

Tumbling Blocks by Machine



BY BARBARA LENDX

Tumbling Blocks is a pattern that has long been a favorite of quiltmakers. It is a graphic display of skill and offers the opportunity to use a large inventory of fabrics.

When Tumbling Blocks moved into top position on my "to-do" list, I was not sure how to approach the challenge. Since a long car trip was not on my schedule, I knew I would not be utilizing any of the various hand-piecing techniques. I wanted to sew by machine, but I eliminated the strip-piecing methods, as I did not want a seam interrupting the visual flow of graphic fabric.

Some quiltmakers look at the Tumbling Blocks pattern and are overwhelmed by the see-in, or Y, seams that are required. Is it possible for the inexperienced to include these seams in her repertoire of skills? The answer is yes! In fact, it can be enjoyable.

Getting Started

A successful multifabric quilt consists of a basic unit that can be pieced efficiently, accurately, and quickly. The units go on the design wall where they can be evaluated, adjusted, and if necessary, discarded without anguish.

In the Tumbling Blocks pattern, the basic unit is a double Y. Five 60-degree diamonds are joined into a column-like formation. Two of those units are joined, and then two diamonds are inserted to complete the hexagon. My goal is to provide a specific piecing and pressing choreography with maximum information and visual clues that will be quick and efficient.

Supply List

3 distinct color groupings of fabric
Open-toe sewing machine foot
70/10 jeans/denim needle
1/4" wide masking tape
Rotary cutter and mat
Rotary ruler w/15-degree angle
Basic sewing supplies



Above,
Crispest Runaway Stripes!, 70" x 70", 2005, by Phyllis H. Thompson.

Left,
Tumbling Blocks, 75" x 80", c. late 1800s, maker unknown. Photo courtesy the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Lands Valley Museum, Lancaster County.

Right,
Tumbling Blocks, 75" x 77", c. 1855, maker unknown. The quilt is constructed completely of silk fabrics. The placement of lights and darks adds to the dimension and excitement of the repetitive pattern. Photo courtesy the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Lands Valley Museum, Lancaster County.



Above: **Tumbling Blocks**, 51" x 51", 2002, by Barbara Lewis

Cutting

Determine your three color categories and put your fabrics into stacks labeled A, B, and C. The three categories used in this example are white (A), blue (B), and pink (C), shown in Fig. 1. Press the fabrics well and cut into $2\frac{1}{2}$ "-wide strips.

Position a strip vertically on your cutting mat, right side up. Align the 60-degree line on your rotary ruler with the left side of the strip to establish the angle and cut (Fig. 2). Rotate the strip end to end and cut again $2\frac{1}{2}$ " from the first cut to make a diamond (Fig. 3). Cut 2 more diamonds and check the cut end to be sure the angle is 60 degrees. Cut diamonds from all the strips.



Fig. 1

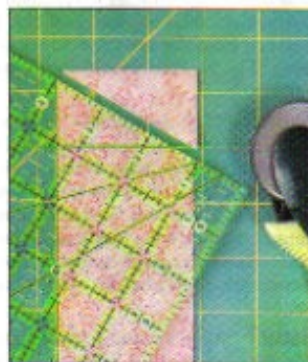


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Seam 1 Before you start, note that some of the sewing positions may seem awkward when joining patches in the correct order. Position an A diamond on top of a B diamond, right sides together, and pin. Place a small piece of the $\frac{1}{4}$ "-wide tape on the wrong side of one corner to establish the starting point. Begin stitching at the edge of the tape, taking a few stitches forward and then backstitching. Continue stitching to complete the seam (Fig. 4). Press the seam allowances toward the B diamond.

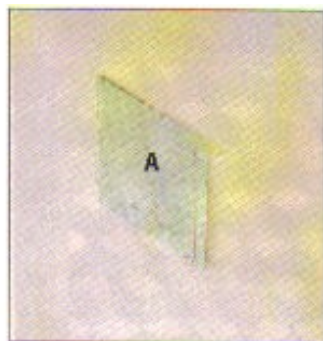


Fig. 4

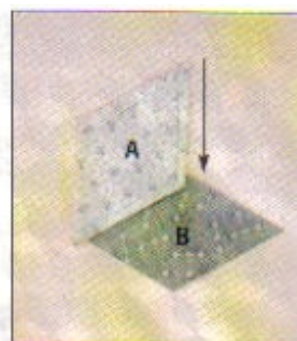


Fig. 5

Seam 2 Place a C diamond on top of the A diamond, right sides together, and pin. Flip the unit over and sew from the raw edges to the previously sewn seam. Backstitch (Fig. 5). Press the seam allowances toward the C diamond.

