

Reverse Appliqué Hints, Tricks, and Tips

Charmayne Umbowers © 2004

Bob and I teach kite making classes occasionally. We always hope our students make a kite plus learn skills which will enable them to go home and make more kites. During one of our classes, I made a comment to a student regarding an easier way to do something. This novice kite maker told me how much she appreciated the tip I had given her. She said so often experienced kite builders forget to pass on tricks and hints to beginners because things become second nature to them.

Reverse appliqué is a very common method used by kite makers to decorate their kites. Over the years, I have learned lots of tricks from the premier kite makers like Tanna Haynes, Jose Sainz, Randy Tom, Deb Cooley, Sam Huston. How's that for namedropping? Also I've applied techniques from my sewing and machine embroidery background and learned from lots of mistakes. One important point to remember is that there are many techniques and many ways of accomplishing the same thing. My method is not the "correct" one! Any one familiar with Kevin Shannon's work will know he uses a variation to great effect. I hope this article will be helpful to beginning appliqué artists and perhaps the seasoned cutters will find a trick they can apply, too.

The design:

Find or draw the design you want, keeping in mind the kind of kite it will be on. You may find a very intricate design that you really want to use. It will be better to simplify it: you will be looking at a kite up in the sky many feet away and details get lost. If you are using a picture, turn it into a black and white line drawing. (figure 1 and 1a)



Figure 1 and 1a show the original Celtic design on the left which is much more intricate than the finished kite.

The colors of the project are picked in conjunction with drawing the design. To help with color selection you can make several small drawings and try out different color combinations. You can color these small drawings with kid's markers. Better yet are the computer paint programs. With these programs color changes are easy and you can also put in blue and gray skies and make the image small to see how your kite will look while flying. Remember to use colors that are as close as possible to what is actually available in fabric.

The pattern:

Decide on the size of the kite or the size area you will have for your appliqué work. Sometimes designs can be drawn full size, but if your kite is large, initially drawing a full

size design on paper is difficult. If the design will be large, draw the design on a sheet of 8.5 x 11" paper. If it is symmetrical design, I draw half of it, fold the paper in half, tape it to a window or light table and draw the other half. Open up the pattern, clean it up, and then go over the entire pattern with a fine-tipped permanent marker. This can also be done in the computer.

The next step is to use a copy machine or printer to make a transparency of your design. An overhead projector will enlarge this small design to the size you need (your pattern). Libraries generally have overhead projectors available for use. You can transfer the design directly to the fabric (but read further on first!) or you may use paper to make the full size pattern. Use a large window or smooth wall. Sliding glass doors are good. We use a garage wall for really big designs. Trace all the lines. Don't stop until the work is done because should the projector get moved or bumped, repositioning can be hard.

Go over your full size pattern. Clean up either the full sized paper pattern or the design drawn directly onto the fabric. Smooth any wavy lines, darken any that are too light. Make corrections if necessary. If you made a full sized paper pattern, it gets transferred to your fabric (see below). We go back and forth on making full size paper patterns. Using paper is an extra step involving the cost of the paper plus your time. For us, it depends on how good the initial design is and whether we think we will make more than one kite. If you will make several kites, the paper pattern will keep each kite the same and save time. Sometimes the size of the finished design and the size of the wall determine the need for paper patterns.

Colors:

Tape your chosen colors to a window on a bright day. Some colors fade or wash out when back lit or put next to similar but stronger colors. Never trust what it looks like laying flat on the table. If you plan on using black as a top layer and separating areas with black, tape it to the window as well. Read on for cautions regarding black.

Sometimes you can use two different colors to get a third color but not always. Red under orange can give a more reddish orange but blue under red doesn't give purple. Tape the layers to a window during the day, preferably a sunny day. Turn around and walk away. Look at it from a distance. Make sure the color you will end up with is what you want. To achieve a more intense color use two layers of the same color. White under a color will not intensify the color: it will dull it. Beige under a color will mute a color. Jon Burkhardt is a master at color and color changes. I was once told his kites can look blah and sometimes downright unattractive on the ground due to his layering of colors, but when Jon puts his kites into the sky they are incredibly beautiful. Another appliqué master (Pete Rondeau) will dye ripstop to achieve the exact color he wants. Bottom line: take the time to choose your colors carefully. You will spend many hours on an appliqué project and want it to look wonderful in the sky.

