

Free-form Flying Geese

by Gail Garber



**BLACK HOLE, 53" x 48",
by Gail Garber, 2003**

I've never made a traditional Flying Geese (or is it goose?) block or quilt. But, I have long been intrigued with using many fabrics in the creation of a background.

It all started with my first judges' critique back in 1989. I was very excited to learn what the judges had to say about my "quilt child," a quilt with a heavily appliquéd and embroidered Eagle Kachina. Set onto a background of blue sky fabric, the Kachina stood on two earth-colored fabrics representing sand (see detail, page 38). Well, much to my dismay, one of the comments stated merely, "Too much negative space."

I had no idea what that meant, and in my naivete, decided that the

judge was simply wrong. It took another eight years of quilting before I came to understand.

My epiphany of understanding occurred in 1997 while I was making BIG BANG (page 38). I wanted the design to appear as if two stars – one warm, the other cool – were colliding. At first I drew loose swirls curving outward from the stars. My plan was to place a different fabric in each of the swirls, but I realized that would only create a rainbow effect rather than movement. Then I got the idea to divide the swirls into the easiest "piece-in-a-long-row" type of design, Flying Geese. I took my paper pattern, grabbed my ruler and pencil, and just started eyeballing the lines in place

without measuring.

Next I was off to fabric selection, not to the local quilt shop, but to my own stash. Because I wanted a look that was scrappy as opposed to planned, I gleefully tore my blues and grays into strips, then sorted them into piles of lights, mediums, and darks. Scraps from the early 1980s blended easily with those from the next decade. I would never again look at my fabric stash with the same eyes.

As I began stitching the rows, I placed the lightest shades near the star's "illumination," then gradually faded to dark toward the outside border. It worked!

After finishing the trailing edge of the cool star, I began working on the geese trailing the warm star. This time, my goal was to achieve the appearance of movement, as if the trail were pushing the star. This was accomplished by using warm colors for the geese in the trailing edge.

Transparencies (those areas where it appears one trail crosses another) add further interest to the design. To complete the image, I was careful to extend the inner design into the border, giving the impression that the border is an integral part of the overall quilt, not just a frame for the picture.

I was thrilled with the result, and, best of all, I finally understood the meaning of negative space! While the background in BIG BANG reads as a background it doesn't compete with the center stars. There are still elements of action that keep the viewer's eye attracted to the quilt and wandering over the myriad of subtle background design elements.

I shared my new-found technique with my quilt group, Designing Women. We all began working with Flying Geese as a design element in quilts, experimenting with different ways to use this unique design. We found that the key to success with this technique is to carefully select fabrics

Flying Geese with Centered Points

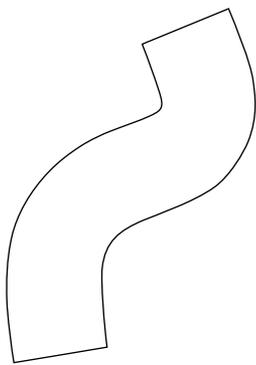


Fig. 1

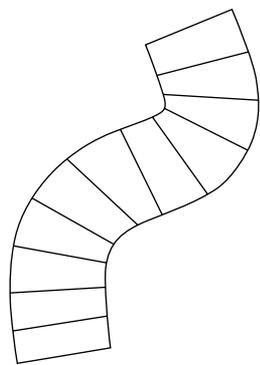


Fig. 2

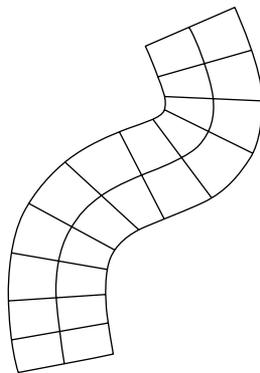


Fig. 3

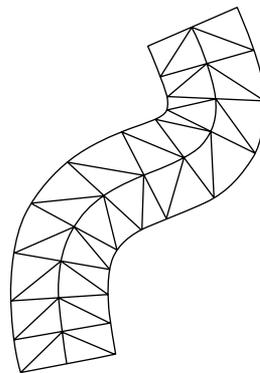


Fig. 4

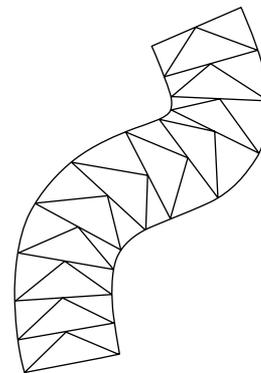


Fig. 5

that don't compete with the center. Tone-on-tone fabrics work well, as do hand-dyed and prints that read as solids. Each quilt looks remarkably different and yet, all have the same underlying theme.

