

# The Art of Thread Sketching

## FREE THREAD DRAWING AND THREAD PAINTING TECHNIQUES



**1** THREAD SKETCHING 101:  
FOCUS ON TEXTURE  
SUSAN BRUBAKER KNAPP

**2** NOSTALGIA SERIES: STITCHED SKETCHES  
AND EPHEMERA IN ART QUILTS  
JANE LAFAZIO

**3** SKETCHBOOK QUILTS  
JJ FOLEY

**4** THREAD SKETCHING ON STABILIZER  
KAREN FRICKE

**5** THREAD PAINTING: FROM PHOTO  
TO STITCHED ARTWORK  
CAROL WATKINS

The sewing needle is the fiber artist's pencil: you're simply drawing with thread. When you hand stitch, you can guide the direction of the thread to make a design. And when you lower the feed dogs on your sewing machine, you can stitch in any direction, too.



In *The Art of Thread Sketching: Free Thread Drawing and Thread Painting Techniques*, five quilt artists show you how to turn machine stitching into drawings with thread. Depending on the style and density of the stitching, thread sketching and thread painting can stand on its own or be combined with other techniques to give your quilt motifs dimension and life.

Art quilt expert Susan Brubaker Knapp shows how drawing with thread can make your quilt designs look positively touchable in "Thread Sketching 101 Focus on Texture." Susan also gives advice on needle and thread basics for successful thread art.

In "Nostalgia Series: Stitched Sketches and Ephemera in Art Quilts," Jane LaFazio shows how to interpret drawings with threadwork, ephemera, fabric scraps, and mixed-media techniques to create lovely fabric art.

In "Thread Sketching on Stabilizer," fiber artist Karen Fricke shows you step-by-step how a heavy-duty stabilizer can make thread sketching easier. You can print your design right onto it, then stitch your thread sketches over the image.

In her article "Sketchbook Quilts," JJ Foley demonstrates two techniques for turning sketches into stitched designs: digital and direct draw. Her easy thread sketching techniques will inspire you to draw more—and stitch more!

Carol Watkins' thread-painting tutorial will show you how to turn a photograph into thread art with machine stitching. She describes her technique in "Thread Painting: From Photo to Stitched Artwork," and also offers tips on choosing machine embroidery thread. With *The Art of Thread Sketching: Free Thread Drawing and Thread Painting Techniques*, you will look at imagery, machine stitching, and your fiber art in a whole new way.

Warmly,

VIVIKA HANSEN DENEGRE  
Editor

## Quilting Arts

MAGAZINE\*

### THE ART OF THREAD SKETCHING

#### FREE THREAD DRAWING AND THREAD PAINTING TECHNIQUES

EDITOR Vivika Hansen DeNegre

ONLINE EDITOR Cate Coulacos Prato

#### CREATIVE SERVICES

DIVISION ART DIRECTOR Larissa Davis

PHOTOGRAPHERS Larry Stein

Projects and information are for inspiration and personal use only. Interweave Press LLC is not responsible for any liability arising from errors, omissions, or mistakes contained in this eBook, and readers should proceed cautiously, especially with respect to technical information. Interweave grants permission to photocopy any patterns published in this issue for personal use only.

## Take Quilting Daily on the go

with the FREE Mobile app for  
your iPhone or iPod Touch.

A swipe of your finger  
gives you access to:

- The latest posts, free patterns, and eBooks
- Over 100 how-to videos
- Tips and techniques from industry leading experts

Get your FREE  
Quilting Daily app at  
[www.QuiltingDaily.com/app](http://www.QuiltingDaily.com/app)

\*Apple, iPad, iPhone, iPod touch, and iTunes are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. App Store is a service mark of Apple Inc. Non-US residents: if the above link does not work for you, feel free to browse our selection of Apps from within the Apple App Store itself by searching for "Interweave".





ADAPTED FROM  
QUILTING ARTS MAGAZINE  
JUNE/JULY 2010

## THREAD SKETCHING 101, LESSON THREE:

# FOCUS ON **texture**

BY SUSAN BRUBAKER KNAPP



“Wool Yarn” (detail opposite) • 12" × 12" • This very close-up image of yarn balls invites viewers to examine the tiny twists in each strand of yarn.



Do you ever wonder why people don't reach out and touch paintings, while they can't seem to keep their hands off a piece of fiber art? One reason is texture. Fiber art invites touch.

Texture—the way a surface feels, or looks like it feels—is a primary element of all art, but it is especially important, as well as easy to manipulate, in fiber art. Fiber artists may not realize how much they are naturally drawn to texture, but it is one of the most important characteristics of our work. Here are some thoughts on how to use texture to your advantage when thread sketching.

## GET SPECIFIC

Think about texture in subtle shades of detail. Just as artists don't think “green,” but instead, “emerald, chartreuse, seafoam, or mint,” they also consider the intimate nature of an object's texture in very specific terms.

A rough object can be more accurately described as sandy, prickly, gritty, cracked, bumpy, coarse, corrugated, wrinkled, rusty, puckery, leathery, papery, spiky, or sharp. A soft object can be furry, fluffy, velvety, or puffy. A wet object can be sticky, gooey, slimy, slippery, slick, shiny, or spongy.

Being precise and specific in the words you choose to describe textures can help you think about them in a different way and better create them in your art.



## CONSIDER THE CONNOTATIONS

Texture can convey strong emotions and ideas. Without consciously knowing it, we all have powerful emotional connections with textures.

You might feel safe and comforted when you remember the feel of the fuzzy baby blanket with the satin hem that you cuddled with as a child, or uncomfortable and anxious when you recall the scratchy wool of the kilt you wore as your school uniform. You might recall the grain of the dupioni silk in your wedding dress and feel a sense of elegance and excitement. Each of these very specific textures conjures up strong emotional and sensory memories that can be used to an advantage in your work.

