

MODERN ART QUILTERS

Block of the Month



HH's rainbow and black version with pieced sashings and cornerstones



HB's Two colour version with the blocks at the edges breaking out into the plain border

Fabric choices and quantities

We would advise using 100% cotton for this project, and that you make your selections from those cottons which are specifically aimed at quilters. Cotton is easy to use, fairly forgiving and takes a crease well, all of which will help you. Avoid polycotton and cotton poplin, both of which are a challenge for beginners to work with, as are synthetics of any sort. It is worth taking some time making your initial selections, and bear in mind that cheap is not always the best way to go. To cook a lovely meal you have to start with good quality ingredients and it is the same with patchwork.

Choose a mix of light, medium and dark fabrics – this give you a chance to make high-contrast and/or low-contrast blocks as you please.

HH chose a single background fabric, 2½ metres of black Moda Grunge, which appears in all her blocks effectively tying all the designs together. In addition to the background each block has one other colour, and Helen used scraps of lots of different fabrics in each colour to add interest. Of course, you could just use a single fabric per block – something that contrasts nicely with your background – allow an 1/8th of a metre for each block which will give enough for the sashings and cornerstones too.

HB worked the same blocks in just two high-contrast colour-sets: hot and cool. Allow seven fat quarters worth of fabric in each colour-set, but of course you can make that up from smaller pieces in the right colours. You need to allow some light, some medium and some dark fabrics within the two colour-sets in order give some contrast in the blocks. HB also used 1¼ metres for the outer border, in this case a navy blue, you might want to allow 1½ metres to err on the side of caution.

Thread

Since you are using cotton fabric, a cotton thread is best. Polycotton and polyester threads have a number of disadvantages including melting under a hot iron. Most of the modern thread manufacturers produce a pure cotton range suitable for use in a domestic sewing machine. Avoid using that old reel of cotton that has been

stuck at the back of the drawer since your Granny last did any sewing – cotton does get weak with age. Buy a fresh reel and, as a general rule, select a pale or neutral shade of whatever colour fabric you are sewing since this is less likely to show the stitches. There are a few exceptions to this, the black and brights version was stitched and quilted entirely in black thread. You will need at least 600m to 800m of thread depending on your quilting choice.

Introduction

NOTE: please read all the instructions before starting

This design includes nine blocks, most with instructions for different sizes and other variations. These blocks cover a range of techniques from improvised piecing, accurate cutting and piecing and foundation paper piecing. Although some of the blocks are traditional, many of them are based on our own designs. We have set out the instructions for the blocks in a specific order aimed primarily at allowing the novice patchworker to build a set of skills as each block is made.

The quilt is designed around nine 16-inch blocks, each 16-inch block containing sub-blocks made in the same technique – sometimes all the sub-blocks are the same size, sometimes a mixture of sizes is used to make up the 16-inch blocks.

If you enjoy a particular block – make more! If you don't like a block – don't make it! This design is all about producing an end product that is uniquely yours, everyone brings their own style – in colour choice and layout – to a finished quilt.. You can make each of the giant blocks bigger or smaller (but keep them all the same) to suit yourself. You could also mix the sub-blocks up in the giant blocks if you prefer. The choices are endless and more information on different ways to join the blocks together will be provided in the final part of programme.

If you fall in love with any of the blocks we show you here why not make a whole quilt with that block!

Keeping it all Together!

We would recommend that you don't sew any of your finished sub-blocks together each month. In fact, we would suggest that you don't even trim them until you have made all the blocks you require for your finished quilt. The reason for this is two-fold.

i. While you are deciding on your finished layout you may be handling the sub-blocks several times as you move them about. This will cause the edges to fray, quite naturally. By leaving your sub-blocks untrimmed you can press the blocks and trim off any ragged edges just before you sew them together. Just remember to photograph each of your giant blocks and the overall layout before you pick them up!

ii. Even if not over-handled, stored blocks will ease over time – after all some of them may be hanging around for nine months! It is always better to press and trim them just before sewing them together.

For these reasons we would suggest you set yourself up with a lidded plastic box and a series of plastic bags (large clear, clean! sandwich bags will be fine) one for each month so you can keep the blocks together. Choose a box that is big enough to store all the fabric you have for the project, so it doesn't mistakenly get used in other projects, and the untrimmed sub-blocks (preferable flat). Something like a 16-litre Crystal storage box (widely available) should also be big enough to take A4 paper, should you be printing out the monthly instruction sheet.

