

# Stitchery Series Part V – Applique & More

Heather Daveno

Contact: [thedaveno@gmail.com](mailto:thedaveno@gmail.com)

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

This is the last in this series, which has focused on (mostly) Chinese embroidery as a surface embellishment. This segment will cover a few other forms of surface decoration that can be combined with embroidery to bring new color, texture and uniqueness to your own textile projects.

## Appliqué

Appliqué is a French word that means "that has been applied." In its broadest sense, appliqué is the process for applying a smaller ornament or device to another surface for the purpose of ornamentation. The term and technique are not strictly limited to textiles.

Although it is a French word, examples of appliquéd felts have been dated to the Neolithic era in Turkey, and the Bronze Age in Northern Europe. Some of the most well-known examples of felt appliqué have been found in the Pazyryk burial mounds in Siberia, dating from the 7th to 2nd centuries BC, where felt rugs displayed fantastical animal forms applied to the surface and edged with embroidery. Appliqué was also used in medieval Europe to decorate wall hangings and canopies.



Appliqué can be as simple as applying a leaf to a surface and holding it in place with stitched veining down the center, as shown here.

It can also be as complex as embroidering a patch that is then appliquéd another surface, as was the

case with 'tablion' in Byzantium (a ranking badge worn by senators on their cloaks) and 'mandarin squares' in China (ranking badges worn by both military and civil servants on their court robes during the Ming Dynasty).

### **Traditional Appliqué Method:**

- Cut patterns for your appliqué pieces out of poster board.
- Pin to the appliqué fabric or draw around the pattern with a pencil.
- Cut out your pattern pieces, adding a ¼ to ½ inch seam allowance on all sides.
- Use the poster board pattern as a pressing guide and turn the edges under, slashing curves and corners to allow for a smoother turn-under. Remove the poster board when you are done.
- Position your pattern pieces on your background fabric, pin them in place and stitch them down using whip stitch. You may go over the edges again with a decorative stitch and fill in details with additional embroidery.

If you are working with a non-fray fabric like felt, you do not need to turn the edges under.

### **My Technique:**

- Trace your design onto fusible.
- Iron the fusible to the back side / wrong side of your appliqué fabric and cut out your design. You do not need to allow a seam allowance for turn under if you have chosen a tightly woven fabric, since the fusible makes your fabric non-fray.
- Position your design on your background fabric, and pin in place
- Whip stitch the design in place, or simply secure it with your choice of embroidery. My choices would be couching or stem stitch.

### **Tips and Tricks:**

- I use a small piece of double-sided fusing at the center of my pattern pieces to secure them in place instead of pins. It allows me to roll the project up and stick it in purse without fear of dislodging pins. Appliqué is also easier to work on if you are not dodging pins all the time.
- If you want to add dimension to your piece, such as with leaves and flower petals, you can embroider detail down the center of your design pieces and leave the edges free, as shown on the previous page.
- If you are leaving the edges free but find they are curling up too much, you can add a very small stitch here and there to secure the edges, or use a French Knot or bead as a decorative / functional element.

**If you are working on a large piece, like a bed covering or a wall hanging:**

- Trace your pattern onto the paper side of a piece of double sided fusing.
- Iron the fusing onto your pattern fabric and cut it out.
- Peel the backing off the fusible, and position your appliqué piece(s) on your background fabric. Iron the pieces in place.
- Finish the edges with your favorite embroidery stitch. I recommend stem, chain or couching.

**Advantages of this technique:**

- your pattern pieces will not shift
- you will not have to work around pins
- it will provide a more sturdy finished piece

**Disadvantages:**

- The adhesive from the fusing can collect on your needle when you are applying embroidered detail. Trade off needles frequently and clean the adhesive off your needles with nail polish remover.
- It will limit your ability to utilize other techniques like padding or trapunto.

For large gauge appliqué projects like rugs or bed coverings, you can also sew the pattern pieces down by machine and cover your machine stitching with hand embroidery.



### **Reverse Appliqué**

This technique is Asian in origin and is still used extensively among the Hmong and Miao tribes in China.

The example shown here is a Celtic knotwork pillow that I made about 25 years ago, using three layers of felt and finished with couching stitch in heavy yarn.

## My technique:

- I chose an existing knotwork pattern and enlarged on a projector to about 18" across, drawing it onto a piece of butcher paper which would become my master template.
- Coloring the pattern allowed me to see where the pattern weaves in and out of itself, which became critical further in this process.
- After I was satisfied with the master paper pattern, I traced it onto tissue paper.
- I laid 3 layers of felt on top of each other, and then laid the tissue pattern on top and pinned it in place through all three layers of fabric.
- I machine stitched through the entire stack, and tore the tissue paper away.
- Using my butcher paper master as a guide, I cut away the layers of felt to expose the knotwork. Anyone who has worked with knotwork will understand the mental exercise that ensues...
- I picked out the remaining tissue from underneath the machine sewing, and finished all the edges with brown yarn in couching stitch.
- To keep the integrity of the layered edge, I hemmed a piece of corduroy so that it was slightly smaller than the pillow top. I machine stitched the top and back pieces together with wrong sides together so the edge would be exposed, leaving an opening for the stuffing.
- After stuffing the pillow with fiber fill, I hand stitched the opening closed.
- I trimmed the felt top so it was even with the corduroy back, and covered the machine stitched seam with a row of couching.

The advantages to reverse appliqué are that it allows you to do more complex designs than the more traditional technique. It would have been far more difficult and time consuming to do this project if I had cut each piece separately and interlaced the individual layers together.

