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American Sewing Guild

Notions

Sheer Magic

by Marla Kazell

Sheer fabrics were in almost every designer's spring collection and you probably have seen them featured in stores, magazines, and pattern catalogs. From dresses and skirts in soft drapery chiffons to simple shirts in crisp organza, sheer fabrics are everywhere.

Don't let sewing with sheer fabrics intimidate you. If you've never sewn with them, you can start small by using a sheer fabric as a detail. Add chiffon or georgette ruffles to the hem of a dress or organza ruffles to the edges of a wool jacket. Add organza bands to the hem and sleeves of a jacket. Insert sheer fabric godets into gored skirt seams. Create a sash, a tie, a scarf, or a shawl. In no time you'll be ready to plan and sew an entire garment of sheer fabric and be right in style.

Sheer fabrics range in hand from crisp offerings, like organza and organdy, to soft versions, like chiffon and georgette. Crisp sheers stand away from the body and form more bouffant fullness when gathered or pleated. Soft sheers drape closer to the body and create gentle fullness when gathered or Shirred. Because softer fabrics like chiffon are more fragile, can be easily distorted, and are susceptible to snags, they are the most difficult to sew.

Other sheer or semi-sheer fabrics, like voile, lawn, batiste, eyelet, gauze, and handkerchief linen, fall in between. Their hand can vary from soft to crisp depending on the yarns, processes, or finishes used. These sheer fabrics are usually the easiest to sew.

The See-Through Factor

Of course, what all these sheer fabrics have in common is the fact that you can see through them. When construction details, including seam allowances, darts, hems, facings, and interfacings, show through, it can be distracting and

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CUTTING LINE DESIGNS 12269



BUTTERICK 5750
OMBRE SILK CHIFFON:
PRINTEDSILKFABRICS.COM



BURDA STYLE 8974
FLORAL SILK VOILE: PRINTEDSILKFABRICS.COM



BETSEY JOHNSON SILK CHIFFON
BUTTERFLY PRINT:
PACIFIC FABRICS

LJ DESIGNS SORBET TOP & MERINGUE PANTS

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create a very messy look. Color and pattern will also factor into your sewing decisions. Lighter colors are more transparent than darker colors. Solid colors show every detail while overall prints and patterns may help distract the eye so that show-through construction details are less apparent. This all presents some special challenges.

Ask yourself a few questions as you consider your pattern choices. Will I be able to make French seams or other narrow seams? Can I change existing darts into tucks or gathers or ease in the fullness? Can I incorporate the hem show-through into the design? Will an alternate hem technique work? Will facings showing through ruin the look of the garment? Will an underlining or lining be appropriate? Can I eliminate interfacing? Can I find an appropriate sheer interfacing?

Consider both the characteristics of your fabric and the style of the garment when making your pattern choice. For very soft sheers, especially fragile chiffon, avoid complicated seaming or very fitted styles. Instead, take advantage of the fabric's drape and choose styles with shirring, gathers, soft pleats, or tucks. Crisper sheers lend themselves nicely to simple styles with a minimum number of seams. Semi-fitted and boxy silhouettes that are already meant to stand away from the body will compliment these fabrics.

Should your garment need interfacing, remember that it, too, will show through. Very lightweight fusibles may work on semi-sheer fabrics, but for very sheer fabrics, a sew-in interfacing is best. My favorite choice is silk organza. It comes in a wide variety of colors and can be steam pressed to maintain its crispness or pre-washed to make it softer. Test out several colors of silk organza—options include white, cream, a flesh tone, or a match to your fabric. Drape each

choice over your hand with the sheer fabric on top and study the effect. A second layer of your fashion fabric can also act as an interfacing.

The Layered Approach

For modesty reasons and/or to hide some of the construction details, adding an underlining, a lining, or using multiple layers of sheer fabric can make your garment more opaque.

Underlining: Construction details will be less visible behind an opaque underlining. The second layer gives added body and strength to the sheer fabric. This can be an advantage if you are making a more fitted or structured garment with a softer sheer fabric. The underlining will help take any stress off the seams and will give support to the sheer layer. It can also become the interfacing layer in collars and cuffs. Try underlining the front, back, collar, and cuffs of a blouse, but leave the sleeves and details like ruffles or sashes sheer.

