

Making the Back of the Work Look as Good as the Front

I must begin this article with a personal anecdote. My friend Kathy Dyer, was visiting one afternoon and working on one of Marilyn Leavitt-Inblum's angels. My husband walked by and asked her, "How come your angel is facing the other way?"

Solution: he was looking at the back of her work, and it was so beautiful he couldn't tell it wasn't the front!!

We mortals can only aspire to such high standards!

For the rest of us, there are some tricks:

Resign yourself that the back will never be as good as the front, even if you do a reversible cross stitch. The front is what's important so don't overly-stress on how the back will look! If it's a framed piece or a pillow, the back will be hidden. The only time the back should show is in an afghan, and there's a way to avoid that, too!

Do your stitches in a consistent manner -on that piece-. Either across the row or down the row. If across, confine yourself to either the English method (complete the whole x) or the Danish method (/// on one journey and \\ on the second). One method will produce the "same pattern" on the back. Try to avoid a mishmash of methods on the same piece. It's ok to change from piece to piece, of course.

End your treads by weaving them under the same color, if at all possible. Otherwise, pick a similar color if there's a choice.

Don't carry your threads at all. End them and restart.

How to Make Your Fabric Flat

It's important to start with flat fabric when you stitch. Make every effort to have it thus - before- you start to stitch. Waiting isn't going to make the flattening task easier! In fact, it will make it more difficult because you will want to be careful around your finished stitches. So, start with unwrinkled fabric rather than plan to take care of the problem during the final wash and iron phase of finishing.

Here are some ideas for starting off with flat fabric:

Avoidance

To stave off having to deal with this, buy fabric without folds, wrinkles, and creases.

You may have to gather your gumption and ask for a fresh cut from the bolt. The shop can sell the piece with folds in it to a less-discerning customer!

Avoid a piece that has the center fold from the bolt. This fold is put in when the fabric is folded lengthwise as it is being put on the bolt. This fold is almost impossible to remove.

If you have a big project, you won't be able to avoid it, but for other projects, ask your shop to cut you a new piece without the fold in it.

Freezing

This is Granny's old wash-day trick brought to bear on a more interesting piece of ironing!

Wet the piece along the folds only. Slip it into a plastic bag so it can lie flat. (Try a dry cleaning bag for large pieces.) The reason for the plastic is so nothing gets on the fabric while it's in the freezer. Lay the piece as flat as possible - - as on a cookie sheet - - and freeze until solid.

Remove from freezer and immediately iron thawed-and-dry.

Watch carefully that you don't leave iron-marks from the edge of the iron in the fabric. It should be perfectly smooth.

Let rest overnight on the ironing before. Don't be anxious to move it!

Microwaving

I cannot vouch for this method, so you might want to try it on a scrap first. (The let me know if it worked so I can add that info here.)

Spritz along folds in fabric.

Microwave on high for 30 seconds.

Iron. Let cool before use.

Mounting Taut

Keeping your fabric taut as you work helps a lot, too. Put it in a scroll frame, stretcher framer, QSnap(TM), or hoop.

In Progress Storage

Be careful where you put your piece during stitch sessions. Keep it flat! On stretcher bars or a scroll frame, you need not remove your fabric after stitching. With hoops you must. With QSnaps(TM) it's a matter of preference.

Washing and Blocking Your Finished Work

Generally, blocking is used in connection with needlepoint but sometimes cross stitch needs blocking, too.

I think needlepoint is more susceptible to being pulled out of shape for the following reason: (1) needlepoint is often worked "in hand"; (2) some of the needlepoint stitches cause quite a bit of distortion because the "pull" is always in the same direction (basketweave produces least distortion, in my opinion); and (3) most stitchers tend to "pull harder" on needlepoint than on cross stitch.

Wash your work, even if it doesn't "look" dirty. Despite your care in washing your hands before starting to stitch, skin oils have been deposited on your work anyway; these oils act as magnets for dirt. Even though you may not see any soil now, it will appear later, after your work is framed and "aged" a little bit. (It's kind of like a spot on the rug. You didn't notice the spill when it happened, but you know it -did- happen because now it's attracting dirt and causing a spot.)

Orvus Equine Soap (Proctor and Gamble) is recommended for washing your needlework. Yes, purchase this at your local feed or tack store. You might be able to get some at the vet's. I understand it is also sold as a "quilt wash" under some quilt-y name at an incredible mark-up in price. If the big size is too much for you to use in this lifetime, share it with a large number of friends--the price will go 'way down! Even if you splurge and buy a whole jug, it's still cheap (\$5 for a 1-pound container, about a pint).

Washing

Put just a little--a capful--in several gallons of water and leave the piece to soak about 60 minutes. If a lot of dye is released by some of the dark threads--unlikely there will be very much, but if it troubles you-- remove piece from this soapy bath and draw a fresh one.

