

abode

The Star-Ledger

4 | THE STAR-LEDGER | 02 07 09

expertise

Workshop explores a world of fabric

BY KIMBERLY L. JACKSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Anyone who sews and shops the fabric stores knows \$20 can go a long way if you find good fabric at a good price.

Check the remnant bins and clearance tables at nearly any fabric store and you're likely to find cuts for as little as \$2 per yard. One yard of 45-inch wide cotton fabric can easily make a sunny, room-brightening throw pillow with fabric to spare. Three yards are enough to stitch simple curtains for a standard-size bedroom window, and four yards can make a throw for bed or sofa.

All of these projects involve only straight stitches and are suitable starters for those with little sewing experience.

Even if you pick a costlier fabric, say a \$20-a-yard silk, the price of making simple pieces such as curtains, pillows or throws still will be typically less than half the cost of a comparable ready-made item.

Slitching up projects for your home also gives you the freedom to experiment with a variety of fabrics and come up with one-of-a-kind pieces that can give your home your signature touch.

GOING GLOBAL

Author and former Star-Ledger craft columnist Lisa Shepard Stewart is a designer and fabric enthusiast who has used materials from a variety of cultures to make quilts, place mats, baskets and other home decorating pieces.

She will offer several project ideas at Fabric Land in North Plainfield on Feb. 19 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. (Call 908-755-4700 or go to fabricland.com to register.) The free presentation, based on her second book "Global Expressions: Decorating with Fabrics from Around the World," is the first in a series of programs that will celebrate the store's 75th anniversary.

Shepard Stewart has demonstrated quilt-making and other crafts on HGTV, the Discovery Channel, PBS and DIY Network. She writes for several sewing magazines including McCall's Quilting and Vogue Patterns. We talked with Shepard Stewart recently for tips to make the most of fabric at home.



1 You've written that you prefer to stitch fabric into quilts, curtains, place mats and other home accessories — as opposed to clothing — because doing so allows you to enjoy your fabrics every day. What is it about fabric that inspires you?

2 Most of the fabrics I write about are handcrafted in some way — they're either woven, dyed, stamped, painted or otherwise crafted by hand, making each piece unique. Many of the techniques are painstaking, time-honored crafts, and I like to imagine the fabric artists as they are creating each gorgeous piece. The stories behind the fabrics are also interesting, and they can tell you a lot about the cultures that created them. It's that feeling I get that inspired my company's tagline "Feel the Fabric. Embrace the Culture."

3 Talk about your company.

4 I launched Cultured Expressionst.com as a specialty company to show people how to use African textiles in decorating, quilting, sewing and crafts. It began in 1999, with the publication of my first

book, "African Accents." Then came "Global Expressions" in 2001, and "African Accents On The Go" in 2007. I wanted to complement the how-to projects in the books by offering readers a source for some of the specialty fabrics, trims and items that I used, like bogolan (mudcloth), African cotton prints, batiks and beads.

5 Every person who loves to sew has had at least a drawer full of fabric awaiting the right dress pattern or project. Do you buy every piece of fabric that excites you?

6 Most fabric-aholics talk about how a particular fabric will "speak" to them, meaning that they react to it on some deep, visceral level. Some fabrics will whisper to you, others might yell out. Those that speak the loudest come home with me with very little thought involved. It also depends on where the fabric is — if it's in a street market in Accra, Ghana, I don't hesitate because I'll probably never see it again. If it's at the local fabric shop, I might feel a bit less pressure to act immediately, but there are other factors: Do I already have something similar? Is it speaking with a particular project already in mind, or just as a collectible?

7 You work with fabrics from Africa and many countries. Where do you find them?

8 The best way is through my own travels, but also through importers in New York, and occasionally through online auctions. In any city I visit I'm always on the lookout for culturally relevant specialty shops, museum shops and other interesting outlets.



A pillow by Lisa Shepard Stewart has hand-beaded detail added to accentuate the batik print.



"Global Expressions" author Lisa Shepard Stewart

9 When you settle on a piece of fabric, how do you decide how you will use it?

10 First, I usually try to use the piece as it is, without cutting into it. The designs, symbols and shape of the fabric will sometimes inspire the project, like kuba raffia fabrics from central Africa. A complete piece, about 17 inches square, can be transformed into a stunning pillow or handbag.

11 How do you organize your sewing and crafting supplies?

12 No comment (laughs).

13 Okay. What projects would you recommend for someone just starting to sew?

14 I think pillows are great. The easiest styles involve just four straight seams, and with an eye-catching fabric, even those four seams need not be perfect. A group of coordinating pillows can add lots of color, texture and excitement to any sofa, chair or bed. They also allow you to advance your skills gradually to include techniques like zippers, piping, flanges, pleats.

15 What is your opinion of no-sew projects?

16 Fusibles are excellent time savers — I use both sewing and no-sew techniques in my books and classes, and in my personal projects. Each has its place, depending on what you're making and how it will be used. My most popular workshop and project kit, the African Mosaic Quilt, requires both fusible interfacing and thread to secure over 200 two-inch fabric squares in place.

17 What can we expect from your Fabric Land session?

18 Do-it-yourself decorators and sewing and craft enthusiasts will come away with lots of easy and creative ways to add a "global eclectic" look to their home décor. This is the subtle blending of various cultures in a single setting. I'll also be sharing images of various textile artists at work, collected from my travels.

On the cover: "Mooncape," a quilt by Lisa Shepard Stewart