



Sewing Fun Stuff!

SOFT SCULPTURE SHORTCUTS

by Lynne Farris
Great Sewing Projects Series

Sewing Information Resources



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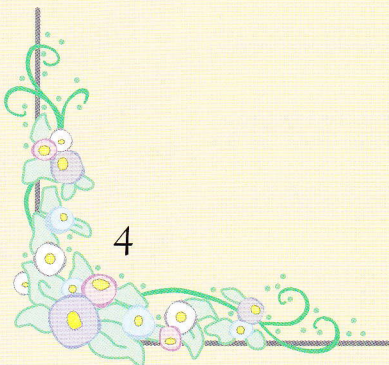
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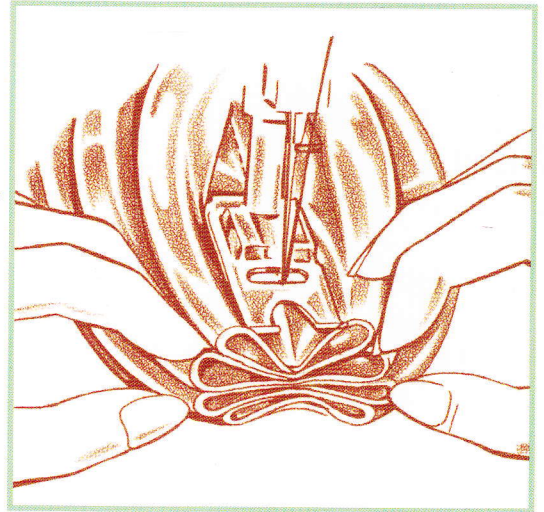
Features

Soft sculpture can be very labor intensive and your project will have the very best chance of success if you use the best materials, tools and equipment.

It's wise to start each new project or sewing session by examining your needle and changing it if necessary. Choose appropriate needles for the fabrics and threads you are using to ensure the very best results. For detailed information consult your machine's guidebook or your local sewing machine dealer.

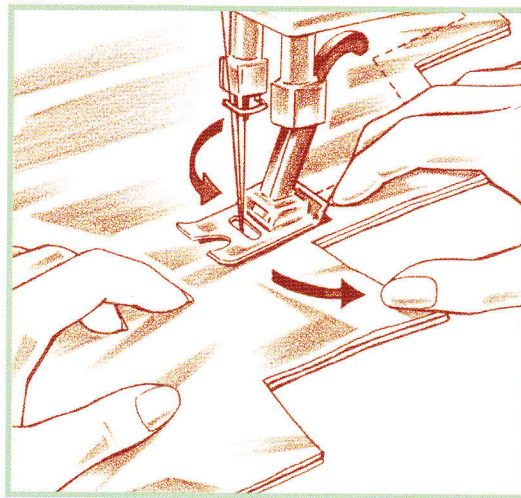
Tension adjustment

The tension dial on your sewing machine should be set at a lower number when working with a thick fabric “sandwich”; this loosens the top tension and prevents thread breakage.



Needle stop up/down

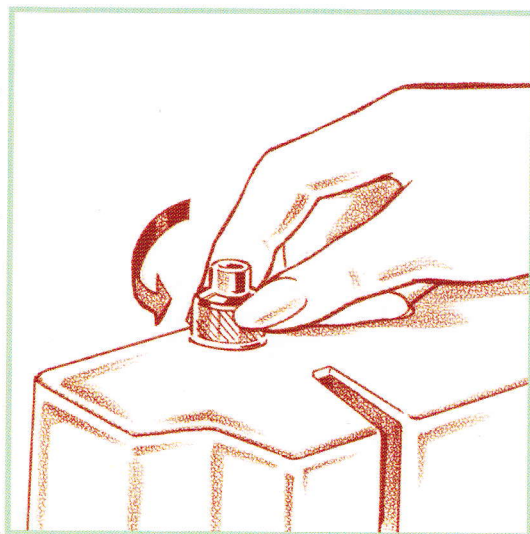
Most newer machines can be set to stop at the end of a stitch or a stitch sequence in the memory with the needle in



the up or down position. This feature is quite helpful for pivoting at sharp points and for making precise turns while stitching.

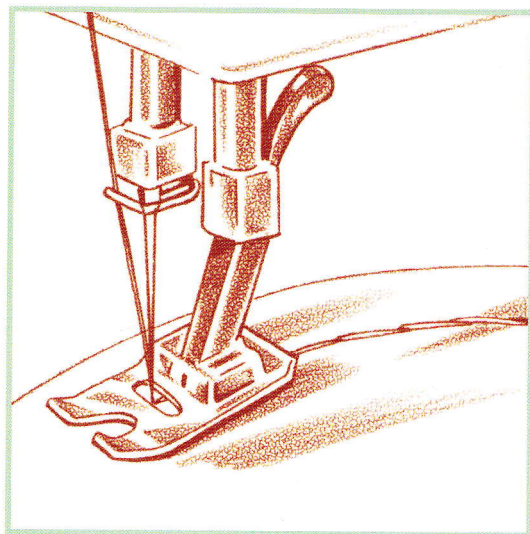
Presser foot pressure release knob

Many machines have a knob located on the upper-left corner of the head which controls the pressure on the presser foot. By releasing this pressure and lowering the feed dogs, fabrics can be easily moved manually through the needle area for free-motion sewing.



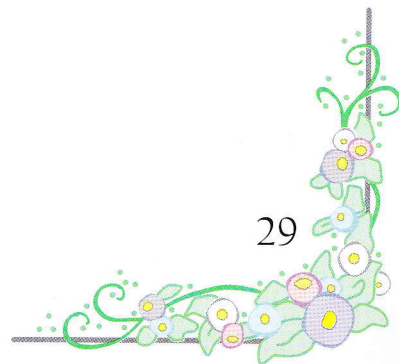
Pre-programmed stitches

Pre-programmed stitch patterns are invaluable for surface embellishment and application of trims and ribbons. Use them liberally to personalize your work. Several can be used to create shapes which can then be cut out in groups, turned and stuffed to create parts as needed.



