



A selection of threads

Threads

There is a vast range of brands and types of thread from which to choose. There are stranded cottons, perlé cottons, silk threads and ribbons of different types, not forgetting the unusual irregular threads, all of which can be space-dyed, over-dyed or hand-dyed. Many can be found from local and other needlework shops, by mail order or via many websites – try to make time to explore their wonders.

We all have our favourite threads that we use for traditional or other styles of embroidery. I mainly use DMC stranded cotton for their wide range and quality of their colour gradation. I find it a stronger thread with a better sheen than other brands. I also use silk threads and 2, 3 and 4mm silk ribbon for specific effects. Many of these I dye or over-dye myself, or source from other textile artists.

Softer, heavier threads are not suited to the work due to the difficulty of drawing them through the various layers. However, they can be couched into place on the surface of the work with a variety of stitches. I advise you not to use wool, as the thread is very prone to insect attack.

A strong thread will be necessary to lace stitching frames and backing boards for completed work. For this, I favour cotton tapestry warping threads such as Bockens **Fiskgarn** 20/6.

Materials for finishing effects

An important part of the stitching process, these elements are never used simply to embellish the work, but form an integral part of it.

Found objects Shells can be stitched into sand ripples on a beach to help evoke and reflect the environment of the bird in your work. Found objects from other settings can also be used.

Beads Useful for adding texture and interest, these can be used to indicate the shine of sap in the bark of a tree, for example.

Teddy bear eyes Found at retailers selling products for making teddies. These typically range in size from 2–5mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$ in), but larger eyes can also be found. Some have a curly wire or a looped wire on the back to stitch into place. The eyes I use for the smaller birds are 2mm with a shiny surface; they come in black or clear with a black pupil. The clear eyes can be painted with acrylic paint in whatever colour needed.

TIP

Clean found objects if possible, even if they come from jewellery. Shell necklaces, for example, collect old skin and body oils when they are worn. If not washed thoroughly, they will eventually mark the work. You would be surprised how dirty they really are!

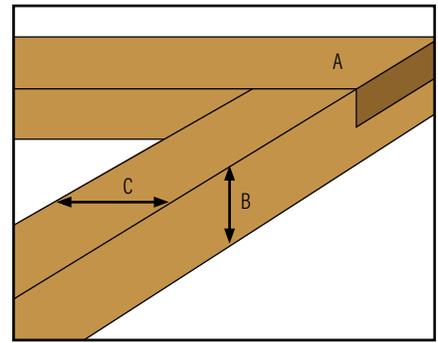


The rigid frame

The rigid embroidery frame starts as a flat rectangular frame with fixed corners (see right). The frame must be level so that it will lie completely flat. The frame should have either glued or screwed lap joints and be smoothly sanded but not finished in any other way. Such a frame is very simple to make; any handyman or framer could make one for you, or you could try it yourself. Artists' stretcher frames can be used but do check that they lie flat and are stable.

The frame can be as long as will clamp to a table, but the most important measurement is that it should be no wider than double the measurement of your forearm from the wrist to your elbow. Working on these frames means that every stitch taken is a stab stitch: due to the tension of the work surface a slipped stitch is impossible. Therefore, doubling your forearm measurement means that, with practice, you can stitch from both sides, giving you complete control over your thread as you stitch.

There are many advantages to using these frames; depending on their size you may have several works on one frame at a time and, once correct, the tension will remain the same for all. For the projects later in the book, I suggest a frame size of 30 x 40cm (11¾ x 15¾in) internal measurements. It is a decent size to start with if you have not worked in this way before. It is also handy to have a smaller frame for stitch trials for your records.