Equipment required

Sewing machine: with a standard foot for patchwork, and a walking foot for quilting

This does not need to be anything special or new, use the machine you have had for years. Helen does much of her piecing on a 100 year old Singer treadle machine, although my Toyota is relatively new at just 29! If you have not used your machine for a while – get it cleaned and oiled and change the needle. In fact, remember to change the needle regularly – it makes a big difference – you should change it after every 8 hours of sewing. For basic piecing with a standard cotton thread, chose a 80/12 needle and make sure you insert it correctly - check your machine's manual if you are in any doubt.

Many modern machines will come with a walking foot, but these are available for most older machines, too. A search on the internet will probably find one for your machine, but I would recommend visiting Helen's website

since, in addition to her skills in textiles, she specialises in sewing machines and their numerous accessories. www.helenhowes-sewingmachines.co.uk

Cutting mat: Inexpensive, self-healing cutting mats are available from most hobby shops and one of these is essential if you are using a rotary cutter. Get the largest one you can sensibly use, bearing in mind that when not in use they have to be stored flat or they will become warped very quickly. Do not worry whether it has metric or imperial squares marked on it – we do not recommend that you use these for measuring.

Rotary cutter: If you are buying a cutter for the first time, try to get one with a sprung blade-guard that will close automatically when not in use, and can be locked closed for transport. A 45mm diameter cutting is a good one to start with, there are several brands on the market but the **Olfa** ones seem most popular and the blades are readily available. **SAFETY NOTE:** rotary cutters are razor sharp, literally, and will cut you seriously if not treated with respect. Never leave an open cutter lying about, and when you are cutting be extremely careful to **KEEP YOUR FINGERS OUT OF THE WAY!** Change your cutting blade regularly (and carefully) and dispose of the spent blade thoughtfully. You will know when your blade is getting blunt, it will start missing threads when you cut. Keep your mat clear and make sure you don't leave pins where they can be run over and cause damage to your blade.

Quilter's ruler: These carefully shaped pieces of clear acrylic are available in an ever increasing variety, many of which are highly specialised and task specific. In order to complete this pattern you will probably find two useful – a long rectangular ruler for cutting strips (we would recommend one between 16½ and 24½ inches long) and a square ruler for cutting smaller pieces and squaring up blocks (an 8½ x 8½ inch square will be big enough for most blocks). By combining these two rulers you should be able to complete all the following blocks. When buying basic rulers it is as well to stick to one brand of rulers for all your purchases so you become familiar with the markings and layout. Most British and American quilt patterns will give measurements in inches and you will therefore find most rulers follow the same system of measurements. (Metric rulers are available since Continental patterns are metric, but it is almost impossible to convert between the two systems so avoid these for now.)

Iron and flat ironing surface: We do not ever steam press patchwork blocks once they are pieced – it is a personal choice made for two reasons: nothing kills an iron quicker than pouring water into it, and we have found from experience that steam can distort blocks. The only time to 'steam' fabric is when pressing before cutting and you find a particularly stubborn crease, in which case spray the fabric with tap water, from a clean plant-spray bottle, before ironing.

If you do not own an ironing board a towel doubled up on the kitchen worktop works just as well.

Scissors: You will find a small pair of pointed scissors is very useful for a variety of tasks, but whatever size they are, make sure their blades are sharp! We would recommend **FISKARS** scissors – they offer a broad range, have good handles, and keep their cutting edge well if treated with respect. Although there is no reason why you should not use your scissors for cutting paper or thin card, **DO NOT** let your other half cut wire or open paint tins with them it ruins blades very quickly. When you notice they start getting blunt, get them sharpened or buy some new ones.

Pins: Again this is a very personal choice, there are many different types available. we like to use the flat, flower headed pins specifically marketed for patchwork and quilting since they are usually long, thin and distort the fabric less when piecing. If you already have thin dress-making pins or glass headed pins – use those – but again, make sure they are sharp. Pins do become blunt with use, they are not expensive – buy some new, slim, sharp ones!

Soft pencils: There are a variety of fabric marking products on the market, and we have used some of them with varying degrees of success. We always seem to fall back on a good soft pencil (2B) for light fabrics and a white water-colour pencil for dark fabrics.

Basic instructions

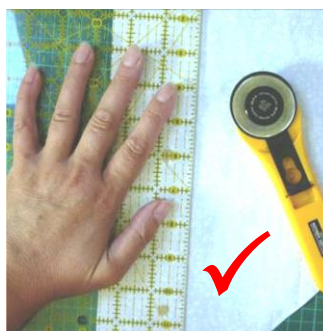
Pressing

Always press fabric before you cut it. Any folds or creases in fabric will distort the shape and size of the piece you are trying to cut, making it very difficult to sew together. For stubborn creases, spray the fabric with water before pressing.

