

Elfis Has Entered the Building

<jensoriginalsembroiderydesigns.yolasite.com>

Posted 2023 September 22

Ever since my sister started playing the Elf-on-the-Shelf game with her little grandson, she's very attuned to all things elf, so when she spied my little knee-hugger ornament on my other sister's tree, she immediately requested a version of her own.



Naturally I was happy to oblige, but she had a couple of specific requests. The elf should be somewhat larger (around 10"-11" tall) and he needed to be wired: a challenge.

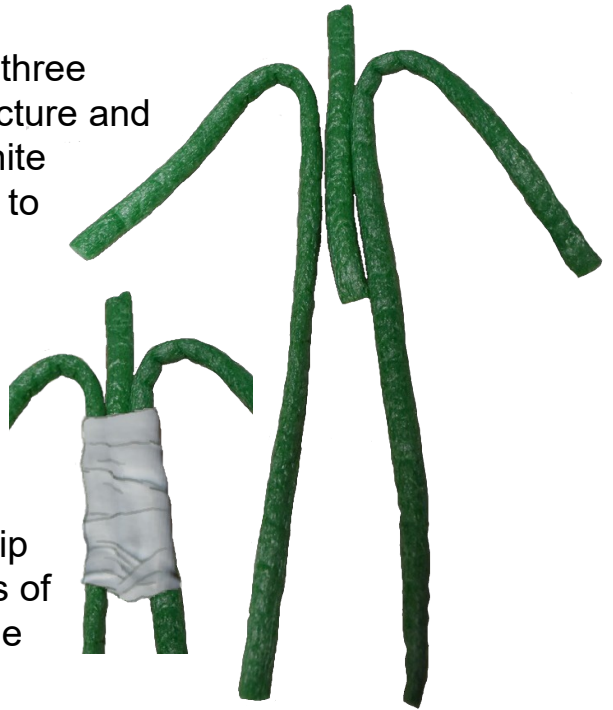
Although I've been designing and sewing soft toys and dolls all my life, and I've made small poseable figures out of chenille stems, I'd never worked with a wire armature in a figure this size, and I was somewhat daunted by the prospect. There's a first time for everything, though, so I embraced the challenge.

My first problem was to figure out what kind of wire to use. It must be flexible enough to bend readily, but stiff enough to hold a pose. I considered several options, but none seemed right: hanger wire is nice and sturdy but much too stiff; chenille stems are far too soft; my usual craft wire, even twisted for strength, would be difficult to pad out without unsightly lumps.

Then my brother suggested this foam-wrapped wire plant tie that he found at the dollar store. It seemed a good solution for my first try at making a poseable wired figure in the correct size, so I went with that. Now to make the armature and build the figure.



To make the armature/skeleton, I cut three strips of wire: two for the arm/leg structure and a third to form the spine, and used white hockey tape (a very sticky cloth tape) to bind the three together around the centre.



To keep the wire from poking through the toy's skin, and also to keep it from being pulled back inside the foam tubes, I used pliers to bend the tip of the wire over the ends of the foam at the tips of the legs and the arms.



Then my plan was to wrap the entire skeleton in the white tape, so that there would be no danger of the green foam showing through the elf's skin.

I really wanted my wired elf to have poseable fingers, so I made an articulated hand using old-fashioned cotton pipe cleaners. Since they have their own padding and are already white, I wouldn't need to wrap them. I just taped the formed hands to the ends of the



arms and continued wrapping the arms with the tape. The hands look great, even if a little scary and mummy-like!



Once the legs were wrapped, my plan was to cover the figure with a fabric skin. But the hands presented a problem.

My preference when working with fabric has always been to sew it rather than use glue, so that was my initial go-to plan: I intended to sew a fabric skin as I have always done with my toys, then fit the armature into it.

But I came to grief over those articulated fingers. I tried several times, with different skin fabrics, to sew and turn a hand; this one is the best result I had, since none of the others survived the process of turning the little fingers right side out. But this looked baggy and unattractive when I placed the hand armature inside: I wasn't happy.



Those teeny fingers had me flummoxed for weeks while I ruminated on the problem. As long as I held to the idea of sewing a skin for my elf, I couldn't see a viable solution; every option I tried ended in frustration.

Finally, I revisited an idea I'd tried way back in the 1970s, when I'd made dollhouse-sized figures by gluing a felt skin onto pipecleaner skeletons. Unfortunately, the glue I used back then stiffened the figures so much that they couldn't easily be posed, and if you forced the limbs to bend, the glued seams tended to burst and the skins work loose.