Corner strength

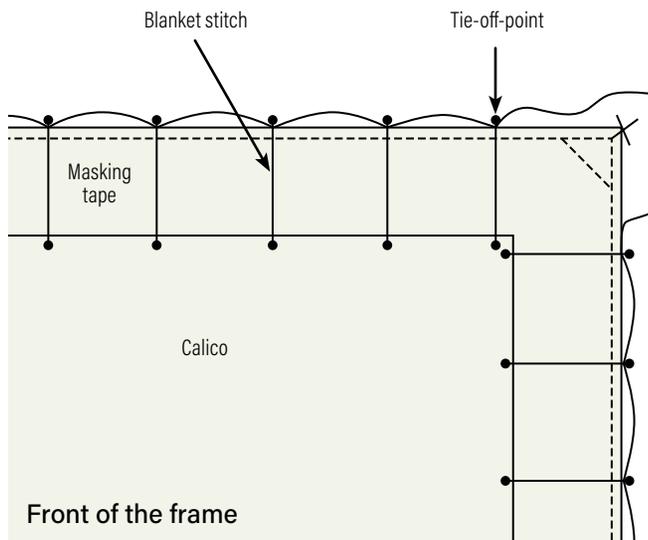
A lap joint is ideal for the corners of the frame (A), as it provides sufficient strength to avoid distortion. Mitre joints do not have sufficient strength. The frame should measure 1.5–2mm (⅛in) in depth (B), and 30–40mm (1¼–1½in) in width (C).

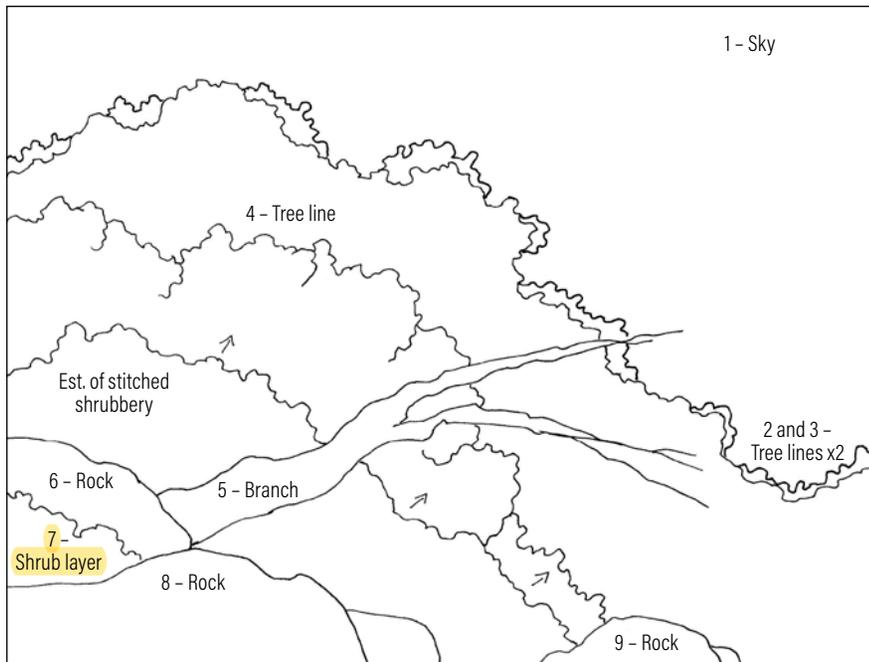
You will need

- 30 x 40cm (11¾ x 15¾in) frame
- Two C- or G-clamps – make sure they accommodate the frame and table depth
- Fabric and paper scissors
- Strong thread and a suitable pointed needle with an eye to take the thread
- Unwashed calico
- 40mm (1½in) masking tape
- H pencil
- Iron and ironing board or pad

Constructing the frame

- 1 Dampen the calico and cover it with an ironing cloth to prevent the size from scorching and sticking to the iron. With a dry hot iron, iron the fabric dry. This will shrink it slightly. Repeat this step several times until the calico has the feel of parchment.
- 2 Place the frame flat onto the prepared calico and draw around the outside edge with a pencil. Cut away any excess with the fabric scissors.
- 3 Fix the calico to the frame with masking tape: start by taping the corners to the frame, positioning the calico precisely. Next, tape the long edges and then the short sides. Keep tension on the calico while taping.
- 4 Clamp the frame to the table with one long edge protruding beyond the edge of the table, calico-side up.
- 5 Stitch the calico to the frame using a large buttonhole or blanket stitch. Begin by pulling the thread through the fabric at the corner of one long side (if you are right-handed it will be the left corner of the frame), then tie it tightly around the frame leaving a 'tail' of 10cm (4in).
- 6 Hold the thread to form a loop to the right of the tied stitch. Insert the needle into the top of the calico next to the frame, pull it through and bring it up through the loop at the outside edge of the frame. Pull the thread through tightly and continue stitching in this manner towards the **right-hand** corner. Use your left hand to maintain the tension on the thread with each stitch as you work.





