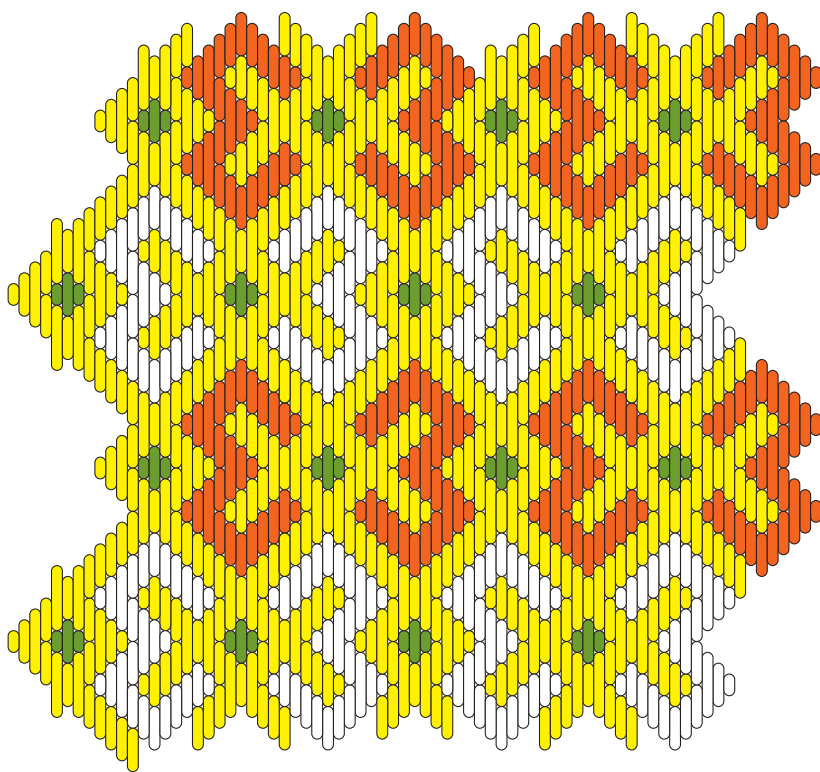
Peaks and Valleys [B]



ZigZags [E]



Flying Birds [D]



Threes [C]