



Amazing Lace

Using these techniques,
it's versatile, forgiving, and
surprisingly easy to sew

BY SUSAN KHALJE

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Guipure

*Densely patterned
and heavy*

Lace fabric is unlike any other: Its unique weave structure calls for special (though not difficult) sewing techniques, but garments made from it always stand out in a crowd. Lace can be as elegant, sophisticated, feminine, and frivolous as you like. I love working with lace and have found it can be incorporated into almost any wardrobe, even if you favor tailored or casual looks.

Sewing lace is more straightforward than you might guess. Some of the techniques for constructing a lace garment are unconventional, but they make perfect sense once you're familiar with the fabric's characteristics.

Three varieties to savor

Fine lace comes in a rainbow of colors and a mind-boggling array of styles—in fact, many lengths of lace are virtually one of a kind. Alençon, Chantilly, and guipure (pronounced: *ghi-PYUR*) are the most versatile types; each has its own qualities and handling requirements (see the following pages for details). They're generally woven in widths of 36 inches or less and have



Chantilly

Delicate and weightless

“Fine lace comes in a mind-boggling array of styles.”



Alençon

Elegant and strong

lovely borders. Guipure and some Alençons can be cut apart and pieced together to take full advantage of their intricate designs. (Be aware that all types are delicate and should be handled gently during construction and wear.) Once you've fallen in love with a piece of lace, study it to familiarize yourself with the density and repeat of its pattern and symmetry and the mirror-imaging of motifs. Lace is complex to produce, so don't be surprised to find prices starting at \$60 per yard and topping \$600 per yard for heavily embellished yardage. A little lace goes a long way, though, and a lace garment you love will always be in style. 🧵

Susan Khalje, of Glenarm, Maryland, is the author of Bridal Couture (Krause, 1997).

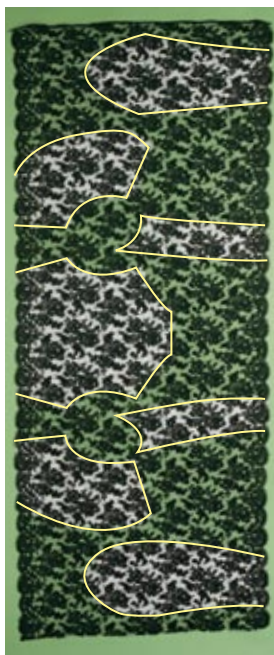
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Borders guide your layout

Laying out a pattern on lace is the best way to figure out how much yardage to purchase.

Begin with a pattern that's been properly fitted and make a full copy of it in muslin, minus seam and hem allowances. Label each piece so that you're sure to have the correct number of right and left sections; take the muslin pat-

tern to the store. Unfold a length of lace fabric, right side up, and arrange the pattern pieces under it, also right sides up. Use the lace's borders for hems and edges, and try to maintain symmetry between right and left halves of the garment. When possible, arrange adjoining seamlines so that border motifs will appear continuous when the garment is sewn. Your trial layout shows exactly how much lace you need.



Alençon can stand on its own

Alençon lace features corded embroidery around its motifs; as long as the motifs are densely placed, you can cut around them and piece the lace into the desired shape, without an underlay.



1. THREAD-TRACE AND CUT OUT THE PATTERN

Pin the muslin pattern pieces to the lace, pinning through motifs, not the delicate net. Thread-trace around the perimeter of each pattern piece to transfer its outline to the lace; mark darts the same way. Cut out the pattern pieces, leaving wide seam allowances and preserving full motifs that straddle seamlines.



