

full of JOY

by Kay Faye Fialkoff

Nature provides a path for reflection and inspiration. Kay skillfully conveys her love and in-depth study of wildlife in her embroidery.

For me, the biggest challenge in embroidery is finding subject matter that can be captivating, inspiring for a long time. If I succeed, then the process of bringing the work to fruition is a happy one. So I take a great deal of care in choosing the elements of my composition.

After composing *Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suite No. 1*, (see “Full of Joy: A Meadow Inspires a Prayer for the Earth,” September 2002 *Needle Arts*), I began to explore how I might portray the meadow in a second suite. The first suite depicted the meadow’s expanse. How might I portray the next one?

An early morning walk along the winding trail at the Allendale Celery Farm Nature Area surprised me with a fundamental idea. A former New Jersey farm founded in the 1800s, the preserve contains over a hundred acres of woods, meadow, and wetland; twisting trails lead through all three habitats. Usually I enter the preserve over a footbridge that crosses a narrow canal to make my way to an observation deck nearby. I like to scan the wetland for egrets, cormorants, swans, and bay ducks. From there, I take the trail back around the wetland to two other observation decks.

But that morning I made my way straight through the woods that led to the meadow. The trail was clear, hardly a chipmunk stirred. The Gray Catbirds were in their usual places foraging for insects in the dense forest vegetation. One flew to a low hanging branch and made its distinctive *meow* call.

The path opened up onto swaths of purple loosestrife and cattail as I headed toward the meadow. Tall primrose clustered between the loosestrife and joe-pye weed. Looking over the meadow to see what else was in bloom, the corner of my eye caught sight of a bright yellow American Goldfinch landing on a primrose.

It was a surprise appearance. There were no other goldfinches flying across the meadow in their roller-coaster fashion with their resonate calls echoing across the sky to catch my attention. The goldfinch arrived silently—no lively trills, twitters, nor *per-chik-o-ree* calls.

Hurriedly, the finch grasped the tall stem with its claws, angled its body upward, and fed voraciously on the yellow flower petals. The yellow against yellow penetrated my consciousness and didn’t let go. That image was the key to developing my next meadowlands suite.

Another visit to the farm gave me a clue to the choice of subject matter. Field bindweed and its relative, the morning glory, were in magnificent bloom. I drew closer to the morning-glory vines, enticed by their helter-skelter growth patterns. Despite all of the tangle, the flowers found their way to the sun in all their glory. I kept a mental image of that array in that walk in the meadow.

One needs patience for inspiration to continue to unfold. A trip to Lyndhurst, New Jersey’s DeKorte Park, provided for the unfolding. The park, a former garbage dump, is a thriving habitat with the New York City

A Glorious Morning in the Meadow

skyline in the background. There is no direct access to it from the highway. A local road, passing through an industrial park, directly connects to the park.

Driving down that road, I was anxiously looking forward to walking the mile-long boardwalk trail along the marshes. Strategically placed bird blinds could offer some stunning sights. But my head turned in another direction as my car headed down the road to the park's entrance. Acres and acres of wild sunflowers swayed in the wind. Songbirds flew in and out of the dense plantings. My heart sang a glorious song of joy. I had found another element for my composition.

Time and opportunity to draw the wild sunflowers and morning glory from life were at a premium. Because of my professional and household responsibilities, I could put the seasons on hold but couldn't change the reality. So I did the most rational thing possible. In the fall, I planted wild sunflower seeds directly in the front of my house in a welcoming southern exposure. In the spring, on the west side, I planted morning-glory seeds in a large pot with a few stakes.

Happily, the plants grew well. By the end of the summer, the sunflowers developed many flower heads! Numerous goldfinches visited them regularly. When some of the flower heads went to seed, the finches brought their fledglings with them. It's a joyful experience to watch the adults feed the young as their wings flutter, their mouths gaping wide open begging for food. Looking out my window, I had a wonderful

opportunity to study goldfinch behavior, their poses, the play of light on their feathers, and familial interaction.