## HOW TO CREATE TEXTURE

### THINK ABOUT FABRIC

Texture is also influenced by the kind of fabric you start with. A base of smooth, fine cotton or silk feels—and looks—very different from a coarse cotton or linen, even when much of it is covered with thread.

### CHOOSE THREADS WISELY

The kind of thread you use makes a difference, too. Heavier weights of thread add more texture while fine

threads add less. Shiny threads like rayons and silks reflect light and can change texture dramatically. You might choose a fine silk to thread sketch the glass in a window, for example. The color shifts in variegated thread can also change perceived texture.

### PAINT WITH THREAD

Think of thread as you would paint: you can make dots, smooth strokes, or long, sinuous curves. Like paint, you can apply thread sparingly or very heavily.

Going over an area with several layers of thread can create wonderful texture, but you need to make sure your surface is sufficiently stabilized to support these layers without puckering. (See “Lesson 2: Focus on Line” in the April/May issue for tips on stabilizing your work.) Conversely, a very smooth texture will generally require less thread sketching.

### VARY STITCH LINES

When aiming for realism in your thread sketching, closely examine the quality of the texture in your subject. For example, grass can be scrubby and coarse, long and tufted, or cropped and sharp. Each of these types would require a different kind of stitching. For long blades, you would choose long, smooth, fairly straight lines. For scrubby grass, you would make short, angular lines.

In “Maximum Cat Nap,” some of the cat's fur is short and close to the pelt, while some is longer and shaggier, or coarser. The individual hairs go in different directions, forming tiny cowlicks in some places. Attention to these details is essential for realism.



## BREAK THE RULES

The holes left by your sewing machine needle create great texture (especially in pieces with fused layers or painted surfaces), as does adjusting the machine's tension so that some of the bobbin thread comes up to the top. Unlike machine quilting, where the goal is stitches of a consistent length, try making long stitches in some places and short stitches in others to achieve different textures.

## PAY ATTENTION TO SCALE

Scale also makes a difference. For instance, if grass is far away, it would have less distinct texture than if it were close. Imagine lying on your

belly in a field of grass and taking a macro shot of the blades right in front of you. Now imagine standing up in a field of grass and taking a picture of it from there. The lines of thread you would use to convey the texture would be very different from each other.

Nearby objects are also often portrayed larger, leaving space for more detailed thread work. In “Wool Yarn,” the up-close look at balls of wool yarn allows detailed examination of how each strand of yarn was twisted as it was spun. If the balls of yarn were farther away and smaller, it would be impossible to achieve this level of detail with thread sketching.

## NEEDLE & THREAD *basics*

In most of my thread sketching, I use a variety of cotton threads with weights in the light-to-middle range. Very lightweight threads (#50- or #60-weight) do not cause too much thread buildup if you go over an area several times. If you do not hoop your work, and only use one layer of stabilizer, you will find that these lighter-weight threads work great and don't cause a lot of draw-up. When I want heavier thread lines, I use #40-weight cottons. If you crave sheen and want to use a shinier thread, I recommend polyester over rayon because it is stronger.

Needles are identified by European sizes (60–120) and American sizes (8–19). Higher numbers mean that the needle is bigger in diameter, as measured just above the eye. Most needles are labeled with both size systems: 60/8, 70/10, 80/12, 90/14, etc.

The type of point (sharp, slightly rounded, or ball) affects how the needle penetrates

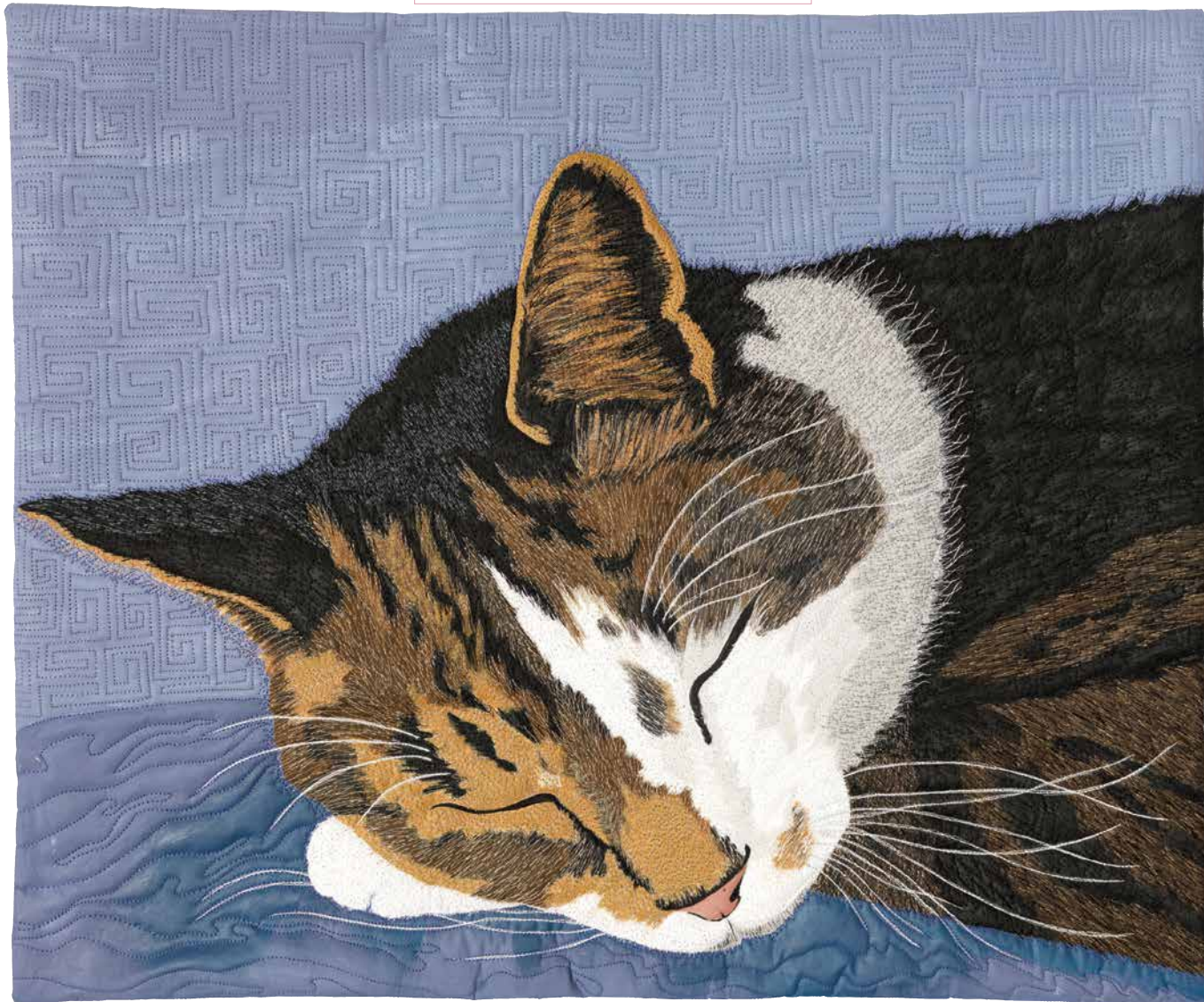
the quilt, and the needle size and eye size affect the tension on the top thread.

