

Sewing Silk and Silk-Like Fabrics

Silk fabric has been around for over 4,000 years, and it is still considered a beautiful and desirable fabric. Silk comes in a variety of types and weights ranging from the very sheer chiffon to a suit-weight silk linen. The silk discussed in this leaflet will be the plain weave lightweight silk usually used for dresses and blouses.

In recent years a number of manufacturers have begun to produce a lightweight polyester that closely resembles silk. In many instances, this silk-like fabric should be handled in the same manner as real silk. When there is a difference, this will be noted. Otherwise, the instructions apply to both fabrics.

Pattern and Notions for Silk

When sewing silk, it's important to use both pattern and notions that are appropriate for the fabric.

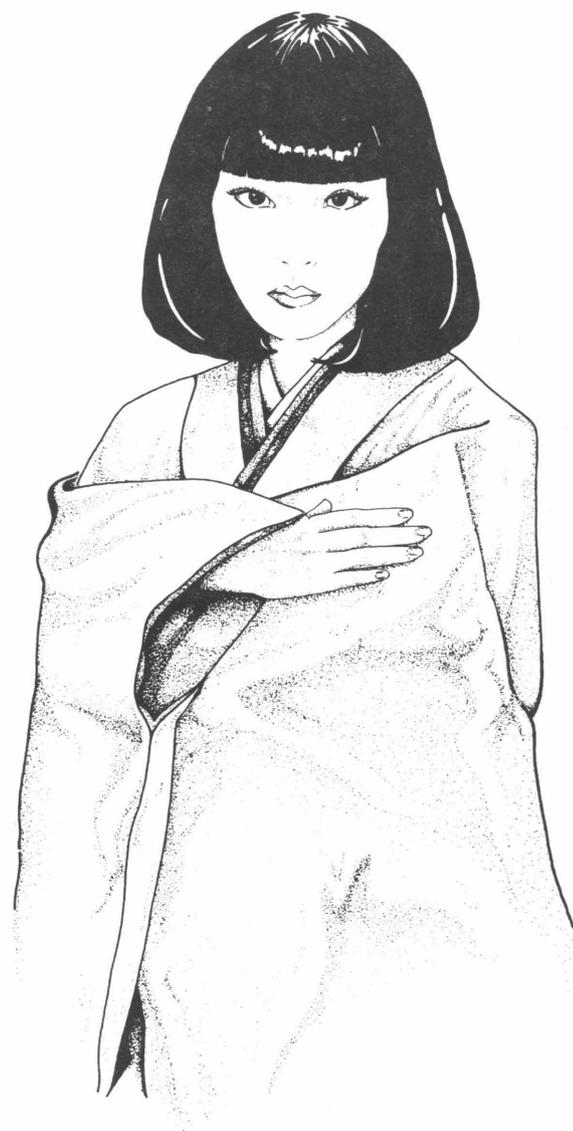
Selecting a Pattern

Select a pattern with soft fluid lines. Make certain that the pattern is loosely fitted as silks do not hold up to stress. Most needle and pin marks do not come out of silk; so make certain the pattern fits. You may want to use a pattern you have already made, or you may make up a test garment to check the pattern fit.

Selecting Suitable Notions

Interfacing should be compatible with the weight of the fabric. A woven sew-in type gives good results. In addition, you can use organza, batiste, or a self-fabric as an interfacing. Fusible interfacings often do not work well on silk and silk-like fabric. If you do want to use a fusible interfacing, first *test it on a scrap*. If it looks and feels good, be sure to hand wash or dry clean the silk sample and wash and dry the silk-like sample to see if bubbling will be a problem.

If a zipper is used, make certain that it is soft, pliable, lightweight, and of good quality. Cotton thread is generally preferred when sewing silks because it is not as strong as the fabric and will



break under stress rather than tearing the fabric. Silk thread can be used on silk fabric, but it is often hard to find and usually is expensive. A good quality polyester thread can be used on silk-like and silk fabrics if stress is not a problem.

