

PRINTING FABRIC

When you step into a quilt store the number of fabric choices can be overwhelming! Typically there is something that appeals to everyone—solids, florals, stripes, polka dots, and more! Perhaps you've found yourself browsing through the bolts and wondering "Oh my, how did they come up with this cool design?" The process for fabric design is rather involved, but it is interesting to know how fabric goes from a concept to the sales floor.

In our design studio many people (company employees, customers, etc.) provide ideas and inspiration for new fabric lines. Once we've decided on a basic concept the artists go to work! Designs are usually created directly in the computer. Software is very sophisticated and can provide an artist with the opportunity to include plenty of texture, colors, shading, etc. On occasion an artist will create a design or a concept with painting, texture plates, fabric collage, and other mediums, and then scan in that piece and use that as the starting point for an entire collection.

When the overall design has been created it's time to choose all of the colors. Depending on where a fabric collection will be printed, there can be limitations as to how many colors can be used. Typically, artists have 12-17 colors to work with. These colors will be used in different shades and saturations throughout the entire collection. (If you check the selvage of fabric you might notice small colored circles with numbers in them. These are the colors that have been chosen to flow throughout the line).

At this point a professional stylist usually takes over. The stylist's job is to combine artwork and color choices, so that additional colorways and patterns can be created. The stylist uses different techniques to stretch the use of the limited colors. She uses specialized software to create "repeats", so that the artwork on the fabric is continuous. Additional colorways are created using the chosen color palette, so that the end customer can choose (for example) from the white flower on blue background, or the identical design with a yellow flower on a pink background.

Once this step is complete it's time to send the digital files to the print plant. There are fabric printing plants all over the world, but most of the fabric you buy is probably printed in Korea or Japan. The print plant begins with a process where they "strike-off" the fabric designs onto fabric. The purpose here is to ensure that the design will translate well to the fabric. Once approval is given the print plant creates screens. The screens look like large hollow tubes with designs etched into them. The screens are placed on the printing press and one color is pushed through each screen. By the time the fabric comes out of the press it has been decorated with 12-17 colors, from each one of these specially cut screens.

After printing, the fabric sits on large tubes while it dries. The print plant cuts large sections of fabric, rolls them on special tubes or boards, and starts sending them to various customers. Eventually the fabric makes it to your local quilt store, where you get excited about all of the new designs to choose from!

So the next time you find yourself wondering "Hmm, how did this beautiful fabric get created?" now you have a good idea of what it takes to bring fabric from design to fruition.

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