Sometimes the geese figure prominently in the design as in TRACKING THE SUNSET IN IOWA by Mary Chappelle (detail, page 40). In others, geese form a subtle statement as in LEAVE ONLY BUBBLES by Michele Hymel (page 38).

Designs can range from large, elaborate quilts to small simple designs, such as I used in my little quilt, SYNCRANE-ICITY (page 40). For it, I

selected a fabric printed with geese and cranes standing in a misty marsh, such as one might see on an early morning visit to a wildlife refuge. My design goal was to use strips of Flying Geese to give the impression that geese were taking flight over the surrounding hills on their way to their daily foraging activities.

More structured bands of Flying Geese complement the background of BLACK HOLE (page 36).

Design ABCs for Your Own Flying Geese

Drafting Flying Geese strips is amazingly easy and requires only three simple tools – a flexible curve (the

Often I like to make the “geese” in the foreground wider, then gently diminish the width of the strip and size of the geese as they recede into the distance.

B. Using the straightedge ruler, gently angle straight lines to fill in the inner curved edges, and fan the lines out around the outer curves (Fig. 2).

C. Next, decide where the tip of each goose will fall. It is not necessary to rigidly line up the geese down the center of the strip. After all, in real life, geese rarely line up symmetrically. Experiment to see whether a symmetrical or asymmetrical alignment is preferable to your eye. First, draw a line down the center of the two parallel lines (Fig. 3). Use your straight edge ruler to create triangles as shown (Fig. 4). After all the geese have been drawn in, erase the center line to see how the finished strip will look (Fig. 5).

Next, try adjusting the middle line so it meanders from side to side (Fig. 6). Draw triangles as before (Fig. 7), erase the middle line and see how an asymmetrical strip of geese will look (Fig. 8).

As long as the imaginary center flows smoothly from one end to the other, the eye of the viewer will also move smoothly throughout the design and will not really notice if the tip of each goose is squarely placed in the center. The same theory holds true for the height of each goose. As long as the adjacent “geese” are of somewhat similar proportion, the eye travels over inconsistencies without notice.

When your design pleases you, square up the design by placing a rectangle or square around it (Fig. 9). Erase the parts of any goose strips that extend beyond this boundary. It is