For these reasons I'd been resisting this obvious solution. But after weeks of being stymied, I decided to take a run at it, this time with a kind of glue that wasn't available 45 years ago when I made my little pipecleaner figures. I dug out my bottle of Aleene's flexible fabric glue and some wool felt (not acrylic).



For each hand, I cut five small felt rectangles and trimmed the corners on an angle. One by one, I spread glue on the felt pieces, then wrapped each finger individually,

keeping the raw felt edges between the fingers where they wouldn't be too noticeable. This is a painstaking process, but it worked, and the fingers stayed flexible.





Another shot of the finger-wrapping. I've folded the narrow end down over the fingertip, then wrapped the felt around the finger.



To cover the palms and the backs of the hands, I cut another scrap of felt approximately the shape shown below.



The thumb fits through the slot, and the "seam" meets in the palm of the hand. I made sure the edges were well glued so they won't work loose.



The elf is far from finished, but the little hands can already grasp a pencil! The hardest part is done, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

I decided to clothe my elf in green wool felt. I wrapped the arms first, gluing the sleeves securely around the wrists, then stitching up the underarm by hand. The sewing process is a little awkward on the finished doll, but



patience is rewarded!

I wanted a neat finish on the feet, so I sewed the rounded toes

on the sewing machine, then turned them right side out, inserted the armature, and stitched up the inseam by hand.

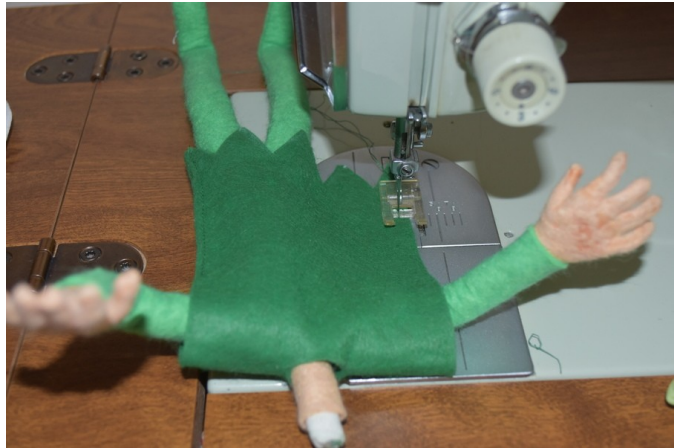


Now to wrap the torso. I cut a rectangle of felt and held it in place on the body while I trimmed a bit to make a good fit. Then I glued and sewed it into position. The torso will be covered by a jerkin when I finish the elf.

The jerkin is made from a rectangle of felt with zig-zagged edges.



I decided I didn't want a back seam in the jerkin, so I'm placing it on the elf body now, before I finish the head. I made a slit in the centre just large enough to accommodate the neck, then machine-stitched one side part way up. I'm stitching the other side after inserting the elf's body.



The next task is to create the head, which is stitched from felt and then stuffed. There are three pattern pieces: face, head back, and ear. The ears are stitched first, then sewn into the side seams when the front and back of the head are joined together.



I stuffed the head firmly, keeping a narrow hollow up the centre so I can insert the neck of the armature.



Once I was happy with the firmness of the stuffed head, I attached it to the neck with glue and stitching. All that's left now is face, wig, and finishing touches.

Using double strands of regular thread, I embroidered a simple smiling mouth, then added black beads for the eyes, finishing off each eye with three lashes and an eyebrow.



Look at those poseable hands! My sister is going to love them. I know I do.



I made the wig from reddish brown fur fabric, basing its shape on the head pattern. I stitched it together on the sewing machine, then turned it right side out and pinned it to the head. I glued and hand-sewed the wig in place, going around twice to secure it, and knotting the thread every sixth stitch or so.



I tucked a little extra stuffing under the wig here and there as I went along, just to round out the head shape wherever I felt it was needed.

To complete the elf, I added a pointed collar and a belt made from Christmas print. I was lucky enough to find a teeny gold buckle in my stash that turned out to be perfect. I love those poseable hands!

Some final thoughts:

- Next time I'll definitely add the jerkin *after* the head is attached!
- I may have been too lavish with the glue on the hands, since a bit of it soaked through in places. I'll be a bit more sparing next time.
- I may reduce the head size just a smidgen: my elf came out a touch too tall at 11.5".

Overall, I'm happy with the result, and Elfis is ready to make his 2100-mile journey to his new home, just in time for December 1st.

