

Designer Details

INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR DISTINCTIVE DESIGNS

Although today's rushed lifestyle doesn't seem receptive to the creation of a complicated, long-term sewing project, we can alter our mindset to justify heirlooms of this magnitude. For Martha Demere, investing years, literally, planning and stitching resulted in a modern heirloom she intends to turn into a family treasure.

My daughter, Mary, graduated from a school in Montgomery, Alabama that still maintains a longtime tradition of wearing white heirloom dresses for graduation. I have, for years, dreamed about the kind of dress I would make for her. At the same time, I knew that the antique family christening gown that my children wore was over 100 years old and beginning to show its age; it was unlikely it would hold up to my grandchildren's christenings.

It occurred to me that I could make a beautiful graduation gown, and later put the skirt onto a christening gown. It pleased me to think that it would be even more special for Mary to christen her children in the gown her mother made for her graduation. Women, particularly those who invested much of themselves in their handmade items, have reused and recycled garments since beginning of time. When preparing for their weddings, women made Boutis underskirts for their wedding gowns that would double as the quilts for their marriage bed. I liked the economy of this and decided to do the same by making a dress for graduation and giving it second life as a christening gown.

While studying at the Royal School of Needlework, I discussed with them the best way to begin such a project two years before Mary's graduation. They were correct that it was best to use a slate frame. I borrowed a large antique frame from my friend Kathy Neal, who acquired it from a 90-something-year-old French woman, who had gone blind. She gave it to Kathy, wanting only someone who had a heart for the needle, to use it for years to come.



“Women, particularly those who invested much of themselves in their handmade items, have reused and recycled garments since beginning of time.”



I had been collecting antique lace for years, and it took me about a month to draw the design for the embroidery. I was inspired by many of the designs in the lace I had purchased and duplicated the motifs in the embroidery design. I used the prick and pounce method, learned at the Royal School, to transfer the design to the white Finella used for the dress. I then laced the fabric to the frame and began my embroidery. The embroidery uses a combination of long and short stitches, padded satin, trailing, French knots, seed stitch, lazy daisy stitch, shadowwork, Ayreshire embroidery and pulled thread techniques. It really doesn't matter where you use these techniques, as it comes together in a beautiful combination in the whole. I used a different pulled thread design in the flowers that have a large center, not duplicating any previously used. At the back, center of the bodice, I embroidered Mary's initials, and fastened the dress with beauty pins.

There are three really special pieces of lace used in combination with other pieces of antique lace collected over the years. The antique Alencon lace around the neck and armhole edge was purchased from a dealer on Portobello while I was on the trip to London with Martha Pullen. Old lace rarely comes in pieces long enough to accommodate a hem, so when I found a dealer in Belgium, on-line, I bought the two pieces for the hem and the bottom of the slip. The overall length of the lace then dictated the design of the dress since





that was all the lace I could get. The slip is two layers; because the Finella is so fine it is too transparent for just one layer of a slip.

When the embroidery was finished, I realized that just plain batiste would not have the gravitas for the completed embroidery. I decided to use drawn thread tucks to complete the dress and worked them on eight separate panels. There are six drawn thread panels in the skirt, and I cut the bodice front and backs from the remaining two. The gown has no seams; all pieces are joined by lace. The pearls on the front embroidered panel were purchased on a trip to Bangkok, and I had a local jeweler drill the holes; it would be less expensive to just purchase them already drilled.

Seeing my daughter walk down the aisle, wrapped in love, knowing her children would one day wear a version of the same gown, justified every minute I spent making it. I hope there is something in this piece that will inspire you in your *pièce de résistance*. —SB

