**Fabric (choices, begging, and preparation)**

* This is where another bit of skill and discernment enters the sewing studio: collecting fabrics.
* Quilt Shops – Approaching these specialty shops to collect as much as possible, while keeping in your budget, can be difficult. Know this – from my experience there is a pecking order in terms of quality and quantity. When you are poor, there is a tendency to skip the higher end of the pecking order. Do not do that. Sales, coupons, discounts, and birthdays may find you in the way of a small stash of something precious. I have tended toward collecting fat quarters when serendipity arises. Quilt Country, in Lewisville, Texas in the past had a wide assortment of fat quarters. When I went searching there, I found a selection all arranged by color. I was always able to find a length to use for accents in the quilt I designed.
* Notions and oddities that professional quilters use I often found on the sale racks in the back of the store. It was a boon with every visit to the store.
* After quilt stores, big box name brand store such as Joann, Hancock’s, and Hobby Lobby come next in the pecking order. Like independently owned quilt stores, I only shop at the big box store if I have no other opportunity or means to buy what I need. Interfacing, muslin, and pins for needle turn appliqué fit into that category. You can find fabrics similar to quilt store stock at big box stores for a cheaper price as well. Wal-Mart’s cutting counter falls in this category as well. They sell cheaper quality cotton at a cheaper price. If you are not making an heirloom quilt, look at their holdings, it might surprise you.
* The next stop you should make time for before you make any major fabric purchases is to find the fabric district in your closest city. It may be located in a manufacturing district or in a design district in that city. I frequent the shops on the lower end of Harry Hines in Dallas, Texas, USA. My favorites are C+C Fabrics and Warehouse Fabrics. There are more shops than those, but I have come to know the selections and discounts offer there so well over the years, that I stop to shop there before I go anywhere else. When going to these places keep in mind your strategy of using more that just 100% Quilter’s cottons. Polyester, linen, and upholstery fabric may attract your attention so much, so that the $1.00/yd cutting price may seduce you completely. Sometimes you have to buy a minimum of yardage, but at that price, it really does not matter. Since I began focusing on making quilts that are 100” x 100”, roughly King size, I decided to find fabric for the backing in the district. What is on the bolts tends to be 54” – 60” in width. I do not have to use much brainpower to piece together a back. One fine sewed line down the middle is all I work. Checking the bins in the back of the store may yield a cache of gems for you at a small price. I once found a series of upholstery books taken apart. The fabric swatches were a little bigger than 8.5” x 11”. I gathered about ten pieces from the bin. The man at the cutting table only charged me twenty-five cents per panel.
* Next of the list for fabric shopping is second hand stores, flea markets, and garage sales. Remember this is not an opportunity to ask for 3 ½ yards per bolt. You are looking at curtains, blankets, clothing, sheets, buttons, tablecloths, etcetera for their beauty, durability, and yield. The eventual chore is not in selection, but in preparation. Taking apart seams, separating layers, removing trim, and decoration will take up a considerable amount of time. Yet, committing to the upfront work with diligence will yield a cache that no one else can produce. The skill is in deconstructing for using large sections.
* Almost forgot! When choosing from these alternative locations, check the material thoroughly for cigarette burns, nicotine and perfume smells, dry rot, insects, color discharge, and discoloration just to name a few. Sometimes these issues end by using the fabric for other projects than quilts or clothing for kids or adults. I former employer told me something of Texas state law about permitting only the use of new fabric in children toys or clothing. Personally speaking, I would be embarrassed making a dress for my niece using fabric from someone former smoking den. I take time to turn the fabric over to examine what is hiding in a seam. I also put my nose to smell the fabric to determine if the odors are permanent.
* At his stage is where you want to train your identification skills - namely to discern between natural and manmade fibers. I have pared my stock of many thick double knits and stretchy polyesters. Running them beneath the needle paired with cotton always leads to a debacle of tension culminating in loose strings and knits. A ballpoint needle only solved the patchwork for part of the problem while causing havoc and runs in the rest. For example, back sweatshirts with interfacing to limit their flexibility. This I learned from a friend who makes excellent t-shirt quilts. Still my personal choices sway from those fabrics. I prefer cottons, silks, wools, and a handful of polyesters. Prepare these by washing in cold water and securing the color from running, press then with starch and store. Do not forget about using Synthropol and Shout color catchers to prevent running. In addition, a modicum of ammonia and borax may alleviate foreign odors and well as brighten colors.