Many variables affect needle choice when thread sketching, including fabric type and weight, stabilizer, thread type and weight, and whether you are stitching through other materials such as paint, foil, or Angelina® Fibers.

For pieces without a lot of stiff layers, and when I'm using a #50- or #60-weight thread, I often use a universal 80/12 needle because it leaves only small holes in the fabric. For stiffer fabrics, more layers, or heavier threads, a 90/14 topstitching needle works well.

Topstitching needles have longer eyes, making them easier to thread, and also reducing thread shredding and breakage. Microtex needles have very sharp points, which help them pierce stiffer, heavier cottons (like batiks) beautifully, and stitch more easily through other art quilt materials.





*“Maximum Cat Nap” (detail opposite) • 18½" × 22" • Realistic fur textures were created by paying close attention to the direction and coarseness of the different kinds of cat fur. The main colors of the cat were first painted with acrylic textile paint on white fabric, and then thread sketching was used to create the illusion of fur.*

## CONSIDER HOW YOU WILL QUILT

Remember that after you thread sketch a piece, you will be quilting it. The thread sketching adds a layer of texture that is more on the surface or two-dimensional. The quilting adds hills and valleys, making the surface more three-dimensional.

When you quilt a thread-sketched surface, heavy quilting in one area will

make it physically recede. Make sure this is the effect you desire. It is best to quilt more heavily in areas that you want to push back. Thread sketching is perfect for areas that need a lot of texture but also need to come forward. For example, if you were thread sketching a lily that had long stamens with pollen on them, you could add that texture with thread, and then quilt more heavily around the stamens—and not on top of them—to make them appear to come forward.

## TEXTURE EXERCISES

Improve your skills for using thread sketching to convey texture by working on these exercises:

- Go through your house and collect textures by making rubbings. Place a piece of paper on top of the textured surface and rub a crayon or soft pencil in broad strokes on top. Find as many textures as you



can, then choose one to reproduce in thread.

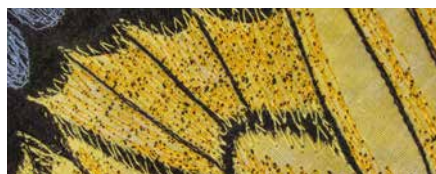
- Look around and write down the objects you see (for instance: carpet, basket, dog). Next to each object, write down a word that describes its texture (nubby, woven, furry). Make a small sketch, about two inches square, to show how you might interpret each one using thread on fabric. Here are some textures to try: carpet, rock, fabric, hair, brick, stone, rust, parched earth, sand ripples, foam, bubbles, wrinkles, shingles, moss, and waves.
- Spend a day consciously thinking about the textures you see and feel around you. Describe each texture using a word or words as complex as you can find. For example, you might look at your dog and think “furry.” Touch the dog, and really think about what you are feeling. More words might come, such as “coarse, bristly, shiny” or “soft, light, fluffy.” ♦

[bluemoonriver.com](http://bluemoonriver.com)



*Top: Detail from “Autumn’s Bounty”  
Heavy threadwork in several directions adds to the bumpiness of these mini pumpkins. To achieve more three-dimensional texture, extra batting was added behind some of the pumpkins before quilting.*

*Right: Detail from “Harbinger’s Hope”  
The use of variegated thread, and the fact that the lines of stitching run in a different direction from the lines on the fabric beneath them, create a realistic texture on this three-dimensional feather.*



*Left: Detail from “Eastern Tiger Swallowtail” • Under close inspection, butterfly wings have scales, just like fish. To add texture that mimics this phenomenon, the sewing machine tension was adjusted to bring the contrasting colored bobbin thread to the surface, adding subtle flecks.*



ADAPTED FROM  
 QUILTING ARTS MAGAZINE  
 APRIL/MAY 2011

# ‘nostalgia SERIES’

## STITCHED SKETCHES AND EPHEMERA

BY JANE LAFAZIO

## IN ART QUILTS



I started this series of quilts after reading Cas Holmes' book, *THE FOUND OBJECT IN TEXTILE ART* (Interweave). I was so inspired by Cas' stitched sketches and the addition of paper and found items in her work. In the past, before I owned a sewing machine, I used old letters in my hand-stitched organza quilts. I've also used some of the images from my sketchbook in my fiber art. And, in the last few months, I've been working on my free-motion machine stitching. So Cas Holmes' book spoke to all my interests, at just the right time, and started me creating what I call my "Nostalgia Series."