Long stitch/basting stitch

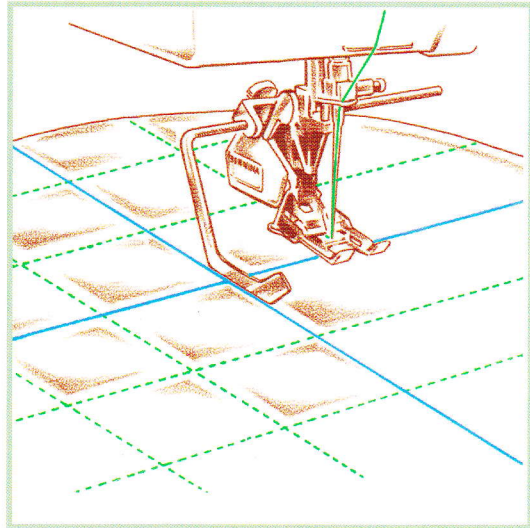
These functions cause the machine to sew either every second stitch or every fourth stitch and can be used for basting thick layers together or for sewing heavy fabrics. They can also be used for decorative topstitching.



Accessories

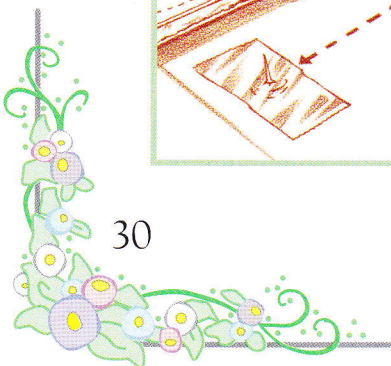
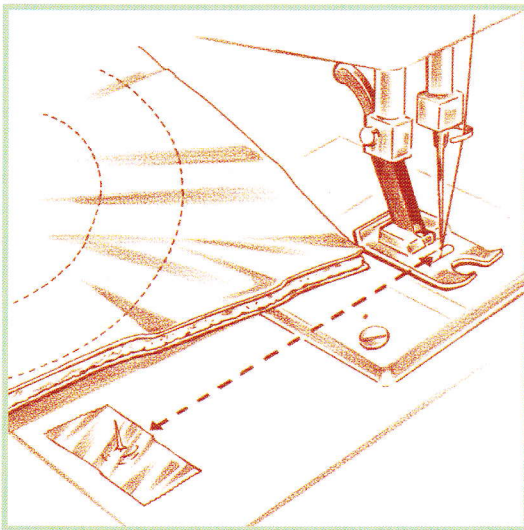
Walking foot

The walking foot is used to help feed difficult fabrics, which tend to slip or stick, smoothly through the machine. Used with the seam guide, the walking foot can be invaluable in quilting layers together in a repetitive pattern.



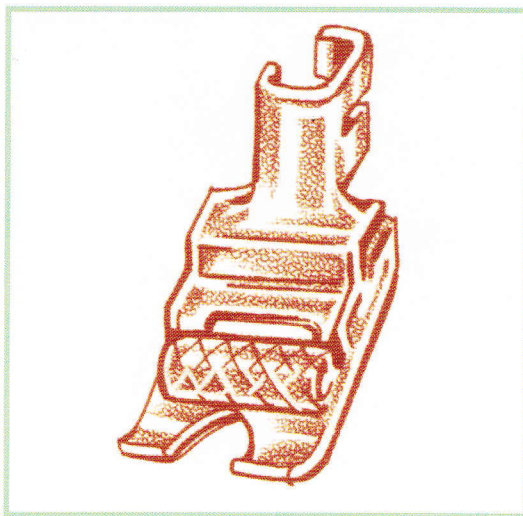
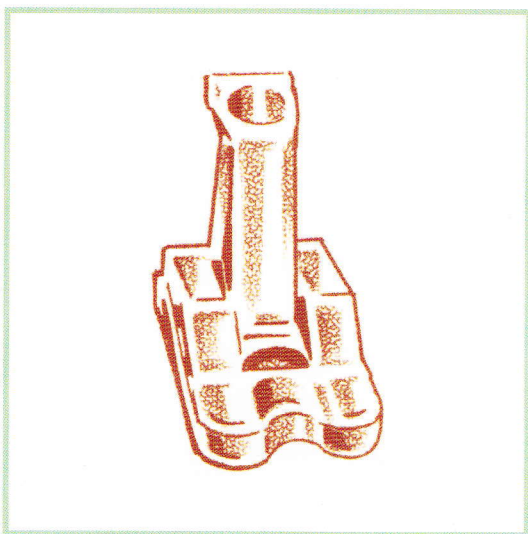
Circular embroidery attachment

If your machine doesn't have a circular embroidery attachment, try the following alternative. Determine the radius of the desired finished circle and then measure from the needle to a left point on the sewing machine bed. Attach a thumbtack to the bed of the sewing machine at that point using cellophane tape. Center the fabric on the thumbtack. The machine will then sew in a circular pattern. This method can be used to create circles and circular patterns of decorative stitches. It has been adapted for a unique soft sculpture application in the beginner project entitled "Cactus Everlasting." Of course, you can always just use an air-soluble marker to mark your circles before sewing.



Leather roller foot

A leather roller foot is handy for sewing together layers of heavy and stiff fabrics such as leather, vinyl and suede. Be sure to use a leather needle with it for best results.



Cording foot

This foot is invaluable for creating and applying corded piping and braided trims. It has a deep groove on the underside which rides over the braid to ensure smooth application by aligning the braid or cord very close to the stitching line.

Open-toe embroidery foot

This foot is best used for surface embellishment and satin stitching. It provides maximum visibility at the point where the needle enters the fabric. When using any open-toe foot, hold fabric taut or use embroidery hoops for best results.

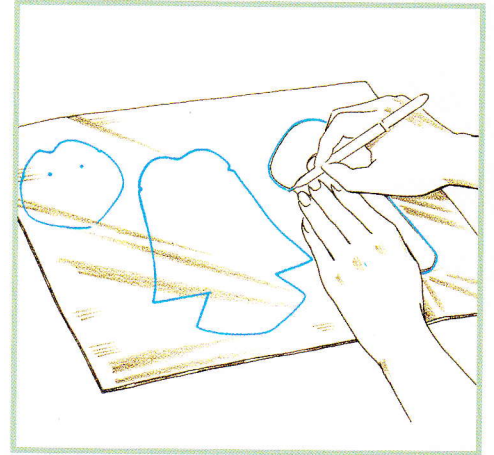


Pattern Tips

Complete patterns for all projects in this book can be found inside the front and back covers. Trace patterns for your project onto tracing paper, transferring all markings, then copy onto stiff pattern cardboard or clear acetate sheets to create durable patterns. (Note: When copying onto acetate, use a permanent marking pen.)