Leaving layers under black will sometimes give you a darker black. But it depends on the black fabric you are working with as well as how many layers of color you leave. Black varies from one manufacturer to another. 5 pieces of black may all look the same laying on a table but can vary from gray to charcoal to maroon to black to REALLY black when back lit. I have had "black" that looks gray even when doubled. Some blacks have a greenish cast, some a deep purple cast. (figure 2) Red left under a poor black will give a maroon cast. Mango under a bad black will give you "yuck"! The best black I have found is North Cloth's

A quality in .75 ounce ripstop. But depending on the project and the effect you want, this is not necessarily what you need to use for excellent results.

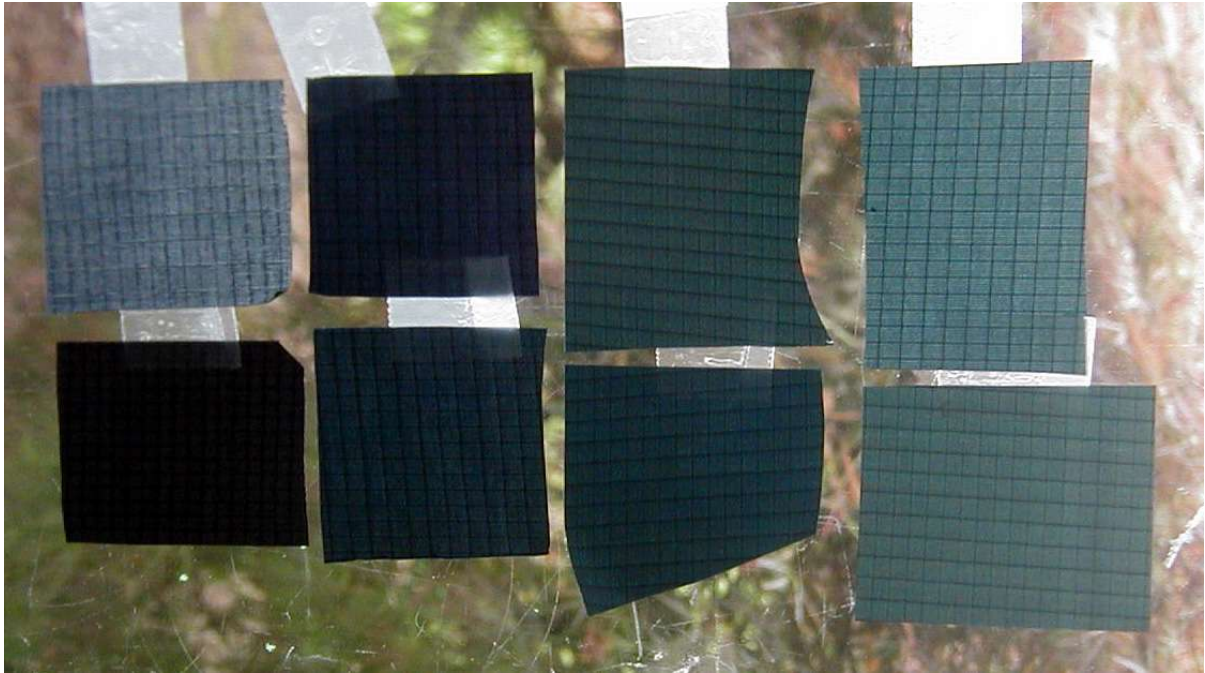


Figure 2 shows 8 different colors of black I pulled out of my scrap pile.

Getting the design onto the fabric:

Use a soft lead pencil to draw your design onto the fabric. The pencil lines will need to be on the outside layer of fabric so you can:

- erase and change lines if necessary after the layers are assembled.
- see your lines easily during stitching.
- erase any lines not covered by your stitching.

Make **sure** you transfer the pattern backwards from what the finished design should be. For example, if you want a face looking to the left when you are flying the kite, trace the face looking right. Letters and numbers and symbols will read backwards in the air if you do not reverse the design.

Make sure you **CAN** erase the pencil; some pencil lead is very hard to erase. Draw lightly, just heavy enough to be seen while stitching.

The pencil lines should be on the lightest color whole piece of fabric. This is usually white for me. It can also be yellow, beige, cream, light blue. A light color works best so you can see the other layers of fabric as you assemble your layers. Some kite makers will always use white to draw on, even if all of the white will be cut away.

It may help you to label each part of the design with the color it will be. I do this on the white fabric and sometimes the paper pattern as well. Don't label areas which will end up as white.