Reverse appliqué can also add a lot of dimension to your project, especially if you are working in several layers of heavy fabrics. I used this technique for a small round pillow with five layers of wool. By the time I was done, the pillow gave the impression that it had been carved rather than sewn.

## Tips and Tricks:

When choosing a design for this technique, color your master pattern (as though it were a page from a coloring book) to determine if it is suitable. With knotworks, you may find there are 'more layers than initially meet the eye' and coloring your master will give you a greater understanding of how many layers you will need, how complex the design actually is, and how much cutting away you will need to do in order to your design to life.

## A Few Other Surface Embellishment Techniques

### Padding and Layering

Appliqué lends itself to dimensional and even sculptural techniques because you can stack layers on top of each other. The body of this bird was padded to give it dimension. The blue and green wing sections were also slightly padded in addition to being stacked to give additional dimension. Jewels and beads gave a slight tufted look to the bird, and the entire motif was then appliquéd to the background. I believe the finished motif was about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch thick at the birds shoulder.



Layering can give a 3-dimensional affect to your appliqué work, and is especially effective with flowers, animals and landscapes.

To pad a layer, cut your padding  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch smaller than your pattern piece so that when you stitch your pattern piece down, you are stitching through just the pattern piece, and not the padding.

### Trapunto

This Italian technique dates back to the mid-13th century and is achieved by slitting the back of your outlined appliqué area and stuffing the area to make it 'puffy'. I have the best success by using cotton balls or small wads of fiber fill and pushing them into the target area with a bamboo skewer or knitting needle. Once your stuffing is complete, stitch the slit closed. This technique works best if you are making an appliqué to apply to your background fabric (such as a skirt or jacket) and if you are lining your finished piece.

### Quilting

Quilting is also a very ancient technique, dating back to Egypt, China and Japan, where people found that a layer of silk batting, sandwiched between two pieces of woven cloth and then stitched through all three layers, provided a warm textile for use in bedding and outerwear.



During the Crusades, soldiers wore a quilted gambeson as a padded 'shirt' under their armor which protected their flesh and helped to deflect hits to their armor from their opponents' weapons. In 18th century Europe, quilting was used for women's winter petticoats and bedding, and was brought to the Americas where it became a functional art form during the Colonial period.

**Quilting can refer to** the joining together of several pieces of colored fabric (piecwork) to make a picture or pattern, which is then stitched to a backing, a similar concept to appliqué.

**Quilting can also refer to** the process of stitching through the layers of cloth and batting for the functional purpose of securing the batting so it remains in an even layer throughout your finished piece.

Both techniques are usually used together to produce a quilted object.

#### **Tips and Tricks:**

- Quilting can be as simple as tying a piece of yarn every few inches, which provides a 'tufted' effect, or stitching patterns in either monochromatic or contrasting thread, in either geometric, floral or freeform design.
- To get a dimensional or 'fluffy' quilt, use a thicker batting and fewer surface stitches.
- To get a sturdier quilt (for use in clothing) use a thinner but more dense batting (cotton rather than fiberfill) and pattern your stitching in more dense, complex designs.
- Design your quilting stitch and pattern to compliment the pieced theme of your quilt. Keep in mind that the more stitching you apply to a quilted piece, the stiffer the finished project will be, and the stuffing will be more condensed.

## Printing, Painting and Surface Dye

**Block printing** on fabric is thought to have originated in China at the same time as the development of printing on paper. However, India took the block and ran with it, and became masters of this craft. Block printing is considered the forerunner of calico and printed cottons in Europe and the US. Shown here is a block being used to produce a stamped border.



The block below is used to print an overall design. You can sometimes find Indonesian carved printing blocks in antique stores or import shops, where they are often sold as wall décor. I brought a few small blocks home from the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, and although I have not been successful in using them for printing, I have used them to emboss velvet by laying the velvet face down on a block and applying a hot steam iron to the back.

**Silk screen** printing dates back to 10th - 13th century China and Japan and was introduced to Europe during the 18th century.

For a tutorial on this process please check out the [Art of Doing Stuff](#) online.

**Batik**, a technique using dye and wax resist to produce patterns on cotton, became a distinctive Indonesian art form. You can learn more about batik at [Dharma Trading](#).



**Shibori**, an early form of tie-dye developed in Japan, utilized elaborate tying patterns to produce distinctive indigo and white textiles for kimono. A Google search will probably bring up several tutorials.



In 19th century China, traditional embroidery became cost prohibitive as a textile embellishment and was replaced by **paint, outlined with embroidery**. I have used this technique on linen and silk with good results. The hat shown here has a Khazak fire motif painted in copper paint on brown linen, outlined with couching in blue yarns.

**Beading** is older than embroidery, dating back to 6000 BC Siberia, where a variety of metal and shell objects were sewn to furs and hides as ornamentation. In

12th century Germany, beadwork was done on vellum (a very thin sheepskin which was also used for bibles and manuscripts) and the beaded vellum was then sewn to church vestments. Beading, especially pearl work, reached its peak of perfection during the Elizabethan period.



**Passementerie** - to decorating a surface with cord or braid - originated in France and dates back to at least the 18th century, where it was seen most frequently on military and band uniforms. You will hear it mentioned as a finishing technique for 19th century furniture. It also shows up as an accent technique in women's fashion every few years. It is the principal technique I employ on some of my hats, as shown at right.

## In Summary...

This series has presented a variety of textile embellishment techniques, many of which I have used to produce costumes, wall hangings and cushions. My favorite projects have combined several techniques to achieve a unique textured look with historical basis.

## Sources

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