Invest in good quality, very fine silk pins before starting to sew on silk and silk-like fabrics. Never use ballpoint pins unless you are working with a knit. Use a new sharp or universal-point machine needle, size 9 or 11, for woven fabrics. Do not use a ballpoint needle except on knit fabrics. Never take any chances with an old needle that may pull your fabric. Avoid sewing over pins as this may blunt your needle and cause a pull. Use a size 9 or 10 sharp needle for hand sewing silk and silk-like fabrics.

Preparing the Fabric

Pretreat your fabric before cutting. Some silks can be hand washed successfully. Buy a few inches

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more than required by the pattern and use this to check for launderability. Hand wash the sample in warm water and mild detergent, rinse thoroughly, roll in a towel to remove excess moisture, and then press with a warm iron. Now compare your sample to the original piece. If the colors did not run or fade, if there is no change in texture or hand, and if your fabric did not shrink, your silk can be hand washed safely. Pull a thread and check to see if your fabric is on grain.

If your silk is hand washable, wash it in warm water and mild detergent. Swish the fabric in the water, but never rub as this will damage silk. Rinse thoroughly in cool water. Squeeze out excess water, but don't wring the fabric. Roll silk in a terry towel to remove as much water as possible. If space allows, lay silk flat on a table covered with a sheet or towel to dry.

If the fabric was off grain, while it is still damp, gently try to get it back on grain. Be careful as silk is very fragile when wet. If space does not allow you to dry your silk flat, hang it over a shower curtain rod protected with a towel or sheet.

If the fabric needs to be pressed, do this while it is still damp. Use the synthetic/steam setting on your iron. Silk may water spot; so use a press cloth when pressing. Do *not* dry silk outside as it is affected by sunlight.

Nonwashable Silk

If your silk is not washable, you can have it steam pressed at the dry cleaners or do it yourself at home. Spread your silk out flat on a padded surface and use a steam iron set at synthetic/steam. Hold your iron 2 inches above the silk, and allow the steam to flow into the fabric. If your iron is known for spurting water with the steam, protect it with a cloth. Allow the silk to relax and thoroughly dry before you begin to cut it out. *Caution:* Steam and heat can damage the finish on some tables.

Washable Silk-Like Fabric

Silk-like fabrics should be pretreated as you plan to care for the finished garment. If it is to be machine washed and dried in a dryer, then this is the procedure for pretreating the fabric.

Pretreat Notions

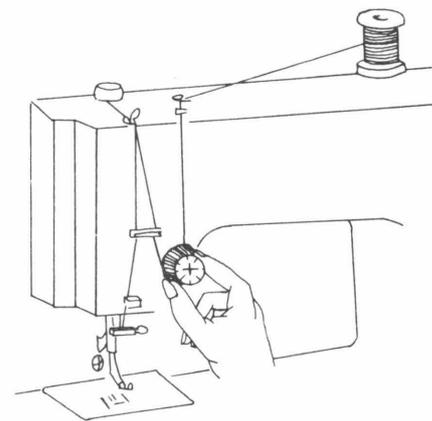
Pretreat all interfacing, zippers, and trims to allow for any shrinkage. Soak in warm water for 15–30 minutes and dry as you plan to dry the finished garment. If fusible interfacing is to be used, it should be hung over a rod to dry. Never dry fusible interfacing in a dryer.

Layout and Cutting

Covering your cutting surface with fabric or paper may keep your silk fabric from slipping. When pinning on your pattern, pin only in seam allowances as pin marks may not come out. To mark silk, use very small clips in seam allowances where possible for end of darts, center front, etc., if you know the pattern will fit. Use chalk or tailor tacks for other marks. Avoid carbon paper or washable markers that need to be removed with water. On silk-like fabrics you can mark with washable markers or pins as long as you test on a sample. Don't use a toothed tracing wheel on silk or silk-like fabrics.

