

Pet Portraits with a Twist

by Laurie Russman

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I love the new obsession with adult coloring books—they are one of my must-pack items for every flight. My other travel must-have is my iPad—which I use as a sketchbook—for planning out future pet portraits inspired by photos. Most of my work comes to life after many hours of tracing and trimming small bits of fabric for my large portraits. These pieces are incredibly rewarding but not exactly portable.



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Materials

- Ready-to-print fabric or your own fabric stabilized with a removable sheet such as freezer paper, 8½" x 11"
- Fabric markers
- Background, 10" x 12"
- Backing, 10" x 12"
- Batting, 10" x 12"
- Lightweight fusible web, ½ yd.
- Threads, colors to match subject and background fabric
- Topstitch needle (I usually use size 90 especially if I use trilobal 40wt thread.)
- Monofilament
- White fabric ink in a squeeze bottle or office correction fluid
- Original or copyright-free photo

Then it struck me ... instead of coloring on paper, color on fabric while on the road. This technique is a fun, fast way to turn a favorite photo into a fabric portrait in the studio. I use photos of animals but the technique is adaptable to other motifs and subjects. To begin, simply print a traced image onto fabric, grab a handful of fabric markers, and get coloring!

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Make a line drawing of the photo, either by tracing it with pencil and paper, or using photo editing software. Focus on the pet—the background will be cut away later. I prefer to do this digitally and use a simple, inexpensive app called Camera 4 Line Art on my smart phone. (figure 1) With this app, you can add as much or as little detail as desired. Alter the photo until there is just enough detail to



"Future Hero" • 9" x 12½"

- follow and be sure to save it on your device or computer.
2. Print the line drawing onto either paper-backed, ready-to-print fabric or your own fabric that has been temporarily stabilized sufficiently to go through a printer.

TIP: Each type of ready-to-print fabric has very specific instructions about the kind of printer it should be used with—laser or ink-jet—so be sure to purchase the right product for your hardware.

- Do not peel off the backing paper or remove the stabilizer. Color in the design as desired with the permanent ink markers.

TIP: Be sure to refer to the original photo for shades of color and direction of pen strokes as you are coloring. Making marks in the pattern of fur growth on the subject makes stitching decisions very easy later on.

- When complete, remove the backing paper. Apply fusible web to the back of the drawing, following the manufacturer's instructions, and let cool.
- Cut out the subject and fuse it to the background fabric. (figure 2)

TIP: Keep the background simple. I like using hand-dyed or batik fabric.

- Layer and baste the quilt. When making a quilt sandwich, place a piece of fusible web—the same size as the other pieces—between each layer. Start with the backing wrong side up, add a layer of fusible, then batting, fusible, and the quilt top right side up. Fuse. This stabilizes the piece and eliminates the need for basting.
- Prepare for thread painting by assembling the threads and needles. Load the bobbin with monofilament thread. Reflective polyester threads


Tips on choosing a photo for this technique

- Closer is better. Consider cropping your photo close to the subject.
- Limit yourself to featuring one pet—remember, this is a small quilt.
- Good contrast is necessary to differentiate among the pet's features.

give the “fur” a terrific sheen. Two-toned (not variegated, but 2 strands twisted) thread is my first choice for realistic eyes.

- Thread paint the subject heavily. (figure 3)
- Quilt the background. Use a thread color that blends with the background color to highlight the portrait.

Note: After thread painting, the background fabric may have a ripple. Choosing a fairly dense quilting stitch easily solves this problem. I like to use radiating lines for these small pieces—either straight or undulating—imagining the subject's eyes as the focal point. (figure 4)

- Trim the quilt, if needed, and finish the edges with a simple zigzag or satin stitch. 

neonkittyquilts.com



figure 1



figure 2



figure 3



figure 4

Thread painting tips

- When stitching animal faces, begin at the nose and move upward and then sideways, following the direction of the way fur grows. Frequently, the direction of your ink strokes will guide you, too.
- Stitching in the irises is the only slow-stitching part of this process. Begin at 1 corner of the eye and visualize a zigzag around the pupil.
- The final step for the eyes is a tiny dot or two of white paint to simulate highlights. This truly brings the subject's face to life. A toothpick and a bottle of correction fluid will also do the trick.