Monkey See, Monkey Sock

I've always adored sock monkeys. To me, they represent everything awesome, cute, and lovely about homemade crafts. They're such a traditional item. You can't make a sock monkey any other way than with your own two hands, and for that reason, they'll always turn out looking like you really cared about them.

Sock monkeys were always a bit of a puzzle to me. I could never look at a pair of socks and work out how a monkey was made from them. The concept was baffling...yet somehow, it can be done.

With a little research and experimentation -- and some courage and gathering of my wits -- I discovered that not only is it possible, it's actually pretty simple! I even managed it on my first try.

To make a sock monkey, you'll need a needle and sewing thread, embroidery thread, some poly fill, a hunk of cardboard, and two buttons for eyes. Oh yes, you'll also need a pair of socks.

I found these striped green ones (cheap, imagine that!). I think that stripes are vastly under-represented in the sock monkey population. Not very traditional, but hey -- I'm guessing that you're like me and don't do much of anything by the book.

First, concentrate on one sock. Take a sock and flatten it out so the heel is centered, like the picture. This is going to be our little monkey's body. Not very easy to picture now, but in a minute you'll really see evolution take place.

Pin your sock at the sides so it doesn't move around, and cut it up the middle, stopping about an inch below the heel. The reason we're cutting these open instead of sewing them right away, like some directions call for, is because we need the sock wide open so we have room to embroider on it.
Embroider on it? Yessirree -- all monkeys can use some extra hand-made touches. But beware -- sock monkeys are somewhat adverse to embroidery hoops. In order to be able to stitch on him you'll need to do a few things differently.

My secret weapon is, of all things, a piece of cardboard. Cut a piece just a tiny bit wider than your monkey, and about five inches tall. Slide it inside the foot of the sock. Your sock should be just a bit stretched by the cardboard.

The reason for this cardboard is two-fold. First, it's going to help us transfer the embroidery design, and second, it's going to help us when embroidering.

Since Mr. Monkey-to-be is already green and striped, I thought I'd give him some luck of the Irish. Judging by some of my mishaps with the Futura, I don't have much luck to spare. But maybe having a lucky monkey around will help. It certainly can't hurt.

The design I'm working with is 3 inches, which is about the right size for a full-grown sock monkey. I put it right where his tummy would be (the side without the heel). The top half of the monkey is going to have a face, so don't put the design too far up.

The way that I transfer a design for hand embroidery is just by tracing it over simple blue transfer paper. The cardboard inside the sock will help to give you a sturdier surface, but it's still a bit tricky to do because socks are usually pretty stretchy. You might find yourself tracing over the design a few times to get a good pattern.

If your pattern comes out as faint as mine did, you may want to touch it up a bit. Find a temporary fabric pen. The pen I'm using is washable, so when I'm done I'll remove it just like I would the leftover transfer paper markings.

Trace over the design with the temporary pen so it's nice and clear. Now you're ready to embroider....
Keep the cardboard right where it is -- the cardboard is your friend. Because we can't stretch our little monkey in an embroidery hoop, the cardboard is the next best thing to keeping the fabric from bunching up. The cardboard stretches your sock nice and tight so the stitches look good, and it also establishes a barrier to stop you from stitching right through the sock. Doing so would sew your monkey together, and that would make a very sad monkey.

Still, this is a bit trickier than normal embroidery, so unless you've been holding a needle and thread in your hands since birth, I wouldn't advise any super-complicated stitches. I used a simple back stitch to make the design.

Yay! Now I have a lucky monkey-to-be. At the moment it's just a lucky sock cut down the middle, but I can see the potential monkey now.

You can add other little embellishments if you'd like. I gave my monkey-to-be a little embroidered heart by his bum. Just because.

Now, back to the monkey business. Turn the sock inside out, and pin your monkey's legs back together. You may want to use a lot of pins because the socks will want to curl. If you have striped socks, like mine, take extra care to line the fold up evenly so his stripes match up and don't look all crooked when we stuff them.

