

Charming Station

Quilt Project

Embroidering the Blocks



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Embroidering the Blocks

After all the preparation, purchasing and practices, it's time to start working on your embroidered blocks. For the purposes of **this quilt** you will want to have:

12 designs that fit a 4x4 hoop

You can:

- use a set that has fewer than 12 designs and repeat some designs if you want
- use a set that has fewer than 12 designs and use a “filler” block for the other areas (for instance, we have a free set of fillers that include some hearts and stars if that fits with your theme.)
- mix and match designs from various sets to get 12
- use a set that is bigger than 4x4 - however you will have to make adjustments to all of the measurements from this point on to finish your quilt. If this is your first quilt, stick to a 4x4 set so that you don't get confused.

Preparation

In Lesson 2 we talked about the great “Pre-wash” debate. If you decided to skip the pre-wash, go on to the next paragraph. If you decided to pre-wash, do that now. Once the fabric has dried, press out all wrinkles with an iron. Try not to push too hard on the fabric or you could actually stretch it a bit (the heat and steam will do that if you are not careful).

To Cut or Not to Cut?

Folks are sometimes surprised to find out that I don't usually embroider on squares of fabric. I usually cut strips of fabric that are about 9 inches wide (1/4 yard) from the bolt. That gives me a piece that is 9x44 or so (depending on the actual width of the fabric on the bolt). I then cut that into two pieces so I have 2 that are 9 x 22.

I hoop one end of this and embroider the first design. I move the hoop to the center and do the second design and then move the hoop to the other end and do the third design.

Any particularly compelling reason to do this? Nope! I just think it's easier to keep track of the blocks in a set (I'll end up looking for 4 strips of fabric for 12 designs instead of 12 blocks). I also buy stabilizer in rolls that usually comes about 20 inches wide. I can cut strips of stabilizer to go with the strips of fabric and that is just a bit more efficient when you are sewing out a series like this (which is what I do quite a bit).



Using Squares

If you want to work with squares, please cut squares that are at least **9 inches** on each side. Yes - this is really big, but this is your first quilt and you want to have plenty of room around the design to work with!

We will end up trimming these blocks down to size for the quilt. If you start with the exact size the quilt needs you may find that the embroidery has pulled the fabric in toward the center and your square is no longer square or big enough.

In addition, the extra inches around your designs give you a little “wobble room”. Unless you are an absolute master at getting your fabric hooped exactly right so that the design sews out dead center, having a little wobble room after you are finished embroidering will allow you to trim the block so that design is in the middle where you want it.

Using Strips

If you want to use strips, cut them about 9 inches wide by the width of the fabric. It is a little more manageable to cut that strip in a half so that you have two that are 9 x 22.

Make sure that you center your designs as you go down the strip so that there is enough room between them to cut out the squares you need. This should give you a little extra “wobble” room for centering the designs in the block when you cut them out.

Stabilizer

Part of the recommendation about stabilizer relates to the kind of designs that you have chosen to use:

- Redwork will require very little stabilizing
- Filled designs will require more stabilizer
- Densely filled designs will need even more stabilizer

What kind of Stabilizer?

- Sheer Mesh:** After some testing with the regular mesh as well as the diagonal mesh, it appears that either of these is an excellent choice for use on the back of a quilt block. The sheer mesh (which is almost transparent) will not create a white shadow behind your design and it will remain soft and as pliable as your fabric.
- Poly Mesh:** I also tested a soft poly mesh that was white rather than transparent. It remained soft and pliable but there is a definite shadow showing through behind the embroidery design.
- Tear Away:** Not really optimal because any scrap you don't remove will leave a white shadow; it can also make your design stiff in the center of the fabric block
- Cut Away:** Like tear away, it will leave a shadow and can also make your design stiff

You can use any of these as long as you are aware of the pluses and minuses for each.

How Much Stabilizer?

For a quilt, you would like to use as little stabilizer as possible and still have a good design without puckering. This is one case where I highly recommend you do a test sew out and see what it looks like (especially if you have a limited amount of the fabric that you will be using for your embroidery blocks). Any other fabric of the same weight will do (whether it is white or not) and any colors for the sew out will do (it's a test!)

