

Ruching as Quilt Embellishment

by Cheryl Sleboda

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Host Susan Brubaker Knapp and quilt artist Cheryl Sleboda

Materials

- 2" x 18" strip of fabric, cut on grain
- Matching strong thread (I use 50wt cotton.)
- Long, hand-sewing needles (I use Jeana Kimball size 7 Embroidery/Wool Appliqué needles.)
- Beeswax to coat and strengthen thread (I use Mind Your Own Beeswax.)
- Quilt or project to sew the ruched trim onto

Optional

- 1" bias tape maker
- Heirloom Smocking Template or other slotted ruler

Ruching (pronounced *roo-shing*) is a historical and heirloom sewing method of gathering fabric. Derived from the word for beehive, *ruche* means to gather or pleat fabric. This method has adorned dresses and other fancy apparel for many years, but the word *ruche/ruching* was first used in the early 1800s.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Create a 'bias' tape strip, approximately 1" wide, using the 2" x 18" strip of fabric. (Fold the raw edges together lengthwise so you have a long skinny strip with the raw edges meeting in the middle.)


Tip: You can use a traditional bias tape maker, if you have one this size, or use this pin method like our grandmothers used. Using a pinnable ironing surface, insert a long straight pin into the board, making a mini bridge for the fabric to be folded under and pulled through. This 'bridge' opening should be about 1". Press the strip as it is pulled through.

2. Cut a length of thread about 12"–16" long. Thread the needle with this thread, knotting the end. Wax the thread to strengthen it.
3. With the raw edges facing you and starting at the bottom right corner, insert the needle so the knot is on the raw-edge side of the fabric. Take a second stitch at the same spot so the knot will not pull out.
4. Sew a running stitch at an angle toward the folded edge on the opposite side (the target).

For More Precision

I often eyeball the lengths and angles I sew but the sewing targets and lines can be marked using a tool like the Heirloom Sewing Template or a slotted ruler; you can mark the top and bottom targets, alternately, to give you something to sew toward or draw the sewing lines between targets, if desired.

5. Once you reach the opposite edge target—whichever side the thread exits on—loop the thread over the folded edge, and sew a running stitch in a zigzag angle toward the opposite fold's target. You will be sewing a running zigzag in this manner along the full length of the strip. Sewing narrow zigzags creates sharper gathers and sewing wider zigzags creates much softer and rounder gathers.
6. After about 3–4 zigzags, pull the thread gently to start gathering the fabric. Take a stay stitch to lock the gathers in place. This will act as an anchor—if the thread breaks along the length, you'll have less to re-sew.

Tip: *If you need a new length of thread, knot the old thread after pulling up the gathers. Start the next angle with a new piece of thread.* 

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Use the Ruching

After you have ruched the strip, the trim can be used in a variety of projects.

- Turn under the raw end and start turning the strip into a spiral, taking tacking stitches as you go to keep it in a flower shape. Many traditional Baltimore Album quilts have this feature.
- Add the trim in a single strip as a border or binding accent.
- Use it as a textural element in an art quilt. (figure 1)



figure 1