If you don't have Orvus, use a mild -pure- soap (like Ivory); last choice is a dishwashing detergent (such as Palmolive). DON'T use Woolite; it contains "brighteners" which will eventually ruin your work by eating away at the fibers and fabric. Laundry detergents also contain these agents.

Swish your piece around gently a couple of times, but don't agitate it vigorously. Rinse well by soaking in successive changes of fresh water. Then rinse some more. You don't want to leave any residue in your work. Such residue will discolor your work in time, just as skin oils + soil do.

After the extra-thorough rinsing, lift the needlework from the rinse water. Don't wring. Lay the work on a clean white terry cloth towel. Roll like a jelly roll and set aside for 15 minutes so the towel can absorb most of the moisture. Unroll and place face-down on another clean towel (I prefer a fabric dish towel for this purpose-clean, of course!). Iron the piece dry from the back side. Turn over to the front and touch up only if necessary.

Leave your piece on the ironing board to dry entirely (overnight). DON'T pick it up!! You must wait a little longer!

Blocking

If your piece is out of square, you'll need to block your work. With cross stitch, it shouldn't be too far "off." You should be able to work it back into square with your hands. Needlepoint sometimes requires some energetic yanking or stretching into shape on a special blocking board.

First, make sure that you have cut the piece exactly along all four sides. If necessary, clean this up by clipping precisely between the same two threads all the way down the side.

Dampen the piece. I use a brand-new squirt bottle, well-rinsed; the kind Windex comes in. (If any of the dark colors run when you dampen the piece, you'll have to rinse and go back to the previous steps about rolling in terry towel, etc. I have never had this problem when just dampening the piece to iron it, however.)

With your hands--and using a T-square or drafter's square or some other reference for a 90-degree angle--work your piece back into roughly square.

Place the work face-down on the [clean] ironing board top and pin the piece to the ironing board with stainless steel pins--they're not hard to find at a fabric store. Just pin right down into the ironing board pad. As you pin, work the fabric into good square, using the right-angle as your reference. Now let the piece dry completely, pinned down. Remove pins and iron the backside, as described above. Mist, if necessary, to remove any creases (though you shouldn't have any) or "belly-buttons" left by the pins (these should be small and in the very edge of the border). Don't iron over pin-heads; they'll melt.

Allow the piece to dry thoroughly before removing from the ironing board. If this doesn't do it, repeat the process until your piece is truly square.

You may need to touch up gingerly the right side with the iron. You probably will need a presscloth for protection.

Using a scroll frame helps a lot in keeping your work square as you stitch it. But you have to have your fabric mounted on your scroll frame good and taut.

To assist in finishing a needlepoint piece as a pillow so no unworked canvas shows at the seam and the seam is stable, work three "sacrifice rows" of background beyond the area indicated by the pattern.

How to Mount Fabric on a Scroll Frame

This discussion is for a scroll frame from Tomorrow's Treasures: the kind with nylon webbing stapled to the roller rod. It does not pertain to a scroll frame with a channel down the rod into which you press the fabric, followed by a little dowel rod.

Check your fabric that it is square. Sometimes inexpensive fabric is not exactly square. You can fix this by wetting the fabric and "blocking" it first. On the bare rod, measure and mark the exact mid-point of the rod (NOT the webbing that's stapled on; it might not be exactly centered on the rod). Do the same on the other rod.

Now find the mid-point of your fabric along the dimension which will be attached to the rod. Match up this with the mark on one rod and begin sewing (basting) the fabric to the webbing, working from the mid-point to the edge. Start at the mid-point again and baste to the other edge. Do the same for other side.

Now your fabric is mounted square, vis a vis the wooden part of the scroll frame, which is the part that is going to determine tension.

Crank that puppy tight, and off you go! Note: Consider mounting your work vertically, rather than horizontally, as is always shown in pictures and advertisements. I did this the first time I ever used my scroll frame because I didn't know any better, and I found I really like it! I can work in tight quarters--an airplane seat, on the sofa with someone sitting beside me. It also eliminates the need for a floorstand AND prevents pain from repetitive stress injuries. I put my dominant hand on the bottom of the work and rest the scroll frame against that forearm, with one of the short ends resting in my lap; my non-dominant hand stitches from the top of the work.

Repetitive Stress Injuries and Needlework

A large amount of needlework can cause an RSI condition, and a modicum of it can aggravate a previous injury. Some [unenlightened!] medical professionals might laugh off the possibility, but that's because they aren't stitchers.

I've been plagued with RSI for several years--the result of lots of typing and piano playing. When I add too much needlework to this already-bubbling brew, I have a problem!

I'd like to share some of the things I do to keep my problem under control.