Layout copy 1

This layout copy shows how I broke down the background fabric layers including the branches.



Off-frame surface stitchery

The two fairy wrens were stitched separately on a hoop and then applied to the completed background (see pages 94–95).



Superb Blue Fairy Wren

25 x 20cm (9¾ x 8in)

It's worth noting that your design work can be re-used to try out different ideas. The finished work above was the second based on the original master copy. The first work's shrubbery was a rosy heath myrtle (one of the baeckeas); but in this later version, tree line 4 has not been layered, and the shrubbery stitch line has been extended into the area. The placement of the rocks is also slightly different to the plan.



SURFACE STITCHING

This is the most exciting part of the project, the surface stitchery on-frame, followed by the application of all stitched elements made off-frame.

As the background fabrics are layered, so is the surface stitchery, which gives further depth and dimension to the work. To gain the low-relief inherent in my work, work in the following way:

- from the middle ground to the foreground;
- from the centre of the work out to the sides;
- from the surface of the background up into relief.

Adding the surface stitchery and stitched elements over the overlay is the part of the process that I find most creative and enjoyable. Do take your time as you develop and add further depth to the work with this stage.

Threads for the birds.



Threads for the midground, grasses and flora.



You will need

Number of strands of DMC stranded cotton – all single strand unless shown (2).

MIDDLE GROUND THREADS

- Tree structures – 3787
- Dead trees – 3024
- Shrubbery and canopies – 3346/3347 (2 – one of each)

GRASSES

- Layer 1 and grass heads – 746
- Layer 2 and grass heads – 746 + 3047 (intermixed)
- Layer 3 – 3052 + 3053 (intermixed)
- Layer 4 – 3052

