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Textile Study: Linen

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TEXTILE STUDY - LINEN

Linen has been called the textile of luxury as its expense in fine grades stands in the way of its common use. In olden times it supplied many of the family needs but in the present day cotton has largely supplanted it for common uses. Linen is made from the long, lustrous fiber obtained from the stock of the flax plant grown in European countries and to some extent in America.

The plant is an annual, and has an erect, slight and willowy stem. It grows from 20 to 40 inches in height, branching frequently in the upper part when not planted too closely and having numerous small flowers which range from yellowish to bright blue. Flax springs up with many weeds which must be removed. In Europe the weeding is done principally by women and children who go over the ground on their hands and knees when the plants are from one to two inches high. Flax is in the best for fiber when the leaves and stem of the lower part of the plant turns yellowish and the seed pods are becoming ripe. This may be any time between the last part of June and the end of August. Dry, clear, weather is selected for the pulling. Men go through the fields grasping a handful of flax at about the middle of the stems, and pulling the sheaf up by the roots. The dirt is knocked off by hitting the root end against the boot. When the flax is cut instead of pulled, the sap runs out and the quality of the fibers is inferior or in addition there would be some waste of stalk, yet the pulling is a tedious operation.

In the United States flax is grown principally for the seed. The seeds are used for linseed oil, which is required in paints, varnishes, linoleums, and oil cloths, linseed cake for feeding cattle and linseed powder for poultices. The flax we have cultivated for fiber has produced mostly a rough, tow-like yarn, and not the kind required for fine linen.

STANDARD LINEN MATERIALS

Butcher's Linen - Heavy, coarse weave. Used for butcher's aprons and for dress skirts.

Crash - Plain weave, coarse and loosely woven. Because of durability used for draperies, aprons and curtains.

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#2 - Linen

Dress Linen - Plain weave. Used for dresses and suits, laundries well but cruches very easily.

Damask - Pattern is in warp lines, that is, threads of design run lengthwise. Best linen is sized very little. Used for tablecloths and napkins because of its beauty and power to shed soil.

Huckaback - Uneven weave. Used for toweling because of its rough surface which easily absorbs moisture and causes skin to glow.

Handkerchief Linen - A fine, firm weave. Used for babies' dresses and handkerchiefs.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LINEN

1. Strong and durable.
2. A good conductor of heat.
3. Smooth and glossy when laundered.
4. Snowy white when bleached.
5. Wrinkles easily because of the stiffness and inelasticity of the fiber.
6. Does not retain stains as persistently as cotton.
7. It does not leave a lint.
8. Washes easily because of smooth surface.
9. Water is absorbed rapidly and evaporates quickly from it.
10. Linen fibers do not dye readily. They fade quickly in washing and in the sun. Therefore, natural or white linen is more satisfactory for dresses than colored linen.

IMITATION AND ADULTERATIONS

1. Finishes, such as sizing or high polishes are put on cotton, making it resemble linen.
2. Sizing is used to make linen seem heavier and of better quality.
3. Cotton is combined with linen, which is often sold as linen.
4. Mercerized cotton is substituted for linen and sold as linen.

TESTS

1. Linen feels cool and leathery. Linen crushes and wrinkles easily. It will hold the wrinkles longer than cotton.
2. Sized linen feels harsh and stiff. Unsized linen feels leathery, soft, and flexible. Test for sizing by flecking with the finger nail or vigorously rubbing. Good linen does not require sizing.
3. Rub linen briskly. If the surface becomes rough and frizzy it has cotton or tow in it. Good linen fiber is 12 to 20 inches long. Short linen fibers are called tow. These are used for coarser, poorer qualities in linen manufacturing.
4. Good linen does not give off lint. Break a thread of linen and of cotton. The former is tenacious and the broken end is erect and the fibers close together. The ends of the cotton thread are spread out in all directions. Tear a piece of linen and of cotton. Linen is harder to tear and has an uneven torn edge. It gives a dull sound when tearing. The cotton tears easily with shrill sound, and has a smooth edge. A little practice on this test may be necessary before one is sure of results.
5. Moisture test, formerly relied upon, is of little value now, because cotton is made to respond to the linen test.
6. Oil Test. Drop glycerine or olive oil upon linen and cotton from which the sizing has been removed. Linen becomes transparent; cotton becomes opaque. Notice the difference upon holding these two tests up to the light.