Sewing Techniques

Before stitching see that your machine is clean and in good working order. Use the single hole throat plate, but don't forget to change it if a zigzag is needed. Your bobbin and upper thread tension should be slightly loose and well balanced. The pressure should be light and give a perfectly even feed. Set stitch length on 12–15 stitches per inch.



When sewing, keep the fabric taut by adding pressure in front and behind the presser foot. But don't stretch the fabric or pull it through faster than it normally goes through. If you need extra stability when sewing slippery fabric, place a sheet of tissue paper or adding machine paper under the fabric. Pull away the paper when the seam is stitched.

Pressing

Pressing throughout construction is essential for a finished product that looks professionally done. Use a clean steam iron. Be sure that it does not spurt water which may water spot the fabric.

For silk fabric the setting should be silk if you have that setting. If the silk setting is not on your iron, use the synthetic/steam setting, but always test a sample to make certain the iron is not too hot. For silk-like fabrics, the iron setting should correspond to the fiber. Don't have the iron too hot.

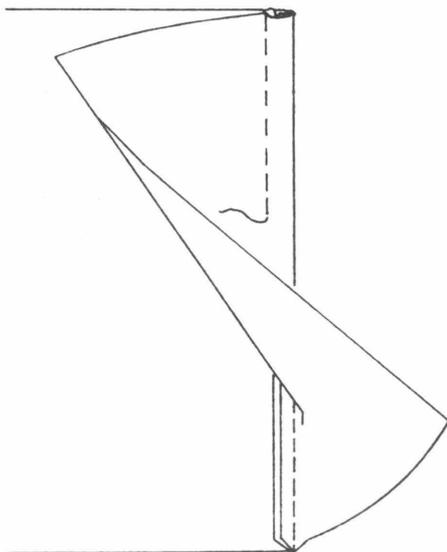
Always press each seam as it was stitched; then press it open. To prevent seam imprints from showing through, use brown paper or envelopes to cushion the seam. Press on the wrong side of the fabric whenever possible. Using a press cloth will help prevent water spots. Allow fabric to cool after pressing before moving.

Seams and Seam Finishes

French seams are great for these lightweight fabrics and can be used on straight and slightly curved seams. Another finish for regular seams that gives a good look is the clean-finished seam. On curved seams use the mock French or bound seam.

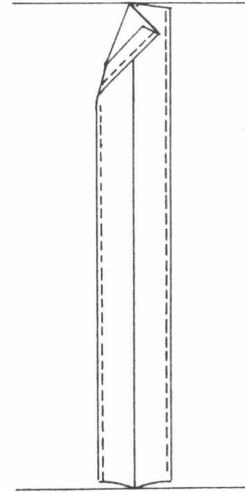
French Seam

- Stitch a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch seam, using 12 stitches per inch, *wrong* sides together. Trim to $\frac{1}{8}$ inch.
- Press seam as stitched; then press seam open with tip of iron.
- Fold *right* sides together and press along edge. This will ensure a smooth seam line. Pin lightly if necessary.
- Stitch $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch seam, right sides together. This creates an enclosed seam.
- Press sides and shoulder seams toward back and sleeve seams toward front. This prevents bulk at seam joinings later.



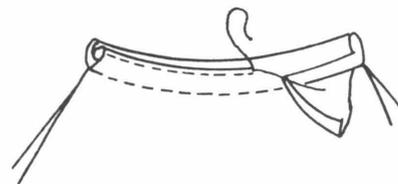
Clean-Finished Seam

- Stitch a regular seam.
- Press seam open.
- Turn under $\frac{1}{8}$ inch on edge of each seam allowance. Press if needed; then stitch close to fold.



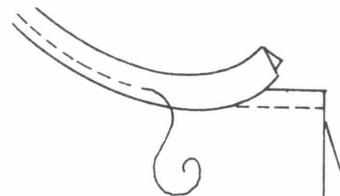
Mock French Seam

- Stitch a normal seam, right sides together.
- Fold in $\frac{1}{4}$ inch on each seam allowance, stretching curves slightly to maintain smooth edges.
- Stitch edges together.