## MATERIALS

- Fabric
  - Batting
  - Sandwich wrap, deli paper, or tissue paper
  - Pins
  - Ephemera such as paper, ribbon, maps, and old letters
  - Tulle
  - Sewing machine with a free-motion foot
  - Your own drawings (or images from decorative paper napkins, as Cas Holmes suggests)
  - Fabric scraps such as silk organza, lace, cheesecloth, and recycled silk sari ribbon
  - Embroidery thread and needle
- Optional**
- Grafix® Dura-Lar™ Wet Media Film
  - Soft gel medium
  - Spoon (for burnishing)
  - Water-soluble crayons

## DIRECTIONS

1. Select a richly patterned fabric that sets the mood for your background. I used cloth I'd created by monoprinting with soy wax and fabric dyes in a workshop with Melanie Testa.
2. Attach the batting to the back of the cloth.
3. Select a drawing from your sketchbook, and scan it onto a piece of sandwich wrap or deli paper, or trace it onto a piece of tissue paper. I have used sketches, continuous line drawings, and even a cyanotype print for images. You can even experiment with image transfer (see "Image Transfers").
4. Determine where you want your first stitched image to be on the front of your quilt and pin ephemera or sheer cloth in that spot. (When you sew from the back of the quilt, the stitching will catch the ephemera/sheer cloth on the front.)
5. Turn the quilt over and pin the paper drawing to the back of the quilt (on the batting).
6. Free-motion stitch from the back of the quilt, following the lines of your image. Tear away the excess paper, but don't worry about removing it; no one will see it. Your stitched design will be seen on the front of the quilt, and the stitching will have caught the bit of ephemera on the front.
7. Stitch one image at a time, overlapping the stitching and ephemera to create a layered surface design on the quilt.



On this page: Two watercolors (from Jane's journal) and a cyanotype provided inspiration for the floral motifs in her "Nostalgia Series."

Previous page: "Zinnia" • 9½" × 13"  
The pink zinnia is an image transfer onto a vintage cocktail napkin (see "Image Transfers").







## image transfers

I used a nifty product called Graftix® Dura-Lar™ Wet Media Film to transfer an image of a pink zinnia onto a vintage cocktail napkin (see “Zinnia”). Follow these steps if you wish to do likewise.

1. Print your image onto the film using an inkjet printer. (It's best to use the printout immediately.)
2. Thinly spread soft gel medium over the surface of the fabric.
3. Place the film, printed side down, onto the wet gel, and burnish it.
4. Lift the film carefully and wash off the film immediately, as the film can be reused.
5. Let the fabric dry completely.

**TIP:** To enhance or slightly alter the color on the image transfer, use water-soluble crayons.

Above: Cocktail napkins can serve as an excellent design source for interesting motifs.

Right: “Thistle and Rose Hips” • 12" × 7"

8. Once the images are stitched with the ephemera in place, add tulle as a layer of subtle shading on areas of the quilt by pinning tulle to the top of the quilt. Machine stitch around the shape you want

to cover with tulle, then using small scissors, cut away any excess tulle just outside the stitched line.

9. Add bits of fabric such as vintage lace and recycled sari ribbon.







"Nostalgia Series: 3" • 12" × 12" • Part of an old postcard is caught in a free-motion stitched flower. This flower was tinted using water-soluble crayons, and French knots were stitched in the flower centers. Hand stitching was used to secure the edges of the postcard to the quilt.

## tip

The thread in the bobbin will show on the front of the quilt. I often select a bobbin thread color that will blend in with the background. Then I stitch again from the front of the quilt, with a black thread, so the stitched drawn lines are more visible. I do this because I'm a little nervous about my free-motion stitching, and doing it first in a neutral color helps get the drawing onto the cloth. Plus, stitching from the top refines the lines and gives it a nice sketchy quality.

10. Hand stitch as desired around the paper, or in the body of the quilt, using a variety of colors of embroidery thread. Stitch French knots in the centers of the flowers. ◆

[janelafazio.com](http://janelafazio.com)



ADAPTED FROM  
 QUILTING ARTS MAGAZINE  
 OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2008

# sketchbook QUILTS

BY JJ FOLEY

I have been drawing and painting my whole life, so when it came time for me to make my very first quilt, there was no question in my mind that the design should come from one of my own drawings. While I was learning to piece and quilt, I was unhappy with the results and wondered how I could get a more personal expression in my quilting. As I browsed a fabric art section of the local craft store, I noticed sheets of cotton that would go through an inkjet printer. I brought some home and printed drawings from my sketchbooks directly onto the fabric, and was very pleased. This offered me a wealth of inspiration, as I have dozens of sketchbooks that I have filled over the last 30 years. I also take photos of my drawings and alter them, then print them out. This is what I call the digital image method.



*"Sketchbook 77" • 8¾" × 10¾" • Muslin, tulle; fabric dye, paint stick; machine quilted.*

## DIGITAL IMAGE METHOD

1. Choose your original image that you would like to use. If you have

a program on your computer for altering images (I use iPhoto), then you can take a picture of your image or scan it and alter it on your computer. Alternatively, put your image onto your copier and

change the size to fit your fabric sheet if necessary.

2. Print your image onto treated fabric. There are several pre-treated fabrics on the market, but I like





*"Portrait" • 7½" × 10½" • Cotton; inkjet transfer of original drawing; machine quilted.*



## M A T E R I A L S

*for digital image method*

- Original images from sketchbooks or journals
- Computer
- Digital camera
- Digital imaging software
- Inkjet printer/copier
- Printer ink
- Pre-treated, colorfast fabric sheets for Inkjet printers
- Sewing machine with walking foot and free-motion or darning foot
- Additional materials as desired for incorporating the image into a quilt, including backing, batting, and binding

Miracle Fabric Sheets. I like to print mine at full size so as not to waste any of this expensive material.

3. Take your printed fabric sheet and iron on top of the paper backing with a hot, dry iron to set the ink. Now your printed fabric can be pieced into a quilt, fused onto a quilt square, or made into a mini-quilt.
4. Once you have decided how the printed fabric will fit into a project, put it all together and add the batting and backing. Then use the walking foot to stitch around the edges of the sandwich.
5. Use your free-motion quilting foot to stitch along the lines of your drawing, taking extra care around small details. I try to pay attention to each and every gradation and puddle in the watercolor, ink, or gouache drawing, in order to bring out each aspect of the drawing.

