

Zeppelin Threads

Quilting Introduction

2007

You are so lucky to be in this class. I want you to know up front that I don't profess to know everything about quilting by far, and that I am still learning just as you are. I do have some experience to share though, and I think one of the best things I can offer you is simplicity, and a non-wasteful view on this craft. I won't be pushing you to purchase a bunch of unnecessary junk in order to quilt. I really just love what I do and want to share as much as I can with you.

I hope you enjoy the process of learning and please ask as many questions as you can.

Smiles,
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Zeppelin Threads

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History of Quilting

So much has been written on the history of quilting. Volumes contribute to understanding deeply the rich and dynamic place quilting has had in our culture. The romanticized image of a woman sitting by a fire working tiny stitches by hand is treasured by so many. It is not my place to contribute to nor disrupt these views today. I just want you to know that quilting is rewarding, creative, and yes, utilitarian. The long and short of it is that women have made quilts for centuries, in this country and in others. Quilting did not originate in America, but rather flourished here, growing with the cultural differences that each woman brought from her native country. By taking an interest in this art, you are furthering its legacy and also creating your own. Thank you for doing this.

Definition of the word “quilt”

What does the word “quilt” really mean? Well quite frankly, it is a sandwich of fabrics with a layer of something in the middle. It is secured by stitching all the layers together, thus “quilting” all the layers together. It can be both noun and verb all at the same time.

I want to take this moment before we continue to tell you that you will hear so many opinions about how to quilt. There are as many ideas as quilters. This isn't a right and wrong art. Whatever you choose to do, and why, is right because those are your choices. I like to ask as many questions from other quilters as I can to gain knowledge and get ideas. The best piece of advice I can give you is to let you know there aren't any real rules in quilting, just ways to help you become more efficient and more accurate.

Fabric

You will learn so much about fabric from me in particular, because I am so very interested in the components that make up what we use. I will probably be giddy every time you come in the shop about new patterns and textures. Just some points to remember from what we talk about today:

- fabric is the basis of this craft, you will spend many hours looking at it's colors, feeling it's texture, and sewing it with your hands---please don't make unwise choices for your precious time
- there are many grades of fabric
- cotton is your friend, love it, use it, be thankful for it
- polyester has it's place in the world of fashion, not traditional quilting
- understand as much as you can about what fabric you are using for a project, you will be so happy with the results
- think cotton, cotton, cotton
- always pre-wash your fabrics to remove sizing, fabric finishes, and prevent any color bleeding---also to pre-shrink
- don't get bogged down in color theory---use what you love

Thread

Just as with the fabric we talked about, so goes the same with your thread choices. You have cotton, polyester, and cotton polyester blends with quilting. (we won't get into silk, wool, rayon, or synthetic materials-although they have their place in art quilting)

There are threads specifically designed for machine quilting, hand quilting, and for all purpose use. Here again, cotton is your friend. It is very consistent in it's performance. Even though you may question the strength of cotton against a blend, be assured that you will get fabulous results with cotton.

Be aware of what you put in your machine or through your needle. It will make a difference. Machine quilting thread comes in different weights. Hand quilting thread has a wax based glaze on it to strengthen it and keep it from twisting and raveling. Your sewing machine will absolutely hate it. If you use machine thread for hand quilting, you will be bothered by it's twisting nature and it's ability to break easily. There are thread conditioners you can use to prevent that.

Some cotton threads are not 100% cotton, they might have a polyester core that cotton is woven around. Read all your labels and take notes on what you like and what you dislike, as well as how your machine performs with differing brands.

Batting

There are just about as many battings out there as there are fabrics. You will find so many combinations of fibers for different purposes. Really, it is a matter of finding what you like by sampling different kinds with different projects. Here are just a few things to keep in mind:

* **Loft**—that is the height or thickness of a batting. The higher the loft, the more cushy the quilt will be and the more sparse your quilting stitches should be. You will find that real high lofts are good for tying quilts or tacking them. Low lofts are good for handwork and can be quilted quite densely (for machine quilting as well).

Medium lofts work beautifully for a variety of machine and handwork. Think about if you are going to hand quilt or machine quilt before you choose a batting.