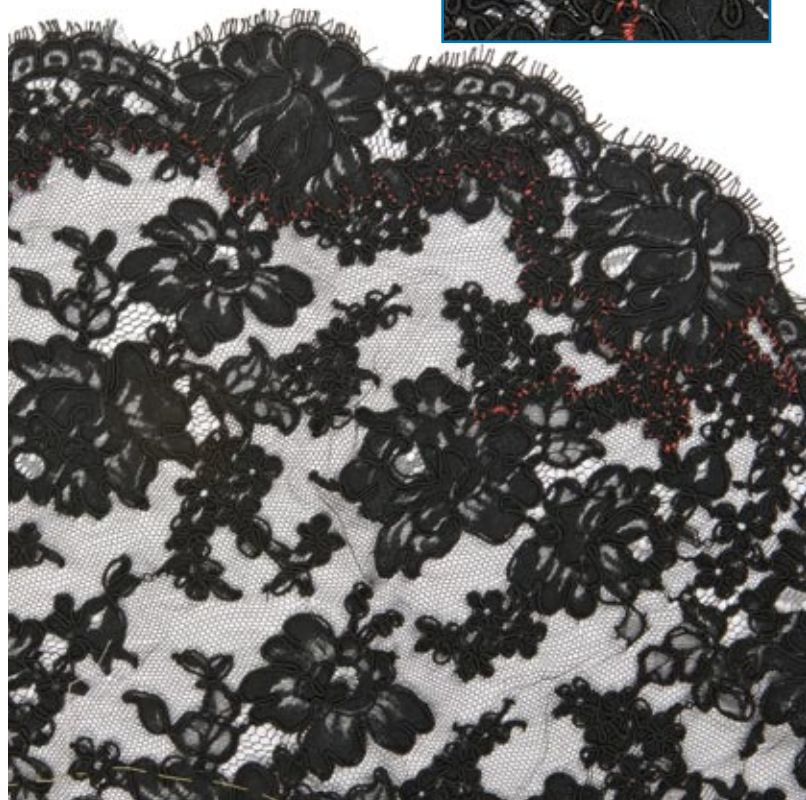
2. CUT, OVERLAP, AND STITCH DARTS

Darts that won't be subject to stress are overlapped and sewn. In the vicinity of the marked dart (it's not necessary to be exactly on the markings), define a route that follows the corded edge of one or more motifs—I call this the "leading edge." Cut open the dart on this line as shown at left, and overlap the leading edge, aligning the dart markings. Pin the dart closed, and sew it by hand, stitching through all layers along the corded leading edge. On the interior of the garment, trim away the lace underlap of the dart, fairly close to the stitching.

3. ATTACH BORDERS AND JOIN SEAMS

The major seams of a lace garment, like darts, are lapped and sewn. Below, the scalloped border has been shaped and joined by hand to the front opening of the bolero. You can sew lapped seams by machine, using a zigzag stitch and sewing around the corded edges of motifs; stitch slowly to prevent machine threads from tangling. For lapped seams, create a leading edge by trimming one seam allowance along the edges of the motifs, lapping this over the other seam allowance with the marked seamlines aligned, and sewing it in place. Trim away the excess underlap.

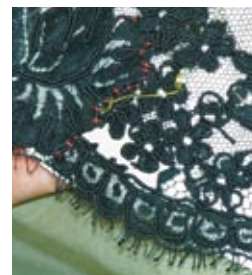
Sew seams that receive stress, such as sleeve and armhole seams, by machine, right sides together.



Keep armhole seam allowances out of sight: Bind them with organza that matches the wearer's skin tone. (Bolero designed and sewn by Pamela Metcalf; Alençon lace: B & J Fabrics, New York)

tip Patch small holes

Use lace fragments to fill in minor openings like the one shown here. Sew them by hand, working through motifs to hide your stitches.



Strengthen Alençon with underlining

To fashion this lace into a close-fitting style, incorporate a strong but sheer underlay such as silk organza or Swiss illusion (shown here). The techniques used for adding an underlay are demonstrated on a narrow sleeve.

PREPARE THE UNDERLAY

Cut a sheer underlay piece for each pattern section, and chalk-trace the seamlines of the pattern onto it. Hand-baste over the chalk lines.



SEW THE HEM FIRST

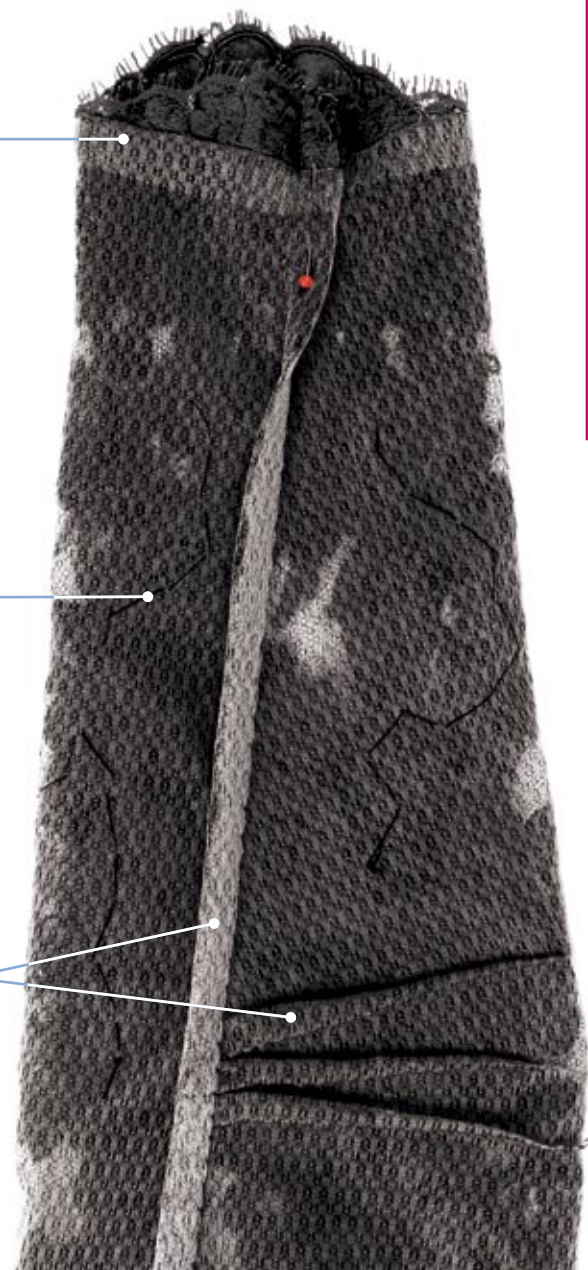
Machine-staystitch along the underlay hemline. Fold the hem allowance toward the wrong side of the sleeve, along the stitching line. Slipstitch the folded edge along the desired hemline of the lace sleeve. Use the intersections of the scallops to define a workable hemline.