Pressing seams at every stage of block making (see individual instructions with each block) and before trimming blocks to size is just as important. Make sure you press the fabric right against the stitched seam with no fold or tuck, or you will find your blocks won't go together nicely.

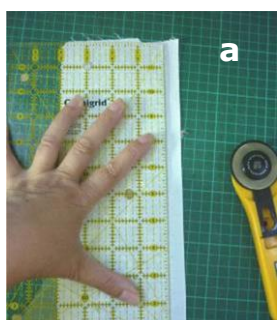
Cutting

If you are able, you will find it easier and more efficient to stand when you are using a rotary cutter with the cutting mat on a kitchen worktop or something of a similar height. This means you can use downward pressure on both the cutter and the ruler. It is possible to cut sitting down, but it is more of a challenge to get enough pressure.

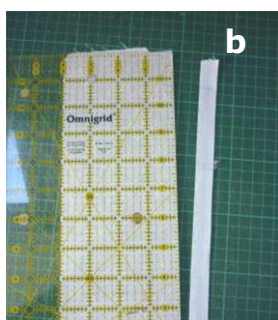


For a right handed person, place the left hand flat on the ruler and hold it down firmly with your fingers well away from the edge, then run the blade of cutter along the right hand edge of the ruler. Always cut away from you.

Before you begin cutting up your best fabric, start on a test piece first and have a practice. You will see the ruler is marked in whole inches and fractions of an inch down to 1/8th. Cut a straight edge on one side of your practise piece, then practice cutting strips of various widths. Turn the strips round on the mat and cut them into various lengths, and squares. Get a feel for the cutter and the mat.

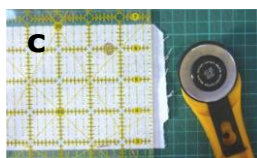


a. cutting a four inch strip from a previously straightened edge

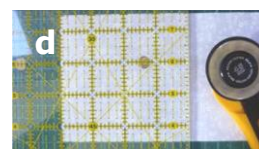


b. move the trimmed edge away from the strip before moving the ruler to check for a clean cut that does not need re-cutting.

NOTE: move this trimmed piece by hand – do not be tempted to scrape it away with the blade of your cutter, it will quickly ruin both cutter and mat.



c. turn the strip round and square up one end



d. turn the strip again & use the squared up end to cut a four inch square

Cutting left-handed is just as easy, but you will need to make sure the blade of your cutter is on the correct side. Talk to the people you buy it from, and ask them to put the blade in the right way round for you to start with. You can then hold the ruler down with your right hand and cut with your left.

In general you will always cut any pieces from the bottom left (bottom right if you are left-handed) of your fabric, so position the bulk of the fabric on the table away from you. Make sure you have all the mat and the ruler supported by the table before you start cutting.

When cutting long strips of fabric, you may find it better to cut across the cutting mat with your ruler horizontally, leaning your weight on your forearm laying along the ruler. This way you can put plenty of pressure on the whole length of the ruler making sure it does not move.



Cut fabrics as you need them. Do not be tempted to cut the pieces for lots of different blocks at once – you will never be able to keep track of them. If you end up with odd pieces of fabric when cutting, or you make a mistake, do not throw the pieces away – keep a bag of strips and scraps, some of the blocks can be made from odd bits.

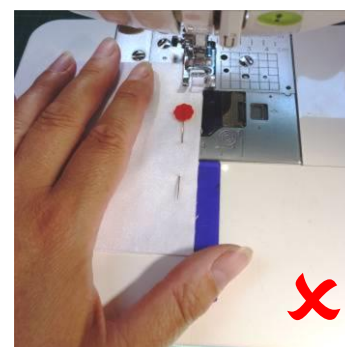
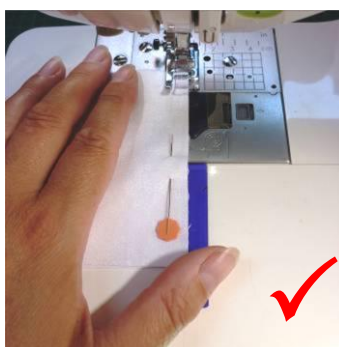
Selvedge

Quilting fabric is usually 44 or 45 inches wide (although there are some exceptions) and down each side runs the selvedge. Often you will find the details of the fabric, manufacturer and print colours included on the selvedge, but even if the printing appears to go right to the edge of the fabric, there is usually $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch of unusable fabric at either edge. Trim this off before you start cutting your pieces.