Flying Geese with Asymmetrical Points

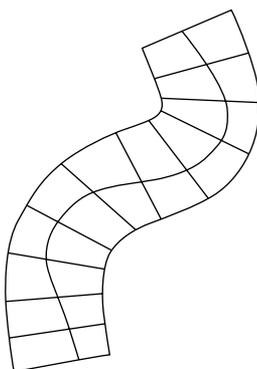


Fig. 6

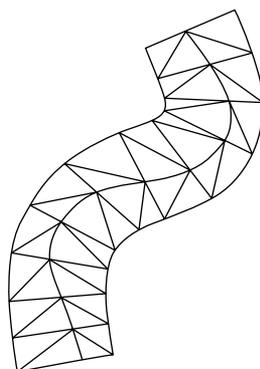


Fig. 7

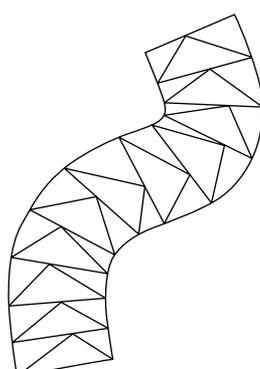


Fig. 8

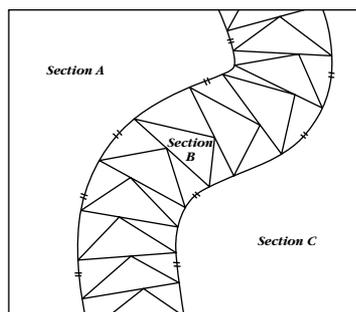
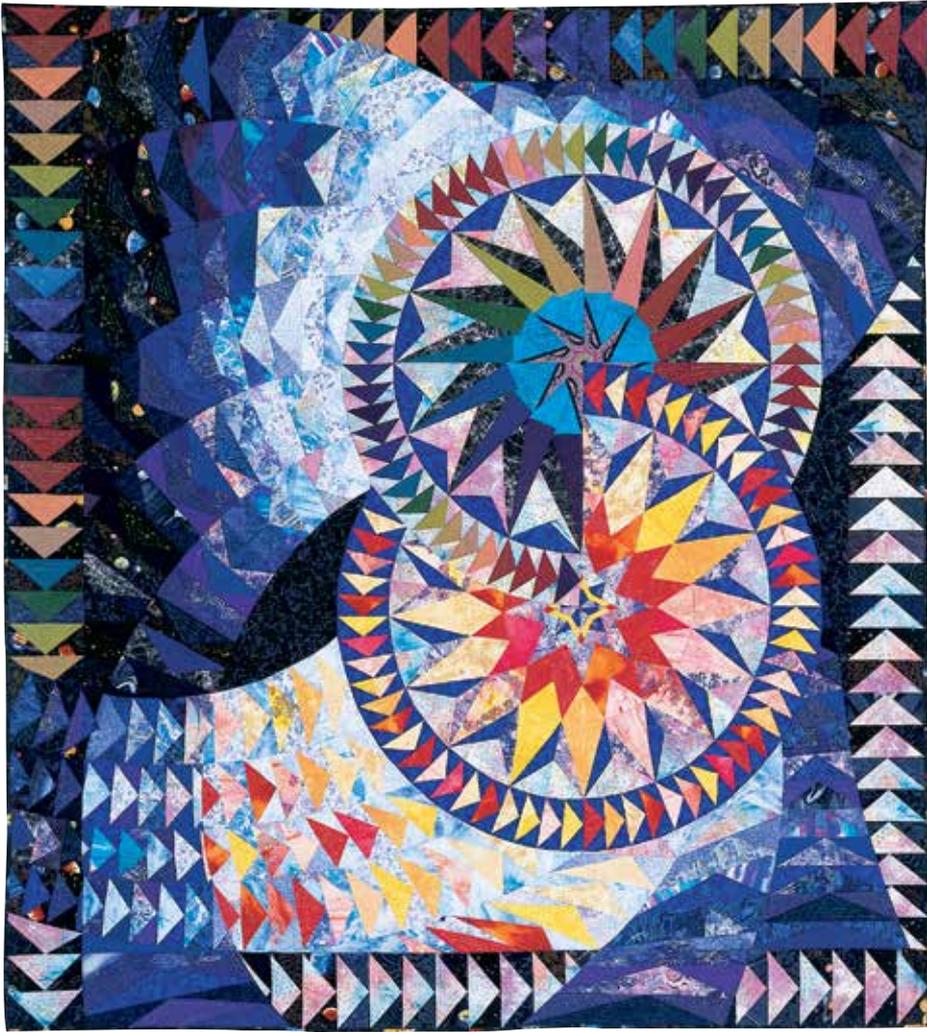


Fig. 9

longer the better), a straightedge ruler, and a mechanical pencil. Actually, it also wouldn't hurt to have a good eraser handy just in case you change your mind about something.

A. On a large, blank piece of paper, begin by drawing two adjacent lines with the flexible curve tool. The lines should be somewhat parallel, although it adds interest to a project if the width of the strip varies (Fig. 1).



Detail, EAGLE KACHINA, 50" x 50", by the author, 1988

essential that the design remaining within the rectangle be completed as drawn. This means that there will be odd-sized geese, and portions of geese, especially at the edges of the quilt.

The same process holds true if you want a much longer flowing strip of Flying Geese (see figures 10, 11, and 12).

Piecing Preparations

Free-form designs that include flying geese lend themselves to paper foundation-piecing techniques because every piece of fabric is a different size and shape. When using paper foundation-piecing techniques, remember that the finished piece will be a mirror image of the drawn design. I always like the surprise of seeing my design in reverse, so I don't worry about this aspect of foundation piecing.

Designate each section of your design by a number or letter of the alphabet. Add match marks to each section so that you can match all the curves later on (Fig. 9). I never cut up my original design, but instead make foundations from the original. This way, if a section is damaged or lost, it can simply be redrawn.

Next, make a paper foundation for each section, again keeping in mind that paper foundation-piecing results in a mirror image of your drawing. I prefer to use freezer paper for my foundations because I can press the first piece of fabric onto the waxy side of the freezer paper and it will not shift. Then as I stitch each successive piece to its predecessor, I press it onto

TOP LEFT: BIG BANG, 71" x 80", by the author, 1997

BOTTOM: LEAVE ONLY BUBBLES, 46" x 59", by Michele Hymel, 2002





Sample A



Sample B



Sample C



Sample D

the freezer paper as well – this eliminates pleats and puckers. Trace every line in each section of the design along with the match marks onto the dull side of freezer paper. Cut out the freezer paper template adding a generous $\frac{1}{4}$ " to the outside edges. Once that is complete, you are set to sew!

