

Appliqué

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Example of the mola applique technique

Appliqué is a decorative surface design technique that adds dimension and texture to the background fabric. The term derives from the French word *appliquer* (and the Latin *applicare*) that means to join or attach. While its early use was most likely to strengthen worn areas or serve as a patch over holes, appliqué developed into a creative art form used by many cultures over many centuries.

Definition of Appliqué

Traditional appliqué is defined as laying pieces of fabric on top of the background fabric to form a pattern or picture. Intricate appliqués may have numerous colors and use many layers of fabrics. After each individual piece of fabric is cut out, the raw edges are turned under and hand-sewn to the background fabric using an invisible stitch. The invention of new materials (water dissolvable stabilizer, glue sticks, and fusible web), the development of new techniques, and acceptance of new standards (machine sewing vs. hand sewing) have made appliqué faster and easier to do and are responsible for its continued popularity.

Appliqué Variations Around the World

A variation of traditional appliqué is *broderie perse* (Persian embroidery), or chintz appliqué. This technique involves cutting small motifs from printed fabrics and arranging them together into a design or pattern. The opposite of traditional appliqué is reverse appliqué. All

of the fabrics that are going to be in the design are layered. Cutting down to expose the layers forms the pattern. The raw edges are turned under and sewn to the next fabric. The Kuna Indians who live on the San Blas Islands off the coast of Panama make their molas using this technique. The patterns range from modern graphics to traditional themes from their legends and culture. A variation on reverse appliqué is known as inlay appliqué. The desired shape is cut out from the background fabric. A second fabric is placed behind the opening and the turned under edges of the background opening are sewn to the new fabric. Any excess fabric is trimmed away. Appliqués can also be three-dimensional, extending above the surface of the background fabric.

Starting with the ancient Egyptians, examples of appliqué can be found on garments and household items in every part of the world. During the Middle Ages elaborate appliqué was used on heraldic and ecclesiastical banners and ceremonial clothing. Appliqué is a part of the decoration on national (festival) costumes (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and ethnic folk dress. Several appliquéed garments are associated with the twentieth century. The Irish dance competition dress, which was relatively unadorned in the 1950s, evolved into an elaborately appliquéed and embroidered garment by the end of the century. The poodle skirt, circa 1955, was a felt circle skirt with a poodle (or other design) appliqué. The hippies, or flower children, of the mid 1960s, decorated and customized their apparel with appliqués. Wearable artists use appliqués to create one-of-a-kind garments. Many fashion designers have used appliqué in their lines: Elsa Schiaparelli, Franco Moschino, Gianni Versace, Bob Mackie, and Christian Francis Roth are examples. Koos van den Akker's entire line is devoted to quilted, appliquéed collages.

See also [Embroidery](#); [Franco Moschino](#); [Elsa Schiaparelli](#); [Gianni and Donatella Versace](#).

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