



## Designer in Focus: Celeste Chalasani

by Wendy Wilson, Virtual Threads

Designer Celeste Chalasani will be teaching three stumpwork classes at Seminar 2020 in Halifax. Celeste has taught extensively for the Embroiderers' Guild of America (EGA), Blue Bonnet Studio Time, and the National Academy of Needlearts (NAN). She is a graduate of the NAN Teachers' Certification Program specializing in stumpwork and completed the City & Guilds Level 1 and 2 Certificate in Design and Craft in stumpwork. She also hosts an online class on Blueprint (formerly Craftsy).

Celeste first learned embroidery from her grandmother. "I started off with stamped pillowcases, which I think was very common for children of my generation. My grandmother did not do a lot of embroidery, but she was able to teach me basic stitches," she recalls.

After she got married and started a family, Celeste did some cross-stitch, but as with most young parents with careers, she didn't have much time for hobbies. "What got me back to embroidery is that I picked up an Erica Wilson kit to work on during a long stay in India to see my in-laws," she says. Soon after that, she joined a local EGA chapter, which gave her a chance to try different techniques on a variety of small projects. "That's how I decided that I really enjoy surface embroidery way more than counted techniques, and it's how I discovered stumpwork," she reveals.

Stumpwork, the modern term for raised embroidery, has been around since the late 17th century when it was part of every wealthy young girl's education. Once she was proficient at band samplers and whitework, she would create a raised embroidery piece to be finished into a casket (i.e. a small box) or a mirror surround. Designs were worked primarily in variations of detached buttonhole stitch.

Contemporary stumpwork features more than just detached buttonhole, with designers developing their own take on designs, techniques, and materials. "Stumpwork has four aspects that make it unique: dimensional stitches (including wrapping beads or wire), padded slips, wired slips

*LEFT: Detail of raised stumpwork piece by Celeste Chalasani.*



*Celeste Chalasani*

and needlelace (variations of detached buttonhole stitch)," Celeste explains.

The fabric and threads used in stumpwork are the same as those used for any type of surface embroidery. The only difference is the wire needed for wired slips – floral or cake wire is quite acceptable and readily available.

Having discovered stumpwork, Celeste realized she had a big learning curve ahead of her, so in addition to joining a chapter, she became a member of EGA's CyberStitchers and started taking as many correspondence courses as she could, including one on Jacobean crewel with Judy Jeroy. For a mother with young children, it was ideal.

"This gave me the opportunity to really focus on learning surface embroidery stitches," she says. "I could work the lessons at home at my own pace and then mail each one to Judy so that she could evaluate it and tell me how I could improve my technique."

She also took courses in Mountmellick and Casalguidi. "I'm a very textural person," Celeste reveals. "When I walk into a fabric store, I like to touch all the fabrics. When I embroider, I like to stitch with thread that feels good. I also like embroidery techniques that create texture, and I think Mountmellick and Casalguidi both do that."

There are a number of similarities between Mountmellick, Casalguidi and stumpwork. "With Mountmellick, you have all these different knot stitches and padded satin stitch to create dimension," she says. "With Casalguidi, you have detached buttonhole stitch and raised stem stitch, as well as other stitches that can also be used in stumpwork."

The main difference between these techniques is the threads that are used. "Mountmellick and Casalguidi are primarily whitework, and they use big threads like pearl cotton, while by definition crewel work is only done with wool thread," she explains.

Stumpwork, on the other hand, can be worked with a variety of threads. "I primarily use stranded cotton or silk for the majority of my designs," she adds, "but I may use pearl cotton for something like padding."

Celeste also turned to City & Guilds, a vocational school based in London, England, to take additional correspondence courses, where she studied with teacher Chris Hammacott. "At the time, it seemed like it took forever, but looking back now, it took me three years to complete her Level 1 and 2 coursework," she states.



*Class project for Stumpwork: Raised Embroidery Essentials, Blueprint class, designed, embroidered and taught by Celeste Chalasani.*



*Detail of Autumn Jewels by Celeste Chalasani.*

Celeste credits the City & Guilds courses with helping her designing skills. "Chris's lessons were very scant on instructions," she acknowledges, "so it made me have to think and figure things out on my own. I distinctly remember one lesson for which I needed to stitch a flower. Her instructions were 'go out to the garden, pick a flower, trace the petals and stitch it'."

