

STEAM BLOCKING ON CANVAS

Steam blocking is a quick, easy method to gently reshape and re-align a canvas back to its original dimensions. The direction in which the stitch is worked and the stitch tension used by the embroiderer, combine to produce a strain on the canvas threads causing them to warp. As each type of stitch and each individual stitcher produces a different tension, the degree of warping can vary greatly from a slight puckering to a badly distorted piece of canvas embroidery. Steam blocking is a relatively safe method to use with most natural and synthetic fibers, especially delicate threads such as silk, metal, synthetic or dyed threads that may have unstable dyes.

EQUIPMENT

I use a small, electric steam kettle for blocking but any type of kettle that delivers a steady stream of steam will work. Avoid whistling kettles as the steam tends to be hotter and the steam area more concentrated. Also avoid kettles that will shut off automatically once the water has reached the boiling point. This safety feature means that you may have to reset several times to complete a large piece. My kettle is a relatively inexpensive one, costing around \$10.00 at WalMart. It also has a safety feature, but rather than shutting off when the boiling point is reached, this one shuts off when the water boils down to the heating element, allowing plenty of time to completely block even a large piece of canvas.

Avoid using other appliances such as steam irons or clothes steamers as they may spit, leaving water or mineral spots. A boiling pot of water will also work well and provide a wider base of steam, but you do have to take more care working so close to a hot element.

PREPARATION

The secret to a perfectly blocked piece of embroidery is in the initial preparation of the canvas prior to stitching. Use narrow wooden stretcher bars and brass tacks rather than roller bars or staples to mount the canvas. Attach the canvas securely to the stretcher bars with the tacks placed no further than 1/2" apart on all sides, working from the center of each side to the corners. When attached, the canvas should be taut, true to grain and ready for stitching.

Keep your embroidery clean as you work, eliminating the need to have it cleaned before it is framed or taken to the finisher. Oil and unseen grime from your hands as well as the dust and smoke in our everyday environment can easily soil the canvas and working threads. To protect your canvas and fibers, secure a piece of tissue paper or clean unbleached muslin over the canvas, leaving a small opening over the working area.

WHEN TO BLOCK

With traditional methods, blocking canvas embroidery is usually done once the embroidery has been completed, just before it is either framed or taken to a finisher. The embroidery is removed from the frame, dampened or wet, then stretched back into its original shape on a blocking board and left to dry, usually for about 24 hours.

Steam blocking is a faster, easier method that does not depend on dampening or wetting the canvas embroidery prior to blocking. As in traditional blocking methods, steam blocking is done once the embroidery has been completed, but unlike traditional methods, it can also be done at any time while the embroidery is still in progress.

In contemporary canvas embroidery, the combination of stitches, techniques and/or fibers often cause the canvas threads to stretch or warp. This is often seen as large ripples on the surface of the canvas or areas in which the threads along the margin seem pulled out of alignment. A simple method to combat this problem is to steam block the canvas after each change in technique. This will not only re-align the grain of the canvas, but re-stretch it as well, producing a taut, smooth surface on which to continue your stitching.

METHOD

Proper preparation of the canvas prior to stitching is the secret behind steam blocking. Once the canvas has been properly attached to the rigid stretcher bars, it remains secure. It may warp out of shape and be pulled off grain while stitching, but the tacks still hold the edges of the canvas on grain. Steaming the canvas while it is still attached to the stretcher bars will re-align the canvas threads perfectly and return the canvas to its original appearance. Do not remove canvas from stretcher bars at any time prior to blocking.



The method used for steam blocking is as easy as boiling water. Plug in an electric kettle, and once the water is boiling and steaming, hold the stretcher bars, with the canvas secured with tacks, approximately 6-8" over the steam. Working from the wrong side, slowly move the canvas over the steam so that it penetrates the entire area evenly, not just the worked section. The steam will penetrate the canvas

from the bottom and exit from the right side, through both the canvas and the stitches. A few light passes are all that is necessary for most pieces, but for those that may be badly distorted, several light steamings and realignment of some areas may be necessary. Using tacks rather than staples will allow you to temporarily remove several tacks in order to pull stubborn areas back into alignment after the first steaming. Lay the stretcher bars on a flat surface, with the canvas facing right side up, until thoroughly dry - at least one hour.

Although this is a safe and easy method of blocking, remember that every piece is individual and no two pieces will block in the same way. If you have never steam blocked before, take note of the following tips to help you achieve the best results possible:

- Steam blocking works best on canvas as the sizing used in the manufacturing process helps it to hold and retain its shape. Linens and other fabrics are "refreshed" by steaming, but will not block in the same way.
- Do not over steam, allowing the canvas or threads to become overly damp or wet.
- Test any questionable threads and/or dyed or painted canvas for dye stability and/or reaction to steam before blocking.
- Boil distilled or bottled water if you live in an area where the tap water has a high iron content.