Experiment with color by holding various colors of underlining fabrics under your sheer fabric. Try a flesh color, a matching color or a darker or lighter shade. You will be surprised at how much the color can change. The rosy red background of a chiffon print used by one of my students for a blouse looked washed out by a pale, flesh tone, darker and dramatic with a burgundy underlining and brighter and richer with hot pink under it.



To underline, cut garment pieces from both your sheer fabric and another fabric. You can use a second piece of the same sheer fabric, another sheer fabric (like organza), which can add some body, or a lining fabric such as crepe de chine, China silk, or charmeuse. Pin and baste the two layers together and treat them as one

during the remainder of construction.

Lining: A garment meant to be soft, drapery or flowing will do best with a separate lining layer added for opaqueness. The sheer fabric maintains its softness and drape. If these styles are underlined, the fabric has more weight and body and will not drape as softly. Sew the seams and hems separately for each layer and attach the sheer garment and lining layers together at the neck for dresses and tops or waist for skirts and pants. Try different colors of linings as described previously to find the best choice.

Multiple layers: Multiple layers automatically create more opaqueness. By building up layers of a sheer fabric, you intensify the color as well. Try multiples shades, dark to light, of the same color or layer multiple colors. For a bolder look, try multiple layers of a strong graphic print or pattern such as polka dots. Or mix patterns to create an entirely new fabric. For example, start with a stripe. Cut



one layer on straight grain and one on crossgrain and you've got a plaid.

The key to getting a client's white chiffon dress opaque enough to wear was to layer three chiffons—one plain, one with a jacquard leaf pattern and one with rhinestones scattered on



it—over a fourth layer of crepe de chine lining. The subtle leaf pattern created an interesting, subtle texture.

Cutting Tips

Sheers have a tendency to slip and slide during the cutting process. Here are some preventative techniques as you lay out and cut your pattern.

Work on a fabric surface rather than a slick table. Use a padded grain board or cover your cutting surface with cotton twill, canvas, flannel, or a flannel-backed tablecloth.

Stab pins into the grain board or use weights. Pinning pattern pieces to the fabric distorts the tissue and prevents it from laying flat.

Cut with very sharp shears. If you prefer a rotary cutter, use weights and a very sharp blade.

Make sure your fabric is on grain by pulling a cross-grain thread or tearing. Match selvages and cross-grain and be sure they are at right angles to each other.

Cut each piece separately. For the most accuracy when cutting, “grain up” a rectangle of fabric large enough for a single pattern piece and cut each piece one at a time. Be sure to flip the pattern piece the second time, so you have a right and a left side!

Marking Tips

Mark construction symbols with your favorite chalk or marking pen or pencil. Check that marks can be removed. They will show on both sides of sheer fabrics. Tailor tacks and thread tracing with fine silk thread is another good option.

Sewing Tips

Use sharp, fine pins.

Use fine needles—size 60/8, 65/9, 70/10 Universal or Microtex Sharp.

Use lightweight thread. My favorites are Coats & Clark Extra Fine or Mettler Fine Embroidery thread.

Shorten the stitch length—the longer the stitch length, the more like-

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ly fabric will pucker.

Try a single-hole throat plate and hold thread tails at the beginning of a seam to prevent fabric from being pushed down into the machine.

Use the taut sewing technique to prevent puckering. With one hand behind the needle and the other hand in front of the needle, hold the fabric taut as you sew. Don't pull on the fabric; let the feed dog do the work.

Shorten the stitch length to 1.5 at the beginning and the end of seams rather than backstitching, which can create unsightly lumps of thread.

French Seams

French seams are perfect for sheer fabrics. They can be sewn as a very narrow seam and enclose all raw edges for a clean finish. The key to a well-sewn French seam is in the pressing. For a $\frac{1}{4}$ "-wide finished seam:

1. Start with $\frac{5}{8}$ " seam allowances. Pin the seam, wrong sides together, and stitch $\frac{3}{8}$ " from the cut edges. Use a 1.5–2 stitch length.
2. Meld the stitches by pressing the seam flat on both sides, then press it open over a wood pressing surface such as a point press or tailor board.
3. Press the seam closed, right sides together with the stitched line exactly on the edge.
4. Open the seam and trim the seam allowances evenly to less than $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
5. Refold the seam right sides together, pin, and stitch $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the pressed edge, enclosing the raw edges.
6. Meld the stitches; then press the seam to one side.