Once you have your monkey legs pinned up, sew a 1/4 inch seam down the side, starting about an inch below your monkey's bum. Don't start too high up, so you can leave a gap to turn and stuff the monkey.
How long you want the monkey’s legs is up to you. I happened to buy knee socks, so my monkey could have freakishly long legs if I wanted. Decide how long you want the legs to be, and keep in mind that the arms can only be as long as the foot of the sock. Don’t make his legs too long if you want a proportional monkey.

If you want a strangely un-proportional Michael Phelps monkey, by all means, experiment. Maybe he’ll win some medals.

When you get to the end of the monkey’s feet, round off the bottom to avoid square-foot syndrome.

When you’re done with the monkey feet, trim off the excess sock and turn it right side out again through the hole in the center. Now, grab your stuffing!

It’s time to make the monkey nice and plump. This part took me a bit longer than I thought it would. Little monkeys hold a lot more stuffing that you can imagine.

For the body, you can mostly stuff with abandon, but don’t use giant clumps of stuffing at one time, or the monkey might be a little lumpy. To stuff his legs, it helps to have something long like a pencil around to help push down the stuffing. Use small clumps when stuffing his legs to keep them plump and even, and don’t be afraid to really stuff your monkey full (or he’ll suffer from the much-dreaded floppy monkey syndrome).

When your monkey is stuffed full he should look something like this. He’s now a creepy faceless, armless torso with legs -- but he’ll be a charming monkey when we’re done, I promise.
To finish the monkey torso, sew the hole closed. Just pinch the raw edges in and use small stitches to sew him shut. I'd go back and forth at least once for good measure. We don't want the monkey to lose any of his stuffing.

Now it's time to grab that other sock, provided it hasn't disappeared. Don't laugh -- I have about a half dozen socks whose partners have mysteriously vanished. It can happen.

Turn the sock inside out and flatten it the other way, so the heel is folded in half. This sock is much more picky as to what it turns into. The diagram to the left shows you what I mean.

The long front half of the sock is the tail. The back top half is used for the arms; the bottom back are the ears; the heel is his little monkey face. If you want, you can lightly mark out the sections with a disappearing ink pen.

Before cutting anything, I'll give you a bit of advice I learned the hard way: You'll notice the tail and the arms are the uppermost section. However, the tail is only one item, and the arms are two, which means that you have half as much fabric to make the arms. This, as I discovered, results in puny-girly-man arms for the monkey. If you want the monkey arms to be a bit more even with the legs, make the tail a little bit skinnier to give more fabric to the arms.

Keep the sock pinned together so it doesn't shift while sewing, and the stripes (if you have 'em) stay lined up.

Once you've decided on the basic measurements, start by sewing the tail. Start at the top of the sock, just underneath the elastic, and sew down to the bottom, rounding off the end of the tail as you did with the monkey feet. Unless you want a super-long tail, you probably won't use up all of the sock length.

You can cut off the top of the tail, where the elastic was, and then carefully cutout the rest of the tail, cutting about 1/4 inch away from your seam. This technique (sewing and THEN cutting) is what we would have used for his feet if we didn't need the big opening to be able to embroider.
Once you've snipped out your monkey's tail, turn it right side out and stuff it like you did his legs. When you're done, you should have this long, snaky tube-like thing. You can put it aside for now.

Back to the cut up bit of sock! Snip out the heel for the mouth, and the two leftover pieces are your monkey arms and his ears. You can cut off the extra bit of fabric that was left over from his tail -- you don't need that bit.

Take the piece you cut out for your monkey arms, flatten it, and cut it up the middle. There's probably a nice crease already there to help you cut.

No matter what you do, the monkey arms are going to be thinner than your monkey legs. It's just the way sock monkeys are meant to be. Take the two pieces and fold each, right sides in, and pin them in place. Make sure that if you have stripes they all line up nicely.

Sew a 1/4 inch seam along the edge of the monkey arms, rounding off the bottom as you did before. You want the seam to be nice and strong, but don't go too far in or the monkey arms will be puny and your little monkey will be teased mercilessly on the playground.
Once you've finished sewing your monkey arms, turn the right side out and stuff 'em. I stuffed mine to the breaking point to try to make them look vaguely like his monkey legs. Hopefully you heeded my warning earlier if you wanted less girly-man monkey arms, and cut yours a bit larger.