* Beg, trade, or relieve someone of his or her grandmother’s stash. I started buying fabric second hand to supplement what my mother gave me seven years ago. I used whatever I could rationalize and understand the fabrics to be good for. I had an overflowing stash of florals and pastels from second hand sources. I could never find gender neutral or masculine fabric - at least not until I began shopping in the fabric district of Dallas. I start with my current mass and supplement with finding from that part of the city.
* At some point of frustration and poverty, I began asking for fabrics from quilters for trade, payment, or donation. Humble was not the word for what I was feeling. I worked through the doubt and the “No, I’m sorry, I don’t/I can’t.” I worked through being the only quilter without expensive fabric and constant flow of patterns. The women at the shop use to tell me to keep working, keep showing, keep competing no matter what. I try not to disappoint them, so I keep working, showing, and competing. The last stash that supplemented my collection was from a classmate’s friend. Her mother had died and left a large collection of notions and fabric. Thirteen garbage bags later and I am still sewing primarily from than gift. That was about three years ago. Asking never hurts. It is just getting over the initial fear.
* Another note to ask about is that some quilt stores have a basket of remnants that they sell from upon request. Quilt Country in Lewisville, Texas once kept a basket with small plastic bags to stuff for a dollar.
* Scraps and lengths
* Embellishment, color controls, texture
* Consider Non-quilt items worth making patchwork as a base.
* Sorting by color – making color flats from scraps and remnants can give some order to your scrap bags. After sewing together all the piece of one relative color, cut to squares of needed widths and lengths for filling an undeveloped section in the quilt. Use as an accent or blend with an overall scrappy approach. Another way to classify them is to call them crazy quilt block accents.
* Maintain your scraps the best you can. First sort by shape and/or color. For those larger portions of scraps that measure larger than a fat quarter, consider cutting the lengths into strips for strip piecing. A variety of widths can produce a quilt with unique motions and reserve. Consider also though to cut widths between 1” and 2.5” for easy handling and uniformity of appearance. Let the optical design you choose in construction of the overall piece do the work for you. Compliment the layout with simple straightforward quilting. Either stitch in the ditch or outlining simple formed shapes can do the trick.
* Skill sets: With the help of the following tutorials, learning the below methods will help you in proceeding to do the work.
* Mola
* Reverse Machine Appliqué – Take two pieces of fabric. (Two different colors and 8 1/2” x 11”.) Draw a large circle on the darker fabric using a bowl and a chalk pencil. Place it over the top of the second piece of fabric. Sew a ¼” seam allowance around the edge. Sew a straight stitch along the outline of the chalk pencil. Take the embroidery scissors and cut out the inner circle with 1/8” space from the stitched outline. Do not cut all the way through both fabrics. Look for the back fabric through this seamed and cut hole. Go back of the raw edge of the circle with a satin stitch.
* Needle turn appliqué
* Machine Appliqué
* Stretch before, during, and after sewing. Take frequent breaks to keep limber and able to concentrate.
* Paper Templates – Stitch three layers of fabric together along the outside edge using ¼” guide for the seam. Layer the colors of the fabric from lightest on the bottom to the darkest on top.
* Using Elmer’s classroom washable glue, coat the back of you design thinly. Working quickly, position the paper on the sandwiched fabric. Smooth over with your hands to secure a good fix. Suggestion: for the image, choose something with open line work, not a densely shaded picture. Try a compilation of shapes, initially like nested circles before trying anything complex. When you delve into a harder design, make sure the lines truncate into an organic shape.
* Stitch along the outlines of the image with a straight stitch. Overlap the finished shape about ½”. Take the bundle out of the machine and place on an open clean surface. Peel the paper off and rub a damp cloth over the bundle to remove the excess glue. Cut through one or two levels of fabric for each shape. Remember to leave 1/8” space between the straight stitch and your cut. Follow up with a medium width sating stitch around and over the straight stitch. Continue to cover over all lines of the forms until complete. Turn over the bundle and cut away the excess fabric until a single layer of fabric forms overall.
* Use this method with complex organic line to produce a three dimensional shape through shadow play, chiaroscuro, and depth.
* I have yet to use more than four layers of fabric for any quilt in this method. Removing the excess fabric makes for a lighter top to quilt and a bundle that is easier to pass through the machine.