

5 Vintage Quilt Blocks

A Modern Patchwork Method Guide

Nine Patch, Churn Dash, Bow Tie, Ohio Star, and Dresden Plate, pieced with today's tools

DRAFT COMPANION, TECHNIQUE FOCUSED. Full cutting charts and yardage ship with the published article's final printable pattern.

Before You Start

Skill level: comfortable sewing a straight quarter inch seam and pressing as you go. Rotary cutting basics help but are not required. Each method below is explained step by step.

Tools: rotary cutter, self healing mat, quilting ruler, sewing machine with a quarter inch foot, iron, and a pressing surface.

Fabric note: reproduction 1930s prints behave differently from true feed sack cotton. Original feed sack fabric tends to be coarser and can fray more at a cut edge. Press and handle a test scrap of your actual fabric before cutting project pieces, especially for the Dresden Plate at the end of this guide.

Block 1: Nine Patch

Skill it builds: straight seam accuracy and pressing discipline.

Modern method: strip piecing. Sew fabric strips into a strata, press, then cross cut into segments instead of piecing nine single squares one at a time.

How to piece it:

- 1 Cut strips from two fabrics at your chosen width plus seam allowance.
- 2 Sew strip A, strip B, strip A together lengthwise. Press seams toward the darker fabric.
- 3 Sew strip B, strip A, strip B together lengthwise. Press seams toward the darker fabric.
- 4 Cross cut both strata into segments equal to your strip width.
- 5 Arrange three segments (A B A, B A B, A B A) and sew into rows, then join the rows.

Vintage tip: The original hand pieced Nine Patch used single squares cut with scissors, one at a time. Strip piecing keeps the same finished look in a fraction of the time.

Block 2: Churn Dash

Skill it builds: half square triangles and matching points where seams cross.

Modern method: grid method half square triangles. Draw a diagonal line on the wrong side of one fabric, layer it with a second fabric, sew a quarter inch on both sides of the line, then cut apart to yield two finished triangle pairs at once.

How to piece it:

- 1 Pair a light and dark square, right sides together.
- 2 Draw one diagonal line corner to corner on the wrong side of the light square.
- 3 Sew a scant quarter inch seam on both sides of the drawn line.
- 4 Cut apart on the drawn line and press each half square triangle open.
- 5 Trim each unit to your target size, then assemble the block: one center square, four half square triangle and rectangle edge units, and four corner squares.

Vintage tip: one long running quilting forum thread called Churn Dash “the perfect block” for showing off a favorite feed sack print, since the plain center square gives a fussy cut fabric a place to shine.

Block 3: Bow Tie

Skill it builds: set in corners, the modern way.

Modern method: stitch and flip corners. Traditional Bow Tie uses a set in Y seam. The modern shortcut sews a small corner square directly onto the main piece on the diagonal, trims the excess, and presses it open to fake the set in look without set in construction.

How to piece it:

- 1 Cut your main bow tie pieces and small contrast corner squares.
- 2 Place a corner square right sides together on the corner of the main piece, aligned to the raw edges.
- 3 Sew corner to corner across the small square.
- 4 Trim the excess fabric a quarter inch from the seam, then press the corner open.
- 5 Repeat for all four corner units, then assemble the block.

Vintage tip: quilters are genuinely split on this one. Some hold that a true set in seam sits flatter under hand quilting. Others find the stitch and flip method invisible once the block is pressed, with far less risk of a pucker at the set in point.

Block 4: Ohio Star

Skill it builds: precision trimming, since this block has the most seams meeting at one point.

Modern method: the no waste flying geese method for the star points, combined with the grid method half square triangles from the Churn Dash block for the corners.

How to piece it:

- 1 Make your half square triangle corner units using the grid method described above.
- 2 For the star points, layer a large square with two small squares in opposite corners, sew, trim, and press to yield two flying geese units at once. Repeat with the second small square pair.
- 3 Trim every unit to the exact same size before assembly. This is the step that makes or breaks a sharp point.
- 4 Assemble in three rows: corner, star point, corner, then star point, center, star point, then the mirror of row one.

Vintage tip: if your star points look blunted after pressing, the trim step was skipped, or done before the seam was fully pressed flat. Trim last, always.

Block 5: Dresden Plate

Skill it builds: curved piecing and a finishing decision based on your actual fabric.

Modern method: rotary cut wedge shapes with a Dresden ruler instead of hand traced templates, machine pieced petals, then a choice between hand applique, machine straight stitch, or narrow zigzag to finish the plate onto its background, chosen by testing the fabric first.

How to piece it:

- 1 Cut your wedge shapes using a Dresden plate ruler, alternating two or more fabrics.
- 2 Sew wedges together in pairs, then pairs into quarters, then quarters into a full plate. Press seams in one consistent direction.
- 3 Fold and press each petal tip for a pointed style, or turn the curved edge under with a turning template for a rounded petal style.
- 4 Press a test scrap of your background and plate fabric together and check how the folded edge holds after handling. Choose your finishing stitch based on that test, not on habit.
- 5 Center the plate on the background square, pin, and finish the edge with your chosen stitch.

Vintage tip: feed sack quilters often chose Dresden Plate specifically to feature a favorite print, based on discussion in long running quilting forums. Modern reproduction cotton can fray faster at a curved edge than true feed sack cotton, so the fabric test above matters more than it looks like it should.

Putting the Five Together

Honest timeline: piecing all five blocks, including cutting and pressing, typically runs several sewing sessions rather than a single afternoon, especially for a first time Dresden Plate.

If you are building a sampler quilt, finish all five blocks to the same unfinished size before joining them with sashing.

Full cutting charts, yardage requirements, and finishing instructions for the complete project ship with the published article and its final printable pattern.