Transferring patterns onto fabric

A shortcut for creating two-layer shapes is to cut a template for the pattern pieces out of pattern board or acetate. A template is cut to the exact shape of the finished piece without added seam allowances. Then, using an air-soluble marker, trace around the outside edges of the template to mark the exact stitching lines. The pieces are sewn together *before* you cut them out. Be sure to read each instruction completely before cutting.



In other cases, the seam allowances have been included on the patterns. These stitching lines are clearly marked with a broken line, usually inside the cutting line. This construction method is used when sewing dissimilar pieces together or when special indicators are necessary.

A third method of construction involves dimensional measurements. The instructions might read "cut a 10"x12" rectangle" or "cut a 6" circle." Accurate measuring is crucial to the success of all projects.

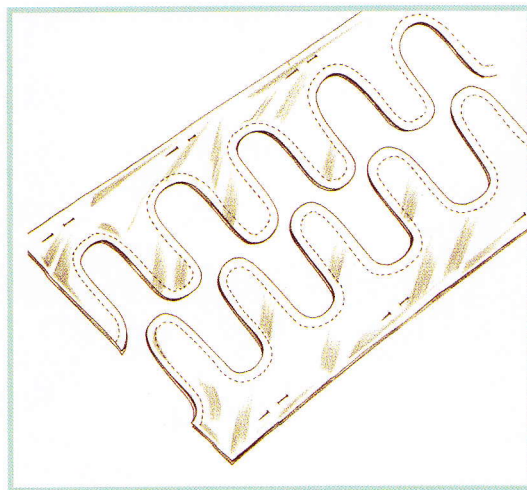
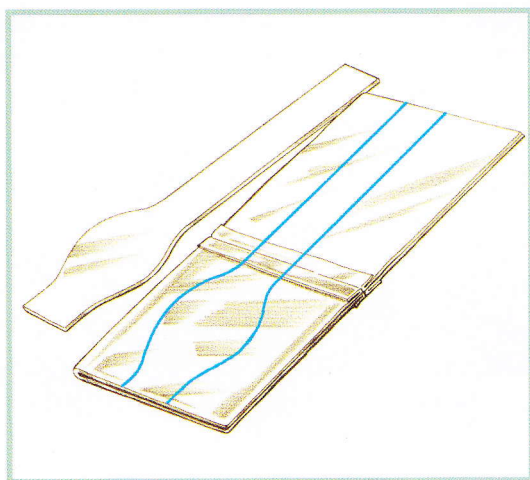
Draping

In the advanced projects, draping will be used to determine fabric shapes. Draping, a fashion design technique adapted here for soft sculpture, involves placing fabric directly onto an armature and pinning in place to ensure proper fit.



Interlocking pattern layout

When transferring patterns to fabric, leave enough space between shapes for seam allowances. A good rule of thumb for most fabrics is $\frac{1}{2}$ " between shapes so that when the sewn shapes are cut apart a $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance remains. Often the shapes can be arranged on the fabrics so that one cut creates two seam allowances.

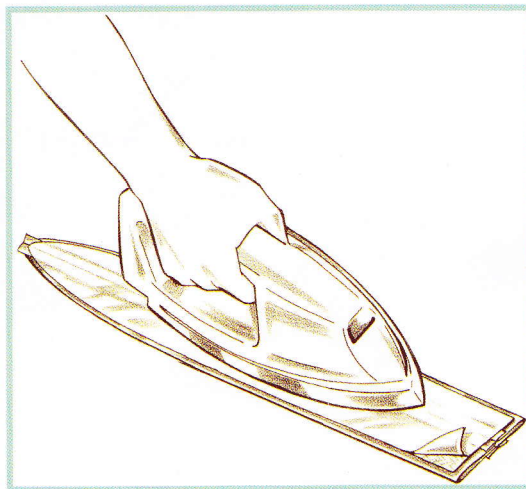


Color blocking

Another fashion design technique adapted for use in soft sculpture projects is color blocking. Contrasting fabrics are assembled before pattern pieces are traced to simplify cutting and construction.

Fusing fabrics together

Fabrics are fused together for strength or to create specialized combinations of colors or textures. Fusible tricot interfacing added to a knit fabric reduces stretch or prevents fraying on woven fabrics. It adds body without changing the essential characteristics of the fabric or adding weight. Two-toned double-faced fabrics are created by fusing together wrong sides of contrasting fabrics. Always follow manufacturer's fusing instructions carefully to ensure success and prevent damage to fabrics.

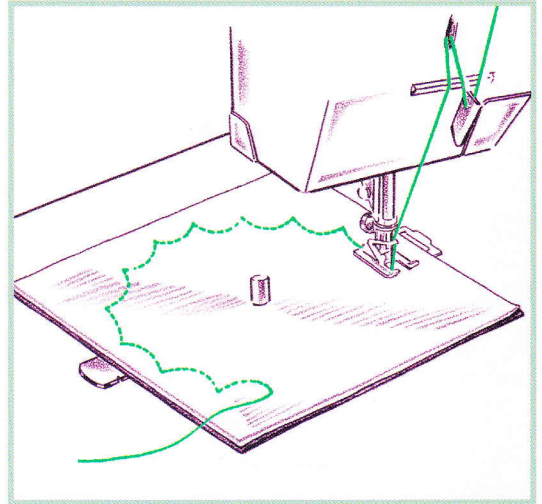


Specialized Tips

The following techniques are used on many of the projects in this book. Familiarize yourself with this information before beginning any project.

Circular stitching

A circular embroidery attachment consists of a ruler-like arm that extends from the left of the presser foot across the bed of the sewing machine. An adjustable slide with a small spike attached is used to pierce the fabric at a chosen center point forming a radius with the machine needle. Once stitching begins, the fabric moves through the machine in a circular motion.



If a circular embroidery attachment is not available for your machine, use a thumbtack, point facing up, and measure the appropriate radius distance from the needle to the tack for the size of circle to be sewn. Attach the tack to the bed of the machine with strong tape. Position the center of the fabric on the tack and proceed with circular stitching.

