

# Mille Fleurs

In the March 2008 issue of *Quilters Newsletter* (#400), Valli Schiller describes making her cover quilt, *Mille Fleurs*. Here is more from Valli.

I began sewing when I was ten. My mother was using her cool new sewing machine to make me lots of dorky elastic-waisted pants. When I complained that they weren't stylish enough for me, she said, "If you don't like the clothes I make, you can sew your own!" So I did, though I'll admit it took several years of trial and error before I came up with anything fit to be seen in public.

My mother was doing a lot of quilting during the bicentennial period, which was when I got the idea that making patchwork was a good thing to do with scraps left over from sewing clothing. However, I was pre-occupied with being an ungrateful teenager, so I didn't pay much attention at the time to the finer points of quilting. After I'd given birth to my first child, I discovered to my chagrin that my body measurements no longer matched the ones on the pattern envelope. I'd have to make pattern alterations if I were going to sew clothes that would fit me. That seemed like an awful lot of work, so I started making quilts instead. How hard could it be to make something that was flat? I've spent the last 17 years answering that question.

I don't work in series in any systematic, conscious way. However, every quilt presents challenges in terms of design and construction. When I'm finished with a quilt, there's always something that I wish I'd handled differently. So I work my concerns out in the next quilt, which then presents challenges of its own. And so on and sew on...

When they're not hard at work, my fabrics are meticulously folded and stored on open shelves so that I can see my entire palette at a glance. I sort them according to color and value. I have separate stacks for multicolored fabrics, stripes, and conversation prints. It's a beautiful thing.

However, when my fabrics are *working*, they're unceremoniously dumped in piles on the table and floor after being auditioned for a role in the quilt in progress. I'll often pull 10 or more fabrics to select one. I rarely put anything away until it's time to clear the decks for the next quilt. Those "reject" piles inspire lots of unexpected ideas. I think of them as the quilting equivalent of sourdough starter. Some fabrics need more time to ferment.

I've lost count of how many quilts I've made, but I think it would be safe to say I've made several dozens. I've been exhibiting my quilts nationally since 2001. To my delight and amazement, my quilts have won multiple awards, including blue ribbons at the American Quilter's Society show in Paducah, Kentucky, and at the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas.

Though I'll try just about any method, I love working by machine best. Except for a few hand stitches securing the sleeve and the label, *Mille Fleurs* was made exclusively on my domestic sewing machine.

When I include applique, I make templates for each applique patch and turn the raw edges over the template, securing them with a water-soluble glue stick. The applique patches are sewn to the quilt using clear monofilament thread and a tiny, nearly invisible buttonhole stitch.

Freezer paper is usually used for the templates with this machine-applique technique, but I use a crisp, lightweight tear-away stabilizer instead. The stabilizer runs easily through my inkjet printer, so I can quickly produce templates in quantity. The stabilizer I generally use is Hollingsworth & Vose 1.5 oz. TearAway/WashAway; similar products are Pellon's Tear-N-Wash and Sew-Stable's RinsAway Tearaway Embroidery Stabilizer, at fabric stores



and online. I use the same stabilizer for foundation piecing. The little compasses on Mille Fleurs were made this way. I don't remove any of the stabilizer from the quilt. After the quilt is washed, the stabilizer softens so it doesn't need to be removed like freezer paper. I like the little bit of extra body it provides.

The embroidered flowers in the block centers are a design detail that occurred to me after the top was completely constructed. I drew a little flower motif to fit inside the appliqued circles. Then I traced the motif onto water-soluble stabilizer, pinned it in place, and free-motion machine embroidered the motif. I didn't need to use a hoop or any additional stabilizer because the appliqued circles were already backed with wash-away stabilizer.

One way I work that may be different from how other quilters work is this: I use a lot of starch and water-soluble products (basting glue, washout markers, stabilizers, thread) to aid in the construction of my quilts. I don't want to leave this stuff in the quilt permanently, so as soon as the quilting is done and before the binding is applied, my quilts get washed. Most of the time that involves soaking and sloshing them by hand (no machine agitation) in my washing machine with mild detergent, followed by two rinses and spinning dry.

Once the quilt is washed, I block and square the damp quilt on a clean, carpeted floor and leave it to air dry undisturbed for a day or two. When it's completely dry, I double check that it's still square using a crosshair laser level, and only then do I apply the binding. That way, my quilt hangs straight and has that lovely, crinkly, washed texture, and the binding is smooth and unpuckered. There goes that secret!

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