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## IN STITCHES

### Problem-Solving Tips for Cloth Dollmakers by Colette Wolff



ARMATURE DOLL BY DEDE TRIPLETT. PHOTO: JON LEATHERWOOD.

**Problem:** I'm interested in wired dolls that I can pose, but stuffing around a wire armature inserted into a fabric is so tedious!

**Solution:** It's also patience-trying and difficult-to-impossible to control! So, instead of stuffing a figure from the outside in, trying to bury the wire as you work—reverse the operation. Build the figure from the armature out, bypassing traditional stuffing procedures entirely.

Starting with a skeleton-like armature fashioned from wire, artists sculpt figures with clay, sticking and shaping the clay piece by piece around the arma-

ture until the body is desirably "fleshed out." Using batting, fiberfill, and strips of fabric instead of clay, cloth dolls can be constructed in the same manner. The finished cloth figure has an advantage over the hardened clay figure—it can be bent to assume different poses without shattering.

Building a cloth doll around an armature is a process, not a pattern. Without the security of a pattern to predetermine size and shape, the armature dollmaker needs to have an eye for figure proportion, an experimental attitude toward the handling of materials, and a sense of adventure. Because the process is so variable

and adaptable in actual practice, and subject to improvisation, the directions that follow are necessarily general.

To sustain the size and pose of the intended figure, armature wire must be sturdy and stiff but finger-pliable. Long pipe cleaners may be suitable for five- to six-inch miniatures but a figure 20- to 30-inches tall requires a more substantial framework. For larger figures, you'll need a strong wire, possibly doubled, that resists finger-bending enough to hold its shape securely after it's bent. Investigate the types of wire available at local hardware and building supply stores.

With fingers and a needle-nose pliers, bend and twist the wire into a stick figure. The head can be a loop, the torso defined by spreading wires that becomes legs and end with loops for feet. Wrap and twist the arm wire firmly around the central "spine" or shoulder wire and finish the

ends by twisting the wire back around itself. For small figures, turn the ends of the arm wire into tight loops. (Fig. 1) For larger figures, bend the ends of the arm wire into hand silhouettes with

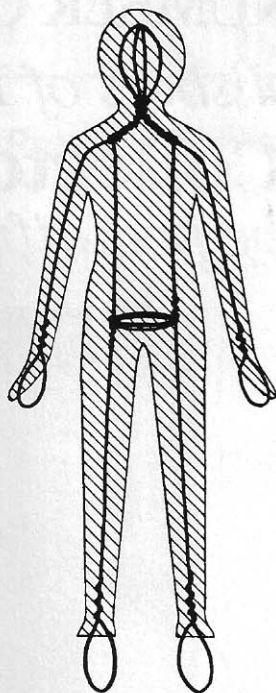


FIG. 1

Fig. 1 On folded paper, cut out a simplified silhouette of the doll figure you want to make and plan a wire armature that fits inside the silhouette. Match the actual armature to the drawing. The illustrated armature is planned for three pieces of wire: two long pieces with head loops in the center, twisted together at neck and shoulders before separating into arms and torso/legs; one short piece connecting the leg wires at the hip. For sculpting purposes, the arm wires would be straightened to shoulder height.

thumbs or, for the adventurous, thumbs-and-fingers defined. More complex wire structures can be devised that suggest head and torso volume, or tough-cut shapes of plastic foam can be introduced to begin the dimension-alizing of those areas.

At this stage, you'll find it easier to work on an armature with straight legs and feet and with arms straight out at the side. For all but mini-figures, start by completely wrapping the

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ping to mold the various parts of the figure appropriately. Connect or hold the ends of the strips with stitching. (Fig. 2) To maintain slenderness, avoid excessive buildup around the neck, wrists and hands, and ankles and feet, but use the bulk created by strip layering to expand dimensions where needed. Alternating between fiberfill, layers or rolls of batting, wrapped strips of fabric, and stitches that model as well as fasten, refine the overall shape and add features such as breasts, buttocks, tummy, and knees onto the figure. Check the figure for proportion and symmetry from all angles. Bend the arms, legs, hands, and feet into a more natural pose. Finish the sections of the body that will not be hidden under garments (e.g., torso, upper arms, and legs) with a neat, stitch-secured wrapping of wider strips and pieces. When fiber-sculpting is complete, the figure will look like a shapely, patched mummy.

