



Trashmagination Podcast #90 – Vintage Linens and Needlework

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today's episode is about creative reuse of vintage linens and needlework, and by that I mean any type of fabric which has stitching such as needlepoint, cross-stitches, doilies, tapestries, embroidery and hooked rugs. These are handkerchiefs, tea towels, pillowcases, table cloths or wall art. Perhaps you inherited some from your family and they are sitting in the back of your linen closet. Or you see them at thrift stores or estate sales, and think they are beautiful but what could you do with them?

Some people collect vintage textiles. If you are unfamiliar with vintage textiles, and you inherited some, you can send photos or bring them to experts or museums to be appraised [<http://blog.modafabrics.com/2018/02/quilt-appraisals-whats-it-worth/>]. Some quilts are worth \$50,000 or more if they were made before 1850 and are in good condition. You can search on eBay to see if anyone is selling textiles similar to what you have inherited or purchased. But if you know the origin of the textile – and you know the materials are not that old – then chances are you can creatively reuse them.

Martha Stewart on collecting vintage handkerchiefs - <https://www.marthastewart.com/919475/all-about-collecting-vintage-handkerchiefs>

Amy Meissner

Amy Meissner started working with vintage linens in 2015 when she received a box filled with linens with the instructions that she could deconstruct them and use the materials any way she liked [<https://www.amymeissner.com/>, <https://www.instagram.com/amymeissnerartist/>]. This kicked off a crowd-sourcing project where she asked people for their “unused, unfinished and unwanted linens.” She received 600 objects from more than 70 contributors, and even though she asked for the names of those who made the work, in most cases, there were no names. She incorporated the donated textiles into her art pieces to make an exhibit called Inheritance which has been displayed around Alaska [<https://www.amymeissner.com/blog/category/vintage-linens>]. Amy's exhibition raises all sorts of good questions about vintage linens and what objects we leave behind as part of our inheritance. How many people store a textile and never use it because they think it is so precious, but the next generation doesn't value it? Like with all things related to creative reuse, I believe that if using the objects makes you feel happy, use them. Don't hide them away! Let them bring joy to your life today because the next generation might not value them.

Rebecca Ringquist, Dropcloth

Once you identify vintage linens that you want to creative reuse, a great place to start is with the work of Rebecca Ringquist. She teaches courses on how to repurpose linens with embroidery on the website Creativebug [<https://www.creativebug.com/instructors/rebecca-ringquist>]. Rebecca's website and social accounts are called Dropcloth [<https://www.instagram.com/dropcloth/>]. She sells stitch samplers, which are pieces of fabric printed with designs that you stitch for fun [<https://www.dropclothsamplers.com/>]. She describes them as “coloring book pages for embroidery.” Also check out her art pieces which involve piecing together secondhand textiles and then overlaying her own stitching. Her stitch is so thick that the pieces do not hang flat. It makes the final results more sculptural.

Mister Finch

The next artist who works with vintage linens is Mister Finch. He sculpts creatures from repurposed fabrics such as mice, rabbits, owls and spiders [<http://www.mister-finch.com/>], as well as mushrooms and flowers. He describes them as “fairy tale creatures.” Often these creatures are wearing clothing or in human-like poses. He uses vintage linens to make moth wings or clothing on the animals. [<https://www.instagram.com/misterfinchtiles/>] You can get a great view of his sculptures in a video which I’ll share in the show notes [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuOb4UW0eTg>].

Kelly Swallow

The next artist is Kelly Swallow – and talked about her work in my podcast episode about upcycling furniture. Kelly is an upholstery artist, and she uses many vintage needlepoints when she reupholsters chairs with patchwork [<https://www.kellyswallow.com/>]. As I mentioned before, she will even make a custom piece of furniture incorporating bits of textiles or linens that are significant for your family. This is a fascinating approach to this question of inheritance, because perhaps your children don’t want your needlepoints to hang on the wall, but maybe they do want them if they are incorporated into a funky armchair design. As she says about her own work, it is “nostalgia with a rebel touch.”

