



## *Instructions for Stitching Our Stories Workshops*

These workshops require at least 2 hours, and preferably 6 hours, to allow enough time for participants to complete their work. Ideally, they can be structured in three 2-hour sessions. Otherwise, they can be tailored to fit the time available. Please leave enough time for creating the story cloths and for sharing their work.

- In the first session, participants view the 30-minute documentary about Esther Krinitz, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, and then discuss their reactions to the film and its relation to their own experiences.
- In the second session, participants create story cloths depicting a personal experience—of cherished family memories, of difficult challenges in their lives, or in the case of recent immigrants, of coming to America. See below for instructions on creating story cloths.
- The last session has participants sharing their stories and images with one another. During this session, guests can be invited to share in the art and stories.

### **CREATING STORY CLOTHS**

The following sections present two different methods for constructing story cloths.

1. The first involves working with cloth and stitching and works well in a setting where participants can work on their story cloths over time.
2. The second method can be done more quickly, in 2 or 3 hours, using felt and fabric glue as the base materials.

In both cases, however, a key part of the process is writing a short caption, as Esther did, to narrate the picture; this is the “story” part of the story cloth. These captions can be stitched directly onto the cloth or, using fabric pens, written on a separate piece of white fabric that will be mounted below the story cloth.

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## STITCHED STORY CLOTHS

### MATERIALS

- **Fabric:** selection of lightweight cotton and poly/cotton fabrics with small overall prints, stripes, plaids, solids. Pieces of trim, lace, rickrack, buttons, and ribbon can be incorporated into the work too.
- **Chenille needles:** sizes 18-20 Chenille needles have the advantage of having large enough eyes and being sharp. Tapestry needles are too blunt to sew fabric.
- **Thread:** Two-strand craft thread works better than embroidery thread because it doesn't need to be divided and comes in bright colors. A less expensive alternative is to use rolls of colored crochet cotton: It is about the same weight and works fine.
- **Scissors:** Good scissors are essential. There is nothing more frustrating than scissors that won't cut fabric.
- **Light weight stretcher bars:** These are the wooden bars used by painters to stretch their canvas. They come in various lengths and fit together without nails and work like an embroidery hoop, keeping the fabric taut while sewing. This makes it much easier to work with. Unlike an embroidery hoop they can be permanent, working as a frame and making display much easier too. They can be bought in bulk inexpensively from art supply dealers like Blick or Nasco which often have their own house brand. 14"x16", 16"x18" are good sizes.
- **Lightweight staple gun:** This is to staple the background fabric to the stretcher bars.  
Straight pins: These are to hold fabric pieces in place while the image is being composed and until it is stitched.
- **Chalk:** Used for marking fabric if necessary

### ORGANIZATION

By organizing the fabrics beforehand, it makes it more appealing to participants when they are making their choices. Possible categories are boxes with warm and cool patterns, warm and cool solids. Or get more specific: reds, blues, yellows, greens, browns, grays etc. Separating stripes and plaids...etc.

### PROCESS

#### ○ Planning

All collage works from back to front. The participant's first decision is to choose the fabric for their background based on the place, time of day, and mood they want to express. This can be effective with patterned fabric as well as solid. The background fabric should be 2" bigger all around than the stretcher frame. Staple fabric to frame, stretching edges around to the back. Staple sides first, and then corners. Again, thinking back to front, participants start composing their images, choosing fabric they think is best suited. What is the next

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furthest back? If they are doing a person in a landscape, it will be the ground or mountains etc. and then the person.

An effective way to help them understand this is to show them one of Esther Krinitz's appliqué panels and have them analyze it. Which pieces did she sew down first? Which could have come next?

Have participants plan their piece in a brief sketch or diagram.

- **Cutting, Pinning, Sewing**

When it comes to cutting—the bigger the better. The temptation is for participants to draw the shape they want to cut onto the fabric first. When they do this, the tendency is to make things too small and the shapes too detailed. Instead, encourage them to cut directly into the fabric, thinking in basic shapes--- and always at a corner or an edge, never into the middle of a piece of fabric. If they do need to draw a shape first, have them do it with chalk, not pencil. Chalk encourages larger shapes and can be easily wiped off with a damp paper towel.

All of the pieces don't have to be in place before they begin sewing, but it helps if the major ones are. Discuss which details are easier and more effective in fabric and which work best in stitching. Some students will really get into the embroidery and want to try different kinds of stitches. The stitching is always part of the picture, like a drawn line, so the size of the stitches and color of the thread matters.

They may want the stitches to be very obvious in some places and choose bright or contrasting thread colors. When working with participants who cannot use needle and thread, have them do fabric collage using iron-on bonding material. Iron the material onto the back of a selection of fabrics in ¼ yard pieces. It stiffens the fabric and makes it easier to cut. The pieces are arranged on a background fabric and ironed in place. The results are very effective; Esther used this method herself in some cases, although she finished with stitching. Otherwise it goes much more quickly than sewing.

If students choose to stitch their captions directly into their pictures, they can create borders as Esther did. Alternatively, as in the method for constructed story cloths with felt, give students pieces of white muslin-type fabric, about 4 x 6 inches, and Sharpie markers to write their captions which will later be mounted below their pictures.

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## CONSTRUCTED STORY CLOTHS WITH FELT

### MATERIALS

- 8x11" pieces of felt of various colors
- White muslin-type fabric - allowing for a 4x6" piece per student
- Sharpie markers - of various colors, and some 'very fine' black ones for writing on the white muslin
- Bottles of fabric glue - Tacky Glue is good for this, or any other kind of glue that is specifically a fabric glue
- Embellishments: Other types of printed fabrics, ribbon, string, buttons, feathers, sequins,

### PROCESS

- Participants each choose a pre-cut piece of colored felt (8x11") on which they glue images cut out of other pieces of felt or other fabrics.
  - They add embellishments of ribbon, string, buttons, feathers, wire, fencing, sequins, etc. to their piece for their desired effect of emotion.
  - They take a small piece of muslin-type white fabric, about 4x6," and write in Sharpie markers a caption that tells the story depicted in the piece or about their experience that led to the piece.

### DISPLAYING PARTICIPANTS' WORK

If you choose to display participants' story cloths, which we'd encourage you to do, you can employ a couple of different methods:

- Use fabric glue to adhere story cloth to a slightly larger piece of background fabric—leave a border of at least 1 inch on each of the 4 sides.
- Then glue the piece onto black or white mat board, available from art supply stores. The size of the mat should be appropriate to the size of the story cloth, and should allow enough room below the story cloth to affix the white fabric with caption.
- Allow a minimum border of 3 inches on each of the other three sides.
- The mat boards can then be displayed using stick-on picture hooks, at least one on each side of the picture.

Students' work can also be displayed as a "quilt," arrayed in blocks across and down a large piece of black felt. The background felt is available at fabric stores from a roll, which is typically about 4 or 5 feet wide. The piece can be 6-7 feet long, or as long as your space allows. The individual pieces can be glued directly on the larger cloth. While tacky glue will work, you can get better adhesion with a hot glue gun. The quilt can then be stapled or tacked around a dowel and hung.

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