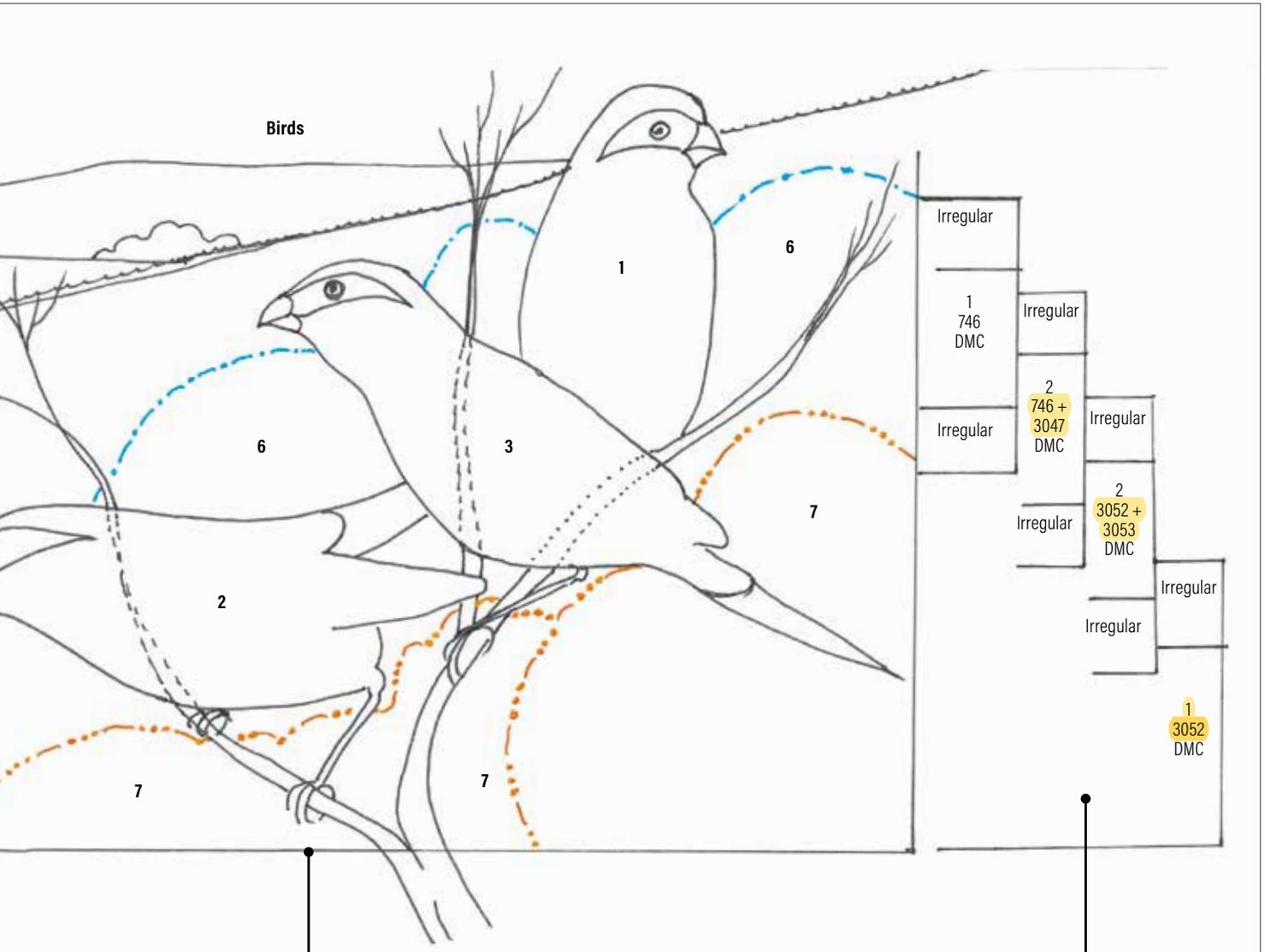
FLORA

- Structure – 3052
- Leaves – 3053/52 (2 – one of each)
- Flowers – Blanc (2)
- Centres – 680 (2)

BIRDS

- Eye and rump flashes – 666
- Top of head, neck and throat – 3023
- Back shading to wings – 3348 > 581 > 580
- Belly – 3024 > 3023
- Tail – 3787
- Legs – 3064





Birds

Straight edge

This is the base line of the work and heavy stitching does not go into the mounting allowances.

Grass colours

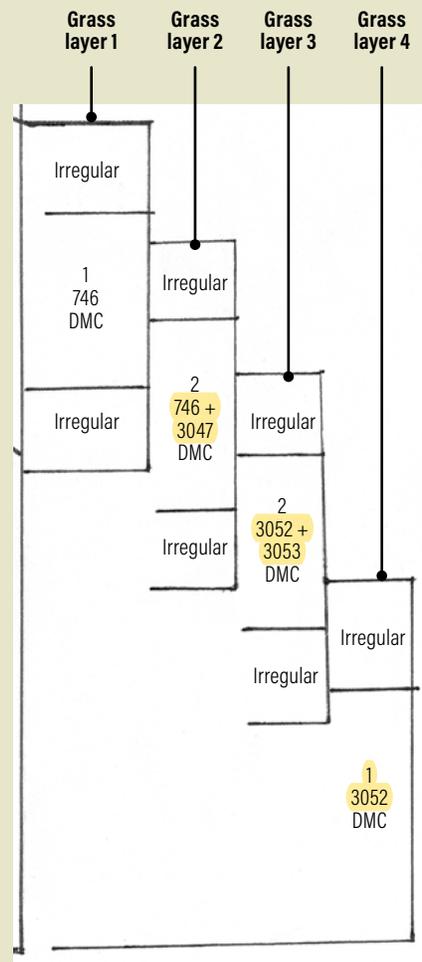
This side panel shows how to work the four grass layers. This is explained in more detail on page 83.



Planning the grass layers

You can design a work where the grass layers are stitched across the whole foreground with an irregular but relatively straight line encroaching on the frayed grass layers of the background, or you can have an off-centre dip indicating a change in the lie of the land – again, stitched across the foreground as described.