Seam 3 With the C diamond on top, align the inner corners of the B and C diamonds and pin the points. Sew from the raw edges to the previously sewn seam and backstitch (Fig. 6). Press the seam allowances toward the C diamond. Turn the unit right side up (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Seam 4 Position another B diamond on top of the A diamond and pin. Place a piece of tape at the corner to establish the stopping point. Sew from the outside points to the tape, backstitching at the stopping point (Fig. 8). Press the seam allowances toward the second B.

Seam 5 Align another C diamond on top of the A patch, right sides together, and pin. Flip the unit over and sew from the raw edges to the previously sewn seam (Fig. 9). Press toward the C patch just added.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Seam 6 With the second C diamond on top, match the inner corners and pin the second B and C together. Sew from the raw edges to the previously sewn seam. Backstitch (Fig. 10). Press seam allowances toward the C diamond; you now have a column unit with the central A patch lying nice and flat because all of its seam allowances are pressed away from itself (Fig. 11). Repeat steps 1-6 to make a second column unit.

Seam 7 Align 2 column units right sides together. Pin the units together at the center A/A diamond intersection. Place tape at the top and bottom of the seam to mark the starting and stopping points. Starting and stopping at the tape and backstitching at both ends, sew the seam (Fig. 12). Remove the tape and press the seam allowances open (Fig. 13), and then press from the right side (Fig. 14).

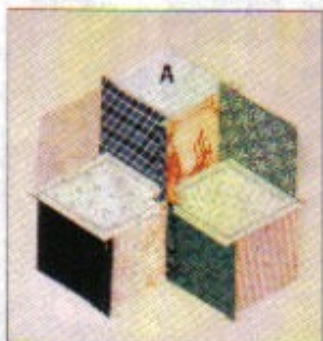


Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Inserting the Diamonds

To insert A diamond at the top of the unit, place an A patch on top of the B, right sides together. Match the corner and points and pin the patches together. Turn the unit over and sew from the raw edges to the seam line. Backstitch (Fig. 15).

Rotate the adjacent side of the A diamond to align with the neighboring C diamond. Pin the diamonds

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

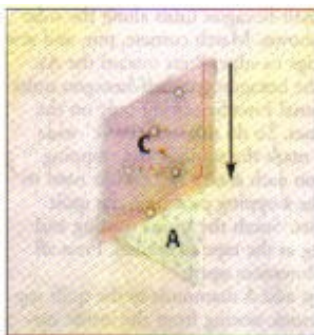


Fig. 6

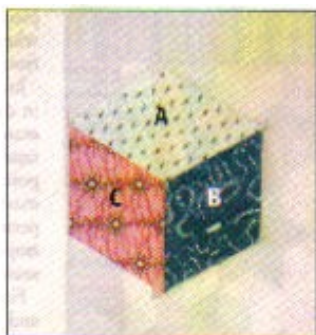


Fig. 7



Fig. 10

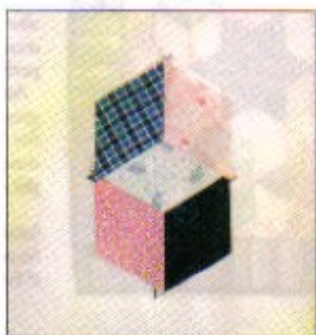


Fig. 11



Fig. 14

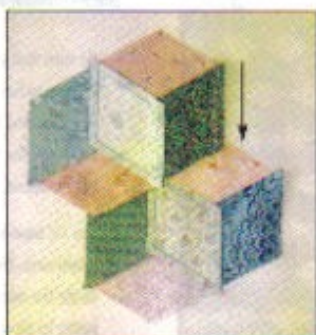


Fig. 15

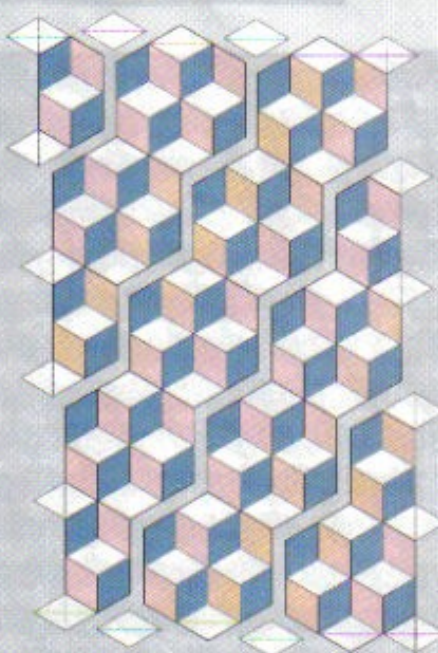
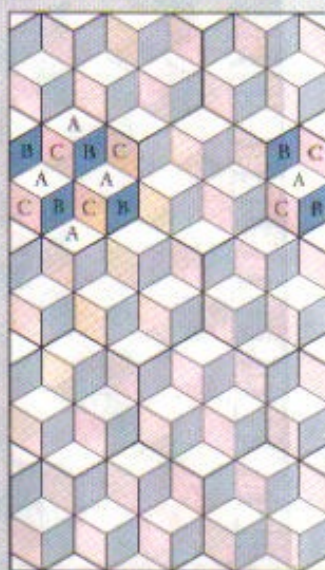
together. With the C diamond on top, sew from the raw edges to the seam line and backstitch. Press the seam allowances, one at a time, toward A (Fig. 16). Rotate the unit and add the remaining diamond A patch in the same way to complete the hexagon (Fig. 17).