For my quilts, I prefer to start with one layer of sheer mesh. If your design is filled, you may want to hoop a layer of sheer mesh and then slide a square of tear away under the hoop for additional support. If your design is really dense, you may need even more stabilizer. You can hoop two layers of mesh or use a heavier weight for tear away for the piece you slide under the hoop, etc.

Since we are not in a classroom situation, I can't see everyone's designs and make recommendations. You will need to test a design or two to see what works best for your design and on your machine. The next section has some tips for figuring out how dense a design is.

How Do You Know If a Design Is Dense?

We are going to back track just a bit here. Different digitizers use different methods to create their designs so there is no one pat answer to this question. Here are a few clues to help you gauge things:

- What is the stitch count? If the stitch count for a 4x4 design is 15,000 to 17,000 stitches it's probably fairly dense.
- My dealer once told me to plan for 1 layer of stabilizer for every 20 minutes of sewing. If a design takes less than 20 minutes, one layer should do it. If it takes more than 20 but less than 40 two layers, and so on. This does work most of the time.
- Does a design have a lot of shading (one kind of solid color fill with a lot of other stitches on top of that fill)? That means that those parts of the design are more dense (more stitches going into that area).
- Does the design sew embroidery stitches across most of the 4x4 field or is it a tall skinny design in the center (or short, fat one across the center)? The more a design fills the entire field, the more stitches it will have.

	
<p>This design has 10109 stitches and fills the 4x4 frame quite a bit</p>	<p>This design only has 7564 stitches because it is taller and skinnier than the first one</p>

- Does a design have a satin stitch for the outline? If this is not an appliqué design, this may be a sign that the design is poorly done. In any case, a satin stitch outline like this sample is going to make the design much denser.

	
<p>This design has 19229 stitches and measures 3.88 x 2.89. You can see that all of the outlines are satin stitches.</p>	<p>Our version of this design only has 12083 stitches and is 3.89 x 3.13 (bigger than the other one!)</p>

- Does the design use a lot of fancy fills in the larger areas? These might look nice for texture but they usually signal a larger stitch count and more density.

	
<p>This design has 12538 stitches using a patterned fill in the light yellow area of the star</p>	<p>This is the same design with a plain fill in the light yellow area and it only has 9482 stitches.</p>
<p>These are both the same size.</p>	

Your machine has to do more work laying down stitches to get the pattern to show up so it makes the designs more dense.

Thread

There is a great, on-going debate among embroiderers whether to use polyester thread or rayon thread. There is really only one specific fact that may impact your decision for a baby quilt:

**polyester thread will withstand repeated washing and
can tolerate bleach better than rayon thread**

If this quilt is going to be used and washed, you may want to choose polyester so that the colors in the designs hold up better. If this is going to be a wall hanging that is rarely washed and won't be bleached, then you really don't have to worry.

Brand of Thread

The brand of thread that you use is up to you. Every machine has its own "personality" and some do better with one brand than another. Thread also reacts to its environment so if your sewing area (or storage area) is extremely hot or cold, or humid or dry, your thread will react differently than someone else's thread.

When I got my first machine, I was given a kit with an assortment of Isacord polyester thread. It has always worked well for me but can be rather expensive. I have recently begun to switch my thread supply over to Admelody from www.BFC-Stash.com. It is far more economical, much easier to store and they have a really wide range of colors. I'm very happy with the way it works on all of my machines - old and new.

Can Polyester and Rayon be Mixed?

Yes - keeping in mind that the rayon might fade if bleached. Sometimes, you just need a specific color and can't find it in the kind of thread you normally use. I have mixed Sulky (which is rayon) with Isacord Polyester on lots of different projects and there is no way to tell. It's really up to your machine and how well it tolerates going from one to the other.

Bobbin Thread

I generally use white bobbin thread for most designs except:

- redwork or blue work - *on my machines*, I can see a discernable difference when there is white in the bobbin instead of a matching color. In this case, I fill the bobbin with the same thread that I use on the top.
- large patches of red or black - *on my machines*, I can sometimes see tiny white dots at the edge of a large fill area when the color is red or black. If I switch to a matching bobbin, this isn't noticeable.

