

# Full of Life: The Forest Understory and Verdant Rhapsody

by Kay Faye Fialkoff

I had a lot  
to consider.



Detail from Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #1. Full of Life: The Forest Understory by Kay Faye Fialkoff

While still at work on *Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suites*, I began designing the *Woodlands Suites*. The first suite, what became *Full of Life: The Forest Understory*, would be the set piece, so I had a lot to consider. I let my mind wander through some past woodland experiences, searching for vivid ones.

I remembered three events in particular. One was a morning hike with my daughter on a trail in the Ramapo Mountain Reservation of northern New Jersey. We noticed a waterfall down a steep slope off the path. I also recalled an early morning drive into northwest New Jersey to visit a woodland preserve before the start of my workday. Roadwork and traffic delays cut into my time for a long hike. So, I took a short walk into the forest. Graceful dogwood branches arched over a stream. Finally, I remembered an occasion when I held out some seed and a black-capped chickadee flew to my hand, gripped a finger with its sharp claws, plucked a seed, and then flew into a hedge. To this day, I still feel those sharp claws, hear the flutter of its wings as it flew away, and feel the air quicken around my face as it flew off.

The forest spoke to me on each of these occasions. *The Forest Understory* would become two dogwood branches near the top of the circle and a black-capped chickadee perched on a sapling beech tree branch in the lower left. All things considered, these motifs were fairly straightforward to design.



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To compose the waterfall, I had to do some research. I browsed through *The Techniques of Japanese Embroidery* by Shuji Tamura. I was captivated by a sake vessel topped with splashing turbulent waves, overflowing like a hanging waterfall into a whirl of swirling liquid.

My research led me to draw a delicate flow of water on and over a small ridge with no space behind it. The delicate flow paused on the small ridge. I felt the energy of the water intensify as I drew more. I was in the zone.

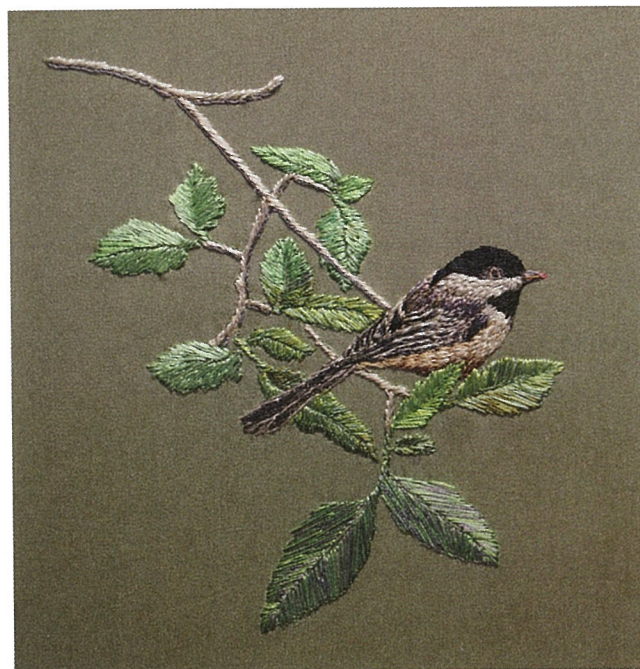
Years later, after completing another series, I began embroidering. Little by little the stitches brought to life the dogwood, the black-capped chickadee, the light gray beech bark, and ebony spleenwort fronds.

How was I going to embroider the rocks? I searched through all of my embroidery books on stitches and techniques and came up empty-handed. Then I thumbed through *Threads of Light: Chinese Embroidery from Suzhou and the Photography of Robert Glenn Ketchum. Rock in Lake with Fog* caught my attention. To find out more about the stitches, I travelled to Connecticut to view Ketchum's exhibited works. During his gallery talk and our conversation, Ketchum explained which embroidery techniques were used to interpret his photographs.

I was especially drawn to *Eagle's View of Winter Mountain*, a two-sided embroidered masterpiece that interprets the photographic gray scale of his black and white photograph. I learned that fine gradations of thickness of silk threads, dyed in twelve colors including silver, as well as sewn strands, convey a sense of distance. I tucked all of that information away, not knowing how I would eventually bring it into play in my work.

I researched Ramapo Mountains geology. I learned about Bear Swamp Brook Falls where gneiss and granite prevail with a plethora of mosses. I studied several books on mosses and was enlightened by Robin Kimmerer's *Gathering Moss*.