JOIN THE TWO LAYERS

Aligning the layers carefully, baste the lace and the underlay together along their seamlines. Anchor the lace to the underlay by hand tacking through the most prominent motifs of the lace.

MACHINE-STITCH DARTS AND SEAM

To camouflage the seam allowances, trim both lace allowances and one underlay allowance. Bind the trimmed edges with the remaining wide underlay allowance.



“Enjoy Chantilly lace’s delicacy in lightweight, softly draping garments.”



*Camisole: author’s design;
Chantilly lace: Lace Star,
New York*



Chantilly lace works best as an overlay

Think of Chantilly lace as an embellishment added to a foundation fabric. It's too fragile to stand on its own but is lovely as an overlay, especially when its decorative borders are used as part of the garment design, as in the camisole shown here.

START WITH A CHARMEUSE FOUNDATION

Carbon-trace, then thread-trace, the seamlines and center front and back onto the charmeuse pattern pieces. Finish the hem, and press under the upper-bodice edges.

With the charmeuse pieces as a pattern, position the lace as desired, using the borders decoratively along edges as shown in the finished garment below.

Cut the lace pieces, leaving generous seam allowances. Hand-baste the lace to the right side of the charmeuse and then treat the layers as one during construction.



CONSTRUCT THE GARMENT

Use French seams for a sturdy, clean finish. Because a zipper would have been too heavy and stiff for this delicate garment, a narrow charmeuse placket with loops and buttons was added as a closure.



Guipure's weight requires a substantial foundation

This heavy, densely patterned lace—which doesn't have a net backing—works best when tacked to a structured underlayer and shaped to fit it. It's ideal for simple styles like this straight skirt, where side seams can be eliminated or converted to darts.



SEW THE FOUNDATION SKIRT FIRST, THEN APPLY THE LACE

Mark seamlines, darts, grainlines, and horizontal guidelines on a muslin underlining; baste it to the coral charmeuse fabric, and thread-trace all markings through both layers. Sew the darts and side seams, from hip to hem; complete the hem.

Lay out the lace, and spread the partially completed skirt

on top of it, both facedown.

Align the skirt hem along the lace selvage, and use the basted guidelines to position the lower portion on the lace's grain.

Trim the excess lace around the skirt, and tack the layers together, working from the lace's right side. Tack the hem edge, followed by the center-front and center-back lines, and then in parallel rows from the front hem to waist, avoiding the areas between the darts and side seams. Use tiny backstitches, loosely carrying the thread between them.

*Embellished guipure
lace: Lace Star,
New York*

“Use the **regular geometry** of

SCULPT AND SEW THE HIP DARTS

Complete the side seams of the underskirt, leaving the lace layer free. Pin the skirt to a dress form, and pinch out darts to eliminate the excess lace around the waist (below left).

Cut between motifs to open the dart area. Overlap the cut edges to form the dart. Sew the dart by hand in small increments through all layers of the lace and underskirt, snipping away the

underlapped lace, bit by bit, as you stitch from the point of the dart to the waistline. Aside from the minor disruption to the lace's pattern, the dart will be invisible once stitched. Machine-stitch a conventional seam at center back, aligning the motifs. Insert a zipper by hand, line the skirt, and finish the waist.



guipure to plan a perfect layout.”

THE PLACE FOR LACE

A visit to New York City's Lace Star (215 West 40th Street; 212-840-0555) will open your eyes to the incredible variety of laces available. Just around the corner, B & J Fabrics (525 7th Avenue; 212-354-8150) stocks a large selection of beautiful lace fabrics as well. Unless you're a true risk taker, don't plan to purchase lace fabric via mail order. It's essential to see the full piece of lace to assess its suitability to your project.