

## Rouleaux Techniques

*This article first appeared in the March 2009 issue of Workshop on the Web (www.workshopontheweb.com). It explains the construction method of Sue's wonderful rouleaux techniques so well that we thought you'd enjoy it and there is so much more in her book. Over to Sue:*

With such a fancy, romantic name, the *rouleau* has an inspiring textile pedigree. It first makes an appearance in 17th century France and is derived from the word *roule*, meaning a roll or tube. Couture has shaped the life of rouleaux, giving padded trimmings for hemlines, functional fastenings and decorative details on Victorian capes, collars, coats; spaghetti straps on 1920s lingerie, insertions with faggoting on silk blouses.

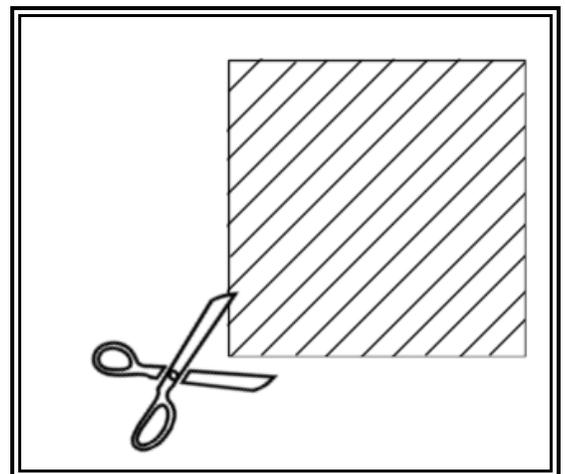
Fashion techniques have always inspired my work, structural details working with stitched surfaces. The *art nouveau* rhythms of slender silk rambled over my embellished jacket for Bill Gibb, in the late 1970s, echoing the free spirit of his clothes. What started as a simple interpretation of a trailing plant stem continues to fascinate and, 30 years on, I am still playing with fiddly fine tubes of material. Modestly described as a bias tube of fabric, the twists and turns of the rouleau always inspire new directions. Enjoy the journey.

If you are familiar with the basics of making rouleaux, skip to Materials & Equipment, then the Creative Projects.

### Basic techniques

The bias grain of fabric is essential when preparing fabrics for making rouleaux. The bias grain runs diagonally across the straight grain of fabric, at a 45° degree angle, the straight grain is parallel to selvedge edge. Bias has stretch, giving the tubes elasticity, enabling all sorts of manipulated curvaceous patterns.

Cut the bias strips on a cutting mat, using a rotary cutter against a steel rule. Or, strips can be chalk marked, then cut with scissors. For first samples keep the strips short, 1¾" (4.5cm) wide, and stitch 3/8" away from fold. For long continuous strips, cross-way joins can be made to link short lengths.



The width of the bias strips can vary according to fabric choice (see *Materials*) or the intended use, for example, fine skinny rouleaux for a trailing fringe or fat, padded ones for bag handles etc. In the illustrated examples, I have used widths of 1 3/8" inches (3.5 cm) which will make a 1/4" (0.5 cm) finished turned tube.



### Stitching

Use a strong polyester thread for both bobbin and top thread when stitching to avoid snapping as the tube is turned and later padded. Use a short stitch length (2-3) and ease the tension a little. A long stitch can cause the seam of the tube to gape when padded. Fold the bias strip in half (do not iron), right sides together. Holding the folded strip, anchor it in place by letting the presser foot down.

Straight stitch 5/16" in from the fold, with slight tension on the strip. Holding the starting threads of bobbin and top in fingers, stitch a continuous line to the end. The slight tension, holding the

stitched fabric as it passes through the machine, prevents a ripple effect on the strip; keep it flat and taught as you stitch. Selecting a far right needle position can help. The final line will be straight.



I always do one or two more rows of stitching. After the first line, do not stop but pivot and return with a second row, just on the outer side of the first row (raw edge side of folded strip). Keep all four threads to use in the bodkin after turning. The second row is vital for fabrics that fray e.g. dupion, as it prevents fray as the rouleau is turned.

### Trim and turn

The fabric can be trimmed close to the last row of stitching, or left to pad the tube as it is turned.

**Option 1:** thread a bodkin with the polyester threads (from seam stitching) carefully cut a diagonal snip from close to the end of the stitches towards the fold, removing a tiny triangle of fabric - see bottom pic. This gives a larger opening to pass the bodkin through. Draw the bodkin through the opening and move the needle inside the tube, rucking and drawing it through until the end. Be gentle and patient.