The fabric:

For reverse appliqué you basically make a sandwich of fabric layers, stitch the design, and finally cut away the unwanted layers.

You will use two pieces of fabric the size of the entire design or perhaps of the kite skin: normally black and white. (The lightest color in the design can be substituted for white. I have seen navy and gray used as the top color. Black gives the highest contrast and is most commonly used. I will use “black” and “white” in the following instructions.)

You are working in reverse—the white fabric is the bottom layer and has the pattern drawn on it in reverse. The face of the kite, or the front side of the work is black. Colors get sandwiched between. Stack the colors from light to dark, lightest next to the white.

Pieces slightly larger than the area it will cover are used. Sometimes pieces the same size as the black and white are used depending on the project. Appliqué can be wasteful of expensive fabric if you are not careful so using the smaller pieces and keeping scraps to reuse is a cost-saving measure. It also makes back cutting easier.

Start with the white taped to a sliding glass door, put on a light table or simply on a flat work surface. The pencil side is down. Lay each different color of fabric over its intended area. Areas must be completely covered and you should normally leave at least a ¼” border. I like a little more generous border as it aids me in cutting. Once in awhile I find I will not be able to trim a border due to my layers. For example, I may be leaving the white in back of an orange area and can’t have a yellow piece extend into this area. The yellow border would be trapped within the orange area and would show in my finished design. Cut the yellow shape to fit its area, allowing for your stitching width. Use spray adhesive on the cutout shape and perfectly position it. Once all your areas are covered with their colors, position the black layer. Secure it.

You must secure each layer or piece. You can use a light coating of spray adhesive, you can hot tack the layers together, or use transparent tape tabs or double-sided tapes or adhesive “tape” for which you remove the backing and are left with just the adhesive. (Some kite makers use masking tape. I don’t like it and don’t recommend it at all. It is harder to remove than transparent tape and nearly impossible to remove if you stitch over it.)

Cautions and tips regarding the various methods: Use spray adhesives sparingly. Use in a well ventilated area. Protect the area from over-spray. Hot tacking should be done using the least number and smallest size holes as possible. You will want to position the holes right on the pencil line and then sew with the hope to conceal these holes. Transparent tape tabs are what I prefer and use almost exclusively. Cut the tape about 1” long and fold under a little tab on one end. This tab makes the tape easier to pull off. If you use tape, position it where you will not be stitching over it. You can reuse the tape several times before the stickiness is gone. Lengthen the life of the tape by only handling the tab. I keep them on a small piece of glass and the edge of my sewing table. Make sure you position the double-sided tape where you will be able to remove it. Don’t leave tape trapped between two layers. It will show in the sky.

Most often you will be cutting away all but one layer. But should you choose to leave more than one layer in a given area, make sure each layer covers the entire area. A spot of missing color will show up when held to the light.

If you use small spots of color instead of a piece over the entire work, make sure all pieces are all from the same piece of fabric. The different manufacturers' colors vary and so do dye lots. Also keep the grain consistent. Turning a piece 90 degrees can give you a different color. Ripstop has rectangles. Use this to keep the direction of the fabric consistent. Remember these facts to get shading differences.

Try to keep the grain of the fabric straight on all the layers. This is important on large areas.

If you must piece together fabric: plan where you sew the seam and try to have a seam fall where it will be mostly cut away. Or where a spar will be. If it can be positioned under a spar, the seam will not show in the air. The seam should be narrow. Back tack it when doing the appliqué stitching to secure the ends of the seam once trimmed.

Sewing the layers:

Use a zigzag stitch. I like a longer length than some kite makers. My length is 20 stitches per inch or 10 zigs on the left and 10 zags on the right. My width is 2 cm. This is just under 1/8th inch. It is a pre-set width on my machine. This is good because I can always return to the same width after straight stitching. Once you find settings you like, mark them directly on your machine with a scratch or permanent marker.

Always start and stop your stitching lines with a few straight stitches. Don't back tack using a zigzag. A few straight stitches back over the zigzag will lock the zigzag stitches. (figure 3)

Figure 3 shows two places where a few straight stitches have been used to start or stop a row of stitching. This is neater and less bulky than using zig zags.

Sew slowly. Appliqué is not a high-speed mending job. Curves need even slower speeds. If you sew too fast, you will not achieve an even stitching job.

Leave the needle down in the fabric when raising the presser foot to turn fabric.



When stitching an area that will be black, stitch just inside the area. Have the needle hit the line when making the right-hand side of the zigzag if the black area is to your left. This keeps a black area from getting bigger.