In this project, the grass layers are designed to emphasize the diagonal line of the foreground, in order to give further tension and movement to the work. On the second layout or tracing copy of the master design (see pages 74–75) a dotted and dashed line indicates the curving line of the top of the first grass layer. On the right-hand side I have drawn a diagram of the four individual grass layers (a detail of this is shown to the right). There is a 'box' area on the top and bottom of each layer indicating the irregular area of the stitching. Layer 4 is the exception. Here, the base line is straight, indicating that all these stitches will be in a straight line at the base of the work. In each layer I have noted the colour of the threads to be used.



Detail of the grass area box from the layout design, highlighting the colours used for each part of each layer.

The colour of grass

The colour of grass changes according to the seasons. The dull colours of winter blend into the new creamy-green growth of spring; into the rich green golds of summer; and in turn into the golden yellows and terracottas of autumn; then, completing the cycle, back to the dull brown yellows of winter.

Below are my suggestions of colours that could be used for the grass layers. The main criterion is that they blend from the palest to the deepest colour at the baseline of the work.

- Spring into summer – greens: DMC 524, 523, 522 or 746, 3053 and 3052
- Summer into autumn – pale yellows into golds: DMC 746, 3053, 3047, 3046
- Autumn into winter – golds into browns: 3047, 3033, 3032
- Base colours (small amounts for emphasis): mauve, terracotta, grey-green, brown: 3042, 3776, 3022, 3790.



Flowers

The flowers (see the lower right-hand side of the sampler on pages 78–79) may be stitched at the tops and junctions of the stems using applicable colours and simple stitches such as French and Italian knots, detached chain with varied-size catch stitches, fly and straight stitches. The leaves are stitched last using detached chains or straight stitches angled into the stems and are placed more to the base of the work.

For the flower used in the project, the snowy daisy bush, I am using French knots for both the buds and petals combined with straight or detached chain stitches for the leaves.

Complete all of the flowers and buds before placing the leaves. Using one or two strands of stranded cotton (DMC 3052 or a suitable green) on a no. 9 needle, place straight stitches as needed towards the top of the structures. Towards the base, use detached chain stitches so that the catch stitch is angled to the stems.

French knots

Stitching French knots on a rigid frame is very satisfying as you are in complete control of the exact placement of the knot. This is because the stitch is a stab stitch not a slipped stitch.

Thread a no. 7 crewel needle with two strands of stranded cotton: DMC Blanc for the buds and petals and DMC 680 for the centre. Bring the needle through at the exact place required, wrap the thread around the point of the needle once and reinsert it a thread's distance away. Pull the thread tightly around the needle and, holding it firmly, gently pull the needle through allowing the thread to slide down the needle and the wrapped knot to rest on the surface of the work. Firmly pull the thread through to the back ready for the next knot.

For larger knots, use more strands and larger needles, not more wraps. The buds are arranged on the tops of the structures in a slightly rounded manner and the flowers are a small cup of three French knots with a single knot within the cup on the tops and the junctions of the structures, as shown on the sampler.



Daisy

Five variations of stitches can be used for daisy-type flowers, using respectively: French knots; double French knots; double cross stitch; and detached chain with differing catch stitches.

Flower with five petals

This was made using tightly pulled detached chain stitch with a long catch stitch. This approach is suited to many common varieties of flower.

Four variations

This shows how different groupings and placements of French knots can be used to easily alter the shapes of the flowers.

Off-frame stitchery

There are more off-frame elements to be worked in this project than *A Brief Flash of Red*. Not only do the robins show a distinct difference in colouration between the male and female, which is not present in the finches, there is also the branch, made up of three sections, upon which a nest is positioned.

The off-frame elements can be worked on a hoop when and in whatever order you prefer. When each is completed, remove it from the hoop and prepare the element so that it is ready to be positioned on the background. Keep them in a clear envelope for protection and apply them in the order given below.

Pages 90–95 cover all the areas related to stitching, preparing and applying the birds and branches to the work. In particular, page 94 details how to prepare the birds for application to the work. The stitch used for both the birds and branches is, as in the first project, elongated stem stitch (see page 156).

