



Painting With Threads

Orchids in a Vase

By Tina Whiteley

One of the most fun and exciting ways you can use your sewing machine is to create thread pictures with free motion stitching. You can use straight or zig zag stitch, or a combination of both to create your pictures. Zig zag has the advantage of being able to cover a large space more quickly and it's good for creating movement and texture, so we'll be using free motion zig zag stitch to create this project.

You can make your pictures any size you like, but if this is the first time you are trying thread painting, I'd recommend working with a smaller size, so that you don't have too much fabric to cover. A smaller project is less daunting and easier to work with inside a hoop. These small projects are ideal as postcards, journal covers or framed artworks.

You will need

- Photograph, drawing or other inspiration for your composition
- Cotton Fabric (approximately 12 by 12 inches or 30 x 30 cm)
- Felt stabilising fabric (dimensions as above)
- Tearaway stabilising fabric (dimensions as above)
- Rayon, polyester or cotton threads of your choice, to match your image
- Embroidery or top stitch sewing machine needles, size 80/12 or 90/14
- Bobbin thread (black, white or other colours as preferred)
- Two piece low-sided hoop (screw type or spring-loaded)
- Sewing machine with adjustable feed dogs
- Free motion or darning foot.
- Scissors, heat erasable marker pen, ruler
- Iron and cloth for pressing.

Instructions

Step 1 - Choosing the design



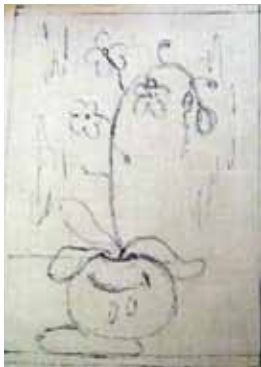
An easy way to get started is to choose a simple image that has clearly defined shapes, a composition and colours that you like, so that you don't have to worry about design decisions while you're learning the sewing techniques.

For this project, I've chosen a birthday card image that I particularly liked and decided it would be an ideal starting point for a practice piece, designed to show the free motion zig zag method.

Step 2 - Transferring the image onto fabric

As you get more proficient with free machine embroidery you can start to create your own original artworks, using your own drawings

or photos, which you can digitally print or manually transfer directly onto fabric. You can also colour your own fabric backgrounds with paints, crayons, watercolour pencils or dyes, as preferred.



I started by making a rough sketch of the design on the fabric with a heat-erasable marker. I had to rework the top and bottom, which gave some extra lines, but they would eventually disappear when covered with stitches and also when the work was finally pressed with an iron. The sketch gives simple defined outlines, which I could break down into particular positive and negative colour shapes for stitching.

Step 3 – Choosing threads



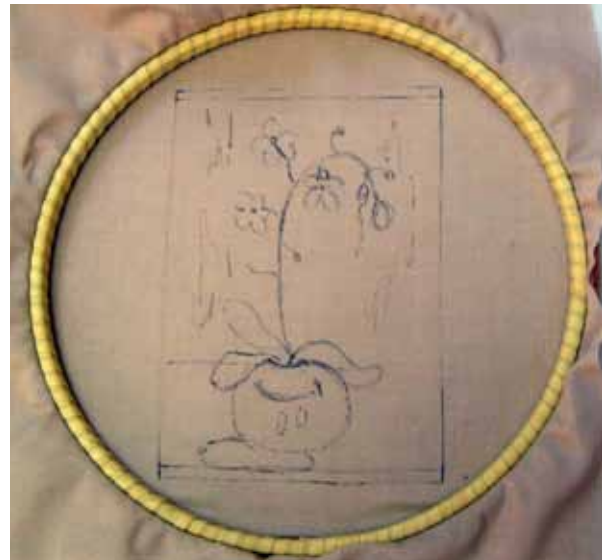
It's a good idea to "audition" all the threads you need before you start, so that you can compare them all together with the original image, to choose the correct

tonal and chromatic values. This gets easier the more you do it, but it helps to squint when looking at the colours to better appreciate which threads are darker, lighter, brighter or less intense when viewed together. You are using your threads, rather like an artist would use paints, to create your picture.

By identifying which colour areas are darker or lighter, on the original image, it makes it easier to sew out the highlighted and shaded areas. It's these tonal contrasts that can really help to add the drama and interest to your work. At this stage, don't worry if you don't have exactly the same colour threads as your image. If you want to add to your thread collection, by all means purchase more colours, but if you don't want to do that, then just use what colours you have, but aim to keep the tonal ranges consistent if you can. (If you are particularly proficient in

colour mixing, you can always blend thread colours together to get the exact hue you are looking for). Bobbin thread can be any colour you like. I chose bobbin fill thread and didn't change bobbin colours for this project, but you can if you wish, especially if you want to incorporate the bobbin thread into the design.

