

Michael Boren

by Cheryl Sharp



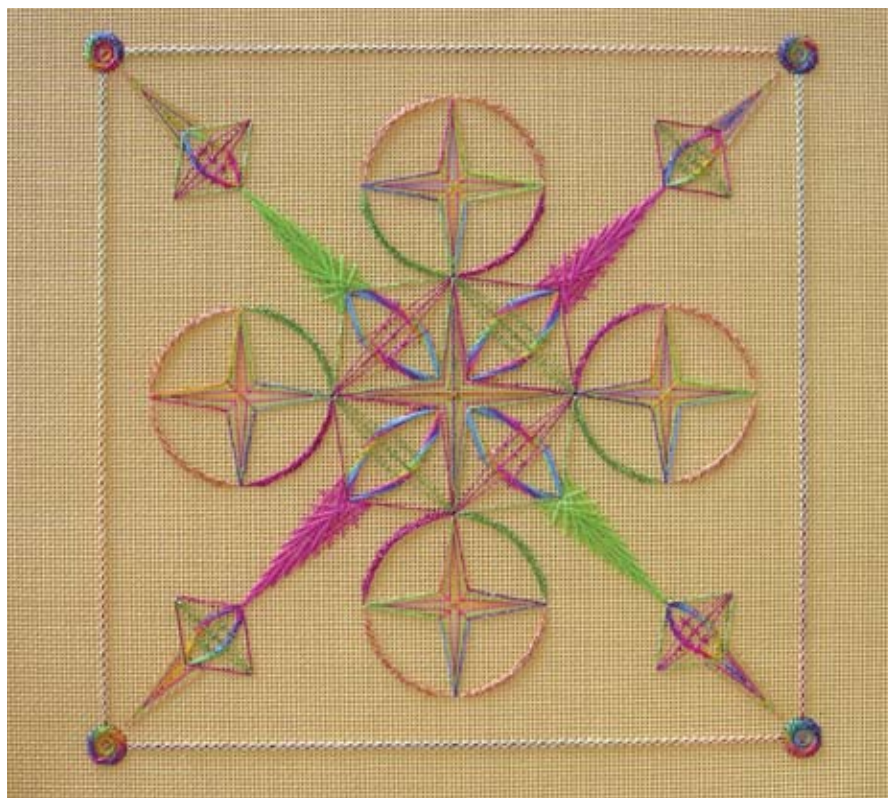
Michael Boren

Michael Boren arrived at his destination as designer and teacher of canvaswork by an unlikely path. At any point along the way, Boren might have veered from this path, and we might not have had the opportunity to study with this engaging teacher.

Boren tells the story:

I think I have always had a natural interest in the needle arts. My paternal grandmother was a wonderful quilter, crocheter, and tatter. I remember watching her work when I was a small child and I treasure all of the items that I inherited from her. She died when I was still quite young so I never had an opportunity to learn from her.

In the mid-70s, my former grandmother-in-law, who was always creating something with a needle, showed me how to do continental stitch on canvas. I worked at it irregularly for many years, moving from pre-stitched canvases to painted canvases. Some of those early pieces are reminders of how far I have come over the years.



Carnival

While he was learning to stitch, Boren was also preparing for a career in performance. He majored in music at Ohio's Oberlin College Conservatory of Music where he took master classes in flute with Jean-Pierre Rampal and James Galway. He continued in this direction with post-graduate studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, England.

Eventually, Boren realized that if he were to be a performing musician, he would probably lose his love of music. He changed direction. After returning to the United States, he attended the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Boren switched career paths yet again. He became an administrative assistant for the Joint Committee of Taxation in Congress. Stitching and cooking helped him reduce stress during his twenty-three years on Capitol Hill, although stitching was an on-again, off-again experience in his initial years there.

In the early 1980s, Boren used to take the stitching he had completed to Mary Duckworth's shop near his home in Arlington, Virginia, for blocking and finishing. He recalls, "She finally had enough of trying to block my pieces which I still worked in hand in continental stitch. She told me, 'Young man, you are going to sit in that back corner and learn how to basketweave on canvas before you leave this shop.' And, she meant it! This was a huge step forward and led to the discovery of stretcher bars, tacks, and threads other than wool."

Sue Jennings and her staff at The Needlewoman East in Falls Church, Virginia, introduced Boren to the world of charted designs. "It was not an easy transition, as I could not visualize what the chart conveyed," he comments. "I am a visual learner, and I needed to observe someone stitching what was charted and hear that person explain at the same time. They did that. I caught the bug! While I still appreciate and love a beautifully painted canvas, I am now concentrating on counted canvas designs."