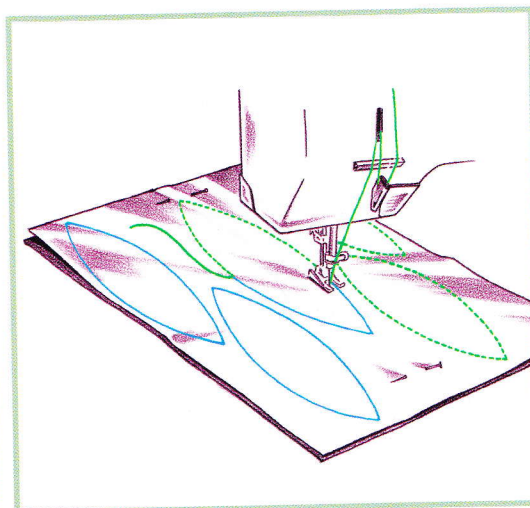
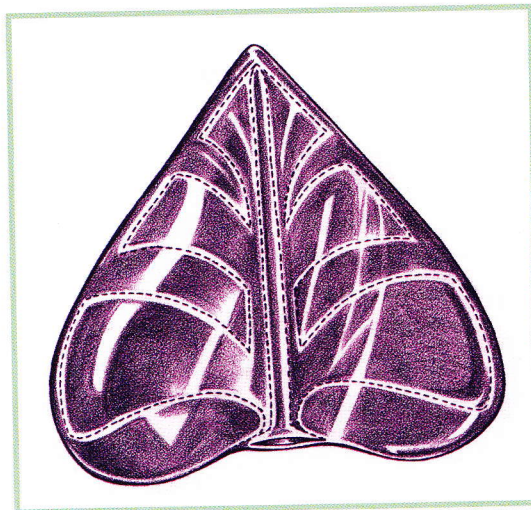


Stack and stitch

A unique method for creating three-dimensional forms is to stack several layers of sewn, turned but unstuffed shapes, matching the edges very carefully. Stitch through all layers to form a series of channels which will fill out to become a round form when stuffed. A walking foot is helpful to prevent shifting.

Sewing, then cutting

When a project requires several small shapes, stitch completely around each piece and then cut out all the sewn shapes at once simplifying sewing and shortening cutting time.



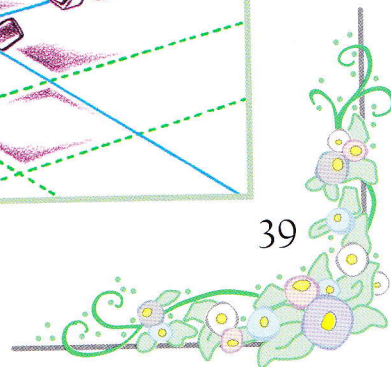
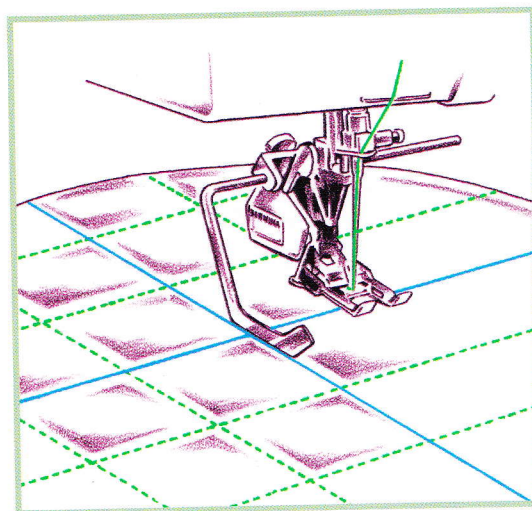
Topstitching and free-motion quilting

A lightly filled shape or one lined with batting can be topstitched to create a dimensional or quilted effect. Lengthen the stitch slightly to accommodate the layers of

fabric and batting. Pin the layers together carefully to avoid shifting while sewing. Use a free-motion or quilting foot and lower the feed dogs to draw patterns with needle and thread across the fabric surface. Natural textures of leaves or bark are easily created.

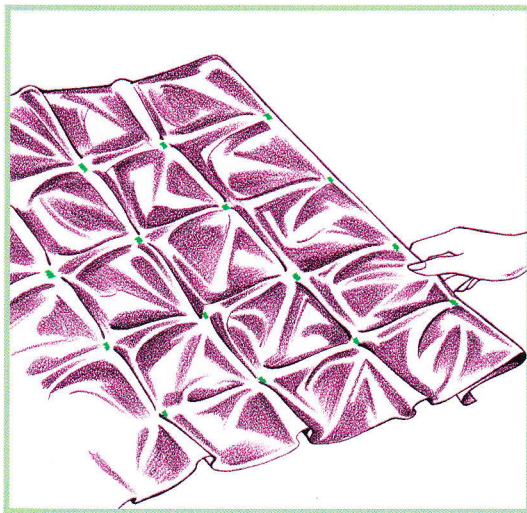
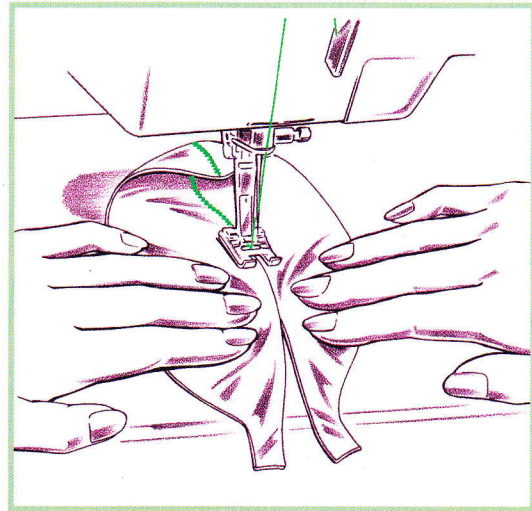
Linear quilting

When working with bulky fabrics and multiple layers, use a walking foot to move fabric easily through the machine and prevent shifting while sewing. Attach and adjust guides to facilitate stitching of parallel rows.



Flat joining seams

To join curved edges of two pieces of fabric without adding the bulk of a seam allowance, set the machine to a narrow zig zag stitch. Using a monofilament thread, butt edges and center under presser foot. Stitch carefully, adjusting edges while sewing to accommodate curves.