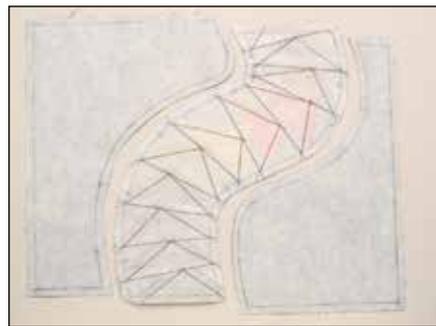
Piecing the Geese

Step 1. Think of your Flying Geese strip as a series of arrows surrounded by background fabric. Start at the bottom of the arrows and press the wrong side of the fabric for the first goose in place on the waxy side of the freezer paper (Sample A).

Step 2. Then align a piece of the background fabric over the first goose with right sides together. Turn the paper over and stitch the background piece in place on the drawn line between the two pieces (Sample B), using a short stitch length (1.5 on most machines).

Step 3. Remove the paper foundation from the machine, turn it over, and trim the seam allowance between the two pieces to $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Flip the background piece up and press it in place against the freezer paper, hiding the seam allowance.

Step 4. Move to the other side of the first goose and add another



Sample E



Sample F



Sample G



Sample H

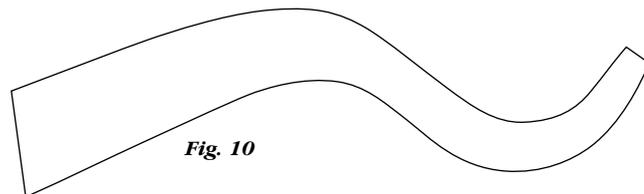


Fig. 10

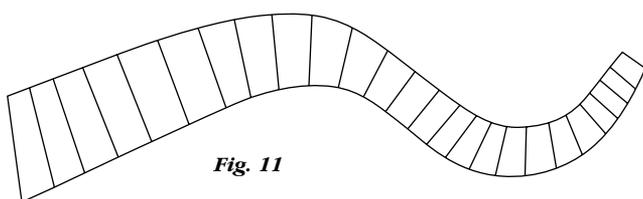


Fig. 11

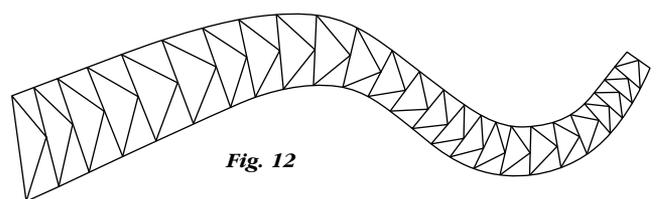


Fig. 12



LEFT: *SYN-CRANE-ICITY*, 18" x 23", by Gail Garber, 2002

BOTTOM: *Detail, TRACKING THE SUNSET IN IOWA*, 43" x 61", by Mary Chappelle, 2002. Full view shown on page 6.



background piece as before (Sample C, page 39). Trim the seam allowance, flip the background piece up and press in place.

Continue adding pieces in this manner until you have completed the goose strip (Sample D). Be sure to leave enough fabric extending over the edge of the goose strip to allow for a 1/4" seam allowance and after the goose strip is completely pieced, trim the seam allowance to 1/4". Transfer the match marks to the wrong side of the fabric and remove the paper.

Beyond the Flying Geese Strips

Repeat this process with those pieces that form the background behind the goose strips, that is, trace the design and transfer all match marks. Press this freezer paper template onto the wrong side of the fabric and trim seam allowances to 1/4" (samples E and F, page 39). Transfer match marks to the wrong side of the fabric and remove the paper.

To assemble the quilt top, simply align the sections, carefully pinning all match marks as well as placing pins between the match marks. Sections that have sharp curves will require a number of pins. Stitch with a 1/4" seam allowance, removing pins as you go. I prefer to stitch with the goose strip on top so I can see where the points of the geese will be (Sample G, page 39).

Take your Flying Geese strips one step at a time and they'll come together well (Sample H, page 39). Soon your quilts will be soaring! ■

Gail Garber is the author of *Stellar Journeys: Flying Geese & Star Quilts* (AQS, 2001). She works closely with a quilting group,



Designing Women, who meet monthly to inspire each other and critique each other's work. In addition to quilting, Gail, who lives in Albuquerque, NM, loves birds. She founded and directs *Hawks Aloft, Inc.*, a nonprofit organization dedicated to research and education. Gail can be reached via e-mail at: gail@hawksaloft.org.