

Mary Elmusa

by Ricc Freeman-Zachery

The path to art quilting can begin anywhere. For some, it begins with traditional log cabin or nine-patch quilts. For others, it starts with mixed-media collage that slowly incorporates more and more fabric. For Mary Elmusa, her immersion in art quilting began with a love of surface design on fabric that bloomed from a background in traditional painting.

“Drawing came really easily for me at a young age,” she says. “I had a strong interest in drawing, painting, and eventually, printmaking.” While she also had an early interest in fiber and

sewing and learned to crochet in childhood, it was painting that took her through high school and college. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from the Kansas City Art Institute in her hometown in Missouri, and, when she realized she wanted to teach, went back and got her Master’s Degree in education. She has happily taught art in the public schools for the past two decades, cramming in as many studio hours as possible during the summer months and fitting in whatever time she can during the school year. About a dozen years ago, though, she felt a transition in her personal work.

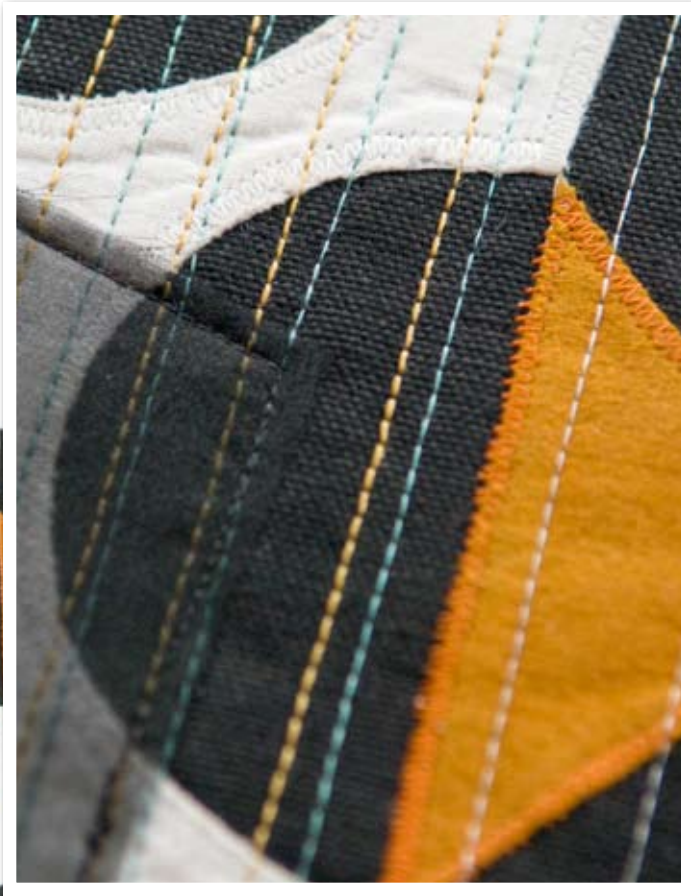


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"I had done a lot of sewing in the past and had always enjoyed constructing things with fabric. I was sewing a caftan dress that I had planned on giving my sister. On the bodice, I had used some paint and really enjoyed it. I got some fabric and stretched it over stretcher bars. Instead of priming with gesso, I painted directly onto the canvas material and started experimenting with that." She enjoyed the process so much that she immediately began looking for local workshops in surface design. She discovered continuing education workshops, which led to the Kansas Art Quilters' Group and the International Surface Design Association.