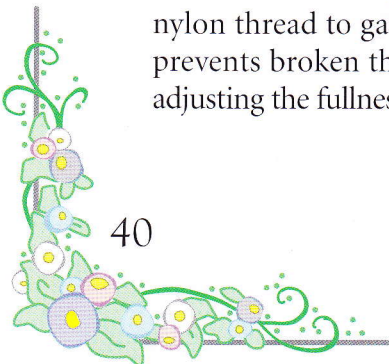
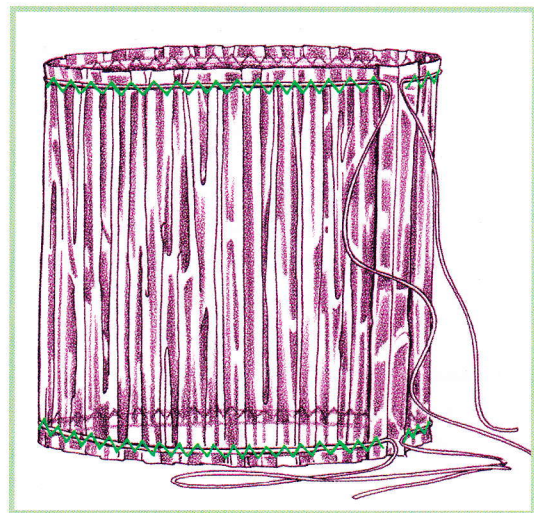


Pleating and tucking

Manipulating fabric by pleating or tucking adds texture, pattern, and stability. Fold and press pleats or tucks and secure with bartacks or topstitching. The topstitching or bartacking can be integrated as a design element.

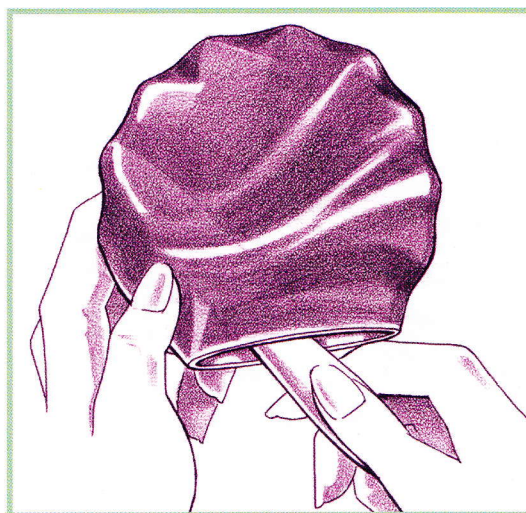
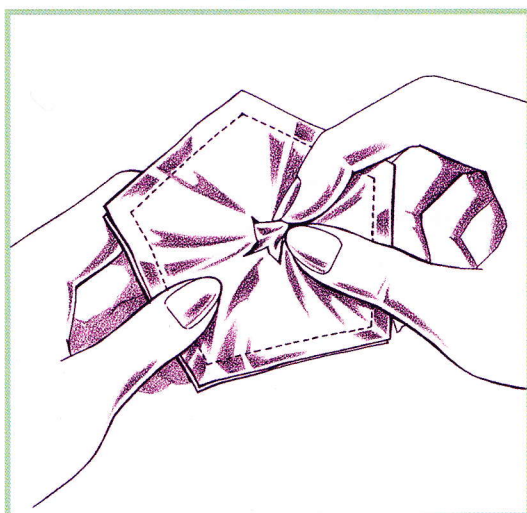
Gathering

For easy gathering, set machine to a narrow, long, zig zag stitch and sew over nylon upholstery thread. Use a cording foot, if available, to keep upholstery thread centered between zig zag stitches. Pull nylon thread to gather. This method prevents broken threads and makes adjusting the fullness of gathers easier.



Tips for turning

For professional-looking results, always notch inside curves and clip outside curves close to the stitching line. Trim away excess fabric from points. Use a point turner or paint brush handle to open out each point or appendage before stuffing. When turning tubes, stitch across one end to close, then insert a dowel or turning rod to turn from the closed end. When turning a sewn shape right side out, always start from the point farthest from the opening for ease in turning.



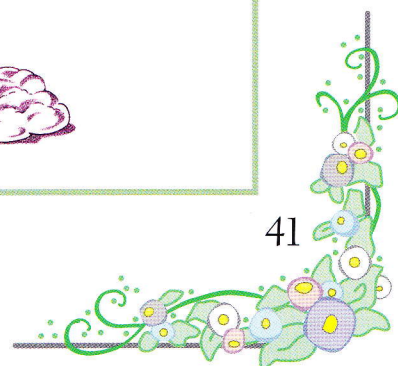
Slash and turn

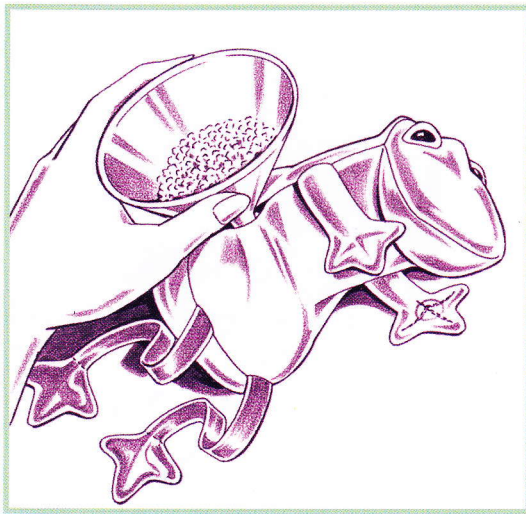
When working with two-layer shapes, stitch completely around the outside of the shape along the marked stitching line. Slit the shape in the back or in an inconspicuous place for turning and stuffing. The integrity of the shape is maintained and the slit can then be whipstitched closed.



Stuffing

Stuffing is a crucial and integral part of soft sculpting. Care should be taken in the selection and application of materials and methods. Densely packed stuffing produces a firm free-standing object, whereas lightly stuffed objects tend to be more flexible and may need the additional support of an armature.





