

The Difference Between Chain Store Fabrics and Quilters' Grade Fabrics

by Jim Salinas

I'm often asked, "Is there really any difference between the printed cottons found in chain stores for \$2.99 to \$5.99 per yard and those found in quilt shops and the best mail order catalogs for \$7.99 to \$9.99?" You bet there is!

Premium brands start with high quality greige (gray) goods. Premium greige goods have a thread count of at least 60 by 60 threads, and most have thread counts higher than, "60 square." Higher thread counts produce a silkier hand, less bearding when quilted, longer fabric life and better printing definition. Most chain store cotton prints are made from less expensive greige goods that have 60 square construction or less. In chain stores, 60 square construction is considered to be the benchmark of high quality.

In addition to thread count, fabric quality is also determined by the diameter of the yarns used, the size of the cotton filaments and the length of the cotton staple. Although premium raw materials are more expensive and add to the final price you pay, you get a far superior finished product.

Premium brands typically make use of a higher number of screens (the number of colors used in the print) and more complex and sophisticated engravings. High screen counts and complex engravings require using slower and more exacting flat bed presses than the high speed rotary presses used by domestic printers for most chain store fabrics.

Once the greige goods are printed, they have to be, "finished." The printed fabric is placed in a chemical bath that sets the dye into the cotton fibers. Unfinished or poorly-finished goods bleed badly and have a very coarse, "boardy" hand. Premium brands are finished using more time-consuming and expensive processes that create the silken hand of quilters' grade fabric in addition to superior colorfastness.

It is, of course, an over-simplification to divide the cotton print industry into chain store brands and quilt shop/mail order catalog brands. Indeed, chain stores often carry a limited range of premium brands. But, generally speaking, chain store offerings are price driven. They cannot easily sell the higher priced fabrics to their clientele. As a result, chain stores tend to carry the lower priced (and therefore lower quality) cotton fabrics.

Consider also the element of design. Premier designers tend to design for premium fabric companies. The technical aspects-the use of premium greige goods, printing many screens with fine definition, creating a silken hand through more sophisticated finishing processes-all these elements enhance a designer's efforts. World-class design brings a unique dimension to premium quality fabric. It comes with a price, but it adds immeasurably to the special nature of quilters' grade fabric.

There is one more point that should be addressed. That is the issue of service and expertise. Most quilt shops and mail order quilting catalogs, the prime sources of premium fabrics, are well staffed with knowledgeable, friendly, quilting experts. Most shops provide classes and expertise unmatched by the chains. Quilt shops and mail order catalogs generally do not sell jobber goods. They offer only first quality, premium brands at fair prices. These firms deserve your support.

In conclusion, there is most definitely a difference in fabrics. You get what you pay for. Premium brands offer a vast quality advantage over cheaper alternatives for just a modest increase in cost, especially when you consider the effort, skill and love that will go into your use of the fabric.

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