

Finding GOOD Designs

A Platinum Embroidery Article by Carol Hoak

It sure can get confusing, facing so many ads for embroidery designs. We often don't know where to begin! We all want designs of excellent quality that we can rely on. But there are just so many sites out there! How can we know which ones will provide consistent, well digitized designs?

First, we need to realize what makes a really good design. Basically, most software programs today provide 2 ways of creating a design. One is an "automatic" feature, where the program looks for definable areas in a graphic, and fills those areas with stitches. It is quick, but seldom produces a quality design. Why? Because even the most expensive, elaborate program out there cannot "see" what a trained designer can see, therefore, creating a design that has no heart, no feelings and no imagination. Kind of like going to the grocery store, and purchasing a can of soup versus creating your own pot of soup at home from your choice of fresh ingredients, simmered all day, filling the house with the wonderful aroma of home made love.

The other way to create a design is when the designer looks at the art, plans the way to build it, considers the order of the elements, the angle of the stitches, the underlay required to maintain the shape and integrity of the design, and how to create the design with the least number of thread changes and long jump stitches. The designer tries different effects to obtain the best results, and often test stitches the design at various stages, to be sure everything is working as a whole. Much as a chef tastes the soup at each stage of the cooking. This is what is often referred to as "manual digitizing" or maybe "manual punch"

Ok – it sounds like I'm pretty biased, doesn't it? You would be right! And all of the Platinum Designers agree – no matter how expensive the software is, there is just no comparison between auto-punch and manual punched designs. And all the designs you find at Platinum Embroidery and at each of our sites are all manually digitized.

Why is this a big deal? Well, first of all, manually digitized designs take longer, so we are not able to create a new collection every day. We all choose to spend the time both digitizing for the best results, and also testing our designs for proper stitchout. We will make adjustments and corrections, and test again until we are pleased with the results, so that you will also be pleased with the results when you stitch our designs.

We thought maybe it was easier to just show you what we mean. Here are 2 versions of the same art work, one manually digitized, and the other auto-digitized.



They both look like they would be decent designs – right? Both of these were done by Teri Sullivan specifically for this article. She did one using auto-digitizing features of one of her programs, and the other she manually designed, just as she would approach any design she was creating. There are some differences that you can easily spot, like how the water is

handled. The Auto-digi design looks at the water as just an area of blue to be filled, just like any other area. But in the manually created design, Teri changed the density of the area, and used other effects so that as you look at our happy hippo, it is much clearer that he is enjoying a swim!

But if you start looking closely at the details of the design, you will start to see many other differences between the two. Here are a few things to look for:

One of the first things I noticed is the way the design is layered, or built. Different programs will approach the art in different ways, but basically, auto-digitizing programs cannot consider what the items are, and how they relate. A well thought out design should be layered with background items first, and building up to the foreground things to be stitched last. In the Auto version, the first thing the program did was the toenails. But toenails should be on top of the flesh on the feet, not peeking out from 'holes' in the fill of the legs!

Another thing that will become obvious to you when you stitch the designs and compare them is fill angle and type. Many Auto features will assign the same fill angle to every block of stitches, giving you a flat and lifeless design. The design that has a designer's eye will have different stitch angles that follow the character of the block, and provide additional depth and dimension, as the light reflects on the different thread angles.