* **Fiber Content**—cotton, polyester, silk, wool, or synthetic blends. Most quilters have their own opinion about what they like for warmth, for easy hand quilting, and for look. 100% cotton has been a standard for so long for a variety of reasons. It will shrink at about the same rate as your 100% cotton thread and 100% cotton fabric. Inconsistencies in blends for your fabric, batting, and thread will produce inconsistencies in your quilt. All that time invested and you don't want to be upset with your finished product. They also like cotton because it resembles historic or vintage quilts since natural fibers were all that was available. Still, lots love cotton because it just feels good to the touch and works well with the needle. With that said, there are some **WONDERFUL** polyester/cotton blends out there. They are warm, extremely easy to use and give you excellent results. In fact, since I first starting teaching this class last year, I now see new products hitting the market at lightning speed. There are

eco-friendly battings made from corn products, wool-which they say feels like butter to quilt through, and flame retardant materials. Generally you will see a price difference between cotton and any sort of blend. Talk to other quilters to get an opinion of what they like and then try some blends and see what you think works best for you. Takes notes.

Cutting Tools

Now this is where I go all crazy and distance myself far away from the modern movement of quilting. Think about what was used by our mothers and grandmothers and generations of quilters before them. Pencils, 12" rulers or yardsticks, and scissors. There weren't any fancy rulers, rotary cutters, or measuring devices. Remember what I said about the only *real* rules of quilting are ideas that improve your efficiency and accuracy? Well, here is where this all comes into play perfectly. You can get bogged down with all the gadgets for quilting but what I recommend to you is this:

- a self-healing mat sized 12" x 18" or 13" x 19" to start, you

can always move up to the 22" x 36"

- 1 rotary cutter, usually a 45mm sized blade. There are many brands out there, just pick one in your budget.
- A rotary blade sharpener. Just a few options out there for those, but invest in one and an extra blade or two and you will be set for a long time.
- 1 pair of good scissors that you don't ever cut paper with (by "good" I mean sharp, not expensive....I have had cheap scissors that were super sharp and expensive ones that dulled quickly)
- 1 nice clear acrylic ruler that has markings on it that can be seen on your mat. Usually a 2" x 18" or a 3" x 18" ruler is great to start off with.

How easy is that? Don't worry about square rulers yet, triangles, a variety of rotary sizes or even scissor sizes. Just one of those five things can last you forever and take you through a large variety of projects.

Take good care of your tools and they will take good care of you. Rotary cutters have revolutionized quilting and you will make very accurate cuts, which will only make you sew better seams, and then make great quilts! Measure and double measure before you cut, and don't worry about mistakes because they most definitely will happen.

Everyone urges caution with rotary cutters and rightfully so. They can be very dangerous due to their sharpness and how much pressure you apply and the speed at which you use them. Just keep your hands safe, and always retract an open blade when not in use.

Generally, when cutting, always iron your fabric first, then lay it on your mat, following the grain lines and cut according to the directions of the pattern you are using. Check that the ruler and mat line up before making those cuts. And if all else fails, you can always resort to the old fashioned way of drawing out your lines with a pencil and yardstick and then cutting with scissors.

Ironing/Tools

Pressing seams is a huge aspect of quilting. You always iron your fabrics before cutting as well as any seam you have sewn. You will need to have pressing capabilities. You don't need an expensive iron or a big ironing board. Whatever you use for normal laundry is fine. Remember, prior to electricity, your choices would have been finger pressing or cast iron. Steam is always helpful and I personally like irons that have auto-shut off for safety. With quilting, you will almost exclusively be ironing your seams to one side. We don't iron seams open as in other sewing construction because that weakens what you just worked to make—a solid piece of fabric out of smaller cuts.

Needles

Let's take a minute to talk about needles. There are several sizes of hand and machine needles that will be of interest to you. I have enclosed some nifty charts, but what do all these sizes mean? Well, needle sizes correspond to the length of the needle shaft, size of the eye, and the diameter

of the needle overall. When we are talking about **machine** needles, you need to remember that the larger the number, the larger the needle. When we are talking about **hand** needles, it is the opposite. The larger the number, the smaller the needle. For example, a size 14 machine needle will be thicker and longer than a size 8. But a size 14 hand needle will be tiny, and make miniscule stitches.

Everyone has to find what they prefer, but if you start with an assorted pack of size 5-10 for hand needles, you should find a good needle for your hand's agility and size. For your machine, I would recommend to try size 9, 10, and 11 for piecing. When looking at machine needles, remember that you will see metric measurements on the packets.

Back to hand needles for a moment, because there will be times when you use them. You will hear about several terms that I want to define for you:

- **Sharps**—general sewing, have a sharp point, a round eye, and are of medium length. The difference between sharps and other sewing needles can mainly be seen in their length.