So, what is Celeste's designing process? Well, the short version: she starts with an idea – a flower she's seen or an idea from a conversation – and researches it by looking at photos, drawings, and whatever else she can get her hands on. "If I have access to the actual plant, I'll take a zillion photos so that I have different angles," she relates. Then she makes sketches of the flower until "it feels right." Once she's happy with the sketch, she pulls out her threads and starts stitching.

In reality, designing is a little more complicated than that! "I match threads to a flower while it's fresh," she explains. "I pull flowers apart so that I can study their structure and figure out how to recreate it with fabric and thread," like whether it can be made with individual petals, what stitch is best to use, or whether she needs to come up with another method.

"For example, I've been contemplating azaleas," she says. "When you start pulling an azalea flower apart, you see separate petals but they are attached to each other. The flower is tubular so the viewer sees both the inside and the outside. So to make an azalea, I will need to dye fabric. Once I come up with a formula for the colour I want, I will

## Celeste Chalasani's Design Process: Tranquility an Example

*Tranquility* is the finished piece. A couple of years ago, I took the photos for the lotus flower and leaves in India. I drew my inspiration from those. Some of my design choices that came into play:

- The piece sits in the lid of a large box so visually, when you look at it, it's as if you are looking down at a small water garden.
- I knew I wanted to use a dark coloured fabric to represent the water.
- I chose to stamp the majority of the leaves on the fabric because:
  1. the metallic – with the way the paint shimmers – represents the leaves that sit right on the surface or are half in/half out of the water, and
  2. the typical water garden has more lotus leaves than flowers and the sheer number to be stitched would have been too many.



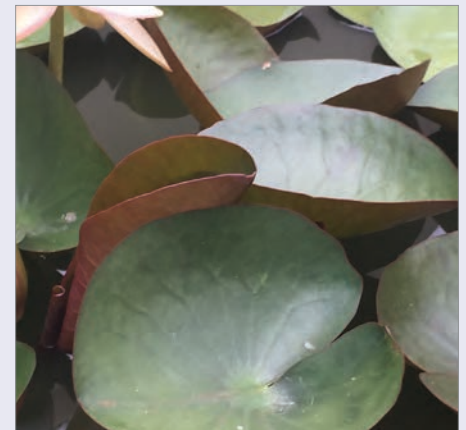
*Tranquility by Celeste Chalasani*

When I'm designing a teaching piece, I also have to think about what techniques I want to focus on and will it fit into the time frame. I add or remove elements as needed.

In this piece, you see that with how I designed the leaves that sit up away from the fabric and with the damselfly; both of those teach a second way of attaching wire to fabric.



*Inspiration photo of the lotus flower.*



*Inspiration photo of lotus leaves.*



*Doodle cloth with stitch experiments for the lotus flower center and line stitches for the damselfly's abdomen.*



*Leaves stamped with different paints on fabric to see what colours and effects were possible.*



*Paper and interfacing mock-up laying out the elements to see how it would all work.*



The Berry Box by Celeste Chalasani

need to match a thread to it and start making samples to see if I can recreate it the way I envision it. Once I know how the flower goes together, I think about how I want the overall design to look."

Celeste estimates it takes about 10-20 hours to develop a beginner level piece, and maybe 40-80 hours for an intermediate or advanced piece. This includes everything from developing a sketch, picking out threads, making samples, and trying different threads and stitches. Intermediate and advanced pieces may have an "unusual twist", and it can take her some time and experimentation to figure out how to get that realistic look. Once she has completely stitched a piece, she writes up the instructions and the lesson plan.

"My goal is to make my instructions as clear as possible so that if a student picks up a piece a year after the class, they will still be able to follow them to complete the project," she says.

Some of Celeste's designs have been inspired by India. "I'm drawn to the colours you see in India," she says. "You see bright, vibrant colours everywhere. I have memories of going to the market in the evening and seeing a bright wash of women in beautiful silk saris.



