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Sweet Dreams

BY JEANNE ROGERS WAMACK



A trip to the antique mall, a flea market, an old attic, or a cedar chest can yield fabric treasures which were made with great care. Delicate, hand-stitched pieces are unique in today's busy world; they're from quiet days of no television when a little girl would sit at her mother's knee and learn not only how to sew, but how to be a lady. Hand-made items, — in this case, a pillowcase — can become even more cherished when they're transformed into something wearable.

I happened to be at my mother's house one afternoon when she was emptying her linen closet of things she never used. She offered me two beautiful linen pillowcases. Her mother had purchased the pillowcases, and had made lovely intricate tating to decorate the outside edge of each as one of her wedding gifts to her daughter. The pillowcases were over 40 years old, antique by most standards, and were a soft, creamy color. They even had the tag on them that said "Irish Linen," indicating that they were made of one of the finest linens available. I was amused as I thought to myself that my mother had never ironed these in order to enjoy them. And, although I would iron an heirloom dress to perfection for as long as it took, no one would ever catch me ironing pillowcases either. Relishing the beautiful linen in my hands, I felt the old itch coming on, and knew I couldn't let those pieces of fine fabric disguised as pillowcases end up shoved in another linen closet. They deserved to be a dress.

My mother just froze when I shared my idea with her, and finally replied with a trepidant, "Okay." I'm sure she envisioned a precious child flitting around in an ill-fitting, cut-up, once lovely, old pillowcase reminiscent of my ninth grade sewing mistakes. But, as any loving mother would, she gave her approval. I realized right then that whatever I did had better be good.

MATERIALS

- One to two pillowcases depending on dress size and length of case
- Cotton broadcloth for bodice lining
- Organdy for sleeve and neck ruffles
- Decorative trim (pink rose bullion trim shown was purchased by the yard from Vestavia Apothecary)
- Tatted edging for collar and sleeve ruffles (measure ruffle strips to determine yardage)
- Pink satin yardage cut on bias for piping and neck binding

For Embroidery

- Embroidery design on pull-out centerfold
- YLI Silk Ribbon (2mm): #63 aqua green
- YLI Silk Ribbon (4mm): #13 lt. yellow #68 pink
- YLI Silk Embroidery Floss: #94 pink #104 blue

CHOOSING A PATTERN

Catherine, my daughter, was only 18 months old and petite at the time I began my project. This meant that one pillowcase would yield enough fabric to make a complete dress; that is, with a little creativity. Looking at the pillowcase, I decided that the pretty tating would go on the hem and the rest of the dress would be plain linen, which I would embroider.

Any simple, yoke dress pattern would work for the dress I made, since all that was needed was a yoke front, yoke back, linings (if separate), and sleeves. The skirt was not cut from a pattern; instead, I determined the finished length (allowing for growth tucks) and cut the skirt from the pillowcase, no hemming required. Because the pillowcase was very long, it accommodated four 1/2-inch growth tucks.

PREPARING TO CUT

The goal when preparing to cut any dress from a limited amount of material is to conserve as much fabric as possible for the outside of the dress. Therefore, all linings, piping, and any bias band required should come from other fabrics. For the yoke linings, I used pre-shrunk, 100 percent cotton the same color as the dress. I also used pink satin for piping and for the bias band to add a touch of color and shine. To further conserve fabric, I cut the ruffle collar out of organdy (faintly tinted with tea), and added organdy to the sleeves to match. To decorate the collar, sleeves, and hem, I set aside pink bullion trim and tiny tating from a baby dress that I once wore.

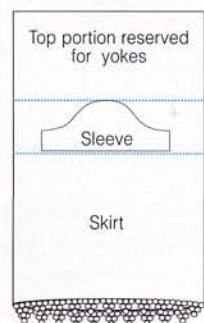


FIGURE 1

then slit open the top of the pillowcase (fig. 2). This fabric was divided into three sections to

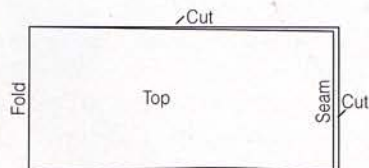
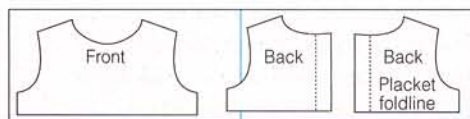


FIGURE 2

Laying out the pattern was easy. I determined the length for the skirt and ended up with plenty of fabric leftover for the yoke and sleeves. I cut out the skirt and sleeves (fig. 1),

cut out the yoke front and two yoke backs (fig. 3).



Open top to cut yoke pieces
FIGURE 3

NOTE: For older, larger girls, another layout would have to be figured. Two pillowcases might be necessary to provide enough fabric.

I positioned the pillowcase side seam — there was only one — down the center back, skirt, and opened the top a little to make a placket. This kept the decorative hem intact.

SELECTING EMBROIDERY

Most any surface embroidery is pretty on linen. It is best to choose something simple

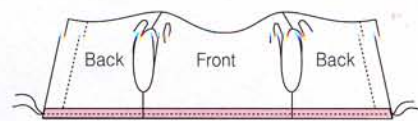
in a color to complement the trim on the dress. I used a combination of silk ribbon, rayon floss Brazilian embroidery, bullions, and pearls (see detail photo). Since the top was so simple, I not only embroidered the lower yoke front, but also each yoke back. All embroidery was worked before construction. *NOTE: Embroidery designs are available on the pull-out centerfold.*

CONSTRUCTION

Construction for this yoke dress was different from a typical yoke dress.

