

# First, Make a Cup of Tea

by Libby Williamson

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Host Susan Brubaker Knapp with Libby Williamson

## Materials

- Tea bags (I used Celestial Seasonings Peppermint Tea, my favorite.)
- Unbleached muslin scraps
- Liquid matte medium
- Black sewing thread
- Sewing machine with free-motion capability
- White gesso
- Acrylic paint
- Toothpick or skewer
- Cotton swab

## Optional

- Tiny scraps of fabric and thin paper for collage
- Crochet thread and large-eye needle for assembly

Steamy tea and a good book on a rainy day provide more than blissful comfort. The overlooked bonus is the lowly tea bag, often discarded without a thought. This substrate, stained in lovely hues of ochre and sepia, begs to be adorned with fabric, thread, and paint.

Tea bags were an accidental invention attributed by some to an early American tea merchant who gave sample-sized silk pouches of tea to his customers. His intention, though, was misunderstood. Rather than emptying the contents into strainers, some dropped the entire bags into the pot. Thus the convenient, disposable tea bag was born. Lucky us. More art supplies!

Today's tea bags are made from various fibers, most commonly abaca, the leaf stalk of the banana plant. The resulting paper is surprisingly strong, able to

withstand boiling water, and sometimes a wringing squeeze.

The shape and construction of teabags varies. Some have folded tops with tiny staples used to fasten a tag with string. There are stringless pillow-shaped bags with the tea sealed inside. Some bags are round, others have multiple compartments for the tea leaves, and some are fancy orbs. I have played with them all.

For this project I chose square, stringless bags. The shape provided a straight edge for binding. These tea bags have a ¼" glued perimeter with an embossed linear pattern, creating a frame around the edge of each art piece. The bags I used contained peppermint tea. Some fruity herbal teas will stain in interesting bright pink shades; black tea yields a darker tone.



## DIRECTIONS

1. Brew your tea and enjoy! I save up my bags so that I can work on several pieces simultaneously.
2. Completely dry the bags with the tea leaves inside. Using small, sharp scissors, cut a small slit through the top layer of paper along one vertical edge. Try not to cut through both layers. Make the slit as close as possible to the sealed side. Expand



figure 1



figure 2



figure 3

- the slit along the edge, stopping at the sealed glue line. (figure 1)
3. Empty out the tea. (I add mine to my plants as fertilizer.) A small paintbrush will help release any stubborn leaves.
4. Cut a piece of muslin slightly smaller than the inside of the pocket to use as a liner. Unravel the edges a little so they blend in. Insert the liner by folding it over your finger and sliding it gently between the layers of the tea bag. Using a skewer or toothpick and a damp cotton swab, maneuver the fabric into place, aligning it with the edges and easing it into the corners. (figure 2)
5. With a small paintbrush, spread a drop of matte medium along the open seam to seal the bag closed. (figure 3) Let dry. Flip the tea bag over so the mended side is on the back.

**Note:** If planning to finish the tea bags as a book, position the glued edges on the left side so they will be hidden in the bookbinding.

6. Collage thin papers or bits of fabric onto the surface of the tea bag with

matte medium. Let dry before stitching. (figure 4)

7. Using black thread for the top feed and bobbin, machine stitch the design. Stitch within the stabilized area to avoid paper tears. Trim threads.

**Tip:** Start with simple designs before attempting more intricate images. Add more detail with paint, or sketch the design using a water-soluble fabric marker.

8. Depending on the degree of tea stains on the paper, apply gesso to restore the “white” of the paper. The paint will show up as brighter colors. Alternately, natural (non-gessoed) bags will yield lovely muted paintings. Apply gesso and acrylic paints with tiny brushes in thin layers inside the stitched lines. Let each layer of paint dry before applying the next.



figure 4



## Finishing

Enjoy your adorned tea bags as individual tiny treasures—or try these finishing techniques.

### Book assembly

1. Align the edges of 5 bags and pin together. (figure 5)
2. Using free-motion or straight stitch, sew through all layers along left edge to bind the book.

### Bunting assembly

1. Thread a hand-sewing needle with crochet thread and carefully pierce the top corner of the tea bag.

**Tip:** Catch the muslin in this stitch. If you pierce too close to the edge, the paper may tear.

2. Cut the thread approximately 8" long and tie a simple overhand knot about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " above the paper edge. Trim the thread tails. Gently rotate the knot to the back of the tea bag. (figure 6) Make a thread loop at the other top corner.
3. Make thread loops on each tea bag for the bunting.
4. Cut a 24" piece of crochet thread and thread it through all of the loops, stringing the bags together. Add a tiny drop of matte medium at the top of each thread loop if the bags slide together. ■

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figure 5



figure 6