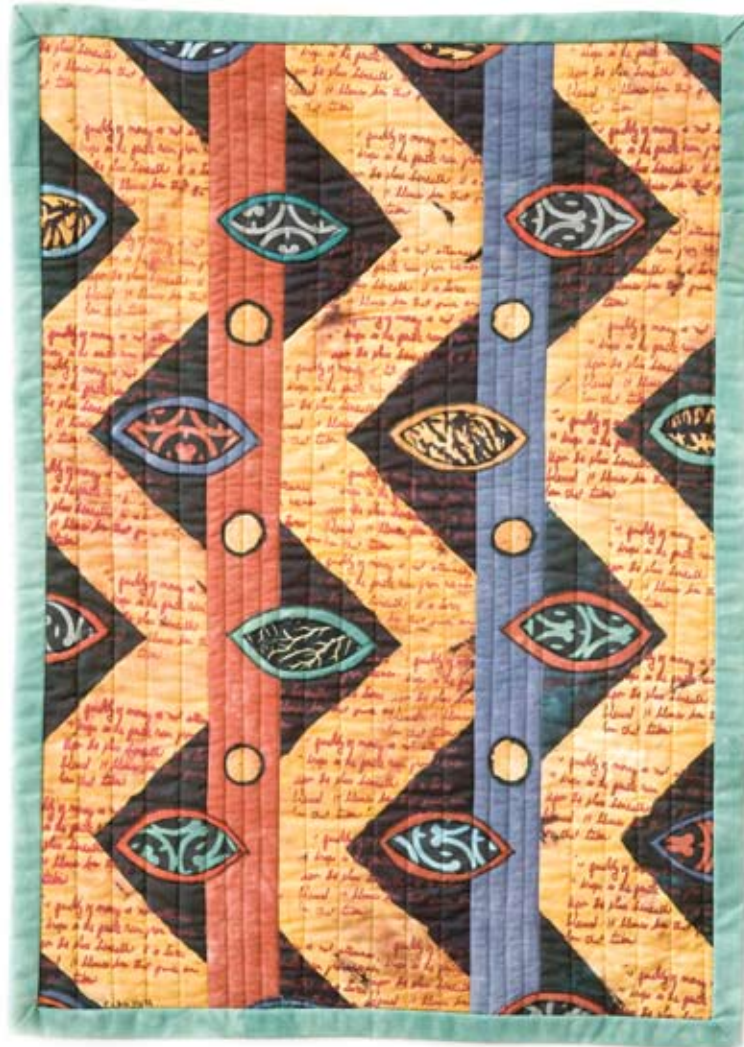
"I was involved with the group as a regional representative for several years and remain an active member," she says. "The caliber of talent in this group is so inspiring, and I don't know where I would have been without my involvement in it." Mary has taken workshops in surface design techniques from dye painting and screen printing to immersion dyeing and shibori, and combining those techniques to create her own fabric led to using that fabric to make art quilts. She seldom relies on sketching, and she instead lets the quilt develop from the images she creates directly on the fabric, beginning sometimes with muslin, sometimes with canvas, and sometimes with both.

"It begins with the fabric that I design," Mary explains. "I will have images or symbols floating about in my head that I want to use. I maybe have colors in mind or a feeling that I want to result from the color." Since she designs all her own fabric, she is unlike many quilters, who collect huge stashes of commercial yardage. That's a good thing because it means she doesn't have piles and stacks and shelves full of fabric to sort through, plus she can create exactly the fabric she imagines. It's a bad thing, though, because creating your own fabric means that it's really, really difficult to toss out even the tiniest scraps.



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"There's a tendency to hold onto those little fabric pieces," she admits, laughing. "A couple times a year I go through and do a major purge." Although creating a finished, bound art quilt is her ultimate goal, of course, creating the fabric is a very exciting adventure all on its own. She has access to a ThermoFax machine, which gives her an easier alternative to more labor-intensive methods of creating screens for silk screening, one of her favorite techniques. She also uses mono-printing, including gelatin prints, and finds the gelatin to be a wonderfully unpredictable surface.

"What's interesting about that is that it tends to deteriorate as you work, and you get these interesting unexpected images," she says. "If you're doing a series, they're all different." This is how she prefers to work, creating layers of color and images on multiple pieces of cloth at the same time. Sometimes in the process of creating the cloth, as she adds collographic images and digital images, one of the lengths of fabric will call to her.

"I usually don't work on more than one piece at a time. I get that one under way, and when it gets to a manageable place where I don't have to do a lot of intense thinking about it, then I know I can move on to another project. Often the next pieces results from using those same pieces I've printed before. It seems like all my life I've tried to develop some sort of method or formula that can be repeated, but I can't. I like to do a lot of printing at one time and painting at one time. And then I'll have too much — way too much — for one piece. But I'll hold onto those printed images and focus on that one piece. she says" She works with the composition, laying out the components on her design wall, and then fusing or sewing them in place. Then she

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often goes back in and re-paints parts to tie one particular area to another. She may paint or print over parts of the original images, reworking them over and over, continuing even after she's joined all the pieces together.

"It's a little scary because you've already assembled it, but it's kind of exciting, too." Sometimes she adds collage elements of torn paper and printed papers onto the fabric before she quilts, using a small amount of medium to hold them in place. She quilts by machine, using a heavy Peltex interfacing that would make hand quilting difficult. The result is a firmer, stiffer wall quilt, often finished with a traditional binding or serged or satin-stitched edges.

"There's a lot of work involved in getting an image out and having it say what you want it to say," Mary says, explaining that having time for that intense work precludes doing a lot of decorative handwork like beading or embroidery. Because she's always been a teacher, she has had to arrange a schedule that lets her work as much as possible in the hours she's not in school. In the summers, this isn't a problem; she can get up and go down to her studio in her pajamas and put in a good morning's work before she gets dressed for her daily two-mile run. During the school year, however, time is limited, and she has to think about how she can continue to create work in what time is available to her. Less handwork and smaller pieces mean she can continue to be productive throughout the year, rather than relegating her studio time to just those few months when school is out. Beginning in the fall of 2011, she has cut back her teaching to half a day with a move from elementary school to high school.