Learning became a passion. Boren began seeking out opportunities to further his knowledge. And secure new opportunities he did.



Spangled Banner



American Salute

“I hope that the students will learn from me, but they will also learn from each other.”



Scheherazade

Boren attended his first meetings of the American Needlepoint Guild (ANG) and EGA in the mid-1990s. “The world of technique was opened to me,” he muses. His first workshop was with Joyce Lukomski. *Basket of Bargello* was worked with stranded cotton and silk threads. He reports:

I remember Joyce talking about stripping the threads and laying them. I’m sure my eyes glazed over as I hadn’t a clue what she was talking about. Realizing that I was lost, Joyce was generous with her time and attention. I learned from her and felt comfortable proceeding with the project. That completed project is one of the pieces that I am most proud of. I am grateful to Joyce and to other teachers who have patiently worked with me over the years. As a teacher now myself, I am mindful that none of us is born with knowledge about stitching, so I try to be patient with my students and attentive to their needs.

Upon his retirement from the Hill in 2002, Boren began to design and eventually to teach. His first design, *Scheherazade*, was printed in *needlepoint now* (July/August 2003), and Boren considers its publication a great honor.

I created the design as a result of a funny circumstance. My local ANG chapter purchased some lovely hand-made wooden boxes from a framer to resell as a fundraiser. They were originally intended to house a photograph, but we thought that the boxes would look great with needlework in them. On the spur of the moment, I spoke up and said I would design something to fit the box. Hence, my first design. The joke was on me because I did not get the measurement of the opening of the box correct, and the piece didn’t quite fit!

It took a certain amount of nerve to begin designing and teaching in charted canvas because there were a great many experienced, talented designers in the market. However, mentors such as Sue Reed, Joyce Lukomski, and Carole Lake, and good friends supported and encouraged him in his efforts.

In 2003, Boren moved to the Shenandoah Valley, near the town of Lexington, Virginia. He became vice president of programs of a newly-formed ANG chapter in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where he accepted an opportunity to teach. “My father was a university professor, and I knew he loved teaching,” Boren says. “I think I wanted to know why. This was a real reach for me because I have always disliked speaking in public. It is one thing to get on a stage and perform a concerto in front of an audience as you can immerse yourself in the music and forget the presence of the audience. To me, it is a very different thing to speak in front of an audience of any size, control the attention of the room, and convey a message.”

Boren soon took to teaching, however. “I love the direct connection with other stitchers, with students, that you get in a live classroom setting,” he comments.

I am there not only to share a design of mine, tips on stitching technique, but to instill in each student a love of the needle arts and a desire to continue to explore the world of needle art. I hope that the students will learn from me, but they will also learn from each other. I am a part of that experience, too. Through teaching, I am not only sharing my love of the needle but am saying a big thank you to all of the great teachers with whom I have studied and continue to study today. This is a legacy that must be passed on!

Boren’s work reveals an affinity for structure and organization. He attributes this attraction to a combination of factors: the discipline that comes with the intensive study of music, his work experiences as a librarian and an administrator, and the love of needlework that he inherited from his grandmother. Boren focuses on canvas because of the structure and order the canvas provides. It is both comfortable and comforting.

“I am drawn to traditional quilt designs which are geometrically constructed,” Boren says. “I have carried over those structures to my designs on canvas.



Daphne Reborn: Olive Grove, one of several colorways



Arabella Reborn, one of several colorways



Color Tiles I



Oasis I

My teaching pieces, which have a similar grid layout, are very much quilt-inspired. These designs provide the stitcher with an excellent way of sampling a variety of traditional and non-traditional canvaswork stitches. Students also will see the different look that can be achieved by working a common stitch with differently textured and colored threads.” The *Color Tiles* series is a good case in point. “This series of three designs is as much about playing with color and threads as it is about stitching. The idea is to move the tiles around and create your own color layout.”

Boren almost always offers his designs in multiple colorways. “Each person has his or her own color sense, and as a designer and teacher I do not want to alienate a potential student who does not like a particular set of colors,” Boren explains. “Besides, I love to play with color and threads, and it is interesting to see how a common design can appear differently with a change of colors.”

Boren finds inspiration in any number of things. He describes the view from his house near Lexington as a constant source of inspiration:

Our house sits on a hill overlooking a bucolic valley of farmland with a herd of cows in the foreground. Beyond this valley rise the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, the oldest mountain range on planet Earth. From our front porch, we can glimpse the Blue Ridge Parkway as it wends its way along the spine of the mountains. This is an ever-changing vista—one of light and shadow and myriad colors at every season. How could one not be inspired by such an abundance of the beauty of nature?! The colors of nature inspire the use of and play of color in my designs.