Summer Serenade by Celeste Chalasani

"Those colours just make me feel alive." She also loves berries, and they are featured in many of her pieces, including the ones she'll be teaching in Halifax: *The Berry Box*, *Summer Serenade* and *Kiss Me Under the Mistletoe*.

"*Summer Serenade* and *Kiss Me Under the Mistletoe* were both developed in my first year of the National Academy of Needleart's Teaching Certification Program," she explains. The requirements were to design two classes for beginners, with set parameters of what types of stitches and techniques had to be included and what could not be included.

*Kiss Me Under the Mistletoe* is a one-day class, recommended for beginners. Students will learn introductory stumpwork embroidery on silk shantung while padding with stitches and wrapping beads to create berries.

*Summer Serenade* is a two-day class, also good for beginners. Students will learn and practice a variety of dimensional stitches and padding techniques. Experience with surface embroidery is encouraged.

*The Berry Box* is a two-day class, recommended for intermediate to

advanced learners. Students will learn intermediate stumpwork embroidery while couching wire, creating padded slips, wrapping beads and wire, and using needlelace techniques to create wild blackberries, blueberries, and a strawberry on silk shantung.

Whether students are beginners or have done stumpwork before, all three of these classes are designed to give participants a lot of time to work on the projects during class. "We'll work on each of the elements and they will be able to practice them while I'm there. They can ask questions and I can help them with their technique," says Celeste.

For those who may be interested in stumpwork but feel a little intimidated, Celeste advises against looking at the project as a big piece and panicking. "A stumpwork piece is made up of many small bits or techniques," she says. "Working it is just a matter of going step by step."

Perfectionists who are worried about recreating the model exactly should consider that surface embroidery is not like counted work, which can be replicated exactly like the teaching sample. "Every surface embroiderer develops their own 'hand', which means



Kiss Me Under the Mistletoe by Celeste Chalasani

that every class project is unique in its own way," she advises.

Celeste also teaches a stumpwork class on Blueprint, but says she much prefers to teach in person because it's easier to tell if everyone is getting it. "I walk around the room while students are stitching and that helps me check to make sure that a student is working a stitch correctly and to answer questions that they may not want to ask in front of the whole class," she says. "And I get so much satisfaction when a student gets that 'aha' moment, especially from someone who is new to stumpwork."

Still, the online class has given thousands of people, who may not have otherwise had an opportunity, the chance to learn the technique. "Because it has reached so many people, I still see it as one of the most important things that I've done professionally," she says.

If you're thinking about taking one of Celeste's classes but are new to the technique, or if it's been a while since

you've done surface embroidery, and you want to do a little prep work ahead of time, Celeste suggests practicing threading a size 10 needle, and finding good magnification - and even a good light - that you can bring to class. All the stitches are demonstrated in class, but if you want to practice ahead of time, she recommends that stem stitch and split stitch are good to know - start with pearl cotton and then practice with a single strand of cotton floss.

Other tools to consider: stretcher bars or a large embroidery hoop are good for beginners; Celeste herself works on an Evertite Frame. For making wired slips, Celeste recommends a 4" embroidery hoop, scissors that are sharp to the very tip, and a small pair of wire cutters (don't ruin your good scissors by using them to cut wire!). Magnification of some kind - even a pair of reading glasses from the drug store - will help you to see those very fine stitches.

Celeste describes herself as a "lifelong learner" and she is constantly working



Happy Holly Days by Celeste Chalasani

on more things than she has time for. Recently, she finished a companion piece to *Kiss Me Under the Mistletoe*, called *Happy Holly Days*, and wants to embroider a cover for a class at an upcoming Focus On Book Arts (FOBA) conference. "Like everyone else out there, I've got a couple more projects lined up," she says. "It's always a matter of having enough time to do everything that I want to do."

You can see more of Celeste's beautiful designs on her website and follow her on Facebook or on Instagram (note: her Instagram account is private but you can request to follow her).

**Website:** [www.celestechalasani.com](http://www.celestechalasani.com)

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