



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT
The Icons, The Giants, The Pink Palace

THROUGH THE RIVER VALLEY

A Quilter's Journey Inspired by Edmonton's Downtown Core

by Susan Lett, Fibre Art Network

In the heart of Alberta, nestled along the mighty North Saskatchewan River, lies Edmonton—the provincial capital of Alberta. The city is rich in culture and history, and boasts Canada's largest urban park of more than 168 kilometers of natural beauty.

For over two decades, this passionate fibre artist, quilter, and member of the Fibre Art Network, undertook a daily commute from Strathcona County to downtown Edmonton. The routine, a journey of more than just travel, has inspired a remarkable series of wall quilts titled *Through The River Valley*.

In this article, I'll delve into the creative process, techniques, and inspirations behind these quilts, each intricately depicting the captivating scenes of downtown Edmonton as seen from a unique vantage point—through the window of a double-decker commuter bus.

INSPIRATION

This artistic journey was significantly influenced by two prominent artists, each bringing a distinct flavour to the creations. The spirit of Andy Warhol, who is known for his iconic pop art and stencil techniques, resonates in the use of embroidery software as a modern-day stencil. Meanwhile, the vibrant, playful works of Ted Harrison, a celebrated Canadian artist, inspired my use of resist in fabric dying—a technique that mimics the black outlines Harrison employed in his representations of life in northern Canada.

A THREE-PART ODYSSEY

Through The River Valley is a visual narrative comprised of three distinct pieces, each mirroring a stage of the bus journey into the downtown core.

The Pink Palace

Just as the morning sun begins to light up the landscape, the double-decker bus enters the river valley. Look right to see Canada Place, affectionately called the Pink Palace, standing on the opposite side of the river.

Look left and the scene is dominated by the glass pyramids of the Muttart Conservatory, where the four glass pyramids house distinct biomes. Visitors can encounter lush rainforests, arid succulents and desert flora, and seasonal plants and flowers. Open year round, the Feature Pyramid hosts rotating exhibits and a sure win for those captivated by a flora and fauna experience. Fortunate enough to house the corpse flower (*amorphophallus titanum*), the Conservatory invites visitors to witness this spectacle and experience a unique blend of beauty and an infamous odour that gives the flower its name.

The new Valley Line light-transit rail system, opened in late 2023, which provides much-needed rapid public transit from the large subdivision of Millwoods to the downtown core, can be seen in the corner of the quilt. And, no scene would have been complete without a glimpse of the 105 street bridge. The white tip of the bridge is visible from the window of the bus if standing on tippy toes.

The Giants

Just before the bus crosses the river, the tallest buildings that form the financial district come into view. Manulife Place, with its distinct blue façade and recognizable landmark, recently lost its status as the tallest building to the Stantec Tower, which dominates the newly-created Ice District. Visitors to this area can enjoy Rogers Place, a state-of-the-art arena that hosts the beloved Edmonton Oilers, and all the latest concerts. Enjoy some fine dining and place a bet or two at the Casino attached to the arena.

These Giants that form the financial centre of the city also boast a series of the integrated pathways, both under and through the buildings, to provide access throughout the downtown core without ever stepping into the elements.

The Icons

As the journey continues over the bridge and winds up the hill, some of the oldest and most recognizable icons dominate the skyline. >

The Hotel Macdonald, standing proudly on the river valley's edge, holds a rich history dating back to its grand opening in 1915. Originally designed by architect Ross and Macdonald, this landmark has witnessed the evolution of Edmonton over the years. The hotel's classic Château-style architecture, coupled with its luxurious accommodations, has made it a symbol of elegance and sophistication. Over the decades, the Hotel Macdonald has hosted royalty, celebrities, and dignitaries, contributing to its status as one of Canada's historic grand railway hotels.

The Telus building, an icon that started its journey as Alberta Government Telephones, a provincially owned telephone service that dated back to the early 20th century. AGT merged with BCTe in the early 1990s and has morphed into the national telecommunications company it is today.

A nod to Alberta College's humble beginning, the little brick building, now integrated into Grant MacEwan

University. The College began its history in 1903. One of the earlier institutions of higher education, it has contributed significantly to the educational and cultural development of Edmonton and the broader Alberta region.

And finally, no scene would be complete without at least a glimpse of the High Level Bridge, an enduring symbol distinguishable by its heavy black girders. It has stood in the skyline since its completion in 1913. Over the years, the use of the High Level Bridge has evolved. While it originally accommodated streetcars, it later became a dedicated roadway for vehicles. The bridge is illuminated at night, and its lights are often colourfully coordinated to mark various events or celebrations in the city.

