

How-To



Taking Your Design from Pencil to Stencil

Deborah Lynn Dixon*
with Terry Banker



The creator of a stencil-based textile embossing technique shows you how to go from concept to a finished piece, step-by-step.

I have been involved for many years with creating the court presentation dresses for the Ball for the Krewe of Contraband in Lake Charles, Louisiana, one of over fifty Krewes that participate in the annual Mardi Gras carnival in Southwest Louisiana. Each year has a different theme that is carried out in the designs and embellishments for the court dresses.

During that time, I have developed a stencil-based embossing technique for creating intricate patterns on the dresses and

Editors Note

Read about the court presentation dresses that Deborah has created over the years in “Mardi Gras Presentation Gowns” ([vol 9 issue 1](#)), and the process of creating them in “Costuming a Mardi Gras Ball from 1300 Miles Away” ([vol 11 issue 1](#)).

on other textiles. The technique uses unique paste compound that I call *emBELLAtex™*. The compound can be colored with metallic glitters, and patterns can be layered to produce beautiful designs that resemble intricate beading and embroidery, but with a sparkle and luster that would be hard to achieve with conventional techniques.

Many artists can see an image in their mind and transfer the idea to their sketchpad, but have difficulty transferring the concept to a product. Creating a stencil pattern and transferring it to a gown is no different.

Developing a pattern into a stencil takes a minimum of 12 hours, and intricate patterns often take much longer. Because of the time invested and cost involved, a good border stencil needs to be versatile, contain open spaces for thematic design elements, and must be produced in segments so that a straight pattern can be manipulated to follow



a gown’s curved hem. The curve of a hem is a major consideration. Many patterns will not transition from a straight repeat to a curved repeat because the elements of the pattern will become closer at the top and wider at the bottom as it works around the hem of the gown.

Sound complicated? It isn’t when you know the steps to follow.

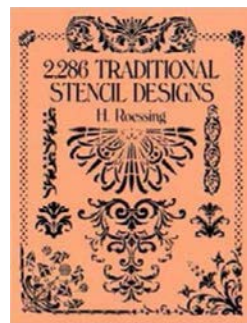
Over the years, I have used the “needs-driven” technique: If I need it, I’ll figure it out. In this article, I’ll show how you too can take your design concepts from pencil to stencil—from inspiration to application—by following my process to transfer your ideas to your creations.

Where to Begin?

I start with inspiration. Ideas come when I’m developing a collection of gowns based on a theme. The border I used on the 2014 “Sleeping Beauty” gown was previously developed in 2008 for the “Great Composers” collection: Beethoven and “Ode to Joy.” (left)

I wanted a border that represented the flow of the music as well as elements represented in the poem. I also wanted a border that could be used for future gowns. It needed to be generic with elements that could carry the theme of a gown. I developed the border around form, rhythm, and scale to create motion, depth, and interest.

Selection of Generic Stencil



After pouring over my source books, one design kept speaking to me. A pattern from 2286 *Traditional Stencil Designs* screamed, "Pick me!" When a design does this then I know it is the one. Once I choose the design, the other design elements

flow: coloration, detail, scale, and design elements (adding or deleting). It's time to get to work.

Creating Artwork for a Stencil Pattern

To create artwork for the stencil pattern, I scan the image into my computer, either hand-drawn or from a copyright free source book. Using photo-editing software, I manipulate the image, changing proportions, scale, adding or removing elements, and create pattern repeats. If the pattern has several layers of color I often create a color image. In this example, I'll begin with a black-and-white image, like this one I chose from 2286 *Traditional Stencil Designs*.



Original pattern. (above). Pattern after editing. (below)



Utilizing the open space in the design pattern allows for the insertion of a unique design element to coincide with the theme.

