



# quilting THE QUILT

BY Dawn Cavanaugh.

## Fabulous Feather Formation

"Mine are short and squat."

"Well, mine are skinny and floppy."

"Mine look like my big toe!"

"The word 'tombstones' best describes mine!"

Can you guess what these quilters are talking about?

Over the years, I have had the good fortune to meet hundreds of quilters across the globe as I travel and teach for APQS. When I ask students what technique they struggle with and would most like to master, nine out of ten will shout, "Feathers!"

"Feather envy" is commonplace among quilters. We are never satisfied with our own shapes and curves, and we pine after the style or gracefulness we've seen in other quilters' feathers. We worry that our own feathers aren't right, when in reality they are just different. Granted, as a quilting nation we've established some basic

principles about feathers—they have a vein, grow the same way up each side of the vein, have a root, and are mirrored if the vein line is straight. (See the September/October 2012 issue of *Love of Quilting* for more about feather basics.) Every feather can be beautiful if you stop worrying that it must look like everyone else's. Let your own personality dictate what your feather will look like. Open your mind and your imagination. Let it become your own quilting fingerprint and legacy!

The first step in creating beautiful feathers is to find a process that matches your particular learning

mode and skill set. Once you determine what gives you good results, you can concentrate on the feather's particular style. Our brains, personal muscle control, and fine motor skills all work differently. For example, some of us make our zeros in a clockwise motion, while others draw the number counter-clockwise. Both paths create the same result on your paper, and neither is better or worse. When learning to quilt feathers, try different paths, putting aside your preconceived notions of what is right or wrong, to see which one gives you the best results.

Lots of books, videos, and classes are devoted to feather formation. These resources are wonderful for getting started or for learning more in-depth skills. As you watch the latest YouTube video or attend your local quilt shop class, keep in mind that quilting is still an art, not a science. If the method the instructor demonstrates doesn't seem to work for you, it doesn't mean you can't quilt feathers. It simply means that method doesn't work for you! You can quilt feathers from the tip down to the root, or the root to the tip. You can quilt up one side and then down the other, or you can quilt both sides as you go, either up OR down. Keep watching, reading, and practicing until a method or system clicks in your mind.

You may want to first draw your feathers on paper or a dry erase board, or trace a feather stencil for

practice, before trying them with your machine. The way you draw your feathers on paper usually mirrors how you'll best quilt them on fabric, but not always. On a longarm frame you won't be able to spin the quilt like you can a dry erase board or piece of paper to change the angle at which you're drawing. On a domestic machine, the limited throat space may mean you must quilt your feather shapes vertically instead of horizontally.

Before you can master a particular feather style, you should discover your favorite feather method. The exercises that follow are designed to help you figure out if you're a "top-down" (tip to root) feather quilter or a "bottom up" (root to tip) quilter. You may be one of those rare quilters who can do both directions equally well. However, almost every quilter I've met makes better feathers

in one direction over the other. You'll also notice that the feathers on one side of the vein will look different from the opposite side, even if you quilted them both in the same direction. That is absolutely normal, and it is okay! Neither direction is right or wrong. You still end up with a feather, whether you started at the top, bottom, or combined the two along the way. Get over the idea that you must travel up one side and down the other, or vice versa. Figure out which direction works best for you and focus your attention on that. If your feathers look nicer when you quilt from the root to the tip, do both sides of the vein in that direction (*Photo A*). To get back to the root after completing one side, you can stitch down the vein a second time, echo your first feather plumes down to the root (*Photo B*), or simply tie off your thread and start again from



the root. If your feathers look better starting at the tip and working down to the root, try completing both sides that way instead (*Photo C*).

You may make prettier feathers by doing both sides of the vein at the same time, bouncing back and forth on each side as you travel. And you may do them better from the top down, or the bottom up, as you bounce! Don't dismiss any particular direction or path until you've attempted to draw it several times.

It takes a while for your muscles to "remember" what they are supposed to do.

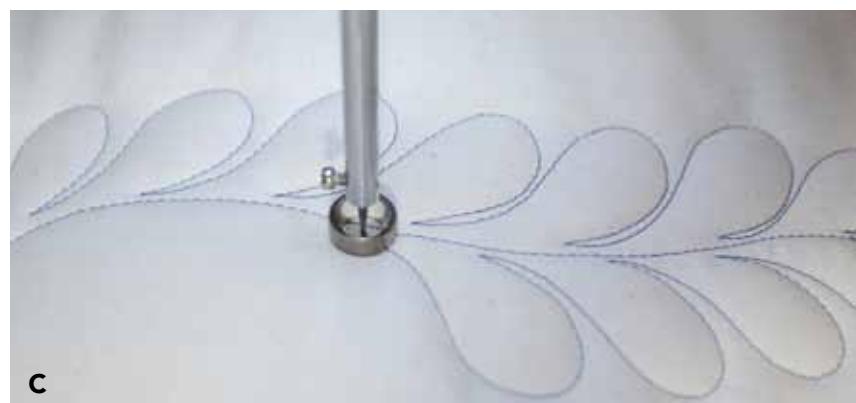
Ultimately your success will depend on lots of repetition. Instead of drawing or quilting a new feather shape each time you practice, trace one of the feather shapes you've already drawn over and over. Your path won't be perfect, but that's not important right now. Your first goal is to force your hands to repeat the motions until they become second nature. Your hands will stop waiting for your brain to tell them what to do, and they will do it naturally. Tracing the feather repeatedly relieves the mental stress of creating the shape each time, and reinforces the physical actions that will eventually reproduce your beautiful feathers.

After tracing over your feather drawings several times, it's time to try it on your fabric. Stitch the feather using the direction that felt most comfortable during your drawing session—top to bottom, or bottom to top. Stitch right over your feather several times to train your

muscles (*Photo D*). Even if you did a better job drawing on paper in one direction, experiment by trying the feather the other direction as well. Since you're using two hands to guide the fabric or longarm machine, your muscle control will be different than drawing with a single hand.

For your first feather attempts, use an open plume type of feather as shown in the photos. Don't worry about one plume touching another,

don't stress if they don't meet the vein, and don't fuss about duplicating any particular feather style at this point. Your first order of business is to master the movement with repetition, finding the quilting direction that yields the best results for you. Once you have that down, developing skills with all of the different styles will be very easy. That's the subject we'll tackle in the next issue.



## Author Profile

Dawn Cavanaugh is National Director of Education for American Professional Quilting Systems.

**Contact:** [dawn@apqs.com](mailto:dawn@apqs.com)  
[www.apqs.com](http://www.apqs.com).