Finally, cover the visible sections of the figure with a skintoned, stretchy knit. Before covering the head, raise facial features such as the nose, cheeks, chin, and forehead with layered batting cutouts stitched to the fabric strips. Smooth and stretch a cut-to-size piece of knit over the face, pulling it to the back of the head where the edges can be trimmed and tacked to the fabric underneath—and all construction details will be concealed by the wig. Needlemodel to accentuate facial contours. If covering the neck and shoulder areas requires a second piece of knit, overlap and locate blind-stitched seams inconspicuously under the chin and at the back of the neck and shoulders.

For the hands/arms and feet/legs, cut and seam stocking-like tubes of the skin-toned knit, allowing for stretch. If fingers are defined, the arm tubes should be shaped like long gloves or mittens. Pull the tubes over the

limbs, stretching and smoothing, locating the seams in back. Tack the edges of the tubes to the upper arms and legs. Where limbs bend, hold the knit down with tiny, invisible stitches, if necessary. If desired, needlemodel fingers and toes.

Color the eyes and mouth with the medium of your choice, wig and clothe the doll, and adjust the its pose for display, bending the buried wire armature at places where figures are normally jointed.<sup>2</sup>

*Colette Wolff has been making cloth dolls and teaching dollmaking for 20 years. Send your cloth dollmaking questions to: In Stitches, Dollmaking, 5713 Louise Lane, Austin, TX 78731. ●*

<sup>1</sup>The reinforced panties of discarded panty hose can be recycled for this purpose.

<sup>2</sup>These instructions are based on methods used by NADDA cloth doll artist Lisa Lichtenfels.

wire armature with yarn. Form the head and torso by surrounding the yarn-covered armature with wads of fiberfill and pieces of batting cut to fit, holding the fiberfill in place with the batting and securing the batting-wraps with large, loose, deep hand-stitches. Continue layering fiberfill and batting-wraps until a rather bulky, crude shape develops around the armature. Wrap the arms and legs with stitch-secured batting; pad the hands and feet with several layers of batting cut to shape and stitched around the yarn-covered wires. Use a 3 1/2-inch or 5-inch needle to run the thread through thick fiberfill/batting, supplemented with a curving needle for surface sewing.

As needed, cut bias strips from utility-grade unbleached muslin, or cut strips with the stretch of a knit<sup>1</sup>—narrow strips for small figures and limbs, wider strips for bigger figures and torsos. Wind these fabric strips around the fiberfill/batting-covered armature, varying the snugness and direction of the wrap-

FIG. 2

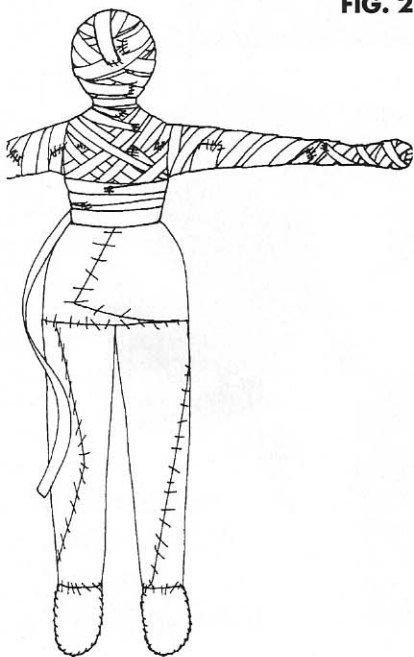


Fig. 2 An armature being wrapped with strips of fabric after initial padding with fiberfill and pieces of batting.



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