

# Needleart: Tips for **Blocking**

by Kaye Evans, CPF, GCF, CMG

**N**eedleart is a work of art created by stitching thread into a fabric. And, it's the best word to use when referring to any type of needlework, especially if you've not yet identified what specific type you are working with. You can refer to an article I wrote for PFM in May 2003 entitled, "I Have A Question..." which gives a reference guide to identification of various types of needleart.

Here, I've presented several questions about the blocking process for needleart that have been frequently asked of me throughout my years as an educator on this medium. Next time, I'll discuss the next step—stretching the needleart, as well as other oft-asked questions. Read on...

**What is blocking? And, should all needleart be blocked before framing?** Blocking returns needleart to its original shape by relaxing the stitches. It also revitalizes fibers and makes needleart more pliable for the stretching necessary during the mounting process. Most needlepoint canvases are too stiff to be stretched without blocking first. Nearly all needlepoint pieces and some crewel pieces greatly benefit from being blocked before framing. Counted thread embroidery typically does not need to be pinned onto a blocking board to return it to the original shape since wet cleaning will usually accomplish this.

**What is a blocking board?** This is the support used to lay the needleart upon during blocking. Boards are available for purchase from suppliers, or you can make one. Some commercial boards are made of masonite and are marked with lines for square, rectangle, and round needleart items. You can also make a board with masonite or hardwood. Whatever the source, the size of the board should be at least 3" larger on each side than the needlepoint, so choose a size that will serve the majority of your needs.

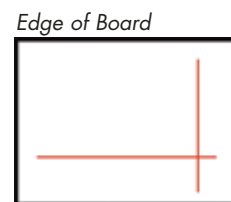
Whatever the material of the board, it needs to be "soft" enough for pins to be inserted. Basswood is a good wood candidate, but since it is raw wood, it can have lignin in it, which produces acids. To prevent any damage to the artwork, seal the wood with polyurethane or place a sheet of Mylar on the surface.

After sealing the wood, cover the board with two layers of quality quilt batting. Next, attach a laundered piece of unbleached muslin, pulling the excess fabric to the back of the board and securing with staples. Secure the center section of each side to the back of the board, pulling the fabric taut

while stapling. Staple the muslin in an outward direction from the center to the corners, making sure each side is stretched taut. The board can be used over and over until the muslin becomes marked up and you want to replace it.

**How is needleart canvas prepared for blocking?** First, determine the exact size of the needleart. Then, transfer this size to the surface of the blocking board to use as a guide when pinning. Here, I've described how to work with a four-sided piece. (Note: When using commercial boards, follow the suggested recommendations.)

On the drawing shown here, notice the red lines, which, when completed, make a box indicating the edges of the needleart. (Note: You can use a wax-based, drawing pencil.)



Intersect each corner by using a protractor to locate each of the lines to ensure a perfect 90° in the four corners.

The surface of the blocking board should then have four lines intersecting at each corner and the resulting box will be the exact size of the needlepoint. The extended lines indicate placement for pins along the edges of the artwork.

A piece that is severely out of square may need to be blocked more than once to ensure it becomes square.

**What is the process for blocking?** Attach the needleart to the ruled blocking board and line up the threads of the canvas with the guidelines you've drawn with the pencil (or those indicated on a commercial board). Use stainless steel pushpins with metal heads to attach, first, one corner of the canvas to the board; then the corner that is diagonally opposite. Continue by attaching the remaining two corners. This sets the four corners at perfect size and 90° angles.

Next, insert pins along the remainder of the fabric to hold it in place, moving in an outward direction from each corner, working all corners at the same time rather than completing one side and then the next. This maintains the balance of the blocking.

The next step is dampening the piece to loosen up the fibers a bit. If the piece is not badly out of shape, you may not need to dampen at all. If you do dampen the piece, let dry completely before proceeding to stretching and framing. Also, it's best to leave the piece on the board until you are ready to proceed.

**For the dampening step, can the needleart be immersed in water, or, perhaps, steam applied?** It should not be immersed in water. This can cause mildew if the fibers do not dry quickly. If the water is too warm, it can also shrink the fibers.

Steaming is also not advisable. The heat tends to shrink some wool and silk fibers, and can actually melt plastic threads, and discolor metal threads.

Needleart threads are usually made of natural fiber, such as cotton, linen, wool, or a blend of several of these with a synthetic. If the thread is a blend, usually there is more of the natural fiber than the synthetic. Therefore, it usually does not harm the needleart to be dampened with water as long as it is not warmer than tepid.

In order to avoid dampening the piece directly, one approach is to wet a heavy, white, terrycloth towel in tepid water and wring it tightly. Lay the dampened towel over the top of the pin heads just above the needlepoint and allow the moisture to transfer to the fibers. Carefully remove the towel after three to four hours, taking care not to dislodge the pins.

This is actually a good technique for most fibers as it keeps the moisture off the delicate threads. Be especially careful with metal threads. If excess moisture gets on these, they may rust.

**Instead of water, can it be sprayed with a relaxant?** While relaxants can be useful in some cases, this is not advisable. Relaxants are chemicals and, over time, they can cause the

fiber to yellow. They also tend to clog fibers, preventing them from breathing. The spray could also cause some threads to release dye. For best results, test a relaxant on a sample needleart.

**Should needleart be blocked face-up or face-down?** All types of needleart should be blocked face-up. Stitches are protected best when you can observe the surface. Since the canvas will have to be pulled to align and pin, be sure to observe the surface of the needleart to notice any changes that may possibly damage it. This is especially true of petit point canvas.

**How long should needleart stay on the blocker before removing?** A minimum of 36 hours depending on the humidity (longer for higher humidity areas), or until you are ready to stretch the work. If the needlepoint is removed and simply laid aside to await framing, it may “remember” its original, warped position. Also, keep the artwork in a dust-free area while it dries. ■

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Kaye Evans, CPF, GCF, CMG, is a noted educator in the framing industry. She has worked with numerous suppliers and associations around the world, including the PPFA, to elevate framing techniques by providing education for retailers. As a consultant to manufacturers, Evans strives to bridge the gap between supplier and retailer.

