

Photos by Matt Graves



"Arm Chair Gardener" • 6" x 7"

NARRATIVE EMBROIDERY

by Laura Wasilowski





From the telling of your traumatic trip to the a store to the description of a 500-page novel, everybody loves a good story. Bringing a story to life with pictures makes the story even more engaging. So why not illustrate personal stories in a very personal way, with hand embroidery?

For me, narrative embroidery—or storytelling with needle and thread—is both a joy and a challenge. I enjoy the thrill of inspiration when I come across a captivating phrase, idiom, or story. And I agonize over the challenge of how to illustrate that same phrase, idiom, or story in fabric and thread.

Through stitchery I can confess that I am not very good at gardening, hence my small embroidery “Arm Chair Gardener.” My political opinions are best expressed by using an old wool coat as a base for stitching in “A House Divided (Thank You Abe Lincoln)”. After expressing my opinions, I can then commemorate them with a favorite idiom, “My 2 Cents Worth,” stitched on black cotton fabric. But by far, my favorite type of narrative embroidery

is a silly visual joke such as “Dyed in the Wool.” Each piece tells my story. You could say they illustrate my ‘glamorous’ life.

All of these narrative embroideries are constructed in a free-form manner. On occasion, I’ll devise a simple pattern (like the one for the “Dyed in the Wool” project). But usually I just wing it, taking one stitch, then another, and another. As I bravely stitch, I experience the excitement of improvising and the thrill of my design slowly evolving. Free-form embroidery is both a delight and a fright.

This kind of embroidery demands that I make original artwork. It gives me the freedom to create designs using line, shape, color, and texture while employing my favorite tools: needle and

thread. And, for someone known for making really quick fused art quilts, I find hand embroidery a slow, thoughtful way to make art.

The key word here is *slow*. Hand embroidery is slow. It is an art form that takes time but requires few tools and materials. Travel the world and, like a comforting pillow, your stitchery easily travels with you. Not only is hand embroidery portable and compact but, for those of us with a scattered mind, contemplative.

Hand embroidery is literally a hands-on art form. From the touch of the needle, to the tug of the thread, to the soft feel of fabric, your hands guide and create each stitch. It is a quiet, gentle pursuit and a great way to tell your own story.



figure 1



figure 2



figure 3



figure 4



figure 5

MATERIALS

- 6" x 6" light-colored wool fabric
- #8 perle cotton threads in 9 different colors, plus black
- Size 3 or 4 hand embroidery needles
- Sheep pattern
- Tracing paper
- Black marker

Telling tales with free-form embroidery

If you'd like to design your own free-form embroidery, begin with a sketch. A simple sketch or cartoon of your storyline helps with the placement and scale of basic shapes in your design. Use the directions for "Dyed in the Wool" to transfer those shapes to the fabric.

The fun begins when you improvise the stitchery. Start by using a linear stitch (like stem stitch) to outline the shapes. Fill in the shapes with stitches that add texture, pattern, or help give definition to the piece. Don't worry, as your design evolves, more stitch ideas ensue.

"Dyed in the Wool" • 6" x 6"

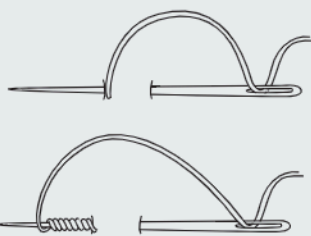


DIRECTIONS

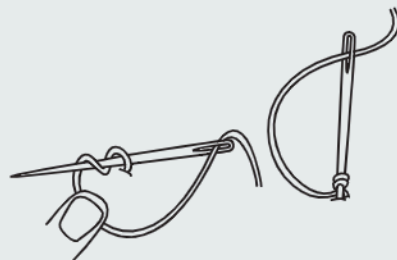
Follow these directions to make a colorful sheep enjoying nature. It is stitched on wool fabric but you can use any fabric you like. Change up the colors or add more features. Tell your own sheep's tale.