The following table illustrates how a modified stencil can be used as a basis for multiple projects:

Theme	Gown	Border	Color	Design Element Floral	Design Element
Great Composers	Ode to Joy	Ode to Joy	Gold, silver, white, green	Daisies	Cherub
Shall We Dance	Waltz	Ode to Joy	Gold, silver	Daisies	Stars
Evening at the Ballet	Sleeping Beauty	Ode to Joy	Gold, purple, green, pink	Wild roses	Crowns

Inspiration for "Ode to Joy"

When I approach a design, I look for symbolism that can be translated into fabric and embossing patterns. The "Ode to Joy" gown was inspired by Beethoven's music and lines of Schiller's 1785 poem:

Line 1: *Joy, Beautiful spark of Gods*

Line 34-35: *Can you sense the Creator, world? Seek him above the starry canopy.*

Stars on midnight blue as well as the ruched poufs of the overskirt created a canopy above the lipstick pink skirt.

Line 10: *This kiss to the entire world!*

The lipstick pink of the skirt represents a kiss to the entire world.

Line 32: *And the Cherub stands before God*

The pattern needed a design element that would not take away from the other elements. The winged cherubs were not as dense as other parts of the pattern.

Line 28: *Follow her rose-petalled path*

Line 41: *Flowers it calls forth from their buds*

The daisy garland represents flowers called forth from their buds. I used daisies instead of rose petals because they are more discernible (theatre's 30 foot rule). Daisies also seem more innocent than roses. While a daisy is soft and gentle, a rose is beautiful and has thorns. Finally,

Line 86: *Help there, where innocence weeps.*

These were my creative choices. I made technical design decisions because ultimately a border is one of many other elements in the dress design.



Layer 5 – Additional element (top)



Layer 4 – Light pink with swipes of darker pink



Layer 3 – Green



Layer 2 – Gold



Layer 1 – Purple (bottom)

Separating the Design

While the complete design may seem daunting, separating the pattern into its fundamental elements makes the process simple.

As I study a design I look for ways to give it motion, depth, and interest. I draw from *trompe l'oeil* techniques, layering and color changes. Outlining a design gives it dimension; color changes create motion and interest. Detail is created by additional stencil layers. Every additional layer of colored paste adds depth. The layers of the completed sketch are shown at left.

Making the Stencils

I burn stencil patterns instead of cutting them out, using a special Hot Tool from [P.J. Stencils](#) with a long angled tip for cutting the stencils. The Hot Tool makes cutting stencils much easier. Hold it like you would a pencil, and trace the outline of the design for the layer.

1. Print the pattern to scale.
2. Mount the pattern to the backside of a stencil blank (available through Ides of March Design Group, Ltd) so that the design can be seen through the stencil as you are burning it.
3. Cut the template for each stencil from the same print out to verify nothing has changed in the printing.
4. Label each stencil with the name of the pattern and the order it is to be laid (1 of 5, 2 of 5, etc.)
5. Trace parts of the previous pattern layers onto the stencil with an industrial marker (Sharpie) to help align the pattern in preparation for embossing.
6. Burn the stencils without cutting the paper pattern. (Note: If you are not used to burning a stencil, this requires practice.) I use an art board covered with a Teflon oven protector sheet as my cutting surface, in case I cut through the paper pattern.

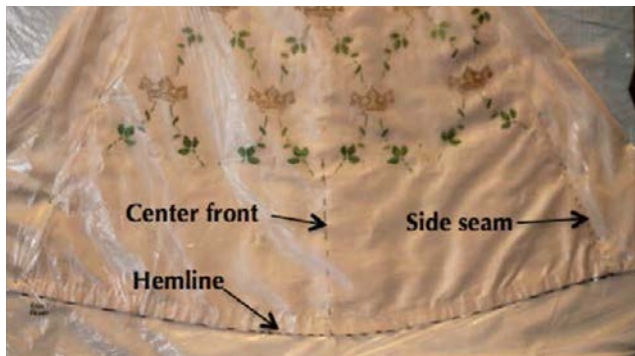


Colored sketch of the design (above), and layer separations – top to bottom (left).

Placing a Pattern on the Gown

Here are the steps for preparing the fabric and placing a stencil pattern.