Putting It All Together

Refer to the diagrams at right as you follow these steps. First isolate the pieced hexagon unit. Each row that begins with a hexagon unit will end with a half-hexagon unit. Conversely, each row that begins with a half-hexagon will end with a hexagon unit. These 2 rows alternate the length of the quilt.

Lay out the hexagon units and half-hexagon units on a design wall or large surface as shown. To fill in the gaps on the sides, add A's to the

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER



WEB
extra

You'll find a line drawing of a Tumbling Blocks quilt on our website that you can use to plan your color placements. Go to quiltersnewsletter.com/webextras and search for Tumbling Blocks by Machine.



pieced half-hexagon units along the sides where shown. Match corners, pin, and sew from edge to edge. Press toward the A's.

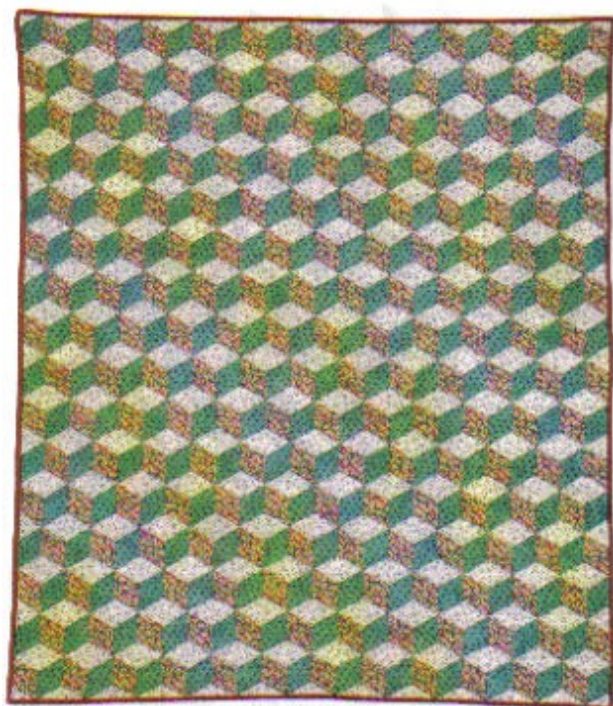
Join the hexagon and half-hexagon units in diagonal rows by sewing only on the seam lines. To do this, use the $\frac{1}{4}$ "-wide tape to mark the starting and stopping points on each seam. You do not need to mark the stopping points on the quilt perimeter. Stitch the seams starting and stopping at the tape as needed. Press all seam allowances open.

Finally, add A diamonds to the quilt top and bottom, sewing from the inside corners to the raw edges.

Trim the excess portions of the diamond A patches, working in small sections and allowing for the $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowances. To secure the edges, stitch along the quilt perimeter just in from the raw edges.

Attention to detail and practice will greatly reduce the perceived difficulty of the Tumbling Blocks pattern. Then it's time to play with your fabric and enjoy the results.

Barbara Lenox is a quilt teacher from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. See *Tumbling Block Mosaic*, a variation of this traditional block, also in this issue.



Above Top, **Citrus Stars**, 38" x 41", 2006, by Barbara Lenox.
Above, **Tumbling Blocks**, 49" x 56", 2006, by Stella Edmunds-Hull.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Be sure that your $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance is accurate. I prefer to have a guideline on the bed of my sewing machine and to use that reference line to guide the fabric. By the time the fabric gets to the foot, it is too late to adjust.
- The $\frac{1}{4}$ " tape and the end of the seam lines are your visual cues. Do not pierce the tape with the needle. While the exact end of the seam line is the target, it is better to be a stitch short than to be a stitch over.
- I use a strongly contrasting colored thread so I can see the visual cues more easily. It's easier to hit the target when you can see it. I routinely use a different thread color in the upper and lower positions.
- I recommend a 70/10 jeans/denim needle and Aurifil 50-weight thread.
- Use a presser foot that allows you to see the edge of the $\frac{1}{4}$ " tape and the end of the seam lines. Avoid a foot that has a bar that blocks your view. I use a Bernina sewing machine with the #37 Patchwork foot. ♦