Step 4 – Stabilising and hooping the fabric



Whenever stitching free motion style, you need to make sure you have a good foundation under your ground fabric. Correctly stabilising your fabric will help the machine to sew more smoothly and your stitching will be more even and less puckered. Using a hoop when you first start out is a good idea, as it will keep the fabric taut and relieve the tension on your hands. The more you cover the fabric with zig zag stitches the more it will want to shrink and distort, so I recommend you keep the stitching less dense to begin with.

Cut a square of cotton fabric large enough to accommodate your design and fit into your hoop with a border all the way round to avoid snagging your free-motion presser foot. A bound hoop, as shown, is good to keep a tight tension on the fabric. In free-machine embroidery, the hoop is worked in the opposite way to hand embroidery, in that the smooth flat surface is underneath and you will be looking into the hoop and your design from the top. Once your machine is set up for free-motion embroidery, the hoop can be put in place as per the instructions below.

Step 5 – Setting up the machine for free motion embroidery – zig zag stitch



For free-motion embroidery you will need to control the movement of the fabric, rather than let it feed automatically under the presser foot. For normal sewing the fabric will move from front to back and is guided by the grooved metal feed dogs on the sewing bed. To gain control of the fabric you need to disable or lower these feed dogs. If you are unsure how to do this, consult your manual to find where the feed dog lever, knob or computerised function is located on your particular machine). If you have an older style machine, then you may have a cover a plate to fit over the feed dogs, so that they won't grip the fabric as you sew.

The first thing to do is to make sure your machine is clean! The area around the bobbin can get clogged with lint after a few hours of use and it can affect the overall quality of your stitching. A few moments spent beforehand, giving a quick brush out of the bobbin compartment to ensure there are no little bits of thread and fabric, can save you time in the long run.

Use the appropriate darning or free motion presser foot for your machine model and make sure it is well secured. It is best to work with a new 80/12 or 90/14 top stitch or embroidery needle to accommodate a variety of threads. These needles have a larger eye and so reduce the friction on the thread during intensive sewing, which means your thread will glide through the needle and be less liable to break or snag, giving you a more enjoyable sewing experience!

Set your stitch to a zig zag with whatever width you like to use and ideally a stitch length of zero, or as close as you can get to zero on your machine, as you will control the stitch length with the co-ordination of your hand movements and foot pedal speed. I would recommend doing a practice piece, using a small stabilised piece of spare fabric, starting slowly to begin with for both pedal and hand movement, moving the fabric smoothly under the needle. Once you are comfortable with your hand/foot co-ordination, go a bit faster on the pedal and maintain a fairly steady glide with your hands. A jerky movement will be more likely to break a needle, so keep the rhythm smooth and even. You can work up and down, side to side, diagonally and make circular or any other directional stitches you choose. When you are happy with your practice piece, you can start your picture.

Carefully place the hooped fabric under the presser foot. Sometimes the presser foot lever will lift a bit higher if you give it an extra push upwards, to accommodate a slightly higher-sided hoop. If your hoop is too high, you should remove the presser foot and put it back in place once your hoop is in position. When you start to sew, ensure that the bobbin thread has been pulled through to the top of the fabric and hold both the top and bobbin thread tails behind the presser foot to stop them from tangling.

For free motion stitching, you must make sure that the presser foot is down and engaged. This is very important. If the presser foot lever is left up, you will have no tension in your top thread and the machine will not sew properly. You will

also end up with a tangle of threads underneath your fabric. With the presser foot down, sew a few stitches (you can do a lock stitch to start, if preferred, but usually the stitches will be locked in place with subsequent layers of stitching, as you'll go over areas several times) and then stop and cut the tail threads. Now you're ready to begin your thread underpainting.

Step 6 - Underpainting - filling the background



There are several ways to tackle a thread painting and no one way is the definitive way. It depends on your own preferences and the look you are aiming for. I tend

to start with an underpainting or underlay of stitches and then build up gradually to the finer details. Along the way you may lose some shape definition if you stitch over the edges, but it's not a problem, as you can always oversee later with the correct colour thread to reclaim those edges and blend the colours to get what you want.

I chose to use an unpainted background fabric. The best way to fill a large unpainted background area is to work in layers using a larger zig zag stitch. You can vary the length and width of the stitch, as you choose. For a greater sense of movement and to be able to get the feel of the form, I sewed in the direction of the planes, i.e. left to right for the horizontal table top and up and down for the vertical wall. Throughout the project, I changed the top threads many times to blend the colours together, but kept the bobbin colour the same. However, if you wish, you can add some extra colour with your bobbin thread by reducing the top tension slightly and letting some of the bobbin thread start to show through in little spots on the top of the fabric.