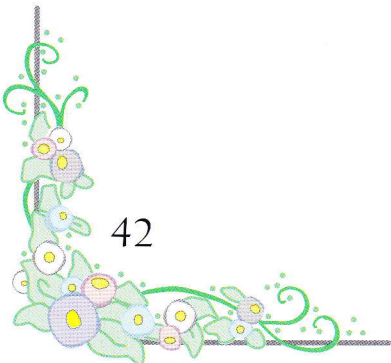
Polyester fiberfill is available in two styles, one very soft and fluffy while the other produces a more dense, solid effect. Natural fiber stuffing, such as cotton and kapok, produces slightly different effects. Experiment to see which suits the needs of your project. To remove a dimpled or lumpy appearance, run a paint brush handle under fabric surface to distribute stuffing evenly, or, if necessary, line with a thin layer of quilt batting.

For flatter pieces, layers of batting can be placed under the fabrics before sewing to simplify stuffing. Choose batting of appropriate thickness and density to vary depth and firmness. Always trim batting close to stitching lines to avoid bulkiness around seams. Topstitching though all layers will stabilize the batting and create a trapunto effect.

To add weight to certain areas for stability or to create posable shapes, polyester pellets can be used alone or with other stuffing materials. These small pellets are durable, easy to use and widely available. For ease of insertion, use a funnel or drinking straw to deposit pellets evenly and neatly.

Pressing

As with fashion sewing, “pressing as you go” yields professional results in soft sculpting. Use an iron to form and re-shape sewn pieces. Heat and steam can be used to set folds and pleats prior to assembly.

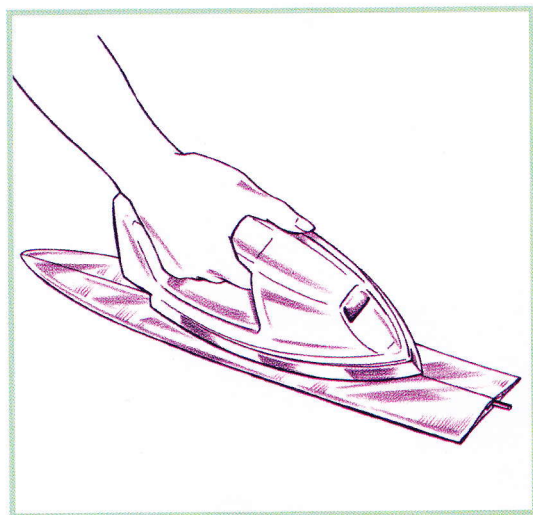
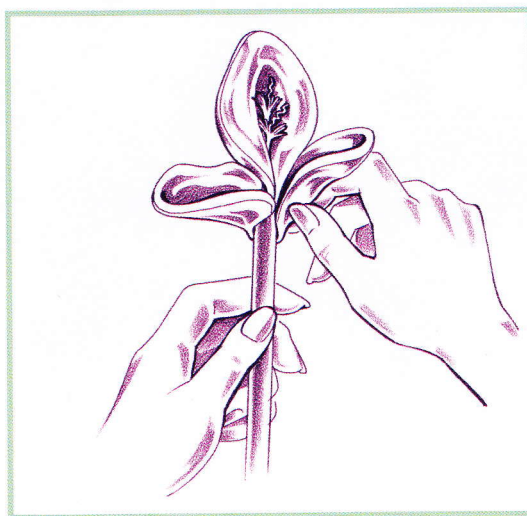


Gluing

The glue gun has enabled soft sculptors to eliminate much of the hand sewing previously required in joining pieces. The ease of application and instant bonding make it preferable to other gluing methods. It can be used for fabric-to-fabric bonds, as well as joining unlike materials.

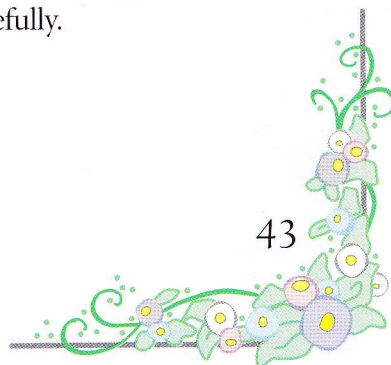
Apply glue carefully to one surface and hold in place against the other surface for at least one minute to ensure a tight bond. For best results, use a trigger feed gun if available.

(Note: To remove excess glue, or separate previously glued pieces, heat area briefly with a hair dryer to soften bond and lift glue from surface.) *Safety tip: Keep a glass of ice water nearby when working with a glue gun. Should you accidentally touch the glue to your fingertips, immerse fingers immediately to cool the glue and avoid burns.*



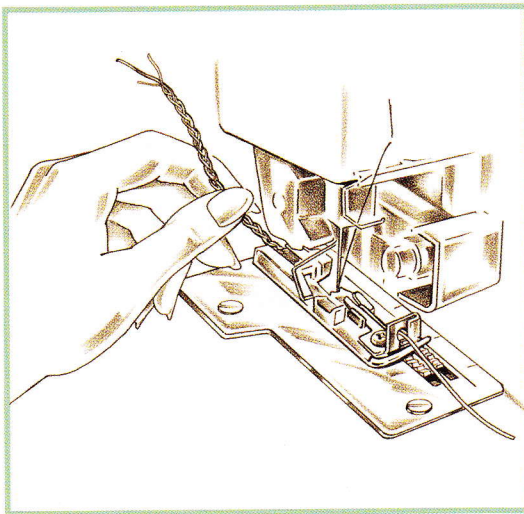
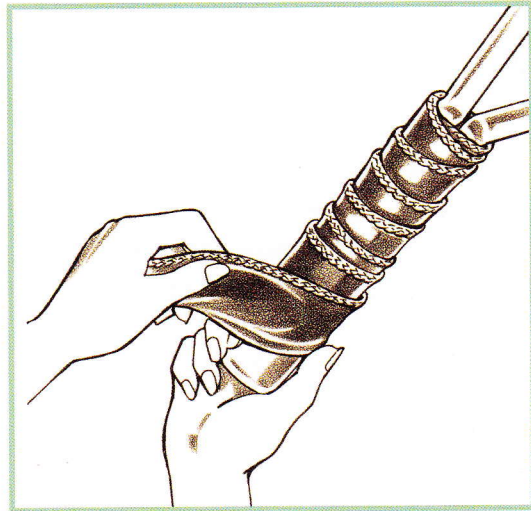
Fusing after sewing

One unique fusing application presented in this book is fusible web applied after sewing. Once stitching is completed, fusible web is applied to one side prior to turning. The backing is removed, the piece is turned right side out and a stabilizing wire is inserted. Heat is then applied again to fuse the two pieces and permanently set the wire in place. For best results, always follow manufacturer's instructions and recommendations carefully.