During the summer months, The Edmonton Radial Railway Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and showcasing Edmonton's transit history, operates a vintage, restored, historic streetcar that runs across the High Level Bridge, offering scenic views of the river valley and downtown Edmonton. The streetcar travels from the Strathcona Streetcar Barn & Museum, crosses the High Level Bridge, and makes stops at key locations, including Jasper Avenue and

109 Street. Passengers on the High Level Bridge Streetcar are treated to panoramic views of the North Saskatchewan River Valley, downtown Edmonton, and the surrounding areas.

TECHNIQUES UNVEILED

The artistic process involved in creating these masterpieces is as fascinating as the final quilts themselves.

Water-Based Resist and Dye

The use of a water-based resist was applied to white PFD (prepared for dye) cotton fabric to form the outline of each piece. These outlines were created based on my original sketches.

Keeping the design beneath the cotton fabric on a light table ensured that the resist could be applied to the fabric without the use of any markings on the fabric. The resist was applied using a bottle with very small application tips that ranged from 5-9 mm in size.

I experimented with two different types of resist: Jacquard water-based resist and Elmers gel-glue. Although the glue did form a resist, the application consistency was not as optimal as that of the Jacquard resist. It didn't hold its shape as well and tended to shrink in places while drying.

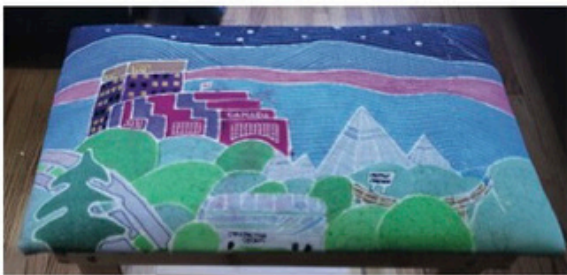
Certainly not the quickest application, it took approximately 24 hours for the resist to dry before fabric dye could be applied.

Unlike fabric paints that are typically composed of a pigment or dye mixed with a binder or medium that helps the colour adhere to the fabric, fabric dyes are liquid solutions containing colourants that chemically bond with the fibres of the fabric, becoming an integral part of it, and allow the fabric to remain soft and subtle.

Because of its spreading nature, the dye concentrate is thickened with sodium alginate, a natural occurring substance derived from seaweed, before applying



First, a water-based resist was applied to white cotton fabric, to form the outlines of the image, then fabric dye was painted on the fabric with a brush.



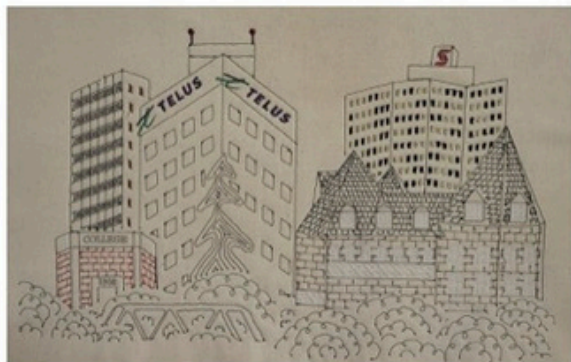
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it with a brush like fabric paint. The dye is then allowed to dry thoroughly before rinsing it out and dissolving the resist.

To obtain brilliant colours, a higher concentration of dye powder was used in order to create a vibrant colour palette as possible. Keep in mind that the final result is never known until after the dye is washed out.

Embellishing with Embroidery

Leveraging embroidery software to create most of the stitching on this series expanded the realm of possibilities by adding details not otherwise doable on a domestic sewing machine. Metallic threads add sparkle in the minute details seen on the building names, logos, and lights.



An outline of the The Icons showing the embroidery.



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However important the embroidery/ sewing machine is, the strength in developing embroidery designs is managed through the software. The software digitizes artwork or designs and turns them into a format that can be read and executed by an embroidery machine. The software breaks down the design into individual stitches, specifying colours, patterns, and a sequence for the machine to follow. Once created, the designs can then be used again and again, creating intricately detailed images within minutes.

CONCLUSION

Through The River Valley is more than just a quilt series; it's a visual symphony of Edmonton's downtown core, captured through the hands of a fibre artist. As you embark on this creative journey, I invite you to appreciate not just the artistry but also the city's vibrant spirit—a spirit that comes alive through the lens of a quilter's eye.

Be sure to join in celebrating the fusion of art, culture, and nature in the heart of Alberta's capital this June when *Quilt Canada* will be held in the heart of the river valley at the Edmonton Convention Centre. 🌸



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