Work plan for off-frame stitching

- 1 - Male bird (SE14)** The male bird is stitched and applied in the same way as the finches.
- 2 - Branch 1 (SE12)** The branches are stitched and applied in much the same way as the birds. There is more information on the specifics of the technique on page 121.
- 3 - Branch 2 (SE13)**
- 4 - Nest (SE15)** Being cup-shaped, the top of the nest requires the background element of silk organza, of a related colour, cut to shape and layered into place. The same applies to the nestlings. The off-frame stitching of the nest is described on page 117.
- 5 - Tree trunk base is completed.**
- 6 - Female bird (SE16)** This is stitched and applied over both the nest and branch.
- 7 - Legs or claws** These are stitched when all the elements are in place.

You will need

Number of strands of DMC stranded cotton – one or two strands.

MALE BIRD

- Head, throat, back, wings and tail 535
- Breast 3608
- Belly to rump, under tail, patch above bill blanc white

FEMALE BIRD

- Patch above bill 746
- Head, back, wing 3032
- Chevron patches on wing 3047
- Cheek 762
- Chest into belly (for shading) 3047, 746, 762

FEATURES

- Legs 3787
- Bills black leather
- Eye for male black 3mm (1/8in) teddy bear eye
- Eye for female – oval bead painted black

BRANCHES (TWO SURFACE ELEMENTS)

- Branch 1 (right – SE12) 842; details 3790
- Branch 2 (central – SE13) 3790; details 3781
- Nest (SE15) overdyed silk bouclé or 3032, 3790, 762
- Mixed greens 3347, 3348, 320, 581

BACKGROUND TREES

- Lower trunk – fine strips of brown suedes with orange and black beads



Threads for the birds.

Mounting and framing

I always leave the completed embroidery on its working frame in a place where I can come across it every now and then. Viewing the work from differing angles over a period of time helps me to be sure that there is nothing further to add or change.

A frame need not be expensive or overly ornate. To me, simplicity more often enhances a work than detracts from it. Luckily my husband is a fine wood worker who makes all of my frames in his workshop, I do the mounting, finishing and framing in my workshop. However, most people use a good framer experienced in framing embroideries.

Preparing a board for lacing

The board I use to back the work is a 3mm (1/8in) craft board or MDF (medium density fibreboard) which is sufficiently strong and rigid for the sizes I usually work in. It can be found in craft and hardware shops, and in most cases businesses will cut to size.

Once the work has been removed from the rigid frame re-measure it and have the board cut to this size. This is important because often the measurements decrease slightly when the tension provided by the lacing is relaxed.

Wipe the board clean with a damp cloth, cut a slightly larger piece of polyester/wool felt blend and, using either UHU glue or Aquadhere, glue the felt to the upper surface. Iron the felt to fuse it to the board and, when cool, cut away the excess with a rotary cutter.

Why do I use craft board? Because the work needs to be tightly laced to help remove any puckering that may occur during stitching the work, lacing the work to craft board removes this and helps ensure there are no 'dints', ugly shadows along the edges of the work, as often occurs with foam core.

Removing the work from the embroidery frame

- 1 Carefully remove the lacing thread and masking tape from the frame. Place the back of the work onto a clean firm surface.
- 2 Place the 'window' over the work and with a 2H pencil draw around the outside edge of the mounting allowance.
- 3 Remove the 'window' and trim away any excess fabrics so that only the work and mounting allowance remains.
- 4 Remove the tacking and isolating stitches and draw any surface threads to the back. Clip all threads off at the edge of the back of the work. Do not iron the work.
- 5 Fold the excess silk organza at the sides of the work to the front and trim away some of the fabric layers to reduce the bulk. Do not cut away any of the sky or foreground fabrics, and always make sure to leave a layer of firm fabric such as a range, hill or tree line intact, as this will help to stabilize the work and allow a firm pull during tensioning.
- 6 As you trim the remaining layers, make sure that they are graded so there is no hard edge, which would be difficult to fold over the board.

Finishing steps

- 1 Preparing a board for lacing.
- 2 Lacing the work to a board.
- 3 Fusing fabric to a mounting board.
- 4 Float mounting.
- 5 Matt boards and framing.

You will need

MATERIALS FOR LACING

- 3mm (1/8in) craft board
- 2H pencil
- No. 5 crewel needle
- Plastic or glass-headed pins
- Polycotton
- Fabric scissors
- Cotton tapestry warping thread (Bockens Fiskgarn 20/6 is my choice) and suitable needle
- Top-quality PVA glue such as Aquadhere or UHU stick