## D I R E C T D R A W M E T H O D

Another method I use starts with drawing directly onto a piece of muslin. With this direct draw method, you do not need a computer or digital imaging software. This is how I made the “Sketchbook 77” quilt.

1. Draw your image on a piece of muslin. To get the image accurately onto the muslin, I traced an original sketch onto paper using a dark marker. With the paper under the muslin, I traced the image onto the muslin with a sharp pencil.
2. Cover the muslin drawing with organza, tulle, or georgette. The colors of sheer fabric can vary from barely tinted to beautifully intense, depending on your intent, and the pencil lines are very easy to see through the sheer fabric.
3. Add batting and backing. In preparation for quilting, use a walking foot to stitch around the edges of your sandwich, so that the slippery fabrics will not shift too much. Then quilt the sandwich using the pencil lines as a guide. I use a free-motion foot.
4. Spray as desired with fabric dye and let dry. To make your quilt image permanent, iron it using a protective ironing cloth (I use a cloth napkin).
5. Contour quilt around the image. This creates a very interesting surface that I like to embellish with an oil paint stick.
6. Apply paint stick as desired. Let the surface dry completely (this may take several days to a week or so, depending on the thickness of the paint and the humidity) and

## M A T E R I A L S

*for direct draw method*

- Original images from sketchbooks or journals
- Paper, pencil, and marker
- Plain muslin fabric, approximately 11" × 14" (This allows some leftover for the margins of your project.)
- Sheer fabrics such as organza, tulle, or georgette, approximately 11" × 14"
- S.E.I. Tumble-Dye spray fabric dye
- Oil paint sticks (I like Windsor & Newton Artists' Oil Bar.)
- Batting, approximately 11" × 14" (I use low-loft polyester batting.)
- Backing fabric, 100-percent cotton quilting fabric, approximately 11" × 14"
- Fabric for binding (I use 2"-wide strips of fabric, length depends on size of finished quilt.)
- Sewing machine with walking foot and free-motion or darning foot

then iron again, using a protective ironing cloth.

7. I like to throw the entire quilt into the dryer as a last step, to make sure the dye and oil paint have set completely.

I would encourage those of you who do not already have your own drawings to try and sketch a few images and see where it goes. The simplest little sketch can give you a delightful result in a quilt, and it will be your own personal, one-of-a-kind creation.

An excellent book to get you started drawing is Kimon Nicolaides' *THE NATURAL WAY TO DRAW*. 🌟

[jgremillionfoley.com](http://jgremillionfoley.com)





*"Butterfly" • 7¾" × 10¼" • Cotton; inkjet transfer of original drawing; machine quilted.*



ADAPTED FROM  
QUILTING ARTS MAGAZINE  
OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2007

# thread sketching ON STABILIZER

It was one of those “thump myself on the head” kind of moments. I was brainstorming ways to include a photographic image in a quilt, but I wanted to try something different from just printing the photograph directly onto my fabric. I was looking for a technique that would allow more of the artist’s hand to be seen, more of a representational sketch than a photograph.

I began by using a light box to trace the important features of the photo onto tear-away stabilizer. Then I pinned the stabilizer to the fabric, wrong sides together, and free-motion stitched along the traced lines from the back. The resulting free-motion embroidery image on the front of the fabric wasn’t what I had hoped for; it was more of a cartoon than a realistic representation of the image. As I sat there, disappointedly fiddling with the stabilizer, I noted how much like heavy paper it was. That’s when the “thump myself” moment occurred. Would it be possible to print the photo directly onto the stabilizer? This would preserve the details lost through the process of tracing and provide me with a finely detailed and shadowed pattern on which to free-motion embroider.

The resulting technique has proven to be remarkably easy and versatile. The process begins with a digital photograph printed in grayscale from my home computer printer directly onto tear-away stabilizer. The stabilizer feeds very easily through the printer. I use a fine-line permanent marker to highlight any shading or details that were lost in the printing and free-motion stitch, using black cotton thread, following the design on the stabilizer. Once I complete the outline of the design, I fill in the shadows and contours, following the details printed on the stabilizer. When the design has been completely stitched, I remove the stabilizer and turn it over to the right side of the fabric. The resulting free-motion embroidery is remarkably like a pen-and-ink sketch.

## DIRECTIONS

### STITCHING THE IMAGE

1. Choose a digital photograph. If it is a color photo, adjust it to grayscale and size it to suit your needs. Unless you are using personal photos, look for photos that are in the public domain, i.e. copyright-free images. Print a copy of the photo on plain paper to use as a reference while you stitch.

*Note: If the direction is important to the composition of the image (for example, if you want the final image to show a right hand rather than a left) you will need to flip the photographic image on the computer. The image printed on the stabilizer will be a reverse of the original photograph.*

2. Press a piece of heavy-duty, tear-away stabilizer flat, and trim it to 8½" × 11". Print the grayscale photo directly onto the stabilizer, with the printer properties set to “best” printing quality. Be sure to feed each piece of stabilizer through the printer individually. Let the printer ink dry completely, preferably 24 hours, and then heat set it with a dry iron. (See Sample 1.)

BY KAREN FRICKE





## M A T E R I A L S

- Good quality #50 black thread (I like Mettler® and Gutterman.)
- Sewing machine with a free-motion quilting or darning foot
- Embroidery 90/12 machine needle
- Background fabric: 100-percent cotton in a light-to-medium shade (preferably a solid or hand-dyed piece that reads as a solid)
- Heavy-duty, tear-away stabilizer (I use Pellon® Stitch-n-Tear®.)
- Permanent fine-line marker, black
- Fabrics for inner border (loosely woven), outer border, and binding
- Batting and backing

3. Since the stabilizer is not completely opaque, some of the detail in the photographic image is lost in the printing process. Use the permanent pen to define any lost details or lines that you want to be sure to emphasize in your stitching. (See Sample 2.) Hold the stabilizer image up to a piece of your fabric to make sure all essential elements are visible. Pin the stabilizer to the fabric, wrong sides together.