I don't hold a frame in my hand (hoop, Q-snap, scroll frame). Many folks use a lap stand or a floor stand, but I just mount my fabric vertically in my scroll frame instead of horizontally. I rest one [small] end in my lap and lean one of the roller rods against my forearm. Thus both hands are free to stitch. I'm right-handed, so I lean the R roller rod against my R forearm and put my R hand beneath the work. My L hand goes on top of the work. I can really speed along this way. It's gotten to the point where I can now railroad with my L hand! This method works well for me. Not only does it eliminate discomfort from gripping the stretching device, but I can stitch in confined spaces without disturbing others, such as an airplane seat. (Another thing I've discovered using this method of mounting the fabric and holding the scroll frame is that

when I sink the needle, I don't pull the fiber all the way through; I turn the needle and immediately send it to the top of the work. I pull the fiber through only with my L hand. I realize this puts some added fuzziness on the floss, but it's worth it to me because I can keep the frame in place on my forearm and not move it with every stitch. I compensate by stitching with shorter lengths (no more than 10") and ending the thread when it starts to fuzz the least little bit.)

Another approach is the "string scroll stand," an inexpensive and completely portable (folds up the size of a skein of floss!) support. I thank my cyberfriend, Helen "Skyhooks" Mardis, for permission to use her idea. Take some common kitchen string 3-6 feet long and knot the ends to form a single loop. Lay it on a flat surface and flip one end over so it looks like a figure 8 instead of a 0. Put the "cross-over" point at the back of your neck and let the loops hang down over your shoulders in front. Slip the knobs of your scroll frame into the two loops, thus suspending the frame. Adjust the length of the string at the knot to put the frame where it's comfortable for you. Note: This works only for work mounted horizontally, unless you modify the way you form the stitches or don't mind looking at the developing pattern 90 degrees out of phase!

Another cyberfriend, Lydia McBride, who describes herself as tall and with a "long torso," told me that having a high enough floor stand made a big difference for her. By high enough, she means one which, in use, requires that she bend her head very, very slightly. Proper height also minimizes how much she must use her wrists at unhealthful angles in order to compensate for a too-low floor stand. "The height of the work, in relation to the spine, is critical. I 'sit tall' with good vocalists' or pianists' sort of posture My arms are held close to my Sides (almost propping on my ribs), with arms bent at elbows so my hands are at about bust level or just below shoulder height. Wrists are held straight. This alone makes it much, much easier to enjoy my work and not get tight & tired in upper torso, especially shoulders and neck." Thanks for the great tip, Lydia.

A practice I use to increase stitching speed also will help RSI. Put the non-dominant hand on the top of the work and the dominant hand on the bottom. This will seem a little clumsy at first, but you will get the hang of it in 10 minutes or less. This makes it easier for you to keep your wrists straight (not bent). When you pull the thread through, pull straight up and make sure you do not flex (bend) your wrist!

It's important to stretch before starting, whether it's needlework, typing, or piano playing. Here are a couple of stretches my physical therapist gave me. (a) Place palms together as if praying. Keeping palms together, lower hands to waist height. Hold. (b) Stretch arm out straight in front of you. With other hand, press hand back, applying pressure at the top of the palm (not fingers). Hold and repeat with other arm. (c) Beside a wall, hold arm straight out at shoulder height and move toward wall until palm touches. Hold and repeat with other arm. (c) My cyberfriend Kristen Wells offered an alternate stretch from her therapist, which is a great deal like my therapist's stretch (a): with hands in the same praying position, gently rotate the fingertips toward the sternum. Return fingertips to upright position and gently repeat several times. Kristen's therapist noted that this stretch is particularly good for reaching the tough-to-stretch ulnar nerve.

For pain, my doc recommended three Advils, 4 times a day. He said it was OK for me to continue this regimen for a week or so but to cut back for a while on what was causing the problem so the RSI could get better again and I could stop the medication. *Ask your doc about what dosage is recommended for you.* I give this information here -only- as an example of what my doc said for -me- to do. Your body and the severity of your condition is completely different!! *Please don't self-medicate!* Ask your doc.

I also sometimes use a commercial ice-wrap pack on my forearm. It hasn't been bad enough for this drastic measure in a while (thank goodness!), but I keep it in my freezer at the ready, anyway. Another approach is to designate a bag of frozen vegetables (we're an Irish family here, so I chose green peas). Whack them (the peas, not the Irish) on the floor to separate them and then put the veggie bag on your arm (or wherever it's hurting). I find this much better than a leaky bag of crushed ice. The veggies conform to the contours of my arm and give greater contact, and thus greater relief. I refreeze for use again. Since it's not recommended to eat these frozen- unfrozen-frozen-again-etc. peas, I mark the bag.