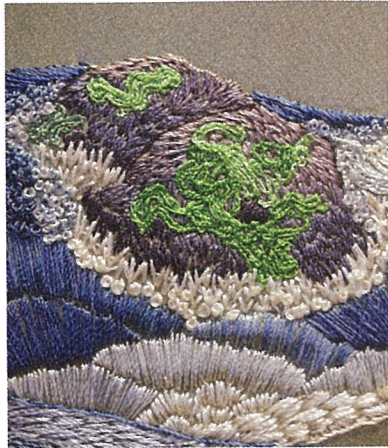
Then I read Katherine Govier's *The Printmaker's Daughter* and learned a great deal about Katsushika Hokusai's personal and professional life. I found an abundance of his waterfall prints in *Hokusai: Prints and Drawings* by Matthi Forrerr. I was especially drawn to



Detail from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #1. Full of Life: The Forest Understory* by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Detail of dogwood branch from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #1. Full of Life: The Forest Understory* by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Detail from Prayers for the Earth:  
Woodlands Suite #2. Full of Life:  
Verdant Rhapsody by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #2. Full of Life:  
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*Waterfall at Mount Kurokami in Shimotsake* from the series *Going the Round of the Waterfalls in All Provinces (Shokoku Toki Meguri)* published in 1832 by Nishimuraya Yohachi (Eijūdō). I immersed myself in the work, carefully studying its color and form.

Knowing that the best way to understand a masterwork is to experience it firsthand, I traced the outline of the Mount Kurokami waterfall and decided to make a crayon study. Before putting crayon to paper, I went to my safe place. I visualized Master Hokusai standing beside me and only then put crayon to paper. Finally, I could plan the waterfall's form and color, and the number of threads in the needle.

I thought about how grueling it was to embroider the tiny ebony spleenwort's leaflets—how concentrated the work was peering through eyeglasses and a magnifying glass to the point where I was overcome with nausea. I realized how much more torturous it was to pair threads, color mixing to meet the demands of color theory. My brain ached from the challenge. It took more than fifty pairings of thread to embroider the waterfall, rocks, and mosses until the work came alive.

With the last stitch made on the Fourth of July, there was a lot to celebrate—not just the work itself, but also how much my spirit had been enriched by the journey. *Full of Life: The Forest Understory* gathers not only the wisdom of the forest, but the wisdom of the planet—in the granite that formed more than half a billion years ago; in the mosses and ferns that came after chlorophyll-producing plants came out of the ocean and settled on rocks long before the continents had formed; in the first birds that came more than 200,000,000 years later and then flowering plants after another 100,000,000 years.

While in the early stages of embroidering *Verdant Rhapsody*, friends visited me from out-of-town. To refresh them after their long drive, I took them to the Saddle River County Park to enjoy the silver maple and slippery elm trees and a waterfall. We filled ourselves with the preserve's life-giving energy.

Later, alone with my thoughts, I found myself in a conundrum. I had partially embroidered a chickadee and elm motifs. How was I going to bring off the rest?

I surveyed my green thread collection to plan the silver maple leaf palette. What I felt in my heart couldn't be accomplished using threads directly off the spool. So, I referred to my earlier study for an elm leaf palette of sixteen pairings of two and three threads taped in rows on two sheets of paper. I chose three pairings.

Expanding on these three, I used value and chroma processes and the Pantone number system, pairing more threads and taping them in rows on a sheet of paper.

With so much to choose from, how would I make the final selection? Then it came to me. My fingers pressed on the threads as though they were piano keys. They *played the notes* as one would play a chord—choosing the color sequence for me!

And so it went for a whole year, stitch by stitch with an ever-expanding palette to work leaves and branches.

For the water feature, I focused on the granite rock, Pompton Pink, which is still quarried in New Jersey and dates back 960 to 1,000 million years. Poised at the top of the falls, the rock is in a unique position. Choosing tints, not shades, to maintain its subdued prominence was paramount. The planes on the rock face would be a balanced schema of pinks, green mottling, and mosses.

Recalling memorable hikes and walking the local area helped me formulate the color scheme at the top of the falls. I let the river speak to me.

I reworked the flows on my design many times, did color studies with colored pencils on paper, and developed a small palette. I imagined playing musical intervals on piano keys to decide color placement.

With the water completely embroidered, the palette for the four small rocks evolved to communicate greater available light as the eye moves from left to right.

The Hebrew words at the top of the design mean "full of life." A verdant rhapsody is a grand celebration of the fullness of life. So, I offer *Full of Life: A Verdant Rhapsody* to fill spirits with a gentle stillness and peace. ■

**Kay Faye Fialkoff** lives in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. She is a member of EGA's Bergen Chapter.



Detail from Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #2. Full of Life: Verdant Rhapsody by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Detail of Pompton pink granite and moss from Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #2. Full of Life: Verdant Rhapsody by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Detail of silver maple leaves from Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite #2. Full of Life: Verdant Rhapsody by Kay Faye Fialkoff