Notice that the key here is that I keep saying "*on my machines*". Remember that each machine's personality means it will react differently to brands, environment, etc. Test sewing is the best way to find out what your machine likes and doesn't like.

You can use pre-wound bobbins or choose to wind your own. I prefer to do the latter because it is far more economical for me than buying pre-wound bobbins (but I probably sew out a lot more embroidery than most people!).

Most brands of thread have a thread specifically designated as bobbin thread. I usually buy OESD bobbin thread which is 41 weight in 6000 meter cones. This is optimal for my machines and was recommended by my dealer - *for my machines!* If your dealer has recommended something else or if you have found a good bobbin thread for your machine, by all means stick with it. I have used 61 weight bobbin thread and found that it worked okay in my newer machines but not my older ones.

The decision here should be based on 1) what works in your machine, and 2) what will coordinate with the designs you plan to do. If you haven't had any issues before with the color of the bobbin thread, then you are in good shape. If you have noticed little "dots" showing through the stitching or bobbin thread pulling up to the top of the design, you should experiment with other brands and other settings on your machine and resolve these issues before embroidering your blocks.

Go for It!

Once you have decided which designs to use, whether you want to work on blocks or strips, what stabilizer to use and what thread to use, you are ready to go.

- Embroider each of your designs - make sure you have enough space around the design so that when you trim the block down, it will be in the center.
- If the idea of spacing the designs out on a strip is confusing, work on the 9" squares instead and save yourself all the trouble.
- Remove any tear away stabilizer when you are finished - you can leave the sheer mesh in place.
- **DO NOT TRIM ANY BLOCKS UNTIL YOU HAVE EMBROIDERED ALL 12!!!**

Trimming the blocks

You already know how to embroider so the previous step wasn't hard. This next step is the one that can make or break the look of your quilt.

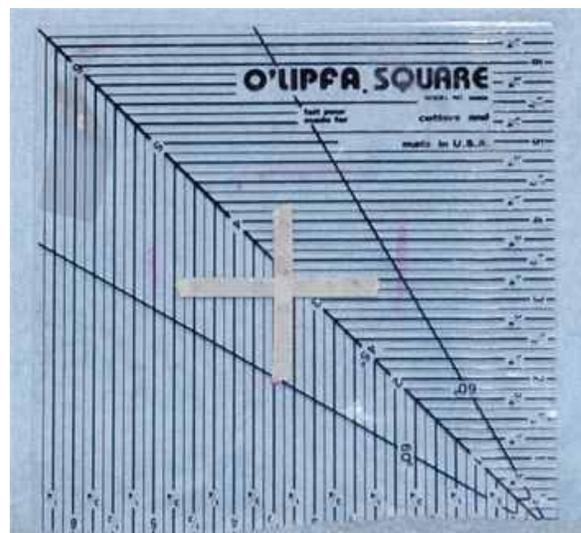
The goal here is to take the designs that you have embroidered and trim the excess fabric around the designs so that the **final size is 6 1/2" square** *and* so that the **designs are centered in the middle of the square**.

Start with your rotary cutter, mat and the 6 1/2" square ruler. Depending on the brand of your ruler, you may need to hunt for the center. Take a close look at the markings on your ruler:

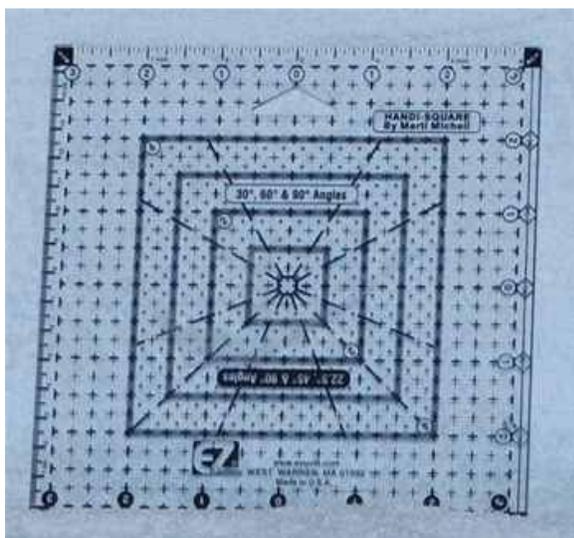
- Is there a distinct 1/2 inch on one side of the ruler?
- Is the extra 1/2 inch distributed on each side of the ruler?