Pinning

When you are starting out on this patchwork adventure it is advisable to pin every seam before sewing unless specifically instructed not to. It is very easy to move pieces of fabric as you try to manoeuvre them under the presser foot, and it is also easy to inadvertently stretch fabric as you sew a long seam. As you become more experienced you may find you do not need to pin short, simple seams, however it is always a good idea to pin if you are matching cross-seams. Insert your pins along the $\frac{1}{4}$ inch sewing line, so that the head points towards you when you are sewing – this makes them easy to remove as you work your way down the seam. **Do not try to sew over the pins.**



Your machine

Refer to the manual for your sewing machine to wind a bobbin with your new thread, and thread the machine. Make a small test piece with two layers of cotton fabric and with your stitch length set to standard (usually about 2.5) sew a line of straight stitching. Take this out from under the presser foot and check the thread tension on both sides of the test – adjust as necessary and retest.

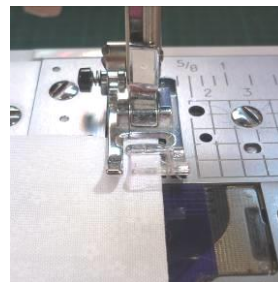
It is worth doing a test of this sort every time you re-thread your machine to check you have everything working correctly. If you find overly loose threads on your work, more than can be remedied with a slight adjustment, it is almost always a sign of mis-threading. Big loops on the top of the work mean the bobbin is threaded incorrectly, big loops on the back of your work mean the top thread is incorrect. Check both sides periodically, and rethread if necessary.

Incorrect threading and badly adjusted tension will weaken the seams on your quilt. If you are going to spend a considerable amount of your valuable time making something beautiful, you want to make sure it will survive its first wash!

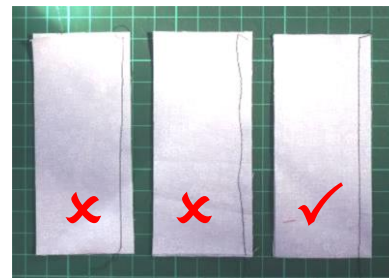
Sewing

Many of these blocks and, indeed, many of the blocks in the wonderful world of patchwork are constructed with a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch seam. It is worth perfecting this basic skill, and you will find you improve hugely with practice. Place two pieces of fabric right sides together (RST) making sure the two edges to be joined line up perfectly. Sew a line of stitching $\frac{1}{4}$ inch away from this aligned edge. It is important to keep this line of stitching a consistent distance from the edge, especially after you have spent a considerable amount of time cutting your fabric pieces accurately.

One of the best ways to gauge your ¼ inch seam is to know where the edge of the fabric should be in relation to your standard presser foot. On a test piece (always use two layers of fabric for testing – a single one layer can easily get eaten by your machine – strange but true) mark a line ¼ inch away from the edge and, lowering your needle by hand to start with, sew down this line a little way. Stop sewing, but leave the fabric in place. Make a mental note of where the edge of fabric is on your presser foot.



Be sure to keep this distance consistent throughout the length of the seam by feeding the fabric into the machine straight – most machines have straight lines marked on the plate to help you. It is easy for the inexperienced to find their seams tailing off at the beginning or end because they have pulled the fabric through crookedly. You should just need to guide fabric through your machine without pushing or pulling it too much.



Unpicking

Although neither Helen nor I are advocates of unpicking seams, occasionally it has to be done. If you feel you really cannot bear to look at a particular seam/block – unpick it and do it again. Just remember three things:

1. It is unlikely that anyone else will notice it (and it is rude to point it out)
2. Sometimes it is quicker to cut your losses and just remake a block
3. No-one ever won a prize for the best unpicked quilt

Even with unpicking there is a right way and a wrong way. The best way if possible is to use an unpicking tool, or very pointed scissors, to cut every other stitch on one side of your work – the two pieces of fabric should then part easily. Do not be tempted to split the stitches between the fabric layers – it puts stress on the fabric and you are more likely to cause damage with a sharp implement.



For more information on various aspects of patchwork please see out individual websites:

<https://www.helenhowestextiles.co.uk/class/tutorials.html>

<https://www.littlepatchpockets.co.uk/patterns/tutorials/handyhints.html>