**TIP:** For greater stability, use two layers of the tear-away stabilizer, with the printed sheet on top.

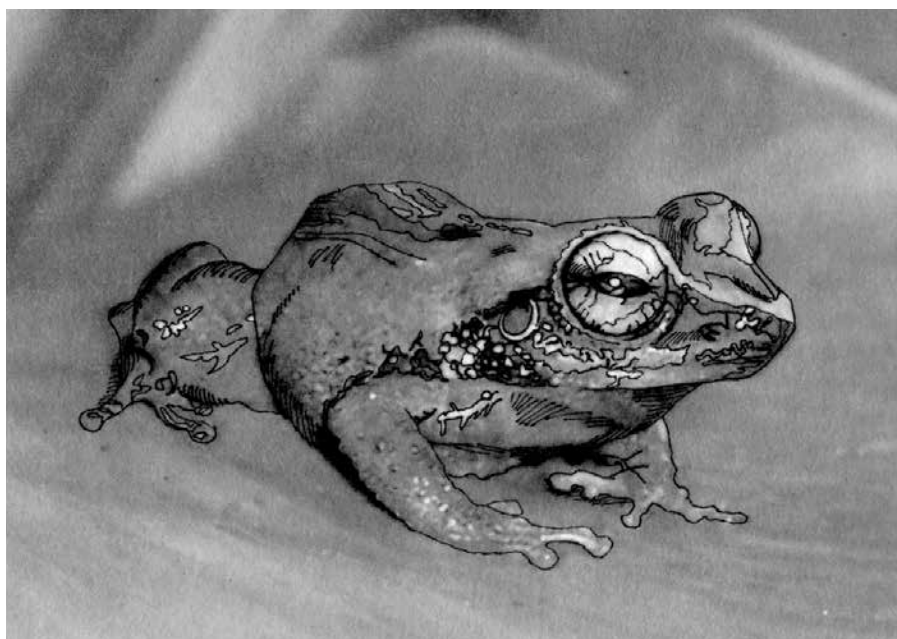
4. Use a good quality, #50 black thread in the needle and bobbin, a 90/12 embroidery needle, and a darning or free-motion foot with the feed dogs down.

**TIP:** Prepare a test sample using the same materials as your actual piece. Test the thread tension by making loops and swirls, as they show any tension problems more readily than stitching





Sample 1: Print a grayscale photo directly onto tear-away stabilizer.



Sample 2: Use a permanent pen to define any lost details or lines.

straight lines. The goal is to have even tension on the top and bottom, so that the bobbin thread is not pulled through to the top, nor is the top thread pulled through to the bottom. Once you feel comfortable with the process, try other types of threads in the bobbin—a fine rayon thread gives you a very precise

stitching line to achieve greater detail, perfect for a small, intricate portrait. A heavier thread, such as a 30-weight quilting cotton, will create a heavy line, which is ideal for a larger sketch. Once you are happy with the tension, you're ready to sketch.

## finding images

A good place to start looking for photos is the photo archives of the United States Department of Agriculture. To create my “Coqui Up Close” quilt, I searched under Google images for “usda frog” and found this little guy. The USDA allows free use of the photos so long as you credit the agency, don't distort the reality of the photos, and don't use them in a way that implies the agency is endorsing a product or position.

5. Begin by stitching the outline of the image, then fill in the shadows and contours of the design, using a smooth back-and-forth motion. The most difficult part about thread sketching is to stop thinking about what you're doing. Many of us delight in being in control—I know I do—but I have been much happier with my thread sketching results when I simply concentrate on following the design on the stabilizer with my needle and thread, rather than debating too much about shading and contouring. Stop thinking, breathe, and just stitch. I prefer stitching over each line at least twice, without worrying too much about accuracy, so that the final result mimics a pen-and-ink sketch.

**Note:** Refer to the original photo as you stitch. When you think you're finished, turn the fabric over and check for any areas that seem empty or sparse,



and fill in where necessary. You'll know you're finished stitching when you say, "Wow!"

- Carefully remove the stabilizer, where possible, using a seam ripper and tweezers. Leave it in place under heavily stitched areas. Press flat. Your finished thread-sketched image can be used as a design element in a larger piece, or it can be the focal point of your quilt, as in "Coqui Up Close."

## THE INNER AND OUTER BORDERS

- Tear 1¼"-wide strips of a loosely woven fabric; I used Burmese cross-dyed cotton, but fine linen works nicely, too.
- Fold the strips lengthwise, not quite in half, and, with the narrower width on top and the folded edge even with the raw edge

of the quilt top, pin or baste the strips to the sides, trimming to fit.

- Pin or baste the remaining lengths onto the top and bottom. The corners of this inner border will overlap.
- Trim a strip of your outer border fabric to the length of each side; attach using ¼" seams and press toward the outer borders. Do the same with the top and bottom outer borders.
- To create the fringe on the inner border, gently ease out individual threads along the raw edges.

## FINISHING

Layer your quilt top with the batting and backing; baste. For the quilting, I used a 30-weight variegated cotton thread and nudged the narrow border aside to free-motion stitch tiny loops

and swirls (they reminded me of frog eggs) around the frog and close to the inner edge.

In the outer border, I stitched random rectangles—the visual opposite of the loopy interior—and finished the quilt with a narrow, pieced binding.