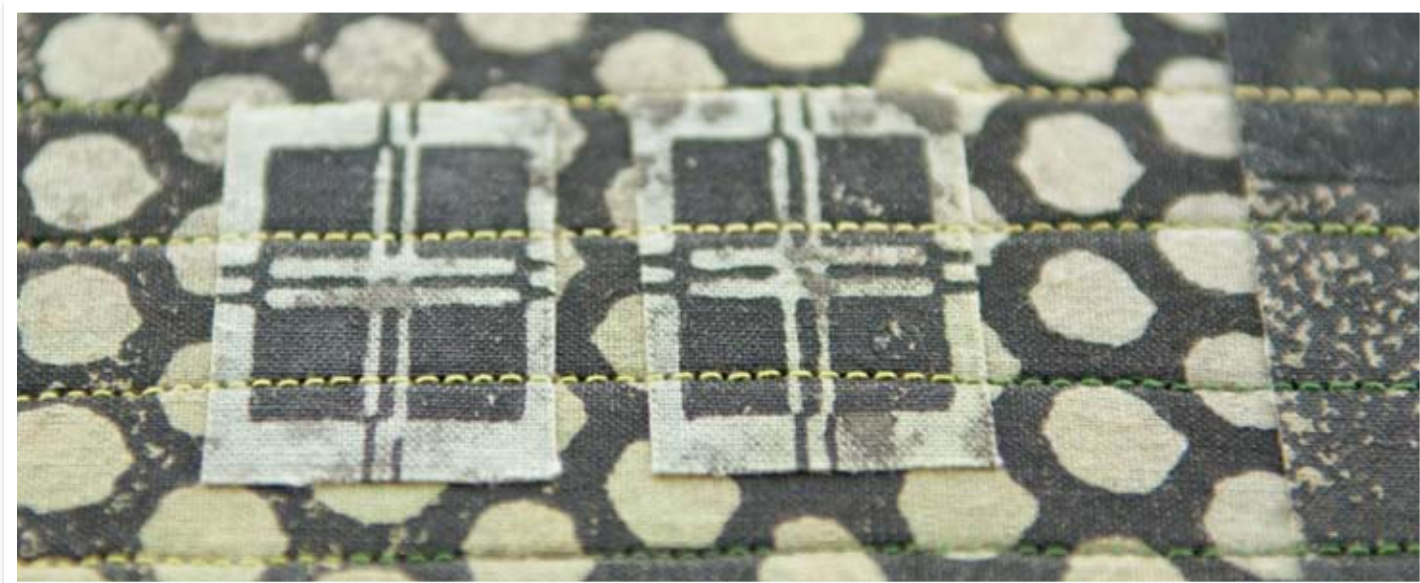
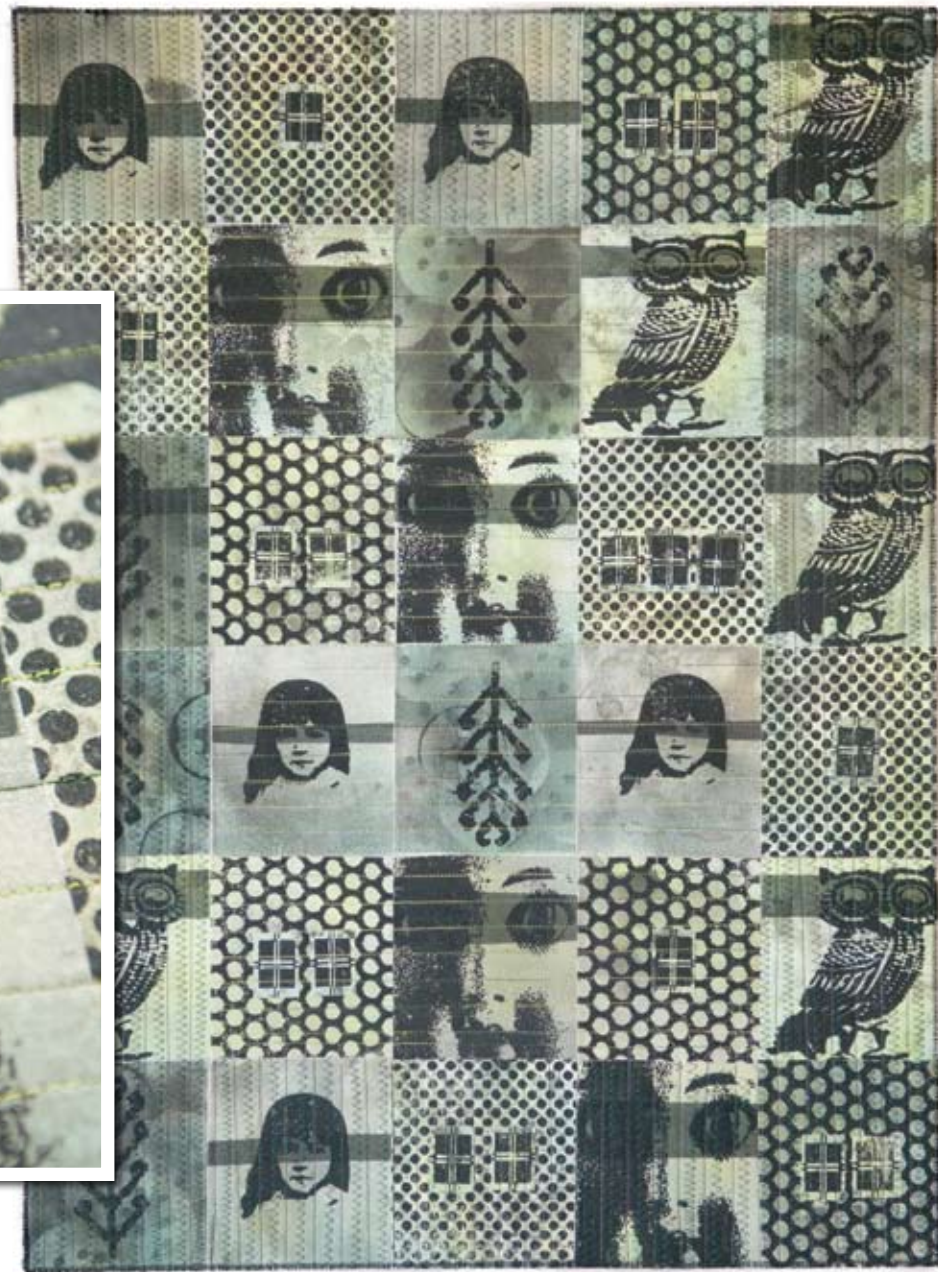


