

Guidelines for an Art Cloth Round Robin

Most of us are familiar with the popular group event referred to as a *round robin*, even if we have never participated ourselves. A specified number of participants agree to share the development of an art object by passing it from one to the other. Over the course of this serial *sharing* each artist contributes to the final creation. For example, an *art cloth round robin* begins with white cloth, which is dyed and patterned several times in succession by the various players. (Other surface design options are also usually employed.)

Pieces produced in a *round robin* can be really great or really bad. It's the luck of the draw, because the basic tenet of the process is one of responding to what arrives in the mail, rather than being intentional as a piece develops. The process is an intriguing challenge - and is obviously fun for those who agree to play. Relinquishing control is a great Life lesson, as is nurturing a sense of humor. A *round robin* encourage the players to do both - and throws in a few lessons about *making* along the way.

Having observed the results of a number of *round robin* events, it's occurred to me that some guidelines might be useful. Not meant to be restrictive in any way, these guidelines are just that - some ideas about how to get started and how to continue - with an eye to the creation of success for all concerned. If you are thinking of organizing a *round robin*, asking the participants to read the guidelines in advance may help everyone start on the same playing field.

Getting Started

When you are the first person working on the cloth, remember *you are the first person working on the cloth*. Right now your role is to produce a background that will be workable for the next person in the queue!

Some of your options include:

1. Dyeing the fabric either a plain color, or by manipulating it - folding, scrunching etc.
2. Adding a pattern by printing with dye or fabric paints.
3. Putting a water-based resist on the fabric and then dyeing over it either by hand painting the color or by immersing it. (if the resist will hold up.)
4. Direct painting the fabric with either dyes or thinned fabric paint.

If you are engaged in a classic round robin, eventually you will have a chance to be the artist putting the final layer on the cloth. Being first is different from being last. At the beginning it is most helpful to the person who follows you to create a background that is interesting or intriguing or appealing, while still having lots of room for the layers that are coming next.

SO at the beginning, it would be helpful to avoid:

1. Any technique that can't be removed. Hand painting large images in paint, for example, substantially limits what can be added, because the large scale and choice of product rules out discharging and over dyeing.
2. Any technique that would be better suited to the finish of the piece instead of being introduced early on. Foiling, for example, can't withstand a dye bath because the caustic nature of the soda ash strips the metallic surface. Soda ash does that to metallic paint, too, so paint would be better added later in the development of the piece instead of as the second layer.

Some good choices for a first layer are:

1. Dyeing a medium depth of color, or a manipulated light/dark combination of color(s) so that the next person can choose to over dye, print, or discharge - and advance the surface so that there is still *room* for the third layer. And fourth, fifth or sixth!
2. Printing a small overall pattern in dye or regular textile paint (not metallic). Small to medium sized images will be easier for the next person to work with than larger design elements.
3. Any water-based resist technique that will produce texture. Coating the fabric with flour paste or wax and then adding thinned textile paint or thickened dye is a great way to get a background started.

The Middle Layers

If you're the artist getting a piece in the mail that already has some color and/or patterning on it, your task is to think backwards and forwards. This is a delightful place to be! You'll be able to see what those who preceded you have done, and possibly even get to read their notes about the process. It's also up to you to think about the next artist, or two or three, who will follow you in the *round robin*.

You are charged with adding the important middle layers and these layers can make or break the piece.

A few things to consider:

1. There may be a theme established because of the imagery that's already there. If so, it's always a good idea to riff off that theme. Add an element that has some relationship if you can. Try to keep the element you choose stylistically similar to what's there. If the previous artist added printed flowers to the surface, then that's what you'll have to work with. Save the clip art image of hot dogs for another time.
2. If, on the other hand, the fabric is dyed blue and has a lovely crackle on it produced by adding flour paste, the world is your oyster. You get to choose whether the cloth

will continue as a non-specific color/texture study - or whether to add a design element that will set the tone for those who follow after you.

3. It's still smart not to add too much that would limit what can happen next, especially if there are still several artists in the queue. Some good choices for middle layers include:

- another dye bath to develop color complexity
- a discharged element - but keep it either small to medium sized or strictly textural to allow for future development
- printing of textile paint
- printing of a water-based resist like wax or glue, with the intention to add dye or thinned paint prior to sending the piece on

Once again, thinking about how many artists are still planning to work on the cloth will help you to make appropriate choices for both color and content. YOU can't ever forget or discount the fact that this is a *cooperative effort*.

Final Layers

When you are the artist who is adding the final touch to a piece, your task is different from that of anyone who preceded you! The best thing to do is to hang the fabric up and take a good, long look at it. (This is actually good advice for everyone, at every step of the process!)

Analyze how the layers have coalesced. (Or not.) Consider printing out my *Critiquing Guidelines* (complexcloth.com tutorials) and use those to analyze the cloth. Make a list of the various options that come to mind, so you can make the most *elegant choice*. Often the most elegant choice is one that will add contrast without overwhelming. If the piece is a rich, dark surface, then maybe some gold leaf will brighten and lead the eye. If the piece is fairly pastel at this point, then a darker value of one of the colors could do the trick.

What about beads or stitching? Might be perfect, but you won't know for sure unless you make the list and check it twice.

Another important caution: The final touch usually works best if it used sparingly and creates either a true focal point or a series of accents that guide the viewer's eyes across the piece. Overdo it, and you've got *background* again!

Good Luck!

Round robin challenges are a great way to learn about surface design and the layering process, and are also a wonderful way to share process and friendship with other artists. I hope these guidelines will be useful in getting your group started.

Let me know how it's going and have fun.

THESE GUIDELINES ARE PRESENTED FREE OF CHARGE AND MAY BE PRINTED AND DISTRIBUTED. PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE THE SOURCE IF USING THEM. THANKS IN ADVANCE!

These books might be helpful:

Benn, Claire, Dunnewold, Jane and Morgan, Leslie. *Finding Your Own Visual Language*. Self-published 2006. Available from complexcloth.com.

_____. *Paper and Metal Leaf Lamination*. Self-published 2007. Available from complexcloth.com.

Benn, Claire, Morgan, Leslie. *Silk Screen Printing*. self-published. available from Dharma Trading Company.

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Gunner, Janice. *Shibori for Textile Artists*. New York. Kodansha International. 2007.

Johnston, Ann. *Color by Accident*. Lake Oswego, Oregon: self-published, 1997.

_____. *Color by Design*. Lake Oswego, Oregon: self-published, 2001.

_____. *Dye Painting*. Paducah, Kentucky: American Quilter's Society, 1992.

Kafka, Francis, J. *Batik, Tie Dyeing, Stenciling, Silk Screen, Block Printing: The Hand Decoration of Fabrics*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959.

Laury, Jean Ray. *Imagery on Fabric*. Lafayette, California: C & T Publishing, 1992.

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Wells, Kate. *Fabric Dyeing and Painting*. Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1997