Mosaic Imagery in Art Quilts

by Heidi Proffetty

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Host Susan Brubaker Knapp with Heidi Proffetty

Materials

- Inspiration photo
- Photo-editing software
- Fine-tip marker
- Assortment of light and dark batik and hand-dyed fabrics for mosaic pieces
- Spray starch or liquid starch (I used Terial Magic™.)
- Paper-backed, pressure-sensitive fusible web (I used Lite Steam-A-Seam 2®.)
- Lightweight fusible web (I used Mistyfuse®.)
- Featherweight sew-in stabilizer
- Freezer paper
- Digital cutter and accessories (I used a Janome Artistic® Edge.)
- Chalk pencil
- Painter's tape
- Tweezers
- Cotton fabric for background and backing
- Batting (I used WoolFelt from National Nonwovens as batting.)
- Fine polyester thread

Why use a digital cutter in your art process? I have found many reasons. It eliminates the need to hand cut fabric pieces or templates. Designs can be traced without using a light box or taping them to a window. Any part of a design can be instantly recut perfectly. Elements can be moved, changed, or resized easily, plus it has the ability to cut fabric pieces ranging from very simple to extremely intricate while maintaining crisp fabric edges. And, depending on the cutter's software, you may have access to a color palette—a fabulous feature for adding or changing colors in the design before you even begin to cut fabric. As a fiber artist, the digital cutter was the tool that gave me a creative voice that is uniquely my own. I was already creating pictorial art quilts emulating the techniques of other artists, but I hadn't discovered my creative voice. A few years ago, I previewed a digital cutter for the first time. As I watched the machine effortlessly cut beautiful, intricate fabric shapes, I realized that a digital cutter could play an integral role in turning my photographs into mosaic art quilts.

I do all of the design work, starting by choosing a photo that evokes an emotional connection—usually human faces and figures. Referencing my photo, I draw the design starting with contour lines and then fill each of the areas with mosaic shapes. This drawing is then traced and cut using the digital cutter.

What is a Digital Cutter?

Unlike a die-cutting machine, digital cutters allow for cutting infinitely variable designs. Using the machine's software, artists can either import their own designs or manipulate provided templates. Each design can be resized, cropped, or edited. A blade then precisely cuts out the designed images. Digital cutters allow for replication of designs, and most are able to handle a variety of materials, such as fabric, paper, and vinyl. Digital cutters are available from several manufacturers.

INSTRUCTIONS

Edit & print a photo

1. Choose a photo in sharp focus with light and dark contrast. (*figure 1*)

2. Use photo-editing software to crop the image. Adjust the contrast and reduce the color/value range to between 7–10 distinct colors.

Tip: *I find using this range works well for a mosaic quilt. In Photoshop®, this command is called Posterize. Other software may have a similar setting.*

3. Resize the image to the desired quilt size. Save the file and print the photo. If the image is larger than your home printer, a local print shop may be able to print an oversized image. As an alternative, print the image on your home printer and then tape the pages together.

Draw the mosaic

1. On the full-size printout, draw the contour lines using the fine-tip marker. Fill each section with mosaic shapes (square, rectangular, or irregular). Once the design is drawn, scan and save it on your computer. If your design is larger than your scanner, scan it at a local print shop. (*figure 2*)

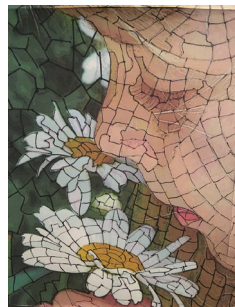**NOTE:** *For the next few steps, refer to your digital cutter's instructions on importing, tracing, exporting designs,*
working with cutting mats, blades, and fabric preparation.

2. Referring to both the marked image and the original photo, select fabrics based on the values using an assortment of light and dark fabrics. Tightly woven fabrics such as batik or hand-dyed work best with a cutter.

Tip: *You are the artist. If the subject of your photo is wearing a red shirt, once you have defined the values, you can easily swap out those values for similar ones in the color of your choice.*

Trace the design

1. Open the marked and saved design in the digital cutter's software as a background image. Trace each shape of your design. After the traced design is finished, save it on your computer. (*figure 3*) Your software may include an auto trace feature: this works fine for simple designs, but it may have difficulty processing complex images.

Note: *Your cutter's software will save the file as a "cut file." Depending on the cutter, the file format must be a recognizable cut file such as a .SVG file.*

Prepare templates

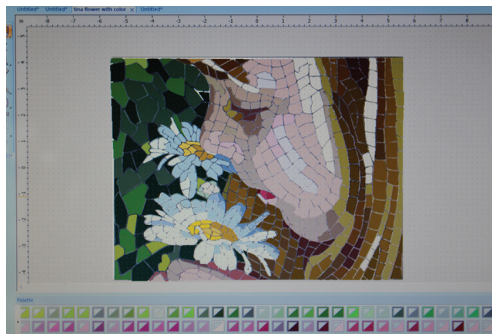1. Break the entire design up into sections with each section no larger than the border on the cutting mat.

2. The templates will be cut from freezer paper. Place the freezer paper shiny side down on the cutting mat. Using the digital cutter, cut each of the templates that compose the entire design.

3. Lift the templates carefully from the mat and discard the little cut pieces left on the mat.

Note: *Cutting mats have a light tack to them that temporarily adheres the freezer paper or fabric to the cutting mat.*

4. On the background fabric, use a chalk pencil to mark the outer dimensions of the design.

Tip: *I prefer using black cotton fabric for the background. Black separates the appearance the mosaic pieces. Experiment with different colored background fabrics. Each will have different effect on the appearance of your mosaic.*

5. Assemble the freezer paper templates on the background fabric, matching the design and the outer edge. Stabilize the templates with painter's tape or lightly press the freezer templates (shiny side down) onto the background fabric. (*figure 4*)

Prepare fabric & cut mosaic pieces

1. Prepare the fabrics using either Terial Magic or spray starch. Cut a piece of paper-backed, pressure-sensitive

figure 1

figure 2

figure 3

figure 4

fusible the size needed for each color section. Press (no steam) the fusible to the starched fabric. Trim around the outside dimensions of the fusible. Remove the paper and place the fabric fusible side down on the mat.

Which Thread is the Right Thread?

I work with clear monofilament polyester as my top thread and extra fine polyester thread in the in bobbin. These threads are very fine and they blend into the fabric making the mosaic itself the primary element of the design. Using this combination of threads eliminates having to change thread to coordinate with the fabric colors.

2. Use the digital cutter to cut the fabric mosaic pieces for each template. Repeat for each fabric.

3. Working one template at a time, use tweezers to lift each of the cut fabric mosaic pieces off of the cutting mat—inserting the pieces into the empty sections of each template. Set aside the remaining uncut sections of fused fabric to recut additional pieces if necessary. *(figure 5)*

4. After one template is filled, carefully lift and remove that template. Press the fabric pieces with a hot iron (no steam) to fuse them in place.

5. Continue this process until all of the templates have been removed, revealing the design. Make any necessary adjustments. *(figure 6)*

6. Steam press the entire design to permanently fuse the mosaic pieces to your background fabric.

Assemble the quilt

1. Apply lightweight fusible web to each layer of the quilt sandwich. Fuse the mosaic top to stabilizer, the stabilizer to batting, and the cotton backing to the other side of the batting.

2. Press the entire quilt sandwich to ensure that all of the layers are fused.

3. Quilt your design using a random stippling stitch. Sew close to the mosaic edges to prevent lifting. *(figure 7)*

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figure 5

figure 6

figure 7