1. Place plastic sheeting over the gown where the embossed border will be added.
2. Trace the gown's hem along with the bottom edge of the brocade pattern onto the plastic. Add the Center front, center back, and the side seams.



Hem, bottom edge, and seams traced onto plastic sheet.

3. Mount the plastic outline onto a Styrofoam board.
4. Place the paper pattern, which now includes the “pattern repeats,” on top of the plastic and tape into place.

This pattern creates waves as it flows around the gown. I look at the multiple repeats of the pattern (right) to see what I can add and where it needs to be placed. The blank spaces to the right of the pattern allow me to place the design element, in this example, the crowns. I wanted something that was light and not too dense to interrupt the flow of the border and add a little something extra to echo the brocade pattern.

Note: Planning for pattern overlap at seams prevents pattern interruptions

5. Place a second layer of plastic over the paper pattern to protect the paper pattern from wet paste.
6. Place the fabric to be embossed over the plastic and pin to the board. The fabric is snug but not so tight as to distort the grain when the paste dries.

We are now ready to prepare the **emBELLAtex™** paste and begin applying it to the fabric.

Preparing the **emBELLAtex™** Paste

emBELLAtex™ is a lightweight and flexible paste that can be gently washed or dry-cleaned once it dries. The paste is made up of three parts (carrier, filler, colorant) and is available from Ides of March Design Group, Ltd. The glitter colorant is added just before embossing to extend the shelf life of the paste. Without the colorant, the paste has a shelf life of up to a year if stored in an airtight bag in a cool place.

Here are the steps that you will follow in preparing the **emBELLAtex™** paste. (see illustrations next page, left column)

1. Mix the colorant into paste:

Amount of paste x 0.12 = Amount of glitter

Example:

6.25 oz of paste x 0.12 = 0.75 oz of glitter

Note: Do not use less than an 88% paste (12% glitter ratio) or the embossing will look milky. The paste should be about the consistency of cake icing. If the paste becomes too thick once the glitter is added, it can be thinned by adding more carrier.

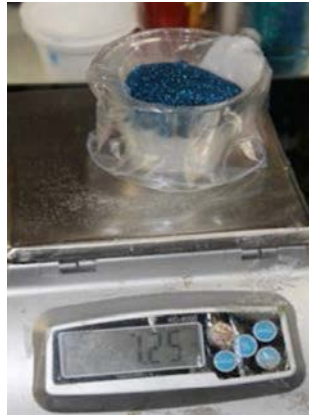
2. Put the paste in a zip-top bag, add the glitter, mix well keeping the mixture at the bottom of the bag. Remove as much air as possible by rolling the bag on itself pressing the air out of the opening. Seal the bag once all air is removed. Store it in cool place.
3. Prepare your supply tray: stencils, bags of paste, plastic card, pins, and gloves.



Multiple repeats of the pattern on top the plastic, aligned with the dress outline. Note overlap at seams.



(a) 6.5oz paste without colorant.



(b) 0.75 oz colorant (glitter) = 7.25 oz paste with color.



(c) Mix glitter into paste.



(d) Remove bag from cup and seal.



(e) Work in unmixed paste.



(f) Properly mixed paste.



Assembled tray with stencils, bags of paste, plastic card, pins, and gloves. Begin with stencil 1a of 3.

Applying *emBELLAtex™* Paste

Here are step-by-step instructions for using your stencils and applying the *emBELLAtex™* paste to the fabric.

1. Place the stencil over the fabric and match to the paper pattern beneath.
2. Secure stencil with pins. (below center)
3. Load the short side of the spreader (plastic card) with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of paste along the width of the spreader. (below right)



Apply the paste with little pressure. Work quickly in small areas.

4. Using short swipes, gently push paste into fabric. Follow the curves of design to avoid getting paste under the stencil.
5. Add paste to spreader when needed.
6. Continue working in sections until entire area of the stencil pattern is covered and work quickly to keep the thickness of the coverage even. Avoid going over areas once the paste has been applied. (above)
7. Carefully remove pins from the stencil.



