

Notes on Image and Surface Design on Fabric

By Aisling D'Art, © 2002 all rights reserved

A dozen or more ways to add images & design to fabrics

1. Use iron-on transfer paper that you print with your inkjet printer. I like the products made by "*invent it!*" from International Paper. You can buy this at most office supply stores such as Staples. It comes in regular (for light-colored fabrics) and opaque, to iron onto black or dark-colored fabrics.

When you use this, be certain to print as many images as possible onto each page, to save money. (The sheets are about \$1 each.) Then trim the image you want to iron-on, and use just that.

2. Iron your fabric to the shiny side of freezer paper, in a size that will fit in your printer. Run it through your printer, inkjet or laser. Thinner fabrics work better, but there is always the possibility that you will jam your printer. Don't take a chance if this will be traumatic for you, or if you're using the office printer.

Heat setting works well with most printed images, but you may need to experiment with this. For dolls and journals, most of these won't be washed anyway, so permanence is not important. If you do use heat setting, be certain to use a pressing cloth or release paper between the iron and the image, so it won't stick to the iron by mistake

3. Use Golden Gel Medium (soft/gloss). Both Claudine Hellmuth and Jonathan Talbot teach techniques for this, and others such as Lesley Riley are finding new variations of this. The basic process involves a reverse, printed image from your inkjet or laser printer, or your photocopier.

Paint the image with gel medium. Let the medium dry. Paint a layer of gel medium on the surface where the image will go.

When the gel medium is fully dry, use a medium-hot iron and release paper or a nonstick pressing cloth, and iron the image, face down, onto the prepared surface. Jonathan Talbot sells a specially ground small iron for this, and I've used it with success. Clover has a new, even smaller iron for crafts work, available at some fabric and crafts shops.

Peel the paper off when the image has cooled.

Use a soft, damp towel to rub off the paper. It will come off in little balls of mushy paper. Keep working on it, until all the paper is off. If you rub too long or too hard, you risk removing some or all of the image; inkjet ink is notorious for this problem, since the dyes are water-soluble. However, I've used it with reasonable success, and I often like the way the image looks "old" if it's a bit

worn off. Laser printers and photocopies usually have more permanent ink, so this is less of a problem with them.

If the shiny surface detracts from the finished product, you can seal the image with a matte gel medium. Matte medium does not work so well in the actual image transfer process; use gloss medium instead.

4. Use iron-on mending tape (from the fabric store). Iron it onto the image you'd like to transfer, using a high (wool) setting with no steam for about 30 seconds. Do *not* apply pressure during the ironing.

Peel the paper off immediately. If you wait until the tape has cooled, the paper may remain stuck to it. If it's too cool, reheat and peel immediately.

Place the tape onto the fabric you want to apply the image to. Iron again, at a higher setting (around cotton) for at least 30 seconds. Do apply pressure this time.

Peel the tape off while the image is hot.

This produces unreliable images, but the process can be fabulous if you're looking for eclectic and random results.

5. Fabric crayon on paper. You can buy fabric crayons at most fabric stores and crafts shops, such as A. C. Moore. Follow directions on the box. Fabrics that are at least 60% synthetic fibers are best for this process.

Basically, you'll color an image on paper, backwards from how you'd like the finished image. Then you'll iron the paper, image down, so it prints on the fabric. Peel the paper off, and presto, you've got the image! This is fine for primitive designs in particular.

6. Fabric crayon rubbings. If you have a design, or art from a headstone you'd like to preserve on fabric, do this exactly as you'd do any other gravestone rubbing, etc. Tape or securely hold the fabric in place. Peel the wrapper off the crayon so you can rub with the full side of it.

Rub the image onto the fabric. Remove it, then heat set it with a scrap paper between the iron and the fabric, as if you'd had the image on the paper first.

Note: Some states and communities have laws regarding gravestone rubbings. In some cases they're outlawed; in others, you may need a permit; in yet other states, it's perfectly legal. This is to prevent further deterioration of wonderful old headstones.

In the UK, they sell plastic images that you can use for rubbings, copied from the classic headstones that people love to use in their art.

7. Got an old dot-matrix printer in your basement or attic? See a great deal on one at the thrift shop? Check availability, but they have made great heat-transfer ribbons that can give you the most permanent possible image directly on fabric. However, though the colors can be brilliant, you'll have to settle for one color at a time when you're printing.

For this, you'll use the freezer paper technique described above, to stiffen your fabric to feed it through the printer. And you'll want a fabric that is at least 60% synthetic fibers.

After printing, peel the freezer paper off, then heat set the image for the best results.

8. While we're talking about archaic office equipment, old typewriters can be used to print text on fabric. Again, the freezer paper technique stiffens the fabric to paperlike consistency.

Allow the ink to set overnight, after typing. Peel the freezer paper off. Heat set. For additional permanence and to prevent smudging, experiment with a workable spray fixative (sold in the fine arts section of most crafts shops). However, test this on a "who cares" piece of fabric first, in case the fixative discolors the fabric.

9. Apply paint directly to the fabric. For this, acrylic paints are among the best. Before painting, or using any traditional art medium on the fabric, experiment with surface coatings. Otherwise, the water in the paint may "bleed" into the fabric giving you uncontrolled edges. If this is what you want, great. If not, a surface coating can solve the problem.

One surface coating is sizing. Spray sizing is the easiest to use, and it's usually sold in the laundry section of the grocery store.

Another coating is matte gel medium. A thin coat is all that you need; you're just creating a waterproof surface to keep the paint from bleeding in. Matte is preferred, since a gloss or semi-gloss surface will be even more noticeable on the fabric.

10. Use rubber stamps on fabric. Again, you may want to apply a surface coating so the ink won't "feather" into the fabric, *if* you like sharp, crisp edges. If the item won't be washed anyway, regular inks can be fine. Archival, non-fading inks are best for this. However, several rubber stamp companies make stamp pads especially for use on fabric.

11. Apply block prints (there are soft, easy-to-cut blocks you can buy, not much harder than the pink rubber sheets we use to make our own rubber stamps) or potato prints, etc. For this, you'll want a brayer, a sheet for smooshing the ink on, and the ink itself. The acrylic (water-based) ink is good for this. These supplies are available at any fine arts store, and most larger crafts shops.
12. Write on fabric as if it's paper. For this, you may need to use a surface coating, but most fabric-type pens are made so they won't bleed/feather much on fabrics.

I like Pigma brand Micron pens. They come in a variety of colors and point sizes. Check the label, but most are waterproof and fade proof.

Remember that almost *anything* you can do to embellish paper, you can do to embellish fabric. It's just a matter of treating the fabric so it behaves more like paper. This may mean alternative adhesives, surface coatings, and/or stiffening with freezer paper while you're working on it. You may need to seal the surface if the ink/treatment will rub off, and a workable spray fixative is usually all that you need for this.

For more information about fabric art techniques,
visit <http://www.aisling.net>

These pages are © 2002, Aisling D'Art
artgrrl@hotmail.com

If you copy them, please leave this copyright notice on the pages. Thanks!