Kalisher and Anew Work

Lastly I want to share a story about two companies who specialize in making custom installation art for large public spaces such as hotels or offices. The companies are Kalisher [<https://www.kalisher.com/>] and Anew Work [<http://anew.work/>]. They created a sculpture that looks like many flower petals fluttering on a wall, and they were made from recycled hotel linens [<https://www.instagram.com/p/B2opw1YpVGF/>]. This sculpture is featured in a shopping mall called the 900 North Michigan Shops in Chicago. It’s inspiring to learn about art installation firms who value creative reuse.

Repurposing Vintage Linens

Next I’ll share ideas for ways you can repurpose vintage linens.

The first step after collecting the linens is cleaning them. Sometimes cleaning is a great way to decide whether it’s worth proceeding with your creative reuse project because if the linens fall apart in the cleaning process, they are not going to last long as your project. Most people who work with these linens recommend washing them in the sink with diluted white vinegar or Woolite, and if they need some extra help, you could brighten them up with Oxi Clean. Many recommend drying the textiles in sunlight which is a natural disinfectant.

In some cases, you might inherit needlework that is not finished. A few years ago, my mom found a hooked rug that was half finished. We managed to find yarn that matched the original, and I did finish the piece. If you inherit such a piece, you might bring it to an artist who can finish it, or you frame just the section that is completed. In the case of hooked rugs or knitted objects, you might be able to pull out the yarn or wool and reuse it for another project.

Doilies

Once your textiles are clean, you can start creative reusing them. Let’s start by talking about doilies. The first idea is for very large doilies. I am a member of a Facebook group called the Up-Cycled Cloth Collective and there was a wonderful post by Gwenneth Haig to Up-Cycled showing how she made reusable produce bags from doilies. This didn’t even require sewing. She just took a very large circular doily and then strung a shoe lace through the holes around the edge. Then she tied a knot and it formed a bag which you could take to a farmer’s market or grocery store to hold produce. [<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2222155548082148&set=gm.1359664397533963&type=3&theater>]

This next idea is for very small doilies. Anne-Gabrielle from the blog BlueLuenn sculpts shapes out of wire and then stretches fabric inside the shapes. To creatively reuse small doilies, she sculpts the wire in a shape like a balloon with a circle at the top and then a long stem below. She then stretches the doily in the circle so it looks like a flower. She puts a

few together in a vase and calls it a doily bouquet [<http://www.blueluenn.com/archives/2013/03/23/26716968.html>]. I like this project idea because it's an unexpected presentation of the doilies, and it allows you to see the intricate stitching when the sun shines through.

Amanda Formaro has a doily luminary craft where she sticks small doilies on glass jars and then puts a battery-powered candle inside. Again this emphasizes all the intricacies and details when the light shines through on a dark evening [<https://craftsbyamanda.com/burlap-doily-luminaries-rustic-meets/>]. Amanda has another doily craft that goes in a totally different direction and doesn't display all those details but involves scrunching up many doilies in the shape of a lacy wreath [<https://craftsbyamanda.com/doily-wreath/> OR <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bqu6b84gzOI/>].

The last idea I'll share for creative reuse of doilies is to frame them. I saw one very nice presentation where they had an old wooden window frame with four panes, and in each pane, they featured an intricate doily. You could put this a real window and it would allow the sun to shine through and make pretty patterns - [<https://www.fleamarkettrixie.com/2011/11/repurposed-vintage-doilies-and-frames.html>].

Needlepoint and Embroidery

Next I'll share ideas for ways to creatively reuse needlepoint or embroidery pieces. Of course most of these pieces were sewn to be framed and put on a wall, but here's a variation on that idea if you don't want to frame one big huge embroidered item. You could get small hoop frames and frame little sections of it in an arrangement. You can see an inspiring example on the Instagram feed of Steph Harkins from In with the Old Goods [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BuHxsirngNQ/>].