Boren states that he is often influenced by shapes and colors, either in nature or in something created by humans. Magazines, museum catalogs, and books provide Boren with good sources of design inspiration. Even thread is inspirational. “On several occasions I have been inspired to create a new design to celebrate the beauty of a thread which is new to the market,” he notes.

“The Muse of Creativity works in mysterious ways and cannot be hurried,” Boren finds. So he does not design against deadlines. Doing so would stifle his creativity and freedom of expression.

Boren claims that he is a work-in-progress designer and teacher. For him, that is the way it should be. When designing a piece, he often draws the outline on graph paper. He may then draw the outline on the canvas or work the concept as a completely counted piece. “I always have a color palette of threads at the ready,” he explains. “If I am not sure about what I want to do in a particular area, I will use #12 pearl cotton to try options on the working canvas—assuming I am working on 18-mono canvas. Once I

have settled on a stitch, I decide on the texture and color of the thread or threads for the particular stitch. I then draw the stitch diagram on graph paper and write the instructions for same in a Word document.”

“For me, designing is a means to an end—that is to get into the classroom setting and share with others the joys of the needle that have been and continue to be passed on to me by my more experienced colleagues. The day we lose our desire to learn and have new experiences might as well be recorded as the day we died.”

Boren values students and his time with them. “I have been told by students that I have incredible patience when I teach. I pride myself on that. I have this quality because of my career and a variety of life experiences. Most importantly to me, to display a lack of patience in the classroom, especially with a struggling student, would likely result in that person being turned off to stitching entirely. What a shame that would be!”

Boren advises beginners not to be afraid to try new things. “Step outside your usual zone of comfort whenever you can,” he encourages. “Never be afraid to ask a question. The only stupid questions are the ones that don’t get asked. Be patient with yourself. We learn in different ways and at different speeds. Remember that canvas work is supposed to be fun! Take classes when you can. You will learn from both the teacher and your fellow students. I don’t think any of us was born with a needle in our hand.”

Boren helps students find their personal comfort level and takes great pleasure in assisting a student in “getting to an aha moment. “The truth is that none of us stitches at our best level in a classroom,” Boren comments. “It is not our home setting, and we put pressure on ourselves to perform. I strive to avoid adding additional pressure on students, so they can relax and enjoy the experience of stitching with me.” Boren found that same quality in the teachers who mentored him. “I hope that my efforts to share the love of the needle will help keep the needlearts alive and well for future generations.” ■

Cheryl Sharp *See contributor’s note page 9.*

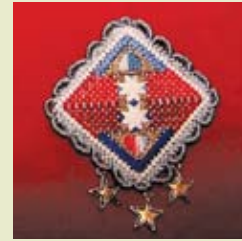
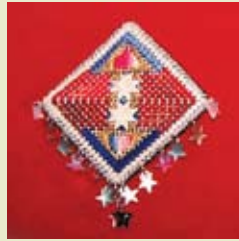
To order the DAA project designed by Michael Boren, see page 18.



Frankie was inspired by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. It is stitched almost entirely with #12 pearl cotton to keep the texture very light, like a stained glass window.



Starry, Starry Night pays homage to both Vincent Van Gogh and his Starry, Starry Night and to Don McLeon and his song "Starry, Starry Night" which in turn honors Vincent Van Gogh.



9/11 REMEMBRANCE PIN designed by Michael Boren

The events of September 11, 2001 forever changed our lives and the way we look at ourselves as Americans. We will never forget those who were lost: family, friends and strangers alike. What better way to remember them and their sacrifice than with a needle and thread. This design is dedicated to the memory of the victims of 9/11.

The design is a tessellation, a shape, a cell, that repeats to fill a surface without leaving any gaps or overlaps. The design, worked on 18-mono canvas, uses hand-dyed silk flosses from Victoria Clayton with Kreinik braid as an accent.

To receive a copy of the instructions, send a check for \$5 payable to EGA, to Designers Across America, EGA, 1355 Bardstown Road, Suite 157, Louisville, KY 40204. Please provide the address to where the instructions should be sent. This pattern is available until June 1, 2010. Orders received thereafter will be returned. Previous designs from the Designers Across America series are no longer available.



FROM *The Embroiderers' Guild of America*

The Heart of the Shenandoah Dedicated to Your Heart

is designed by Michele Chavez with instructions by Lucy Edmison. Stitched on linen twill with Appleton wools, the finished piece is 6" x 6". It will look beautiful framed or in a presentation box.

A portion of the proceeds benefit the American Heart Association's women's heart health research.

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