I left the foreground elements unstitched for the most part, but overlapped them a little with background stitches so that there were no gaps at the end when I added the final details. I also gave a little bit of padding or underlay to the

leaves, stem and some of the flowers. I knew I would be adding more layers to the background as I progressed through the project, so I kept the pressure or density of stitches light at this early underpainting stage.

If you want to build up more texture, you can make the stitches denser or closer together, but don't make your stitching too dense at this stage as it will be more difficult to go over it later. Too much heavy stitching, especially in one area can distort the fabric. As with painting, a light touch is best.

Step 7 - Working in colour areas - colour blending



Here I have begun to work on the different foreground elements of the picture and started to outline and add shadows. You can work

from dark to light or light to dark, whatever you prefer. I followed the contours of the shapes, such as the spherical vase and the leaves, adding the darker colours first and then building up with the lighter ones. It's easier to add an extra bit of shadow or highlight at the end with thread than it is with paint.

I added more colours into the background and used my original background colour threads to help blend the new layers. I then began to work on the flower highlights and the shadow areas around the vase. When you work on smaller shapes, adjust the zig zag stitch size accordingly. Notice where the shadows and highlights are and start to work them in with blocks of darker tone colour. You can blend them more as you add more thread later. Don't worry if it looks messy at this stage. The various elements need to be built up gradually with stitch. This small sample project took about 5 hours to complete, so it's not something that you can do in 5 minutes. As you begin to work on the form of all the objects, the picture will start to come alive.

Step 8 – Working in colour areas – starting to building up form



Notice the light and dark areas of the foreground elements. Stitch these light and dark areas where you see them, using appropriately

coloured threads, matching the tonal values as accurately as you can. Analyse the tonal relationships between adjacent shapes and try to keep that relationship the same with your choice of threads.

It doesn't matter if the colours are not exact, but if one element is lighter or darker than another, match those values if you can. For example, the light is coming in from the right side of the vase, so the right side is lighter than the left side as you look at the picture. The more you can correctly match the tonal values of your colours, the more believable the form of the objects in the image will be. I must say that this is not easy, so if it isn't exactly right, don't worry, just keep going and learn! You need to squint to get a better idea of tonal values and it does take practice to match the colour tones. You will be changing threads more regularly now to assist with finer colour blending.

As well as working on the tonal values, you also still need to be mindful of stitch direction. The energy of the stitch, as with an artist's brush stroke, comes from its direction and character, which include its length, pressure and texture. For example, to emphasise the spherical vase, I stitched in a semi-circular motion, sometimes with long stitches and sometimes going over the same spot several times. I varied the stitch direction and used a mixture of blue, green-blue and violet-blue threads, and blended-in white to lighten areas and add edge highlights. It can sometimes be tricky to see the nuances of form when you are working close up, so it's good to take time to view your work from further away and any tonal imbalances or odd shapes will stand out more easily.

Throughout your stitching, take regular breaks and this will be your opportunity to step back from your work to see where you need to add highlights or shadows, brighten or knock back areas and add more colour or texture to correct any mis-stitched shapes.

Step 9 – Adding detail



Begin to work on more specific areas, such as the leaves and the flower petals, building up various layers of colour.

For the leaves, I blended various green threads together, using different stitching

directions to make the most of the light reflecting properties of my polyester and rayon threads. The leaves had a darker underside and lighter topside. I worked with a mid-tone green as the underlay for the leaves at this stage, adding the darker and lighter greens later.



With the flower petals, I stitched white as the background layer then added light pink, working the stitches to reflect the shape and

direction of each petal. Gradually, I added a darker fuchsia pink and then finally the dark red violet centres.



At this point, I started working more closely on the stems, building up more texture, mindful of the curved aspect of the plant and the light

source. I continued to work on the vase and the background, blending colours and refining the shapes. You will see above that some of the dark flower centres here are too big, but I was able to correct this in the finishing stages of the picture.

Step 10 - Refinding and refining edges



The final reclaiming of edges is one of the most important aspects in building up your picture. As stated earlier, it's much easier with thread than with paint to go over areas and correct them, such as reducing those dark flower centres and adding any shadows or highlights. Providing your stitching isn't too heavy, now is the time to add those little touches of light or dark stitching here and there to emphasise the illusion of one element sitting in front of another. You should aim for more detail in the foreground and less in the background. The further your eye is from the finished picture the more it will register a 3D image.

Once finished, remove your project from the hoop, iron with a pressing cloth, to restore its shape and then trim it, frame it or use as a postcard project, as desired.

I hope this tutorial has helped you learn more about painting with threads, so that you now feel confident to have a go at your own painting. Have fun experimenting with colours and stitches and don't worry too much about the outcome, just enjoy expressing yourself with stitch. The more you play the better you will get. If picture painting with thread is something that really interests you, then the more you learn about and understand the elements of art and design, the easier it will be for you to start designing your own compositions and getting really creative with your sewing machine.

Happy Stitching!