The result is a thread sketch that looks very much like a pen-and-ink drawing. You'll find that this technique is quite versatile. You can personalize any quilt, literally any piece of fabric, in much the same way fiber artists have used photo transfer techniques to create new design elements on fabric. Unlike photo transfer, however, this technique combines the representational attributes of a photograph with the appeal of an artist's individual rendering. ♦

[karenfrickequilts.com](http://karenfrickequilts.com)



# thread *painting*

ADAPTED FROM  
QUILTING ARTS MAGAZINE  
APRIL/MAY 2009



## FROM PHOTO TO STITCHED ARTWORK

BY CAROL WATKINS



Quilting led me to machine embroidery, which in turn led me to dense thread painting. Mixing threads to create depth and shadow and to tell a story captivates me. My focus is on the color of the thread, the stitch, and on the “painting” taking shape. Everything else temporarily takes a back seat. The hours fly by as I stitch, choosing colors of thread that will continue to build depth and enhance the image.

Quilting and photography emerged as passions for me at about the same

## MATERIALS

- Good quality #50 black thread (I like Mettler® and Gutterman.)
- Cotton broadcloth, pre-washed to remove the sizing, or PFD (prepared-for-dyeing)
- InkAID™, white matte pre-coat
- Wide foam brush
- Freezer paper
- Iron
- Photoshop® or other photo-editing software
- Printer, preferably with pigment inks (I use an Epson® 2200 with Ultrachrome ink.)
- Fusible such as WonderUnder® or MistyFuse™
- Heavyweight interfacing
- Sewing machine with free-motion capability
- Free-motion or darning foot
- Thread (I like to use Madeira® threads.)
- Rotary cutter and mat

### Optional

- Commercial prepared-for-printing cotton fabric with backing already in place or inkjet transfer paper to be printed and ironed to cotton
- Dura Textiles Ink Jet Canvas, matte finish (in place of the cotton broadcloth and inkAID)
- Foam core board, for mounting the piece

time, and I thought I would have to choose between them. In a eureka moment I realized I could combine the two, and I now use my own photos to print my fabric for quilts and thread paintings.

Early on, intimidated by free-motion stitching, I relied on simple line quilting using a walking foot. Always driven to explore, I began practicing free-motion stitching and was enchanted by the lyrical line, the design possibilities, and the way stitching adds another layer of complexity to a quilt.

I start with a photo (or several), manipulate it, print it, and then stitch. The process of composing the image for use in a quilt is very important. I take my time choosing images, cropping, combining photos, removing elements of the background, enhancing color, applying filters, or performing other manipulations with my photo-editing software. By the time it is printed, the photo I use may bear little resemblance to the original.

I find inspiration everywhere, including in such diverse subjects as windows and wildflowers, or shoes and boots. I am also drawn to old, rusty farm equipment, twisted metal, graffiti, and much more.

**Note:** Beware of the addictive nature of this activity.

## DIRECTIONS

1. Choose a photograph, or several, and use your photo-editing software to digitally manipulate the image(s). First, open a photo or scan an image. Make a copy of it and close the original. You can do various manipulations on the copy of your photo. I suggest starting with fairly simple designs or shapes. There is a lot of complexity within a simple format. Shading for depth and mixing colors will provide plenty of challenge.
2. Prime your cotton broadcloth with inkAID. The inkAID will hold the ink from the printer on the surface of the fabric for a crisp, sharp, detailed image. It also stiffens the fabric, which lessens distortion that would otherwise result with heavy stitching. This step is comparable to a painter

## OPTIONAL *surfaces*

- Print onto prepared-for-printing fabric sheets. This will not result in stiffened fabric. If you use prepared-for-printing fabric sheets, skip Steps 2 and 3.
- Use iron-on transfer sheets. This will give you a stiff, albeit plastic-like surface to sew on. Since you will be covering the image entirely with thread, the shiny plastic will not show.
- Use Dura Textiles Ink Jet Canvas, matte finish. If you use this product, skip Step 2.

*Previous page: “Steppin’ Out: Red Party Shoes” 8½" × 8½" • Original photography, digitally enhanced, and painted with thread. • “This pair of red, sparkly ‘dress-up’ play shoes belonged to a neighbor child. She delighted in wearing them with a tiara and long dress.”*





"Steppin' Out: Mary Janes" • 8¼" × 8¼" • Original photography digitally manipulated and printed on fabric. These thread paintings include 30–50 different colors of rayon thread.

priming a canvas prior to applying paint. Follow the manufacturer's directions on the container.

3. Cut the cotton about 1" larger than the final print and iron the back side of the fabric to the shiny side

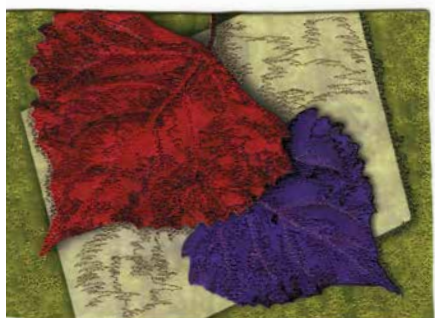
of an 8½" × 11" piece of freezer paper. I have made the mistake of ironing the inkAID side of the prepared fabric to the freezer paper, so watch out for this. Trim with a sharp rotary cutter and iron again.

**Note:** Ensuring a tight bond between the fabric and freezer paper is important for the smooth operation of the printer. If not held firmly, the ink carriage can yank the fabric. This usually stops the printer.





Digitally enhanced photo printed on inkAID-treated fabric and fused to interfacing.



The initial stitching.