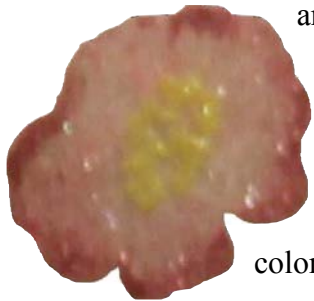
Area to be embellished. (left) Pin stencil to pattern. (center) Amount of paste on card $\frac{1}{4}$ " across short side. (right)



8. Remove the stencil from the fabric by anchoring the lower left-hand corner with your fingers and lifting the upper right-hand corner. Roll the stencil up toward the anchored corner while lifting it away from the embossing.
9. Once the stencil clears the wet embossed design, lift it from the fabric. (right)
10. Check the back of the stencil for any paste that may have seeped under the stencil.
11. Move the stencil to the next area of the pattern and repeat steps 1-10. Depending on the size of the stenciled area and intricacy of the stencil design at least 3 placements can be completed before it is necessary to clean the stencil by washing it in a basin of water.
12. Place a fan on the wet embossing. Air circulation helps the paste to form a skin.

Once a skin has formed on the paste, touch it lightly to see if it will lift. The cooler the embossing feels the wetter it is. Once it does not lift, you can continue with the next layer of color. The embossing will dry within 12 to 24 hours. The fabric will then be safe to remove from the board.

Note: The Wild Roses on the border are created by blending different colored pastes on a wet design. The base layer of color is applied, and while it is still wet, additional colors are lightly “swept”



Carefully lift one corner of the stencil, firmly holding diagonal the corner in place.



Smoothly roll towards opposite corner as you lift stencil away from embossing. (above) Continue rolling stencil away. (below)



Newly embossed area.

on. The last color applied becomes the highlight. It takes a light hand in working the colors so that they are blended only on the edges and not mixed into each other.

Summary

The result? An “Evening at the Ballet” princess gown: “The Sleeping Beauty.” The border is a companion design to the “Crown with Vine” embossed Brocade and Placardé also used on the gown.