Here's another cold pack (which I haven't tried because I haven't had a flare-up in a while!). Pour 1 c rubbing alcohol and 2 c water in a quart-sized zipper bag. Squeeze out air and seal. Place this bag, zipper down, in another quart zipper bag, again squeezing out the air before sealing the second bag. Freeze. Mixture will be a slush (because alcohol won't freeze) and thus very "mold-able." Refreeze after use. Label! Rubbing alcohol is poisonous! (You might want to use food coloring to dye your ice pack in a non-food color, such as blue!) This recipe can be doubled; use gallon zipper bags.

Beyond stretching, here are some other things I have found that help.

When I type, I wear support gear. I wear a Hand-Eze glove on each hand (turned inside- out so the seams don't irritate). Then I put on a Velcro-tabbed wrist support (by Pro), recommended by my doc. I look like something out of a science fiction movie, but I find this really does help.

As a pianist, I keep my wrists straight naturally, not "breaking" (flexing) at the wrist. Look at your position when you type and make whatever ergonomic changes you need to in your equipment or workstation. (You might find the Pro wrist wraps will help you, as they immobilize the wrist.)

I mouse L-handed. I had a big problem with the "clicking" finger of my R hand. All that clicking sent me over the edge in aggravating my elbow problem, since the return key is also on the R side. Putting the mouse on the other side has helped considerably. I also rotate fingers, so the same one isn't always clicking. I didn't need to reprogram the mouse buttons, by the way.

Look at your mouse. Is it too big for you? Too high off the pad? I had to hunt quite a while to find a small enough mouse so that my wrist didn't "break" while using it.

I've heard of people putting the mouse and mouse pad in their laps, too.

There's a gadget called a "Ring Mouse" (Kantec, 800-536-3212) which I haven't tried but will if things get bad again. You wear it on your index finger and take advantage of the natural opposition of the thumb because the thumb does the clicking. Another product, the Kensington Expert Mouse, which I've not even seen pictured, also uses the thumb-opposition principle. (Addendum: my friend, a computer guru/stitcher/pianist bought one of these and wasn't too impressed.)

I investigated the availability of a foot-controlled mouse, too. I couldn't find such a critter (as of this date, 1997). Asked several engineer friends if it would be possible to somehow merge a sewing machine pedal or a guitar pedal with a mouse's wiring. Probably possible, they said, but then I just put the mouse on the L side and didn't have to pursue that further.

Someone on a newsgroup said that vitamins E and B6 were recommended. Whether this actually does anything, I don't know, but I throw out the information here so you can -ask your doc- whether this is an avenue worth pursuing.

A read that a naturopath/acupuncturist in London (Michael Van Straten, ND, DO) recommends cabbage leaves. Pull one or two of the outer, very green leaves off a head of cabbage. "Roll" them with a rolling pin to break down the fibers a bit and then soften them further by putting them in the microwave oven for a few seconds. Leaves should be warm (not hot) and pliant. Wrap leaves around site of discomfort, followed by a towel. Wear your cabbage about 15 minutes. Be careful not to burn yourself by heating the cabbage too long. (Each oven is different, so you'll have to find out how long it takes your oven to render the cabbage leaves the correct limpness.) The article does not say whether the cabbage is re-useable (and I have not tried this method). The proof is left to the student! (Ha! Didn't you -hate- that in school?!)

I guess someday someone will actually have some decent products for folks with RSI..... Guess we'll have to wait for someone with decision-making power to get the problem!

I am still trying--with not much success--to train myself to type "piano" instead of "forte." It's hard because I get going fast and stop paying attention. Pounding hard on a computer keyboard is -very- aggravating to the condition, believe me! That's why prolonged bouts of writing are a dangerous time for me!

My piano repertoire has changed quite a bit, too, as a result of RSI. Gone are octave runs and thundering pieces of Rachmaninov! Now I go for finesse than power! This has made a big difference, too.

I find that using the "stab method" allows me to stitch for long periods, but when I use the "sewing method," my hands begin to ache sooner. If you "sew," you might want to try "stabbing" and see if that helps.

And finally, use a well-plated needle. The tarnished ones don't slip through the fabric very easily. Platinum needles "feel good" as they pass through fabric, but I am not replacing mine when it grows tarnished because I learned that the process of platinum-plating results in all kinds of toxic waste materials.

I have recently begun treating myself to a hand and arm massage every two weeks. It feels so good, I am thinking of changing to weekly! I chose a manicurist who is also a certified massage therapist. If you have a massage, I suggest you hire someone with training and credentials so further damage is not done. If you can't find someone on your own, ask your doc or physical therapist for a recommendation.

The short answer for RSI:

Seek help immediately and quit for a few days when it gets very bad.

Use ice and follow your doc's advice about pain medication.

Prevent problems with stretches and frequent rests/stretchers during typing, playing, or needlework.

Redesign your computer workstation so you can keep your wrists flat.

Wear support gear, especially when typing, and stitch with a slippery needle using the "stab method."

Type "piano," not forte.

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