

Quilts by  
Elaine  
Quehl



Hosta photography transformed into quilted artwork.

# Hostaholic

by Elaine Quehl Ottawa, Ontario

I suppose I could be described as a “hostaholic.” Unlike most hostaholics, however, I do not collect rare hosta plants nor am I even an avid gardener. My addiction is one of photographing hosta leaves and turning my photographic inspiration into quilted art.

At home in the suburbs of Canada’s capital, Ottawa, I had seldom given the ubiquitous hosta plant a second glance. In 2006, however, a chance encounter with hosta leaves unfurling after a spring rain during a visit to Prince Edward Island, Canada, changed that and the course of my life. When we are away from our usual environment and routine we notice things in ways we may not have before. With new DSLR camera in hand, I took many photographs that day.

One was interpreted into my very first hosta quilt, “Opening Act.”

I had already begun my quilting journey in 1996, making traditional and contemporary quilts. The process of making a quilt provided a peaceful and meditative diversion and a connection to my mother as she suffered from early-onset dementia. Not easily satisfied with following directions and patterns, I moved into designing my own original quilted art not too long before I became besotted with hosta leaves.

I confess that I know little about the names and varieties of hosta leaves, nor am I knowledgeable about the best growing conditions, but I have found

over the last 8 years that I am drawn to the hosta leaf to study light and shadow, movement, curve and line. I adore artworks that feature value contrasts, depth and drama. Hosta leaves provide all of these. It might be a leaf that is dramatically backlit, one that has a sensuous curve, the direction that the veins run through the leaf or the way a group of leaves form an interesting flow and feeling of movement. I am not overly concerned about depicting the particular variety with utmost accuracy.

Creating one of these works is a long process that begins with a photograph. I have a library of thousands of hosta photographs. I use only my own photos so I am working with my own experience



Elaine tightly crops her hosta photographs.



Hand-dyed fabric captures the look of dappled light.



Using her sewing machine, Elaine free-motion stitches through the fabric layers to create texture.



and vision, and I never need to worry about copyright issues. A very small percentage of my photos demand to be interpreted in fabric. I spend considerable time at the planning stage, considering the composition and usually cropping my photos before settling on a design. During that process I make decisions about what features to emphasize and what to eliminate. I am always looking for impact and drama, and often try to create a feeling of movement in the work.

Then I move on to the process of creating a simple line drawing, or an outline of my subject on a transparency film that is placed over the image, tracing out key aspects that I want to include. I indicate where the highlights and shadows are, and I often emphasize the veins. The line drawing or tracing is then enlarged to become my pattern. I am not rigid about following my pattern exactly and sometimes make changes as I go. When I decide to combine several images I play with the scale of the photos to ensure that it is similar in all of the images



Beauty in golden senescence.



I am combining, and then I use good old-fashioned scissors and tape to re-arrange them.

My pattern is traced to a base of muslin or lightweight interfacing, and the quilt is built on this base using a raw-edged fusible appliqué method. Building the quilt is like painting with pieces of fabric. Decisions about colour and value need to be made for each part of the design. The work is then layered with batting and backing fabric and is free-motion stitched through all three layers to give it texture. For this step, a free-motion foot (or darning foot) is attached to the sewing machine, the feed dogs are lowered and control of the stitch length is in the artist's hands. It is essentially like doodling or drawing on the quilt.

Early on I came to realize how vital hand-dyed fabrics are to the kind of work I wanted to make. The mottled look that results from low-water immersion dyeing is, to me, perfect for rendering nature, as it has the look of dappled light. Nothing in nature is flat or solid, and hand-dyes give the work a painterly look. Dyeing my own fabric also allows me access to a wide range of values. In the last couple of years I have become particularly enamoured by the colours and curves of late-season hosta leaves. It was a true pleasure dyeing

a new palette in golds, yellows, coppers and browns.

While we have a few hosta species in our garden here in Ottawa, I find myself very short on time for gardening these days. After working in a variety of administrative positions in universities and colleges for more than 25 years, I escaped to be a full-time artist and teacher in 2008. I am on the road lecturing and teaching (primarily across Canada but also internationally) at least three months of the year. I manage to find and photograph hosta leaves wherever I go and enjoy visiting public and private gardens I encounter in my travels.

I have been privileged to visit several fine hosta gardens here in Ontario:

-----  
 Budd Gardens ([www.buddgardens.com](http://www.buddgardens.com)) here in Ottawa.  
 -----

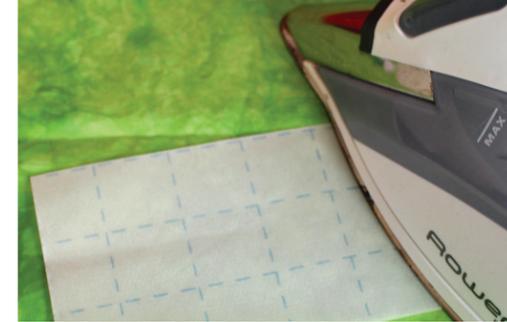
Rideau Woodland Ramble ([www.rideauwoodlandramble.com](http://www.rideauwoodlandramble.com)) outside Merrickville, Ontario  
 -----

Giboshihill Hostas, ([www.simplyhostas.ca](http://www.simplyhostas.ca)) outside Cobourg, Ontario.

# Glossary

by Cheryl Clark  
 Minnetonka, Minnesota

*Elaine Quehl is a quilt artist, teacher, fabric dyer/designer best known for her nature-themed art quilts featuring luscious foliage (particularly hosta leaves). Fabric is hand-dyed to provide the wide range of values she employs to create depth and drama, and to read like nature's dappled light. Her work has won awards at international and national juried exhibits and has been widely published. Elaine delivers lectures and workshops internationally and also teaches at Hali-burton School of the Arts. Elaine's schedule leaves little time for gardening, but she manages to find hosta foliage at inspiring gardens in her travels. To view more of her work, visit her website: [www.elainequehl.com](http://www.elainequehl.com).*



**Fusible applique:** is a technique using an adhesive bonding product to attach one piece of fabric onto another.



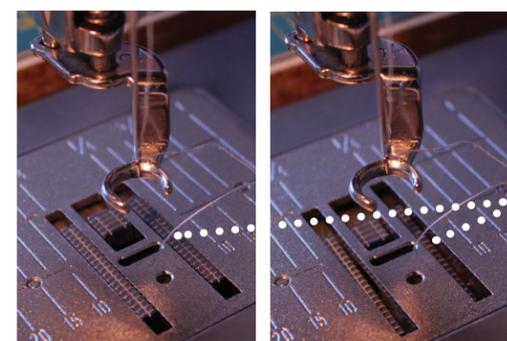
**Muslin:** a simple cotton cloth that has not been overly processed and is in its natural color (off white) or white (bleached).



**Batting:** the middle layer of a quilt "sandwich" (used to provide warmth to the finished quilt), can be a natural or synthetic fiber.



**Low-water immersion dyeing:** with limited amounts of water using one or more colors resulting in fabrics with a marbled appearance and more visual depth.



**Feed dogs:** are metal teeth-like ridges that emerge from a hole in the throat plate of a sewing machine; they push the fabric along beneath the needle.



**Free motion stitching:** the feed dogs are lowered into the sewing machine, allowing the quilter complete control of where the fabric is moved.