

"Invisible" Machine Appliqué

Rebecca Kemp Brent

Beautiful needle-turn appliqué, with its finished edges and invisible hand stitching, is the gold standard for appliqué among needleworkers. You can achieve a similar result with a machine stitch that's designed to disappear into the fabrics, and modern notions make the preparation and completion steps simple and less time consuming.

Supplies

1. Stabilizers: You'll use two different kinds of stabilizing material. These are available from machine-embroidery suppliers and some quilting and stitchery shops.

a. Fiber-based partial wash-away stabilizer (Quilters Select Print & Piece): This resembles a sheet of cotton rag paper. It's made from fibrous material held together with a water-soluble binding material. You can print or draw on it, cut it, and use it to back appliqué shapes as you finish the edges. After assembly, it dissolves into a soft, undetectable layer of loose fiber between the appliqué and background fabrics.

b. Paper-backed water-soluble stabilizer (Floriani Wet N Gone Tacky): These 8 1/2" x 11" sheets of water-soluble mesh stabilizer have an adhesive backing covered by a paper protective sheet. They run through your printer just like paper. Remove the paper backing, stick the pattern to your background at the desired placement, and position and stitch your appliqués right through the stabilizer. Afterward it washes away, leaving no marks on your fabric.

2. Fabric: Start with 100% cotton woven fabric, like quilting cotton. It's easy to use and great for learning. Later you can experiment with any other washable fabrics.

3. Thread: All-Purpose and Fine threads are great (I use Coats & Clark Dual Duty XP threads). Choose a color that blends into your background fabric; that may sound crazy, but most of the stitching will be on the background. Invisible machine threads are another fine choice, as they blend into almost any color fabric. Do stitch a sample first, and change to a different thread color if you prefer.

4. Glue (Quilter's Select Fabric Glue Stick): Choose a water-soluble glue that will wash away with the stabilizers.

5. Bias Pressing Bars

Preparing the Appliqués – Shapes

1. Print or trace the appliqué shapes onto the stabilizer. Reverse the shape if it is not symmetric, or flip it over for use. Cut out each shape on the line, keeping your cuts smooth and accurate.

2. Use a little glue to attach the appliqué shape to the wrong side of the appliqué fabric. It may be helpful to position the shape on the bias or slightly off the straight grain.

3. Cut out the shape, leaving a generous 1/8" seam allowance. It's okay to judge the seam allowance by eye, and minor irregularities won't be a problem. If your fabric is heavy or ravel, leave 1/4" seam allowance.

4. Turn the appliqué shape wrong side up and apply a little glue to the seam allowance, working with one section at a time. Use a cuticle stick as an aid when your fingers seem too big. Lightly press the turned edges with a warm iron to set the glue. Apply a little additional glue at corners where the seam allowances overlap. If your appliqué shape's edges will lie under a second piece of appliqué, do not press the seam allowances to the wrong side; leave them extended away from the stabilizer.

5. Apply basting glue to the seam allowances on the wrong side of the appliqué pieces and attach them to your background fabric and stabilizer.

Preparing the Appliqués – Lines

1. Cut strips of appliqué fabric on the bias. Each should be twice the finished width of the desired line of appliqué, plus 1/2" seam allowance. For lines that finish 1/4" wide, that equals 1" cut strips.

2. If necessary, sew lengths of bias together to create a long strip, pressing the seam allowances open. Fold the bias strip in half lengthwise, **wrong sides together**, and sew. For accuracy on narrow strips, gauge the seam location by running your foot or other guide along the *folded edge* of the strip, adjusting the needle position to yield the desired strip width.

3. Trim the seam allowances to about 1/16" – very narrow. Slip the correctly sized pressing bar into the tube and roll the seam to the center of one bar surface. Press the tube, slipping the bar along as you work through the length of the tube. Keep the seam allowances centered on the wrong side of the tube. You can press the seam allowances open if you choose, but it's not necessary.

4. Apply glue to the prepared bias tube along the seam allowances. Position the tube on the background fabric ready for stitching. It may be necessary to work in sections in order to accommodate under- and overlapping appliqués.

Stitching the Appliqués

1. Set your machine for an appliqué stitch. This stitch is a series of about four forward-motion straight stitches, followed by a single narrow zigzag stitch to one side. The straight stitches should enter only the background fabric, lying immediately beside the appliqué's pressed edge, while the zigzag catches just a couple of threads in the appliqué fabric. Stitch a test sample or two to determine which length and width settings work best for your fabrics and project.

If your machine doesn't have an appliqué stitch, use narrow zigzag stitch with a longer than normal stitch length. Position the stitch so that only one swing of the zigzag enters the appliqué shape. A blind-hem stitch with a short stitch length is another possibility.

2. Working from background to foreground (for example, from the outer petals of a flower to its center), stitch the appliqués to the background.

3. Following the manufacturer's instructions, soak or wash the project to remove the stabilizers. Be sure the stabilizers and glue are out of the fabric before using detergent in the wash water.