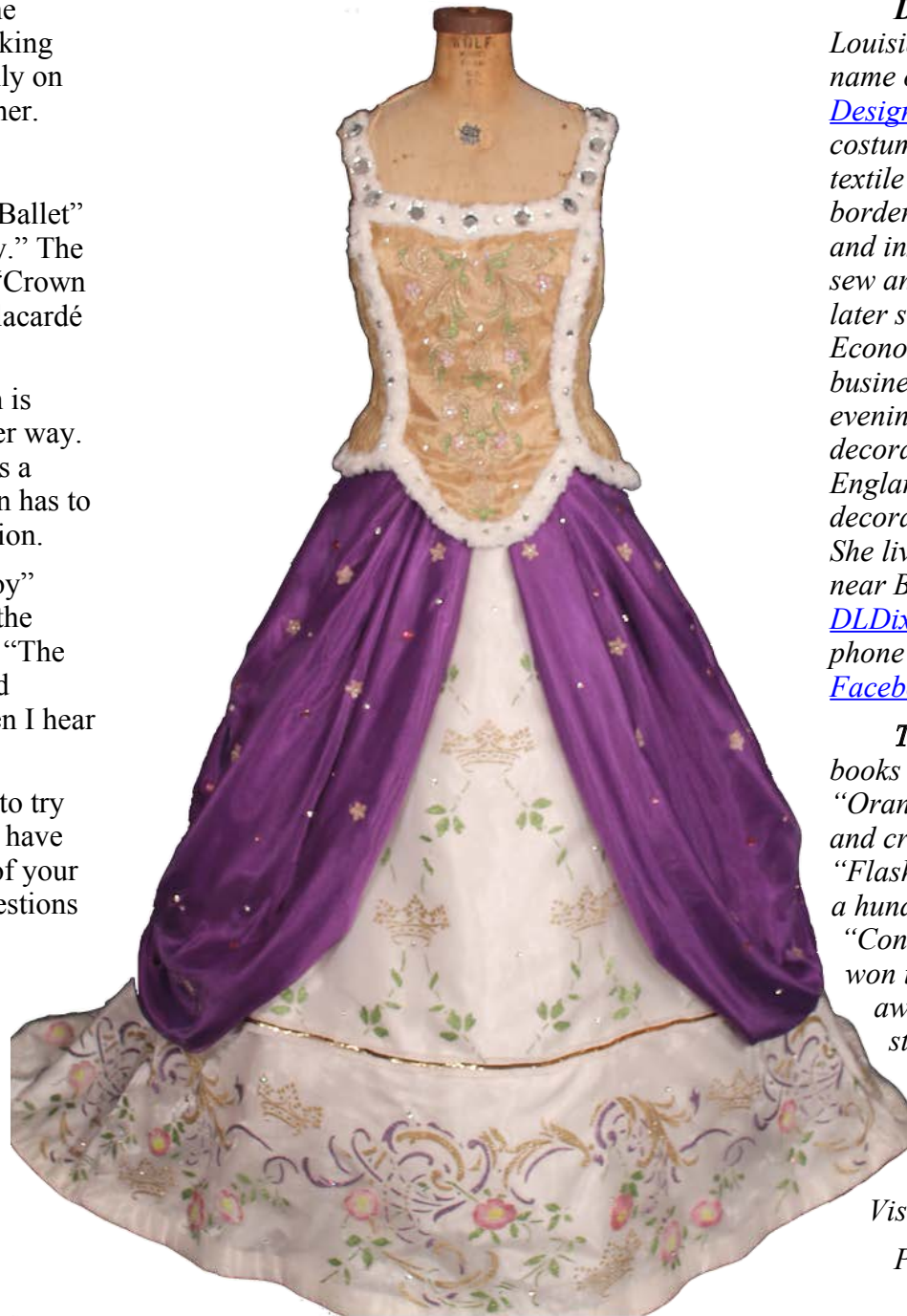
Ultimately, I know that a design is right when I can’t imagine it any other way. A well-balanced design is the same as a well-structured sentence, and a design has to be my words and convey my inspiration.

It is my wish that the “Ode to Joy” pattern that I originally designed for the “Ode to Joy” gown and also used for “The Sleeping Beauty” will convey joy and exuberance, as this is what I feel when I hear the music to Schiller’s poem.

I hope that you will be inspired to try the fabric embossing technique that I have described in this article on a project of your own. Feel free to contact me with questions and feedback.

Bibliography

Roessing, H. *2,286 Traditional Stencil Designs*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Dover Publications with The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 1991. ISBN-13: 978-0486268453.



Deborah Lynn Dixon was born in Louisiana on a March 15th. This inspired the name of her company, “[Ides of March Design Group](#),” which specializes in costume design, design consulting, and textile embossing including yardage, borders and appliqués, stencils and blanks, and instruction. Her mother taught her to sew and she was tailoring by age 13. She later studied Interior Design and Home Economics in Business in college. While on business trips to New York City, she spent evenings at museums taking in costume and decorative art exhibits. She also traveled in England, France and Italy, exploring the decorative arts, architecture and costuming. She lives with her husband in the mountains near Bailey Colorado. Contact her at DL Dixon@IdesofMarchDesign.com or by phone at (303-838-4740), and follow her on [Facebook](#).

Terry Banker is the author of a dozen books (“*Underdogs of the Caribbean*,” “*Orange Blossom Mambo*”), a ghostwriter and creative consultant (“*Spinning*,” “*Flash & Dazzle*”), and the author of over a hundred technical articles. His memoir, “*Conquering Cancer, My Wife Our Love*” won the Colorado best new nonfiction award in 2004. When not lecturing students on how to follow their dreams AND make money, Terry divides his time between Atlanta, Denver, and Key West with his wife and two Old English Sheepdogs, Fitz and Zelda. Visit his [website](#) for more information.

Photographs: Deborah Lynn Dixon.