Stitch slowly and smoothly around curves. Gradually turn the fabric as you sew. When the line you are following gets too far off center, stop the machine with your needle down in the fabric on the outside of the curve. Turn the fabric slightly, realigning the line to the center. This may take several realignments. Don't make drastic adjustments because your line will look jerky. If the curve is sharp, you may need to realign the fabric every 2-3 stitches. You want the zigzags to all be even, not tapering. (figure 4 and 4a)

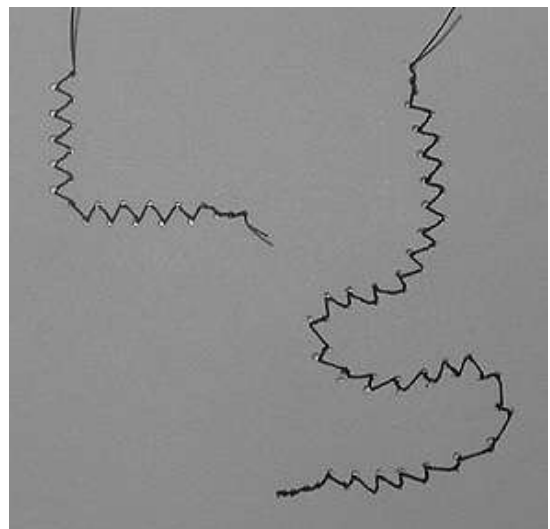
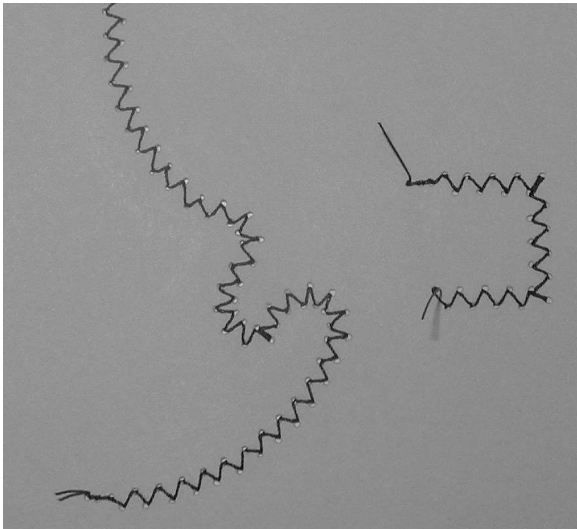


Figure 4 shows the way your stitching should look at the corners and around curves. Figure 4a will hold a kite together but simply doesn't look as nice.

Try to stitch right over your pencil line. If you miss, erase it.

If you start to stray off the line, it is better to gradually stitch back towards it. You should be sewing slowly enough to see you are off your line before you get too far off. Stopping and actually moving the fabric back on track will give you a jerky line. Gradually sewing back towards it will give you a smooth line. Erase the line and chances are no one will notice.

Plan your stitching path ahead of each line you sew. Try to have as few starts and stops as possible. Sometimes more than one area can be sewn consecutively due to connecting or crossing lines. A few perfectly placed stitches sometimes allow you to hop a short distance from one area to another.

If you have a long line with other lines intersecting it, stitch the lines that come up to it and then do the main line itself in one smooth line. Don't turn off the main line to pick up a line that intersects it. This will help cover any jerkiness you may otherwise have.

If you hot tacked your layers together, you will need to stitch over the holes. You don't want a hole out into an area. All holes should be under the stitching line. It is nice to actually drop you needle into the hot tack holes but this is a chore, which is why I use hot tacking as a last resort. But this is personal preference.

To get a sharp point you may need to narrow your width or even straight stitch for 2-3 stitches.

Whenever you turn the fabric around to go in a new direction, leave the needle in the fabric. Then before you start sewing, turn the flywheel by hand to find out if the needle will be swing in the right direction. Reposition the fabric if necessary by raising the needle and then moving the fabric as little as possible.

It is very important to keep the layer from shifting. They must remain flat and smooth. You may want to work with smaller projects until your skill level increases. If you do a large project, turn it into a small one. One method used by Pete Rondeau: he sometimes divides his projects into smaller chunks and then sews the pieces together using the appliqué techniques. I have never been able to do this with our designs so I fold my fabric inwards, from all four sides



until I have a manageable size piece of fabric. Fold with the white side up. Make a fold on one side, then another side, then another, round and round. This locks the previous fold into place and everything stays more manageable. Stitch within that area, remove the work from the machine, and refold. Repeat and repeat until your design is fully stitched. (figure 5)

Clip threads right at the fabric. Don't leave even 1/8 inch long.

