



What Makes a Quilt a Quilt?

Timeless Stitches – Quilt Capital of Kansas

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What makes a quilt a quilt? As quilters piece their tops, many wonder how to quilt them to make the quilt complete. There are some who quilt their top, batting, and backing together on their home sewing machines. Others have sit-down quilting machines or midarms that are dedicated quilting machines where the quilt is moved under the needle with no feed dogs. Still others may have a longarm quilting machine with a frame or pay someone with such a machine to do the quilting for them. Let's consider these options.

For the hobby quilter, using a walking foot or dropping the feed dogs and free motion quilting on their sewing machine can be an affordable way to complete their quilts. Using a walking foot to stitch simple straight lines or a decorative stitch such as the serpentine to create wavy lines are two ways for hobby quilters to finish their quilts. They can also drop the feed dogs and learn to do simple to complex custom quilting designs with free motion quilting or adding a ruler foot and using rulers for more precise grid-work or lines. The limited space in the throat of most home sewing machines can make it difficult to maneuver a quilt much larger than a throw. It takes dedication and a lot of practice to finish large quilts on a sewing machine. The quilter needs to find ways to manage the weight of the quilt so it doesn't create drag and ways to squish half the quilt into the small throat space as you stitch through the center of the quilt. Obviously, it can be done as there are prize winning quilters who use nothing but their sewing machines to quilt. They plan, mark, and focus on small sections at a time to not become overwhelmed. Stitching slow and steady on a sewing machine, any quilt can become something special.

A midarm quilting machine offers the next level of affordability for those who don't have the budget nor the room for an expensive longarm machine with a large frame. Machines like the HandiQuilter Sweet Sixteen or Babylock Tiara sit-down machines and others are a much more affordable option that typically has a 2.5 foot by 6 foot table that fits in most homes. These machines have more space to work in than a sewing machine as the throat is 16 inches from needle to machine body by 9 inches high or larger in the throat. Adding small craft tables on either side of the quilter's chair can create a "nest" that catches the quilt and prevents drag as they maneuver larger quilts. Some midarms come with stitch regulation and some do not. Even without regulation, any quilter can become adept with their machine with practice by learning to focus on their stitch length (how fast they move their hands on the quilt) and the speed of the machine. Because the quilt sandwich is still moved under the needle, everything that is stitched is free motion or can be done with rulers.

Finally, to own a longarm quilting machine and frame is often the dream of many quilters. Having space for a 10 foot frame or the larger 12 or 14 foot frames can be limiting for many. Plus, the cost can be prohibitive for most, especially if a computerized system is desired. Many quilt shops have longarm machines and offer quilting services for a fee which can be an affordable alternative for hobby quilters. Of the people we know

who do own longarm machines, many also offer quilting services which can help the machine pay for itself over time. These machines are mounted on a platform that rolls up and down the frame over the quilt. The quilt is attached to leaders and is rolled onto poles on the frame. One section of quilt, the depth of the throat/frame capacity, is exposed at a time. As that section of quilting is completed, the quilt sandwich is then rolled on the frame to expose the next section.

Liz began quilting on her sewing machine which she did for six years until she was able to purchase her midarm sit-down. She has done custom free motion quilting on her own and customer quilts over the last 8 years. Now she is focusing on getting her own backlog of quilt tops quilted, moving those made by her husband Les (also a quilter!) towards the top of the stack. Sharon has been longarm quilting for many years in comparison and has two longarm machines in her shop, Quilters' Paradise, one of which is used only for free motion and hand-guided pantographs and the other is computerized.

Regardless of what type of machine you use to finish your quilts or whether you send them out to be quilted by others, our feeling is a finished quilt is better than an abandoned unfinished top stuck in a closet. Learning to do even simple quilting designs on your own can be quite gratifying, being able to say you did it all!