To create an even narrower French seam, stitch first $\frac{1}{2}$ " from the cut edges; meld, press open, and press closed; trim the seam allowances to a scant $\frac{1}{8}$ "; stitch again, $\frac{1}{8}$ " from the pressed edge.

Hems

Hem allowances that show through



can become part of the design of your garment. These hems work best on straight-grain edges. For curved hemlines, choose a narrow machine- or hand-rolled technique.

Basic hem

(A): Press up the hem allowance along the hemline. Turn the cut edge under an even $\frac{1}{4}$ " (remember—it shows through) and slipstitch by hand or topstitch close to the edge by machine. For a decorative finish and to play up the $\frac{1}{4}$ " edge, stitch beads along the upper edge of the hem.

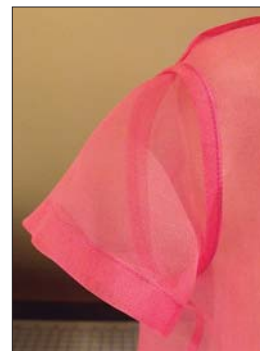


Double-fold hem (B): This hem outlines the garment edge with three layers of fabric. It can also be used to create the look of a band along a center front edge or along the edges of a slit. A wide version can add some weight to the bottom of a garment. A narrow version can mimic a French seam to give a consistent look to all lines that show through.

1. Press up the hem allowance along the hemline.
2. Turn the cut edge in to meet the hemline fold; press again.
3. Slipstitch by hand or topstitch close to the edge by machine.

Armscye Seams

Because they are curved and there is ease in the sleeve cap, French seams are not easy to do on an armscye. A **double-stitched seam** is a good alternative:



1. Ease the sleeve cap and, using a 1.5–2 stitch length, stitch the sleeve into the armhole. Press the seam allowances flat.
2. Stitch again, a scant $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the first row of stitching.
3. Trim the excess seam allowance very close to the stitching.

A mock Hong Kong finish will be even cleaner:

1. Ease the sleeve cap and stitch the sleeve into the armhole. Press the seam allowances flat and trim to $\frac{1}{4}$ ".



2. Cut a bias strip of fabric about $1\frac{1}{4}$ " wide. Stitch it to the armhole along the previous stitching, being careful not to stretch the strip and overlapping the ends $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
3. Press the strip around the trimmed seam allowance, enclosing the raw edges. Pin in place and stitch $\frac{1}{16}$ " from the seamline.
4. Trim the excess bias strip close to the stitching.

Facing a Facing

This technique creates a clean finish on the edge of a blouse front while also adding a bit of support. It works



well for sheers and other soft fabrics—a great way to use up some of your leftover sheers!

1. Cut a second set of facings from your sheer fabric.
2. Pin one set of facings right sides together. Stitch together along the outer curved edge and the shoulder seam of the facing. Use a short stitch length and be careful not to stretch the curved part of the seam out of shape.
3. Meld the stitches, then carefully press the seam allowances open over a wooden pressing tool. Press the seam closed.
4. Open out the facing and trim the seam allowances to $\frac{1}{4}$ " or less.
5. Baste the neck and front edges together and apply the facing to the garment.

Marla Kazell, a member of the ASG Portland, Ore. Chapter, has been sewing



professionally for over 30 years. She creates beautiful couture garments in her custom clothing business and teaches classes and hands-on workshops in Portland, Oregon and across the country for ASG chapters and private groups. She will be returning for her 10th year as an instructor at ASG Conference 2012. Marla has been one of the tour guides on the ASG New York tour and will also be leading a fabulous tour of Portland, Ore. this June. Visit www.marlakazell.com for information about her tours, classes, and workshops. To receive Marla's new newsletter, send your e-mail address to webmaster@marlakazell.com.