Wrapping

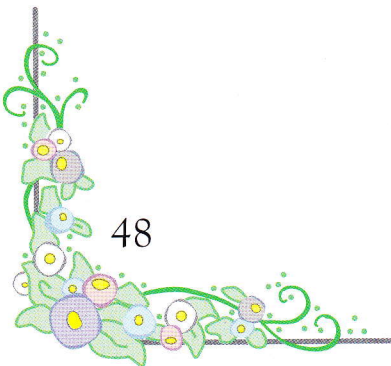
Wrapping fabric or trim around a form is an effective way to cover it or create texture. Overlapping wrapped layers slightly prevents fraying, adds dimension, and simulates true-to-life growth patterns.



Serged wire edge

Wire-edged ribbons, available in many colors, widths, and fabrications are the soft sculptor's dream. The wire edges function as an internal armature so the ribbon can be easily sculpted, reshaped and retain its form indefinitely.

To create your own wire-edged ribbons and trims, select the cording foot and decorative thread and adjust the serger for a three-thread rolled edge. Insert wire into the foot and serge edges of fabric to create wire-edged ribbon or trim.



Remember, this is just research and these rough sketches will never be seen by anyone else. The purpose of this exercise is strictly to put the idea into your mind. Repeat the same steps for the left and right sides, top (overhead view), and bottom.

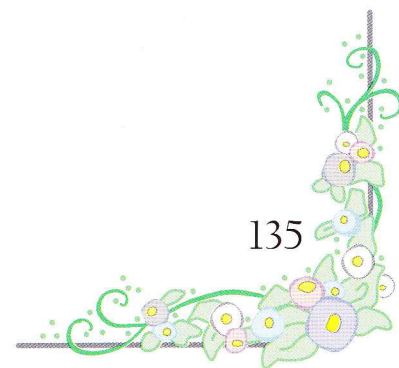
Once you have a general idea of the shapes and how they relate to one another, you can begin to think about translating your two-dimensional drawings into three dimensions by creating patterns for them.

Soft sculpture differs from fashion sewing in that there is no “right or wrong” way to fit things together. You can design your pattern pieces very carefully and concisely or you can nip and tuck at will and allow the process of design to become part of your overall design. There is a certain freedom in that knowledge which releases your creativity so that you are free to experiment. Two excellent pattern making methods are described below:

Building a paper model

In designing an item to be stuffed, one very effective way to create soft sculpture patterns is to create a paper model. Once the model is constructed from paper, the main shapes and forms are then disassembled and adjusted until they can be flattened out into flat paper patterns.

It's a good idea to make the model about the same size you want the finished piece. However, for very large projects you might work small first, then enlarge to scale once the model is complete.



For this exercise you will need some heavy paper (brown paper grocery bags or old manilla folders are excellent), masking tape and scissors.

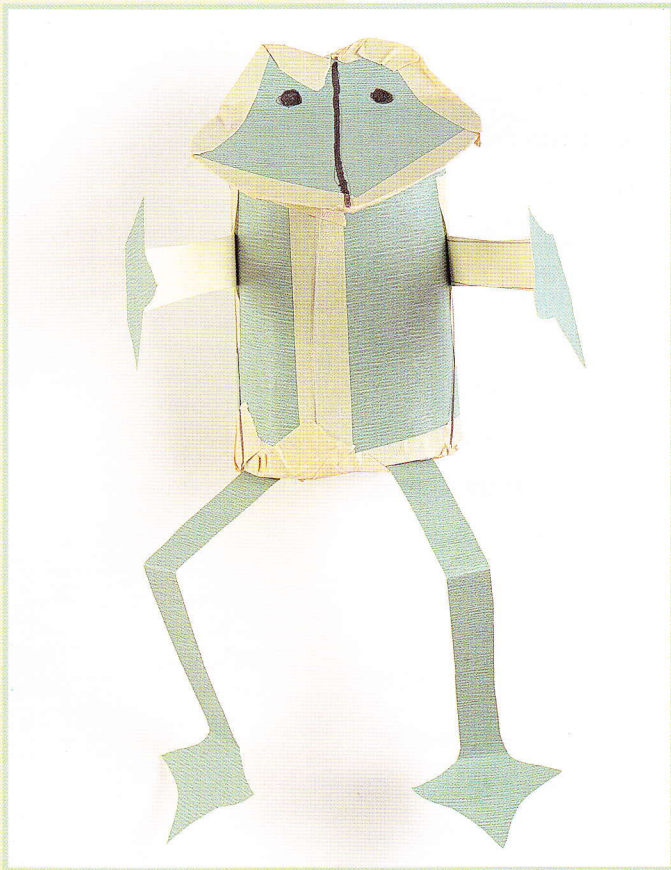
Using your rough sketches as a guide, cut and fold a

piece of paper into a basic three-dimensional geometric form (cone, cylinder, pyramid, cube, etc.) which closely approximates the largest shape in your sketches, taping where necessary to hold the form together. Looking at the drawings again, add secondary shapes, trimming them as necessary and taping them into place on the main form. The parts won't fit together perfectly, but add tape wherever you need it to bridge any gaps and to hold things together.

You can overlap edges to take in a piece, add strips as necessary to enlarge, clip out darts, fold small pleats to simulate gathers

or pinch in a small tuck. Just be careful to tape everything together well.

