

Reverse appliqué

Revealing layers of colour

Instead of applying motifs to a background layer, with reverse appliqué – also known as cutaway appliqué – shapes are cut away to expose the layer/s underneath. The raw edges are then turned under and slipstitched in place. Rather than cutting shapes away, you can just cut the fabric and turn the edges under to expose a ‘furrow’ of the fabric underneath. You can work with just two layers, but by working with three or four layers you can create more colourful designs, although this does mean that it isn’t the most economical of techniques.

The best-known reverse appliqué work is mola – also known as San Blas appliqué – which is made by the Kuna Indians of the San Blas Islands, off the east coast of Panama. The vibrant primitive-style patterns often reflect flora and fauna found on the islands, although some designs are geometric. The whole surface is covered by the design, with any gaps filled in with embroidery or the addition of small pieces of extra fabric. The panels are used to decorate the front and back of the short-sleeved blouses worn by the Kuna women.

The Hmong of Thailand are well-known for a form of appliqué which looks similar to mola. But they generally use two layers and cut away the geometric designs, through which brightly coloured fabrics are inserted and appliquéd to the base layer. This method is also practised by ethnic minorities of China, such as the Miao of south-west China (see page 26). A cutwork method is also used by Indians in the Barmer region of Rajasthan (see page 46).

Basic method

- 1 In the sample shown here I’ve used three 6½in squares, with the darkest fabric on top. Fig 1.



Fig 1 Three layers of fabric

- 2 With each piece right-side up, tack the layers together. I’ve tacked around the edges, and also the horizontal and vertical mid-lines to act as a guide when centring the templates. Fig 2.



Fig 2 Three layers tacked together

- 3 You then need to transfer all or part of your design to the top layer – you might wish to transfer small elements when some of the larger ones have already been worked. My first template was a 4½in square, positioned centrally on the top layer. Fig 3.

Top tips

- Strong contrasting colours work best with this technique. Often the darkest colour is placed on top, working down to the lightest layer, but just experiment with the look you like best.
- Traditionally, solid colours are used, but you could try batik-style fabrics (as used here) or combine solids and prints.
- Five layers is about the most you can work with, but you can add highlights of extra colours by cutting slits or holes in the top layer into which you can insert smaller pieces of fabric that can be appliquéd in place.
- My shapes are simple, so I used freezer paper templates as these can be ironed in position and won’t move while you mark around them.
- You could use chalk to mark the design. I used a white marking pen; any remaining marks can be removed by pressing or spraying with water.
- Once you get the hang of the technique you can experiment with more complex designs. An online search will come up with several titles on mola designs and contemporary patterns using reverse appliqué.
- As the panels comprise a few layers, they’re ideal for bags, cushions or wallhangings. You could appliquéd small panels onto larger background pieces.



Fig 3 Square template in place

- 4 My second template was a circle with a diameter of 2½in. Again this was positioned centrally. Fig 4.



Fig 4 Circle template in place

- 5 I worked on the circle motif first, with the first step being to tack around the circle ¼in either side of the marked line. Fig 5.



Fig 5 Inner and outer tacking around the circle motif

- 6 As I wanted to expose a furrow of the second (red) layer, I then cut through just the top layer of fabric on the marked line. A pair of small, sharp-pointed scissors is best for this – and take your time as you don't want to accidentally cut through the other layers. Fig 6.



Fig 6 Circle motif cut through first layer only

- 7 You then need to turn under the raw edges and slipstitch them in place using thread that matches the top layer of fabric. You might need to clip into the seam but I didn't need to with circles of the size used here. You can turn under the edges as you go, or pin them in place with small appliqué pins. Fig 7.



Fig 7 Appliquing the outer edge of the circle

- 8 I then wanted to cut away a smaller circle (diameter 1in) in the centre of the design, so this template was positioned and marked as described above. Fig 8.



Fig 8 Small circle template in place

- 9 This time I needed only to tack $\frac{1}{4}$ in beyond the marked line. I then cut through the first and second layers on the marked line – it's easiest to cut away one layer at a time. I then trimmed the second (red) layer back a little, as turning under two layers is thick and fiddly. Fig 9.

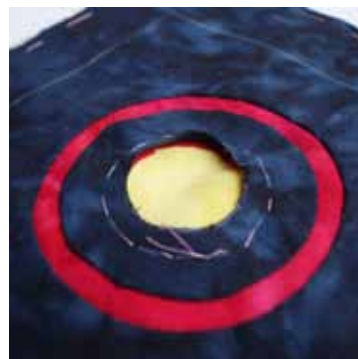


Fig 9 Circle motif cut through two layers

- 10 You then need to turn under the top layer, enclosing the raw edges of the second layer, and slipstitch in place as before. Fig 10.



Fig 10 Appliqued circles

- 11 The square was worked in the same way as the outer circle (steps 5–7) to create a red furrow. At the corners, snip at a diagonal angle approx. $\frac{1}{8}$ in into each seam allowance so that you can turn under the fabric neatly. Fig 11.



Fig 11 Fabric turned under at an inner and outer corner

- 12 To complete my design I marked 'L' shapes at each corner, $\frac{3}{8}$ in from each edge of the square, with each 'arm' $1\frac{1}{2}$ in long. I cut through two layers here to expose the yellow fabric of my third layer, again snipping on the diagonal at the 'corners'. Fig 12.



Fig 12 Finished sample

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Extra idea

If you prefer, you can work by machine. Tack your layers and transfer your design as described above. Stitch on the marked lines with a close zigzag or satin stitch and then cut away the layers as required. You can cut up close to the stitching or leave $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$ in of excess fabric to leave a raw edge to create extra interest.

Cushion cover made using machine reverse appliqué