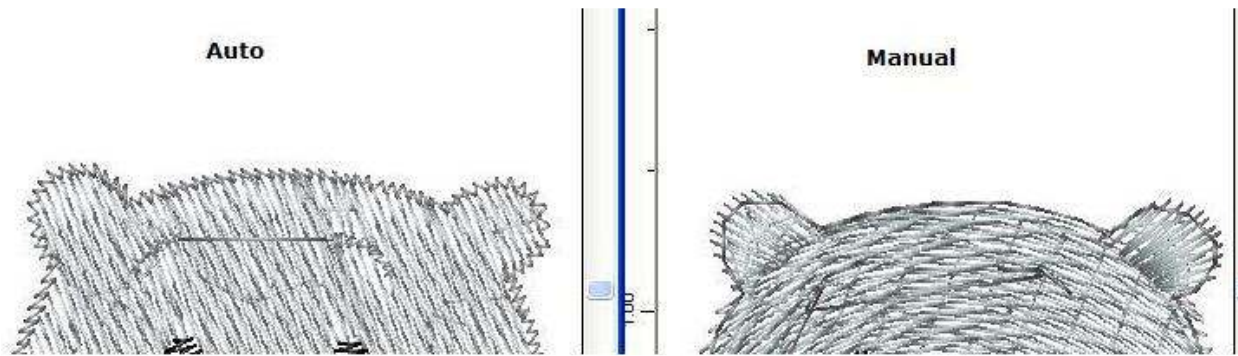
Auto-digitized



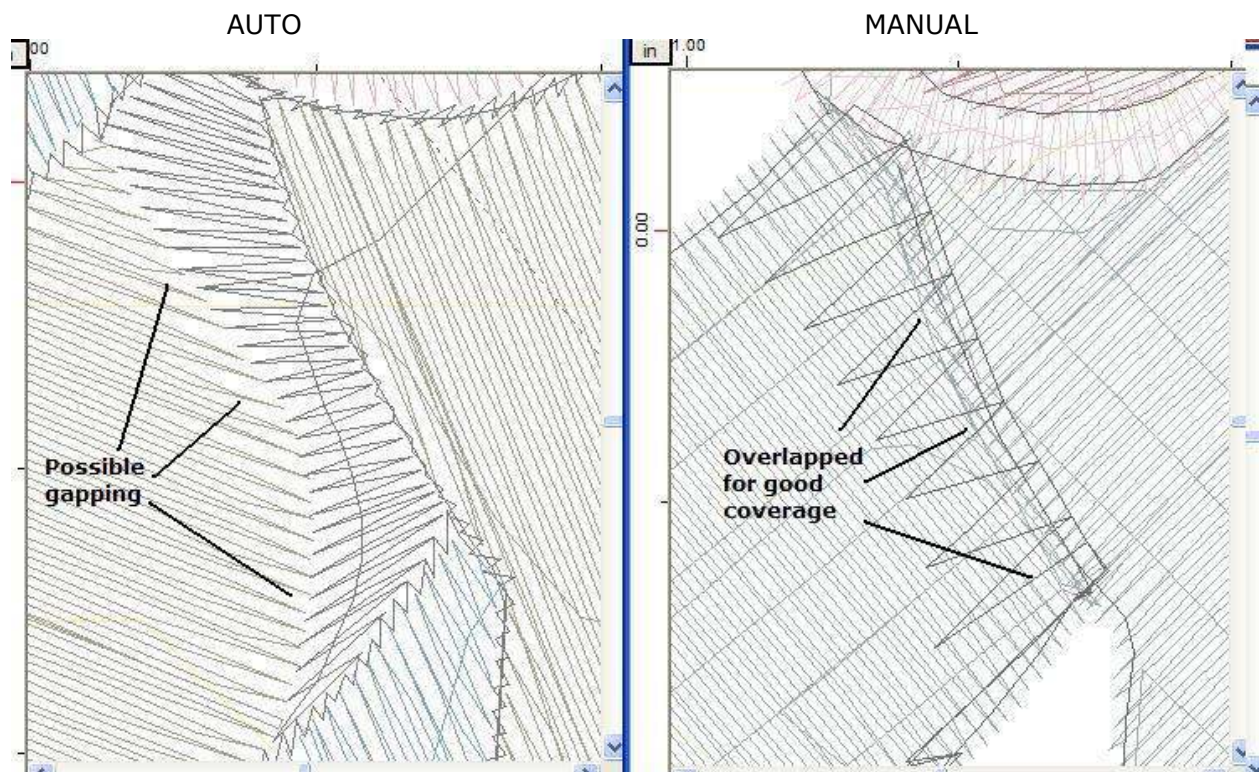
Manually Punched



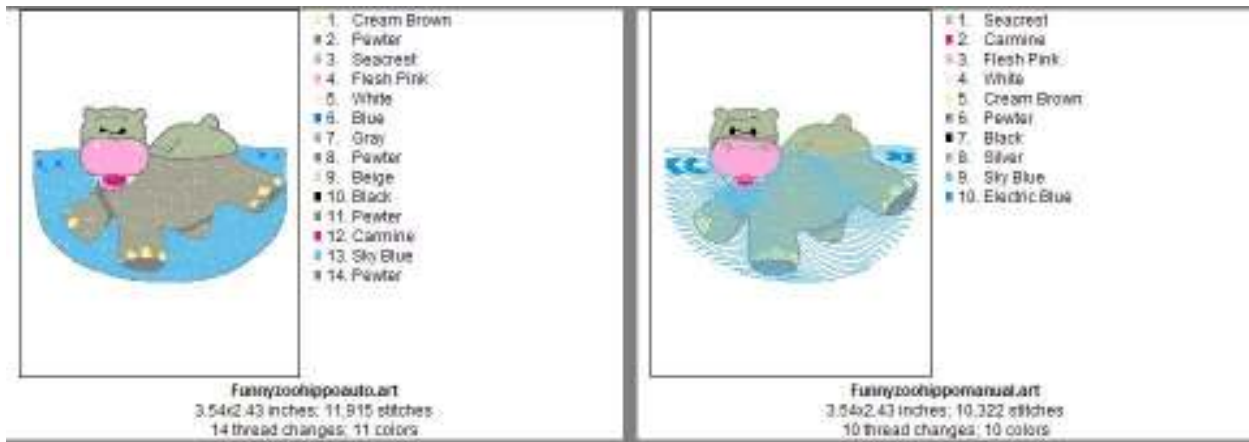
Look at the ears. The Auto version has the face and ears as one big block of identical stitches. But the Designer version shows the ears with a different angle, and a different stitch type, so they will actually look like ears, not a lumpy head!



Another difference that you can see by zooming in on the design is the Auto-digi version often has spots where the adjacent blocks have no overlap. Sure – it looks ok on the screen, but when you actually stitch the designs, these places can become gaps. In this picture, you can also see the difference between auto-digi interpreting a shading section as a solid block of a different color vs. the designer, who creates a more natural looking shadowed effect with a light fill of varying depth.



One more obvious difference between the two versions of the design is how the thread changes are handled. The auto design has 14 thread changes, but 11 colors. The manual design has 10 colors, and 10 thread changes. As a side note, you can also see that the stitch count is close between the 2 designs. But the manually created design has much better underlay, to maintain the integrity of the design when it is stitched.



So how can you know which designs to buy? Well, this is not the easy part. As you can see from the pictures above, just looking at a web site will not always tell you how the design was created, or what the quality will be. Also, there is a lot of confusion about what really qualifies a design to be called 'manual punched'. Some digitizers use the term without fully understanding what it means, or where it came from. It goes back to the days of embroidery by machine before the computer programs existed, and designs were created on a huge 'punch' board, one stitch at a time. There was no 'editing' – one mistake could cause you to have to go back to the beginning and start over!

We could provide a check list of things to watch for, but even that is not always a sure thing. An example of that would be the number of thread changes and thread colors, as discussed on our hippo design. Generally, a designer will try to group all areas of the design that will use the same color of thread, so that the number of thread changes is lower. But occasionally, the desired effect needs a color to be used at different times in the stitching process. The same thing with jump stitches. A talented designer will make every attempt to flow through the design and connect areas with running stitches, and avoid excess jump stitches. But sometimes, the correct depth of vision in a design will result in details being added later, and there will be jump stitches required.

One more very important part of a good design is the testing process. Again, just because it looks good on the screen, does not mean it will stitch well. As a designer gains experience over many years, and thousands of designs, problem areas are anticipated and avoided. But just like that pot of soup mentioned in the beginning, the real proof is in the tasting. Looking pretty in the pot doesn't always mean it will taste good! So the good cook samples the soup, just as the good designer tests the design, makes adjustments, and 'tastes' it again and again until it is right!

We hope you now know just a little more now about how designs you can rely upon are created, and some of the things to look for. Bookmark your favorite sites, where you have gotten tried and true designs, and where you will receive good customer service after your purchase as well.