1. Trace the sheep pattern on page 50 onto tracing paper using a black marker. Pin the tracing to the wool fabric with straight pins. (figure 1)
2. Follow the black marker lines and stitch the outline of the sheep through the paper and wool using running stitches. Use the tip of a pin to score the paper next to the stitches and remove the paper. (figure 2) These running stitches will be removed after the design is stitched.
3. Stitch around the shapes of the sheep's ears and legs using a stem stitch. (figure 3)
4. Stitch long-and-short stitches across the sheep's face using a light colored thread. Fill in the ears and leg shapes with rows of stem stitches packed tightly together. (figure 4)
5. Stitch a row of bullion knots vertically across the sheep's forehead. Stitch the head and neck of the sheep with French knots packed tightly together. Fill in the body of the sheep with French knots.
6. Add a tail using French knots.
7. Remove the running stitches from the shapes. Stitch grass using straight stitches in a variegated thread. Stitch from the sheep's feet down to within $\frac{1}{4}$ " of the bottom edge of the fabric. Keep $\frac{1}{4}$ " free of stitches on each edge for finishing the piece. (figure 5)

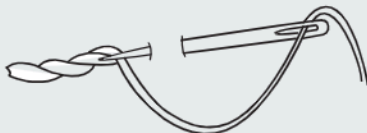
Stitch Glossary



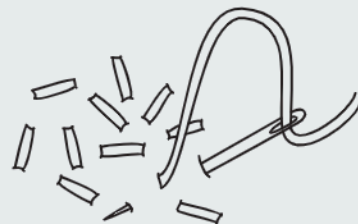
Bullion Knot



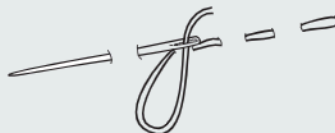
French Knot



Stem Stitch



Straight Stitch



Running Stitch



Long-Short Stitch



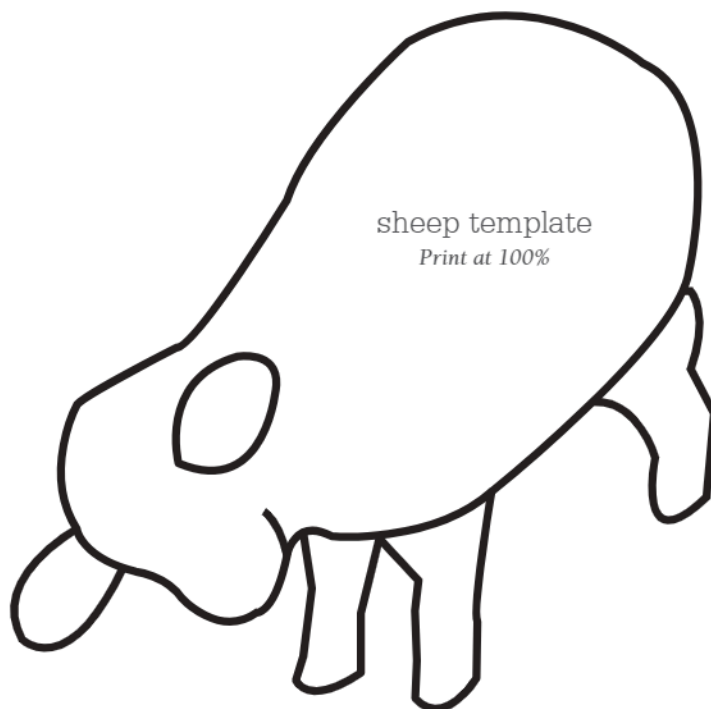


"My 2 Cents Worth" • 3¾" x 5"



"A House Divided (Thank You Abe Lincoln)" • 7" x 8"

8. Stitch 2 French knots on the face to make eyes. Stitch a T-shape on the nose of the sheep to make the nose and mouth using straight stitches.
9. Stitch 2 rows of stem stitches within ¼" of the fabric sides and top edges to form a frame. Stitch a spiral for the sun using stem stitch. Add French knots inside the sun spiral. Stitch parallel lines of running stitches across the sky to make waves and spirals.
10. Trim the fabric close to the stitching to finish the piece. ✨



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