**Option 2:** Use a rouleau turner with a latch hook. No need to keep threads or do a snip at start. Glide the long turner through inside of stitched strip, fix the latch hook at the end and pull. It will turn it inside out like magic. There are other specialist tools that will also do the job.



## Equipment

Sewing-machine, straight-stitch presser foot  
Bodkin (blunt) or rouleau turner  
Scissors or rotary cutter, mat, steel rule  
Chalk marker, such as Clover brand  
Straws/ Millinery sewing needles for stitching details with rouleaux  
Iron and board.

## Haberdashery materials

Polyester dressmaking thread, such as Drima or Guterman, to match fabrics  
Millinery wire (comes in white and black) for a very stiff structure such as a tiara  
Finer gauge covered craft wire  
Other wires can be used (for the tiara I used gardening wire)  
Quilting wool, such as Coats/Anchor used for Italian quilting  
Some other wools can be used if they are loosely spun  
Beads, sequins, pearls (choose to suit your project).



## Fabrics

Most of the fabrics used in the illustrated project are silk. The silkier the surface the super skinny the rouleaux, for example, silk satin, *crepe de chine*, habutai.  
Heavier silks, such as Dupion can be stitched 5/16" from fold edge.  
The rougher the texture, for example, with more slub, the trickier to turn inside out.  
Even Calico, if it is washed, can make rouleaux; velvets too, but they are cut wide; lamés and metallic dupions work well, as do the cotton/lamé mix patchwork fabrics ; synthetic satin and crepe de chine work but are more slippery to handle when machining.

## Ideas for using Rouleaux

### 1. Watercolour Rouleaux

Creating painted effects on fabrics prior to stitching the strips offers another dimension to the rhythmic meanders of silk crepe de chine rouleaux (see right and overleaf).

The technique used here is air-brushing, using a basic hobby air-brush, such as Badger, and diluted pigment paints. Fabric squares were stretched, coloured, then cut up into strips and formed into rouleaux, as described on page 2. Other paint effects to try: stippled metallic on black, marbled painted silks, sponged colours. These rouleaux were padded with quilting wool, as described below, after the tubes were turned.

**Technique:** Thread a bodkin with two strands of quilting wool, to fill a stitched tube (made with a ¼" seam from the fold); it looks thick but it will fill out the rouleaux. Next, arrange loops in naturalistic curves along the length. Using a Straw/Milliners needle threaded with polyester thread, glide the needle through the rouleaux, letting it surface where appropriate to anchor the loops. Sequins and beads can be added at this stage.



This sample combines manipulated flowers with the rouleaux to give a romantic floral decoration for fashion; individual corsages could be made in the same way.



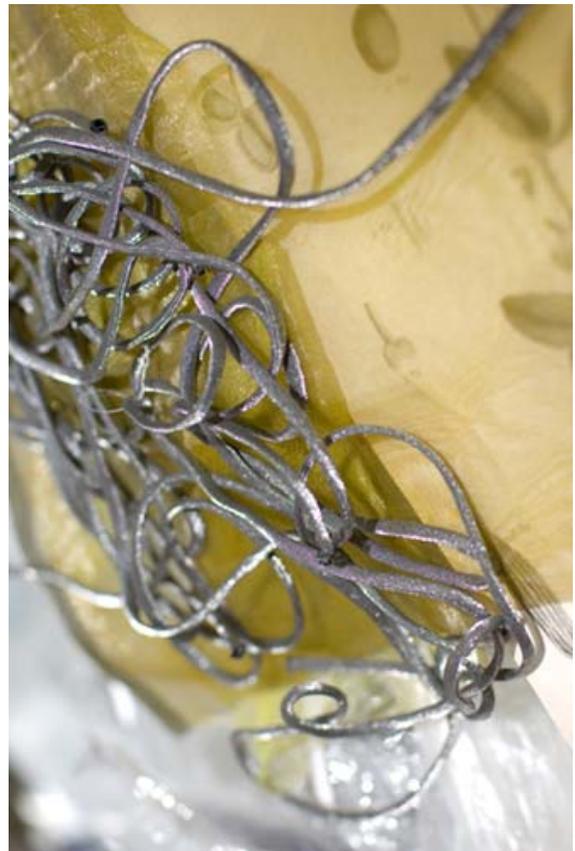
## 2. Botanical Ramble

A design influence of old botanical engravings inspires samples for bag structures. Selecting a source of design can influence colour, fabric and the manipulation of rouleaux.