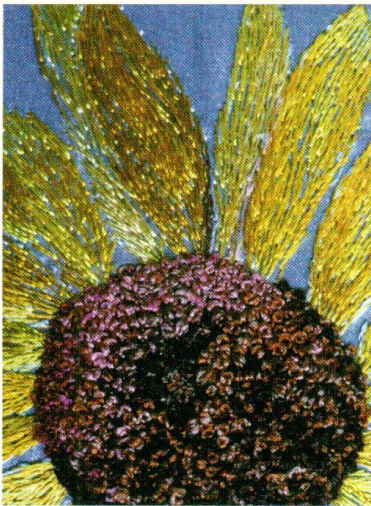
In the early evening I took my large graph paper pad out to the sunflower plantings, chose an interesting growth pattern, and drew very carefully within a pre-drawn 15-inch diameter circle. It took several "sittings" before I got the sketch right.

The morning glory grew rapidly creating interesting twists and turns on the stakes. Their morning blossoms brought a smile to my face and warmth to my heart as I passed them on my way to daily errands. When the plant had a reasonable amount of growth, I brought the pot into my house, put it on my kitchen table, and drew the morning glory. It was challenging to decide what to include and what to leave out to make the design work on paper.

To create a strong overall design, I enlisted the spiral as the underlying dynamic. It would create a strong sense of motion. Combining the two drawings to make one

The second piece of the Full of Joy needlework series is shown below. Details also appear in this essay.





Details of the morning glory and sunflower show Kay's thoughtful choices of colors and stitches.

composition established an excellent sense of moving through space. Going with the dynamic, the goldfinch's pose had to enhance and capitalize on that movement. I decided on an opening pose with the breast feathers fully exposed.

There was one problem. My goldfinch observations didn't include enough visual

information for me to be able to render the underside of the bird properly. I called around to the few local museums that had bird collections to see if there was a male American Goldfinch specimen among the lot. No luck there.

Fortunately, a local newspaper profiled Princeton University Biology Lab's bird specimen program. It reported that the lab placed specimens on loan for educational purposes. With hope in my heart, I contact-

ed the curator to request a male goldfinch study skin. To my delight, my request was granted.

The two most challenging aspects of *Suite No. 2* were rendering the sunflower disc's florets and the goldfinch feathers with a certain amount of realism. The sunflower's florets eventually yield the seeds arranged in a double spiral on the platform. It confounded me for the longest time as to what stitch to use

and how to work with color mixing of the threads. My local library's enormous embroidery book collection didn't yield any solutions.

Finally, I put myself in front of a flower head and studied it. The disc florets were in different stages of bloom and, therefore, varied in height and texture accordingly. Letting that information mull around in me for a while, a solution materialized. I would use French knots of multiple threads according to the flowering process—go from single thread to four threads. To be true to the sunflower's geometry, each French knot was inserted along a spiral line. With careful consideration as to color, the idea worked!

The goldfinch specimen from Princeton arrived in a small box, stuffed with shredded paper, wrapped in bubble wrap. To my delight, one wing was outstretched—just the reference I needed! Stuffed with cotton, the specimen's flattened body was a shadow of its live counterpart. Its left breast carried a wound made visible by bloodstained feathers.

What the specimen revealed gave me inspiration as to how to approach the embroidery. The goldfinch's golden feathers lay on top of gray and dark gray ones! That was information enough—I would embroider the feathers in multi-layered colors. The eye's ability to mix color *à la pointillism* would then do its work!

While embroidering the goldfinch, I kept the specimen nearby and referred to it often. When I held it in my hand, I told the specimen that it was beautiful and that its soul was blessed. In my mind's eye, I animated it from my field observations. I happily recalled the goldfinch's energetic flight and agile balancing in precarious places. Its song rang in my ears. I could recall the rapture of it all.

Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suite No. 2, מלא שמחה Full of Joy. It is 15 inches in diameter and worked with rayon thread on silk fabric. Color mixing was accomplished by thread layering and side-by-side thread placement. The work took approximately one-and-a-half happy years to embroider.



Kay Faye Fialkoff lives in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. She is a member of the Bergen County Chapter. She is still working on embroidering *Meadowlands Suite No. 3* and is researching motifs for *Suite No. 4*.