Another idea is to fold embroidered towels or pillowcases into small envelopes. I found a free pattern to something called Grandma's Linen Pouches by Joan Fee [<https://www.freepatterns.com/sewing/grandmas-linen-pouches/>].

https://www.instagram.com/p/BowiP_ThfGo/

I have seen examples where people sew multiple small embroidered linens together into one larger one to make a privacy curtain in a doorway or bathroom [https://rosehip.typepad.com/rose_hip_blog/2013/08/my-entry-2.html].

Another way to repurpose embroidered linens is to incorporate them into clothing. I'll share in the show notes an example where someone took an embroidered towel and made a collar for a wedding dress [<https://www.lovemymdress.net/blog/2012/05/embroidered-vintage-tablecloth-dress.html>]. There is a style of clothing called lagenlook which means "layered look" in German. This style involves layers of unconventionally-shaped clothing worn one on top of the other to create a one-of-a-kind statement. I see many lagenlook designers incorporating repurposed embroidered linens in their designs.

Michelle Paganini upcycles clothing through her website Paganonoo. She has a Youtube video where she shows how she make hanger covers from upcycled pillowcases [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8r92e0_81cl]. These hanger covers are a great way to keep clothing from slipping off the hanger. She noted that many old-fashioned pillowcases are too small for modern pillows, but they are the perfect width to make hanger covers.

Lastly I'll share another story from the Facebook group called Up-Cycled Cloth Collective posted by Danuta Warec. She owns an upholstery shop. One of her customers makes needlepoints and they collaborate to make one-of-a-kind pillows. She adds leftovers from her upholstery business to make very funky pillows that look modern even if they are incorporating old-fashioned textiles. This is such a great creative reuse collaboration! [<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157660779584878&set=gm.1361023374064732&type=3&theater>]

Vintage Handkerchiefs

The last type of repurposed linen that I'll talk about are vintage handkerchiefs. There are many people who collect these handkerchiefs, so if you have some that you don't want anymore in good condition, your first step might be to get them to a collector. But if you don't want to do that, here are project ideas to creatively reuse them.

The first idea is to make beeswax wraps. These are square pieces of fabric infused with beeswax that people use to store food instead of using plastic wrap. They are not difficult to make, but it is important that people understand that beeswax wraps do not behave exactly like plastic wrap. They are not as sticky and they work more by forming to the bowl than by creating a perfect seal. They are not good for storing wet items like half an avocado. But they are a fun option and a great alternative to plastic. There are many tutorials for making beeswax wraps and the fun thing about using vintage handkerchiefs for this project is that they are usually colorful and already cut in a square. Even if your handkerchiefs have a crochet edging, they can still be used for beeswax wraps.

Beeswax wraps - <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Lzb8qgw0X/> - Reverse Garbage Queensland

The next idea for creative reuse of vintage handkerchiefs is to get them to people who specialize in making Barbie clothing for vintage Barbies. There are many people who collect Barbies and also many people who design vintage clothing for those dolls. Vintage handkerchiefs provide just the right amount of fabric and they come in the prints that match the age of the Barbies. For examples, check out the Etsy store of Sylvia Bittner called HankieChic [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/HankieChic>].

Barbie Dress - <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156841789852775&set=pcb.1367701150063621>

The last idea for vintage hankies is to frame them in a grid of square frames or sew them in a quilt with square blocks. Since hankies are already square, they lend themselves to grid layouts. For tips on how to sew them into a quilt, check out a blog by Melissa Mortensen from the Polka Dot Chair where she gives tips on preparing the hankies and sewing them into a quilt even if you have not quilted before [<https://www.polkadotchair.com/vintage-hankies-quilt/>].

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! You can see more ideas for creative reuse of vintage linens on my Pinterest board [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/linens-doilies-cross-stitch-needlework/>]. What are creative ways that you have reused linens, doilies and other needlework? Please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see recycled linens as a source of art in your life!