- **Between**s—primarily for quilting. They are shorter, with a small round eye and are best for fine stitching as in hand quilting or for tiny stitches in hand piecing.

I would also like to make note that with each new project you should change your machine needle. This is common sense, but something many overlook. Every 6 hours of running time should cue you to change your machine needle, or with each new project. You can tell when hand needles are getting dull by how they prick your finger. When in doubt, just change it and get in the habit of remembering. I learned a little trick of wrapping a discarded needle in masking tape for the safety of our trash collectors or other family members. You could also just save them in an old film tube (remember 35mm film?) as well and throw them out a few at a time.

Marking Tools

There are a ton of marking products for you to choose from. You can pick graphite, vanishing ink, water-soluble ink, and all kinds of chalk products. You will really have to sample several

products because they all write differently on fabric. Some are smooth, some are faint, and some are very dark. You will probably have several things you keep around that will work with dark fabrics, lights, and mediums. Some products are better for certain applications than others. Whatever you pick, just remember that almost everything becomes permanent when it is heat set, and that can mean an iron, the dryer, or even sitting in a sunny window on a hot day. A lot of quilters will sample certain tools on scrap fabric first and see if they truly wash out before marking an entire quilt top. Just don't ever use ink, that never comes out.

Piecing-Hand or Machine/Tools

Once you have fabric, washed it, ironed it, and then cut it, you are naturally going to move on to piecing those bits and bobs together. This step is called piecing. (lots of quilters enjoy this process the most, as it is very creative and rewarding) Let me tell you what you need for whichever method you are applying:

For Hand or Machine Piecing

- *your trusty ruler
- *pencil, chalk marking tool, or fabric marking pen
- *thread (machine or hand)
- *hand sewing needles or your sewing machine with needles
- *note: Weather you hand or machine piece, you are working with 1/4" seams **always**. This is quite different from garment construction or your standard sewing machine foot, which has a 3/8" seam. Accuracy is SO important. I like drawing my 1/4" seams by hand on all my pieces, and then follow the line when piecing with either method. This is especially useful if you don't have a 1/4" patchwork foot for your machine.

Piecing your quilt blocks together will just take practice. The more you do it, the more you will find your comfort level and be able to experiment with methods to get speedy, but continue to be accurate.

Always iron your seams before you sew the next piece on. You can also "square up" your blocks as you piece.

Quilting-Hand or Machine/Tools

After all your careful fabric selection, cutting, ironing, and then sewing pieces back together to make your quilt top, you will be ready to *quilt* the quilt. You have options when you get to this point. I will not get into execution details in this class, as we are just going to talk about what tools you need.

Remember, there is a place for everyone in the quilting world. You can just make tops and have other people quilt your top. You can just quilt your tops with straight lines on your own home sewing machine. You could tackle hand quilting if you wish. You could also buy tops someone else makes and just quilt however you like. There is no shame in any of these types of quilters.

Hand Quilting

If you decide to hand quilt, you have the option to do it free-form or follow patterns, stencils, or templates. You can also quilt straight lines, diagonal, or stitch-in-the-ditch. Whichever you

choose, you will generally need these things:

- *hand needles
- * hand quilting thread
- * hoop or frame
- * scissors and a thimble (if you prefer)
- * templates, stencils, or ruler (optional)
- * marking tools

Machine Quilting

If you are going the machine quilting route, you will have the options of doing free-motion, or to follow the blocks (stitch-in-the-ditch), or to use stencils, templates, or patterns. For this you will need:

- sewing machine
- walking foot (optional)
- darning foot (for free motion)

- needles
- machine quilting thread
- templates, stencil, or ruler
- marking tools

Whichever method you choose, you will also need to baste the quilt to keep it together until all the quilting is complete. There are several ways you can go about this too. You can make long running stitches across the quilt with thread or you can safety pin the layers together. There are some basting gadgets on the market for making this process easier, but I don't use or recommend those. It is really not hard to baste, doesn't take much time, and you will be happy when you find what works for you.

Value-Personal and Practical

There is really no way to categorize or quantify the value of a quilt. So much time, dedication, and attention goes into any project you do, whether by hand, machine, or a combination of both. This is a fun art, and if you stress over any aspect of it, it will cease to be fun and you won't enjoy the process. Quilting is not an instant gratification art form by nature, so patience is a great asset to have. Many women find it soothing and relaxing, and enjoy working on little bits at a time. Some women like easy fast projects so they feel a sense of accomplishment. In the end, I want you to enjoy each step of the way, and be happy with your finished project because *you* made it.

Happy Quilting!