Now take the other long piece, the one that's not the heel, open it flat, and cut it down the middle. You should have two long stripey bits that will soon become his ears.

Take the long strips of fabric, and fold them in half lengthwise, right sides together. You'll want to pin them in place to keep your monkey ear from moving around. Draw or lightly mark the shape of your monkey ear on the fabric, and make sure the rounded side is facing the folded end. You won't need a perfect semi-circle, because you'll want a little bit of extra length on the ears for when you sew them on.

Trim the extra fabric above the curve of the ear, and turn them right side out.

To make some neat, slightly dimensional monkey ears, stuff them very lightly, spreading the stuffing evenly inside the ear.
Place the ears carefully under the presser foot and sew another semi-circle, mimicking the shape of the ear about 1/4 inch in from the edge. This will give your monkey a nice little shapely outer ear, and add some dimension.

Now you should have five monkey pieces: two arms, a nice long tail, and two little ears.

It’s time to assemble the monkey! I started with the tail. To sew the monkey appendages, just punch the raw edge inside and use small, tight stitches to secure them.

It may help to do four or five tackdown stitches before you start going all the way around, and to make sure your monkey's tail is secure, I'd recommend stitching around it twice. Strange, but tails on sock monkeys tend to be yanked quite a bit, so do give extra care to that area.

Next I stitched on the monkey arms. In this case, the stripes help you line them up so you don't have wonky monkey arms. Keep an eye out to make sure that they’re not only at the same height, but that one isn’t farther back than the other.
Now our monkey is a little less creepy, being only faceless and earless. Let's remedy that.

Give him a little face time! To begin, pin the top of the fabric, following the curve of the heel, on to the monkey's face. It should pin in a semi-circle, not a straight line. You'll want to fold the raw edge underneath so it's not showing. Make sure you like the placement of it before you start any stitching.

Starting at the corners, use small, tight stitches to secure his little face on. You can keep the pins in place while you're sewing to keep it from shifting around. Sew all the way to the other side of the top edge, and stop. You don't have to tie off your thread here, but we need to do a bit more pinning before more sewing.
Pin the bottom half in place. Don't pull the sock flat -- leave it slack so when it's stuffed it's nice and round. When it's pinned in place, keep sewing around the corner and along the bottom until you're about halfway across the bottom of his face, and stop again.

Now stuff the monkey's face until it's nice and plump, then re-pin the bottom edge in place and sew it shut.

The last of the difficult appendages are the ears. These are a bit tricky because they're not very large, so it's a bit harder to tuck the raw edges. Just use a few tack down stitches before you stitch all the way around the ears, and you should be fine.

Keep a close eye on placement, trying to keep the ears level with each other, and not have one further back than the other. To be honest, it doesn't matter much if you do, because these little quirks are part of what makes sock monkeys so charming.

Now you have a nearly-completed monkey! All he needs now are some facial features.
Sew on his button eyes just like you would regular buttons. You can test their placement by sticking pins in them and trying out different spots. You may want them high, or low, or close together, or far apart. The placement of the eyes can have a profound effect on the monkey’s personality, so try out a few before stitching them in place.

If you’d like, you can add other features, like a little embroidered mouth, or nostrils. It’s all up to you.

I embroidered a little smile and a nose onto my monkey. When embroidering features, I found that a split stitch worked best, because it hid the exit and entry of the thread.

When you secure the knots, keep them small and tight so they blend in with the rest of the embroidery.

I also dabbed just a tiny bit of glue onto the ends of each knot so they wouldn't come undone if some little tyke (or me) wanted to give the monkey an enthusiastic hug.

And here he is, a lucky monkey all finished and full of life. My monkey went home with me and immediately took over the couch. He won’t even give the remote control back.

Start with a pair of fun and fabulous socks, and a little time. Make one to liven up your studio, or make an army of them to take over the crafting world. It’s all up to you!

I’d say that sock monkeys make great gifts, for adults and kids alike. But dude, this one’s mine. Even if he is a remote control hog.