The scissors:

Most kite makers use sharp-tipped embroidery scissors. Some use shears. Some use thread clippers; some use seam rippers. Some round off the lower blade of sharp-tipped embroidery scissors. This is so the lower blade can't accidentally slice into a bottom fabric layer if too much pressure is used. Some kite makers file the angle of the scissors' blade and hold the scissors perpendicular to the fabric. Some hold the scissors in the palm of their hand; some put the thumb and index finger into the holes. Whatever works for you! Try various scissors and methods.

Cutting away:

If you have taped or hot tacked your layers, you can scrunch the layers away from each other in large areas, clip a tiny slot into the top layer, and then make the clip larger by slicing that one layer. I usually make a triangular cut and fold it back. Determine if the next layer will also be cut away. Repeat process. When you have all the layers to be cut away, slice over to the edge of the stitching and proceed.

If you cannot scrunch the fabric, use a dental pick, an E-xacto knife tip, or I use the tip of my scissors to pierce into the top layer. John Freeman uses a sewing machine needle to penetrate the top layer. He then slides a seam ripper into this little hole (with the needle still in place) and then makes his slice. This is the most dangerous thing in appliqué. It is very easy to cut into a layer you want to leave (see below for the fix!).

Start your cutting near the stitching line, perhaps an inch away. Pick a corner to start in or an inconspicuous place. If you need to start along a curve or edge, clip just a tiny bit in between a zigzag stitch. The end will then transition into the beginning smoothly.

Hold the layers you are cutting away taut with your other hand. You want to slice through the layers, not push them away with the scissors. Cut as smoothly as possible. Cutting is more important than stitching. I try to slice through the fabric (layers) rather than “chopping”. Turn the fabric around as you cut to keep the line straight in front of you. You can smooth a bad stitching line with the cutting.

Cut all layers away (from each side) at one time if possible. 4 or 5 layers are difficult to cut at once but possible with a good pair of scissors. Three is good. Two is easy. And 1 is great! Be very careful when you cut into an area with fewer layers. The force needed to slice through is not as great and the scissors will go faster and you may slice into the stitches if you are not careful.

Cut as close to the stitching as possible without cutting the zigzag threads. I cut with the scissors to the left of the stitching but you may find you can cut easier and smoother with the stitches to the right. Personal preference...

I hold the scissors at a slight angle. This gives me a slight undercut to the layers. The various colors won't show, as the black is just a bit larger. If colors stick out from the black, fold the fabric back and trim the color away. Don't cut the black and don't cut the kite skin!

Correct jagged or crooked stitching with your cutting.

To cut a sharper corner, clip into the corner, just a bit in between a zigzag stitch. You can emphasize points with your cutting.

Trim each side the same distance from the stitching. If you cut one side slightly further away, it needs to be the top (the black). Otherwise the under layers will shadow through and not look nice.

Hold up the kite skin to the light and look at the section you have just cut. If you see any jagged areas, too thick of a line, etc. correct it right away.



Save scraps for future projects.

Fixing a mistake:

Mistakes usually happen when you are in a hurry or when you are tired. They always happen when you are both! The best way to fix a mistake is not to let it happen. Stop when you need a break. Work slowly: it is not a race. Cut carefully and check your pattern as to what color

is to be left. Do the hardest parts when you are fresh or after you have gained some experience on larger areas if this is a new skill you are acquiring.

Should you cut through the color you want, (or cut it away entirely) it is easy to fix but the whole area of color must be redone. Place a new piece of the color and a piece of white over the area to be fixed on the back of the kite skin. Make sure the piece is from the original fabric. Check grain line. Tape securely in place. Re-stitch on the black side, trying to match the original stitching. Cut the mistake out, cut away the new white. Now your mistake is fixed.

If you clip a stitching line, mark it with a chalk pen or tape tab. Later, secure the line of stitching with a short line of straight stitches. Don't ignore the cut stitches because the line of zigzags could come undone enough to cause a weak area in your kite.

When you think you are done:

Once you think you are all done, tape your work to the window. Stand back, admire it and then be critical. Do any spots you missed, cleanup any areas as necessary.

I wish you success in your appliqué work. As always, if you have questions or need clarification or have hints and tricks for ME, please send me an email: 2kiters@2kiters.com