“At times working full-time has been a challenge, but I found little ways of making it work — if I worked smaller, for example, I could develop ideas as needed. I feel my enthusiasm for my own work helps to encourage creativity in students. Teaching is very much a mutual process, a definite give and take. I like discussing art, looking at artists’ examples and student work, brainstorming multiple ideas, processes, and solutions — and those are all part of everyday teaching. Even after all these years, I am still excited about teaching art and helping students find the rewards and joys of art making. says Mary”

She’s still excited about her own art, too, and what’s most exciting to her right now is the possibility of having her own images professionally printed on fabric. At a recent surface design conference, there was a presentation about *spoonflower.com*, where artists can have their own designs printed on yardage for prices that are far more reasonable than most people assume, with custom cotton starting at just \$16.20 a yard.

For Mary, that opens up a whole world of possibilities. Although she’s been printing on fabric with her Epson printer for years, this gives her the opportunity to work much larger. She’s beginning a series called “Doll Play,” inspired by her mother’s extensive collection of dolls and by those she played with as a little girl. She creates images by taking photographs, adjusting them in Photoshop, printing them out and studying them, and then going back into the editing program to tweak them some more. Because doll faces are so widely varied, the resulting altered images can go in many directions, which makes starting this series really exciting, especially when coupled with larger work made possible by the freedom of more studio hours.





"Getting commissions and selling pieces is always wonderful, but since I have earned my living through teaching, my main object has been to have the time and the messages to make meaningful work of a certain quality. Being an artist is a lifetime goal, something I wanted no matter what. It's a basic need for me; I couldn't imagine a life without the expression that art provides." ❖

To see more of Mary Elmusa's work, visit her website at maryelmusa.com. You can contact her at melmusa@yahoo.com, and you can find out more about Spoonflower fabrics at spoonflower.com.

Ricē Freeman-Zachery is the author of three creativity titles published by North Light Books including Destination Creativity: The Life-Altering Journey of the Art Retreat, Creative Time and Space: Making Room for Making Art, and the best-seller, Living the Creative Life: Ideas and Inspirations from Working Artists. She lives in Midland, Texas. You can reach Ricē (and read more of her creative ideas) through her journal at voodoonotes.blogspot.com. You can join her Creative Life group at groups.yahoo.com/group/thecreativelife.