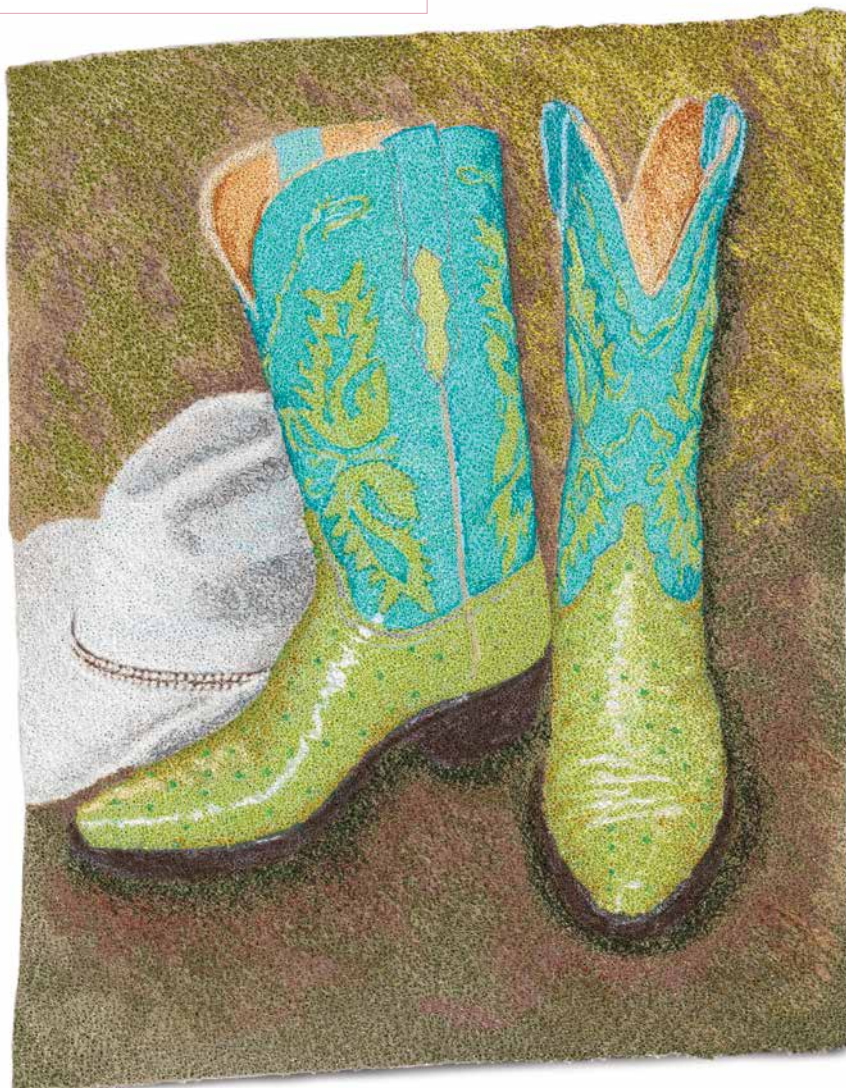


Additional stitching has been added.



The finished thread painting.

4. Set the printer to thicker media or envelope and print using the Matte setting. While pigment inks are



"Sharon's Boots" • 9½" × 11½" • "Cowboys riding the range never had boots like these. They are made for a woman who is not afraid of making a statement. My friend showed up wearing these and willingly allowed me to photograph them."

preferable to dye inks, either may be used. Dye inks may fade.

5. Remove the freezer-paper backing and bond the printed image to the heavy interfacing using fusible web. The interfacing helps to prevent the fabric from distorting with so much stitching.

**OPTION:** Bond the image to canvas and let it distort. Some people like this effect.

6. Wind several bobbins with a neutral-colored thread so you will not have to interrupt your rhythm

later, then lower the feed dogs, set your stitch length to 0, and attach a free-motion or darning foot.

7. Turn under the edges of your piece about ¼" and stitch over them, unless you are planning to add fabric borders later.
8. Print out a copy of your image so you can see the details that may be obscured as you cover the image with thread. Do some stitching all over the surface and then go back, building up additional



## stitching TIPS

- I use a Bernina® sewing machine and run the bobbin thread through the eye in the finger of the bobbin case as recommended for buttonhole stitching. (A 1975 Bernina 830 is my preferred sewing machine for this work.) Since this process is entirely free motion, an embroidery machine is not useful.
- I reduce the upper tension very slightly. This keeps the bobbin thread from showing on the surface so I do not need to change bobbin thread colors as I work.
- Test your stitching on a scrap sample before starting on the printed image.
- Posture and relaxation are important when doing such intense work. Relax your shoulders, breathe freely, and have your arms and wrists in optimum position. Stop and roll your shoulders regularly or get up and move around for a few minutes.

layers of color. Usually I begin “painting” smaller details before filling in large areas. Iron the piece occasionally to keep the work flat.

**Note:** I prefer a narrow zigzag stitch, placed close together at a 45-degree angle. I like the way this gives a sketched line effect. But you could use a straight stitch or zigzag directly up and down. Practice various options before beginning.

Your thread painting can cover the surface completely and densely so no background shows, or you might like a more sketched effect of heavier stitching in some areas and lighter stitching in others.

I respond to the color and shapes as I stitch. Once I start work I see more color, more subtle tone, and I end up using many more shades and tones



“Abandoned” • 9¼" × 8¼" • Multiple colors of threads were used to achieve the depth and shading.  
• “Broken and boarded up, this window was photographed at a train yard.”

of threads than I generally anticipate. Having a lot of thread choices is necessary. In the leaf sampler I used five reds ranging from orange to deep maroon, five purples, five greens, and four beige-to-brown colored spools of thread.

9. To frame your finished stitchery, cut a piece of foam core slightly smaller than the work. Hand sew the piece to the foam core from the center out. The tiny stitches will be invisible. Bond the foam core to a canvas-covered stretcher. While I often finish thread paintings this way, they could instead be used as details within quilts, inserts in jackets, incorporated into handbags, or whatever your imagination conjures up. These small works deserve a beautiful presentation. ❖

[carolwatkins.com](http://carolwatkins.com)

## THOUGHTS ABOUT thread

Rayon thread has a beautiful sheen, but cotton and poly-cotton threads are fine, too. I mix threads if I need a particular tone and do not have it in rayon. Sometimes I like to contrast a reflective rayon area with a flatter, less reflective area. So many choices are available! I do not use multicolor thread. It is beautiful, but I want to be in control of light and dark tonal areas. I create the blending by stitching and then going back into an area with more threads, overlaying lighter or darker tones or contrasting color. Painters take paint, mix various pigments to get lighter or darker tones, and brush the paint onto canvas, while we can create tonal changes by constantly changing threads and mixing them with stitching.