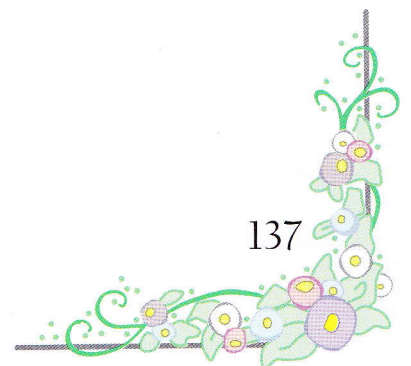
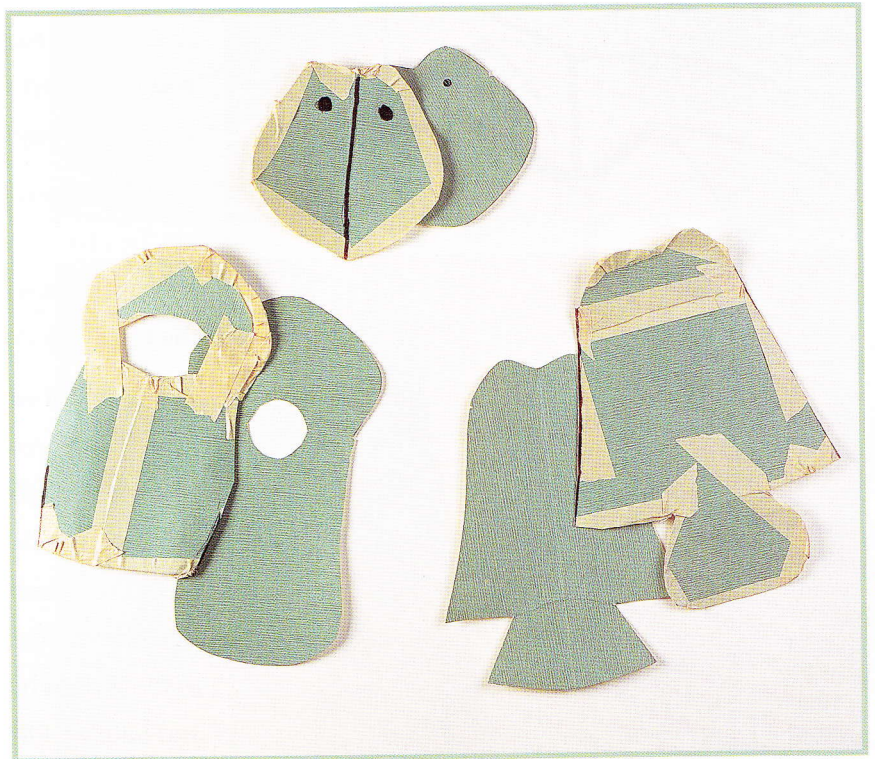
Once your model is all taped together, the next task is to translate it into pattern pieces by flattening it out. Instead of untaping the joints, use your scissors to separate each shape from the others, being careful to mark crucial



connecting points with colored markers or letters so that you can reconstruct the model as necessary. Then clip each shape at various points until it will lie flat. Your goal is to simplify the construction as much as possible while maintaining the integrity of the shapes.

When you recreate these forms in fabric they will be much more fluid and flexible. Additionally, you will be able to manipulate the fabric somewhat in the stuffing process. The key to success is to experiment, adjust the shape of a dart so that it curves slightly or lengthen or shorten it to smooth out a shape. Use your model pattern as a starting point and trace its outline onto pattern paper. You can then make whatever adjustments you need to onto the second or third generation pattern, preserving your original model pattern as a reference.

You can fine tune your patterns using paper, but the real test will come when you make up a fabric sample. Use fabrics similar in weight and content to the ones you will be using for the final piece. Some designers like to stuff the first



fabric version inside out so that adjustments can be marked directly onto the seam lines.

Creating an armature

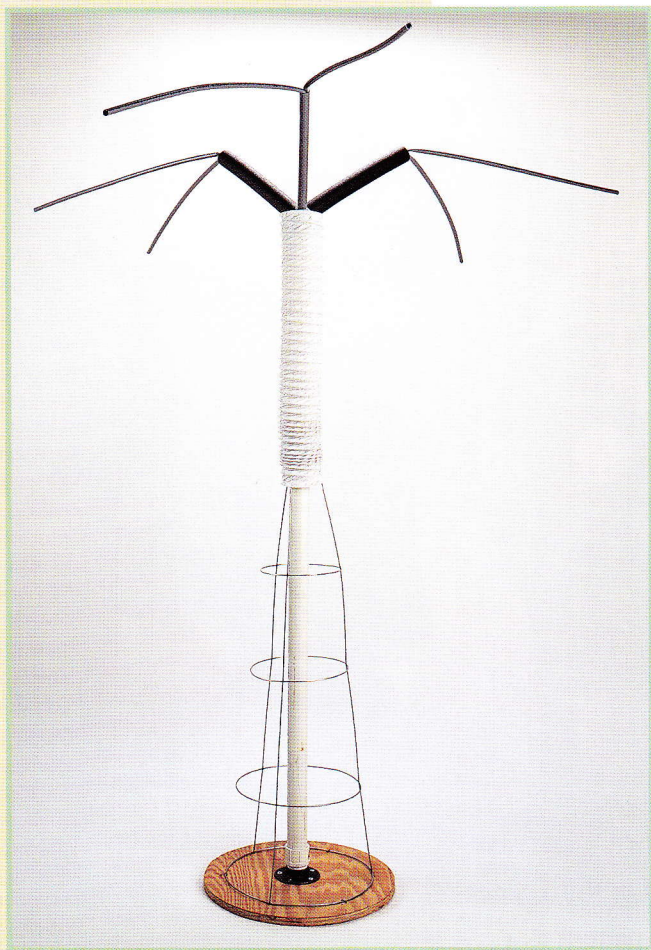
For very large items which require an armature or some sort of internal support, you must start with the “skeleton” and work your way out.

Using your drawings as a guide, create the armature from “found objects,” PVC pipe, or whatever you come across at the hardware store that seems to fit the bill.

A bit of experimentation is called for here. If the project is very tall or top heavy you will probably need to stabilize the base somewhat with extra weight; wooden blocks or beanbag weights work well. Remember, you will be adding significantly to the weight by the addition of fabrics and batting. Once it's finished it's hard to go back inside to add stabilizers.

When you have completed the armature, you can use batting to cover it, wrapping and tucking and perhaps taking

a stitch or two with upholstery thread and a soft sculpture needle. Build up the batting layer by layer to create a smooth surface.



To create the outer “skin,” simply drape the fabrics over the armature and pin in place to fit. Mark all seams with air soluble markers or a chalk marker. Remove fabrics and stitch together being sure to leave openings so that you can slip the finished outer cover over the armature. Certain techniques such as wrapping lend themselves to this method. You can combine the pattern making methods as necessary in order to meet the particular needs of your project.

Designing your own projects from start to finish is a process of trial and error in which serendipity is a major ingredient. Your willingness to experiment will reward you with tremendous creative satisfaction.