The fabric chosen is an unusual lamé, shot with black and gunmetal. Using shimmering fabrics can enhance the surface of the textile creation as it twists and turns, loops and knots.

These rouleaux have added ingredients of wire, beads and padding as in the previous section.

**Technique:** Thread a bodkin with fine craft wire or plain, fine gauge jewellery wire, with the two strands of quilting wool as before. To avoid the end of the wire snagging the fabric, I usually twist the end that has passed through the bodkin in with the wool and back into the rest of the length, so the end is secure. Draw through the rouleau - it will be a bit slower than just the wool.



**Securing the ends:** remove the bodkin, then twist the wire in with the wool, double it back then let it slide back into the tube. If you cut the wire and wool shorter than the tube, there will be surplus fabric to tuck in and stitch across the end. After stitching the end of the rouleau with strong thread, attach a bead. These sample short rouleaux had beads at each end and, as the photo shows, were manipulated to form undulating shapes or spiral patterns.

**Tip:** Complicated manipulations can be pinned into patterns before hand-stitching to anchor the design with Straw /Milliners needle, using the same technique described in page 3.



### 3. Wired and Wonderful

Rouleaux make a grand finale as a bag, performing an elaborate, intricate arrangement of wired and padded rouleaux. Silk dupion is used for the tubes, with bold Czech glass beads in shades of amber for the added sparkle factor, the bag is lined with silk organza.

**Technique:** The rouleaux were made as before but with the addition of an extra wire threaded with the wool (2 wire 2 wool or 1 millinery wire and 2 wool). Millinery wire does give the structure extra stiffness but it is not as pliable and is sometimes more difficult to manipulate into shapes. In this sample, two finer craft wires were used.

Here, we focus only on the embellished surface rather than making the bag, but the rouleaux surface was shaped into a rectangle ready to form the bag. It was then studded with large glass beads, secured with a special beading thread or strong polyester. Additional sequins, stitched on with the Straw needle, decorate the surface. The rouleaux lace was stitched at one side to form the 3D shape. It was anchored to an oval base of fabric, then lined. Finally padded rouleaux were entwined to form each handle.

Making rouleaux handles: as a functional decoration for an accessory, two wired and padded rouleaux were entwined to form each handle (see above).



## Rouleaux as fringe

A duo of party bags (below) give a rouleaux look to the swing-time Jazz Age, with a free moving fringe of flowing silks and lamé, combined with velvet. In complete contrast to the wired and padded manipulations described in technique 3, above, here the rouleaux can dangle and move like a Charleston dress. I have used this technique many times to accent streamers of decoration for belts and fashions.



**Technique:** a mix of colours was used, in silk dupion, silk lame for the fringe of rouleaux. The strips were pressed with the seam on the edge, then cut into different lengths. A velvet collar at the top of the bag traps the streamers in place; with such arrangement, baste first before machining the velvet band on top. The velvet bag was made up first, then the decoration was fixed and, finally, the handles were attached.

**Final detail:** Beautiful Czech glass beads were attached to the end of the rouleaux. The beads add weight and cause the rouleaux to move in a lively swing.

**Handles:** The velvet handles are rouleaux too. Cut the velvet bias strips to 2½ " wide, fold in half, baste to prevent movement and machine approximately ¾" away from fold. Pad with 4 lengths of quilting wool.



Rouleaux can accent fashion, create a fantasy accessory and add surface interest to an interior textile. These intriguing bias tubes of fabric can spark a never-ending flow of ideas.

Sue's book contains lots of other ideas for using this technique as well as superb photos of her inspiration and wonderful drawings and examples of wearable art.



The tiara (detail above) was a special creation for Sue's solo show in Tokyo in 1993. It was made as an accessory to a wedding outfit. The technique was as for the 'Wired & Wonderful' amber bag, plus appliqué accents made as separate motifs and applied.

Edited by Maggie Grey, Workshop on the Web is a quarterly internet magazine with lots of articles like this one.

Do look at the free taster in [www.workshopontheweb.com](http://www.workshopontheweb.com)

