

An Artist's Touch

Though logos are still a primary focus for the industry, one embroiderer takes stitching to a whole new level.

By Jimmy Lamb

Pam O'Brien is no ordinary embroiderer. The owner of Youngstown, NY-based Memories, One Stitch At A Time, has taken embroidery and digitizing to a new level of sophistication. She combines her artistic talent with a keen mastery of embroidery to create spectacularly detailed tapestries.

O'Brien digitizes a client's photograph and transforms it into a framed embroidered tapestry. "What I create is a very detailed rendering that combines elements of cross-stitch and embroidery, and may have up to 1 million stitches when completed," O'Brien says. "Because of the work's texture and detail, it looks more like a tapestry than an 'embroidered picture,' so the term tapestry is much more fitting for the final product."

It's not every day that a typical embroiderer handles a job with 1 million stitches – in fact, the thought of such a stitch count is almost ludicrous. But O'Brien's not an average embroiderer, so she takes the high stitch count and lengthy production process in stride.

The production process

It takes O'Brien between four and six weeks to create a single tapestry. The first step is when her client gives her a photograph – typically of herself, family members, pets or a favorite location – that she wants recreated as an embroidered tapestry. O'Brien then schedules a consultation to discuss the client's vision, which she uses to stimulate her own ideas of how the tapestry should evolve.

The process isn't just about recreating an image in thread; it's about giving it its own life apart from the photograph. That



Pam O'Brien needs four to six weeks to create a tapestry that can include a million stitches.

means O'Brien talks to her client about various visual interpretations of the photo, including full color, monochromatic color, sepia tone or even black and white.

Next O'Brien focuses on the photograph itself, and this is where her talents really start to come in to play. "I was a professional photographer in my former life," she says. "I worked closely with models, photographing them of course, but also coaching them on how to pose in order to capture the best images.

"I also worked hard to refine those images as needed to create the best possible product, so I became very proficient in photographic processing techniques," she says. "So with each tapestry job, I take the initial picture and refine it in order to create the core artwork for the project."

Once she has the project artwork ready for production, the digitizing and sewing phase begins. "I don't have any one program to magically create the design," O'Brien says. "I use multiple software systems to combine cross-stitch elements with traditional embroidery. I slowly build the design while injecting my own artistic interpretations. Unlike traditional digitiz-

ing, I literally create the details as I go."

After many hours of preparing the design, O'Brien finally starts stitching. "My tapestries can take anywhere from 24 hours to 90 hours of stitching, depending on size and the image itself," she says.

Amazingly she puts huge stitch counts – remember, up to 1 million stitches – in a relatively small area, as her tapestries range from 5 inches by 7 inches to 8 inches by 14 inches in size. For most embroiderers, this would amount to a registration nightmare, but O'Brien handles it with ease. "It took me about five years of experimentation with backings and hooping techniques to devise a method that ensures perfect registration," she says. "The last thing I need is to be 20-plus hours into the sewing and have something shift, but the process works and my results are spectacular."

Once the sewn tapestry's finished, the final step is the framing. "I offer framing because it's part of the artistic process," O'Brien says. "You'd never put this much effort into a project and then throw it into a dollar store frame. It's something I discuss with my client at the consultation,

so the look of the tapestry can be matched to the frame. Though my customers have the option of framing it themselves, they never do." To ensure a quality framing job, O'Brien uses the services of a local framing professional.

Upon completion of the framing, O'Brien presents the finished tapestry to the client, which can be an emotional time. "When my clients see their tapestries for the first time, many of them are speechless and some even cry," she says. "I can be affected as well, since I spend four to six weeks on each tapestry and it becomes my life during that time, so I know what they're feeling."

Starting point

O'Brien's tapestries aren't created overnight, and neither was her embroidery business. "I spent seven years developing my process and wasn't willing to take on any jobs until I was comfortable that I could handle pretty much anything," she says.

Her first foray into embroidery was when she received a home embroidery machine for her birthday. It came with a software program that converted digital images into cross-stitch patterns that could be embroidered. "I spent all night doing a really lousy version of my son, but it was a start," O'Brien says.

Over the next several years, she became fascinated by the idea of turning photographs into something extra special. In fact, that's all she worked on, and never even paid attention to more traditional forms of embroidery, such as sewing company logos and team names.

As her skills developed and her products become more sophisticated, O'Brien ran into some major roadblocks with her home embroidery machine. "It was limited to 250,000 stitches per design, and my creations were starting to exceed that on a regular basis," she says. "Plus, it didn't provide the definition I needed and



O'Brien has perfected the technique of converting photos into finely-detailed tapestries.

I desperately wanted automatic trimmers."

So, she bought her first commercial embroidery machine and was able to take her tapestries to an even higher level of creativity and finesse. After purposely staying under the radar while developing her techniques, O'Brien finally reached a level where she was ready to go public,

and she showed her tapestries at local art shows.

As expected, she started receiving inquiries that turned into orders. Though her initial jobs were regional, O'Brien's since taken on clients in other states and from Canada. And as her business has increased, so has her status as a recognized artist. "I was rebuffed by one particular art festival's planners when they learned my tapestries were produced using a machine, as they didn't consider this to be acceptable according to their standards," O'Brien says. "But after reviewing my process, they recognized what I did was truly an art form, and have since allowed me to display my works in their show." ●

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