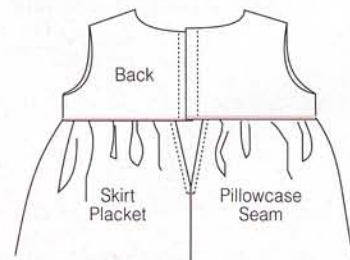
Step 1: Sew the pillowcase yoke front to the backs at the shoulder and side seams.

Step 2: Apply satin piping to the lower edge (fig. 4).



Apply piping to bottom edge of yoke
FIGURE 4

Step 3: Lightly gather the skirt and sew to the yoke along the piped edge (fig. 5). Remember to set the skirt placket edges 1/4 inch from the back placket foldlines.



Allow placket foldline to extend 1/4" beyond skirt placket edges
FIGURE 5

Step 4: Stitch the yoke linings together at shoulder and side seams. Pin lining to wrong side of bodice along the skirt seam and stitch along seam with pillowcase skirt sandwiched between the yoke and yoke lining (fig. 6). Flip yoke lining up and line up with neck and sleeve openings.

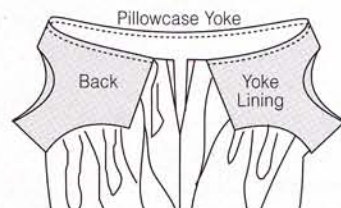


FIGURE 6

Step 5: Finish sleeves with a satin piped band and organdy ruffle as shown (fig. 7).

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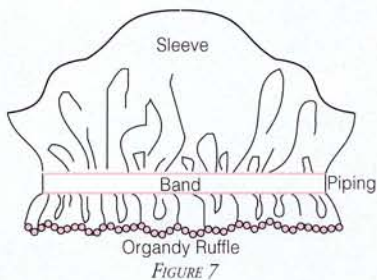


FIGURE 7

Sew sleeve underarm seam and set in sleeve openings with a French seam through both layers of pillowcase and lining fabrics.

Step 6: Finish the raw edge of the backs and fold the back plackets to the inside of the yoke. Stitch buttonholes at this time or use hooks, snaps, or beauty pins. I used a hook at the skirt seam and two beauty pins on the yoke since the lower back corners were embroidered.

Step 7: For the ruffle collar, cut a 2-1/2-inch organdy strip one and a half times the length of the neck opening. Roll and whip one raw edge and apply tating and bullion trim by hand to clean edge. Fold and hem both ends of the strip. Gather and baste the raw edge to the neck edge of the yoke (fig. 8).



FIGURE 8

Step 8: Cut a 1 inch wide bias strip of pink satin for neck binding, allowing 1-inch extra in length. Press strip in half. Pin the double raw edge of the satin strip to the raw edge of the neck with right sides together. Stitch 1/4



inch and trim seam to 1/8 inch (fig. 9). Wrap the satin binding over the seam to the inside of the yoke and hand stitch the folded edge

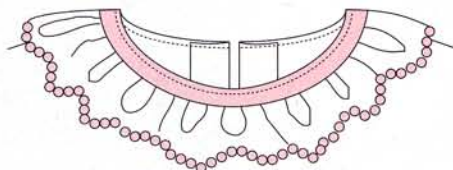


FIGURE 9

to the seam edge. Trim the ends to 1/4-inch overhang and fold inside binding. Finish ends by hand (fig. 10).

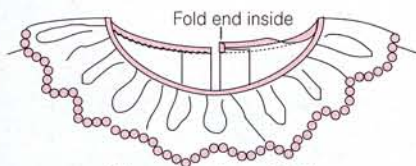


FIGURE 10

To finish the ensemble I added the perfect ivory high-top shoes and a pink-flowered hat.

When Catherine wore the dress to church for the first time, people turned around to

catch a glimpse; one boy told his mother, "Come look at this beautiful little girl!" At lunch, an elderly man waved to Catherine from his car and said "Hey little girl!" Mothers who found out about the origin of the dress were amazed in how it was made. Of course, my previously-skeptical mother was happy to have given her part.

Now Catherine has worn the dress several times, and what was once a hidden antique is a much-treasured heirloom to pass down to future generations. True, some collectors of antique linens would be horrified at the idea of cutting into a lovely pillowcase, but I would rather see it used and appreciated than locked away in a dark closet for another 40 years! So I say, take out your old pillowcases, handkerchiefs, linen hand towels, tablecloths, and table runners. Enjoy them in a new way! ☺

SOURCES

- Organdy fabric from *Billie's Heirloom Sewing* in Birmingham, AL (205) 841-2015.
- Pink bullion trim from *Vestavia Apothecary* in Birmingham, AL (205) 979-4444.

—*Jeanne Rogers Wamack is a designer and SAGA member from Birmingham, AL. She is a frequent contributor to Sew Beautiful magazine. See the Suppliers' Guide on page 93 to contact Jeanne Rogers Wamack Designs.*