Bound Seam

- Stitch a normal seam, right sides together.
- Trim seam to $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch width.
- Fold and press a strip of hem tape or other suitable fabric.
- Stitch in place to enclose the raw edges of the seam allowances.



Hand-Picked Zipper

If a zipper is to be used, consider using the lapped method. The zipper is put in by the usual

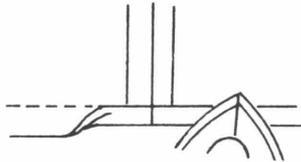
method, except the last row of stitching is done by hand. A single thread is used and the stitch is a backstitch. Don't pull thread tight. Stitches should be about $\frac{3}{8}$ inch apart.

Hem

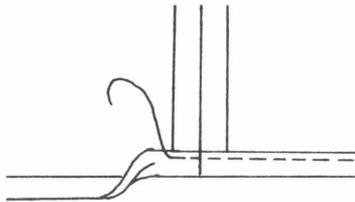
You can hem silk and silk-like fabrics a number of ways, but in all cases use a narrow hem. Let the garment hang overnight and then pin in the hem. Select one of the following methods:

Narrow-Stitched Hem

- Place a row of stitching $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch from bottom edge.
- Fold edge of fabric to the stitching line and press.

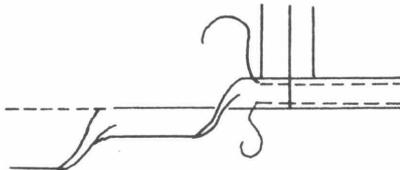


- Fold again, just far enough to turn the stitching to the wrong side. Stitch close to folded edge by hand or machine.



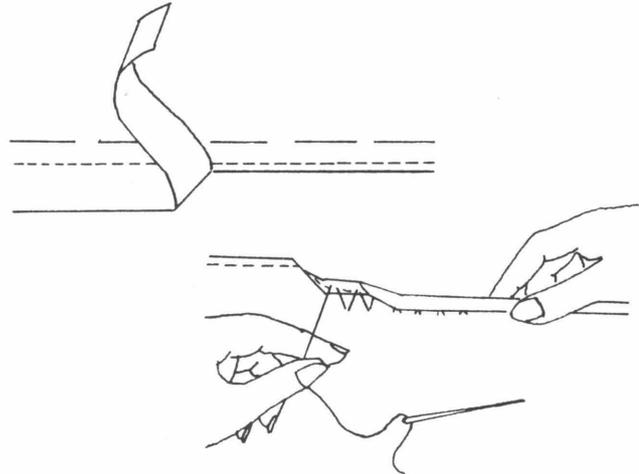
Twice-Stitched Hem

For a more tailored hem, do the same as above, except you must stitch by machine (not by hand). Add another row of machine stitching close to the bottom edge of hem.



Hand-Rolled Hem

- Machine stitch $\frac{1}{4}$ inch below marked hemline.
- Trim off hem allowance $\frac{1}{8}$ inch below stitching.
- Fold hem to wrong side, turning just far enough that the stitching line shows.
- Working right to left, take a small stitch through fold; then $\frac{1}{8}$ inch below and beyond that stitch, catch a few threads of garment. Pull thread to roll hem to wrong side.



Regular Hem

If a regular hem is preferred, make it no wider than $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 inches. Finish the edge of the hem and use very loose stitches for the hem.

Precautions for Silk Fabric

Silk is a very beautiful fabric, but certain precautions should be taken. Perspiration and deodorants are damaging to silk; so be sure to use dress shields, or else remove any perspiration stain as quickly as possible. As some dyes used on silk will bleed if they come in contact with alcohol, make certain perfumes and deodorants are dry before putting on a silk garment. Also, be careful in handling alcoholic beverages when wearing silk.

As sunlight can damage silk, never hang it outside to dry, and avoid long exposure to the sun. Store silks away from direct light as this will also fade them.

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