This Omnigrip ruler has the 1/2 on the left side and at the bottom. The red x indicates where the center is on this ruler. Notice that it is NOT at the cross mark of the ruler lines..



This O'Lippa Square is completely different and the tape in the center marks the middle - this one is NOT very helpful in centering the blocks



This is the Handi-Square by Marti Michel. It is already marked for the center and makes centering blocks really easy. The extra space is 1/4 all the way around.

The idea is to find the center on your square ruler and create a square marking like the one shown here on the Handi-Square that will allow you to center the ruler over the design.

This ruler can still be found online and runs about \$6.95.

Where ever you find the exact center point, mark it in some way. You can use a Sharpie pen (but that will stay on there forever!). I like to put a little dot of tape or cut a small corner off of a label and stick it on there. This way, if you need a different marking for your next project (or none at all), the label can be removed.

Next measure out from the center and mark the lines all the way around that are 2" from the center. This is the 4x4 mark for your design. Do not cover over the center part of the ruler - we want to have a window that we can use to see the design in the center and how much fabric is on either side, at the top or at the bottom.

The goal here is to make your ruler as useful as the one pictured here. This one allows me to see the center of the design and the outer edges. I can shift the ruler around until the design is centered - top to bottom and side to side.

Once you have your ruler ready, you will do each of your blocks **one at a time** with the following steps. Do NOT try to stack the blocks and cut more than one at a time. The designs will vary in size and stacking usually doesn't work well.

- Press your block if necessary to be sure that it lays flat.
 - Lay it on your cutting mat.
 - Position the ruler over the design
 - Move the ruler around so that you can find the best position - where the fabric around the design is even on both sides and the design is centered in the middle. Don't forget to look at the top and bottom of the design as well.
 - Once you have the ruler over the center, you can pick up the rotary cutter and open it.
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- **Remember the safety rules:**
 - Always cut away from yourself
 - Never put the cutter down without closing the security guard over the blade
 - Cut standing up so that you use the weight of your arm to do the work
 - Be careful where your "ruler" hand is positioned so that you don't cut into your hand
 - Never cross hands while cutting - if your hands are crossed, the signal to your brain could be too and you can easily get cut doing that..

- Cut each of the four sides of the block to fit the 6 1/2" ruler size.
 - Don't allow the ruler to wiggle away from you. For instance, don't let the ruler slide to the left as you run the cutter along the edge - you won't have a straight line.
 - It might be easier to cut one side and then turn the mat 90 degrees and cut the next. Then turn and cut and turn and cut until the whole block is done. Turning the mat means you shouldn't have to reposition the ruler but I would still take a close look to make sure it didn't slip while you were moving the mat.
 - Take your time here. If you go too fast, the cutter may slip and one of the blocks may have to be redone. Worse yet, if the cutter slips you may get cut and bleed all over your blocks!

Old Quilters Tip:

If you happen to get a small drop of blood on a part of the quilt that you are working on, try to summon up a drop of your saliva. Your own saliva is often a complete solvent for a small drop of your blood. If you act quickly, you may never be able to find that spot again!

What to Do If There Is a Mistake

When you are all finished trimming, re-measure each of your blocks. Make absolutely certain that each is exactly 6 1/2" square. If one is too big, trim it down. If one is too small, take it out and set it aside.

- If everything is the right size, congratulations!
- If there is one block that is too small, don't feel bad - I do that all the time!

Your choices are fairly straightforward. You can embroider another block with that design and trim it correctly. Or, you can trim all of the other 11 blocks down to match the one that is smaller.

This quilt is already going to be relatively small. If you trim all of your blocks down to match the one that is the smallest, your quilt will be even smaller than originally planned. In addition, you will have to find the correct measurements for your borders since your quilt will no longer match the layout the way we have designed it.

In the long run, it would probably be easier and faster to just sew out another block and cut it to the correct size.

Finished!

You need to have all 12 blocks embroidered and trimmed before we go on to the next step which will be assembling the quilt top.

We will not be posting another lesson for a couple of weeks in order to give everyone time to create these blocks.