

Sequin Smarts

Tips for
smooth
sailing
with this
sumptuous
fabric

by Karen Howland
(from issue #92)

The fastest way to make invisible, alterable seams in sequined fabrics is to hand-sew them. Faced hems, piped seams, and hand-inserted zippers are all part of the process, too; the results are unparalleled for comfort and elegance (tops on these two pages are the author's designs).

When you're making prom dresses and wedding gowns for a living, you need to be able to smile when your client says, "I want sequins!" Here are a few of the techniques that keep me sane when sequin-covered fabric is the order of the day.

Sequin basics

Given the effort it takes to sew sequins, it's not worth it to work on second-rate fabrics, so before you buy, check the quality of the backing fabric (it should be strong and evenly woven or knit silk or polyester), the quality of the sequins (avoid cheap-looking, fragile sequins), and how the sequins are sewn to the backing fabric (avoid chain-stitched fabrics—you can't easily remove single sequins from these).

Cut and fit the lining before cutting the sequined fabric. Make the sequined layer of the garment slightly bigger than the lining, so the lining, not the sequined layer, will take the strain of wear. Use a single-layer layout when cutting. Sequined fabric has a "nap"; the sequins overlap each other from top to bottom. The nap, or smooth direction, should run from the top down on your garment. Cut with a sharp rotary cutter with the fabric face down. Keep a vacuum sweeper handy while cutting and working with sequined fabric, and clean your work area frequently. Before leaving the work area, thoroughly vacuum yourself, including the bottom of your shoes, or by the time you finish the project, scratchy sequins will have found their way into the

Model photo: Jack Deutsch; hair and makeup: Susanna Perks

rest of your house. Do not iron or apply heat of any kind near sequins. Press the lining before attaching it, because that will be your last chance. Use sew-in interfacings only.

Hand-sewn seams really are faster!

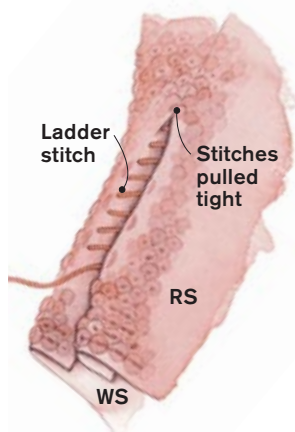
The traditional method for seaming sequins is to remove the sequins in the seam allowances and just beyond, machine-stitch using a zipper foot, then cover the seamline with sequins hand-sewn back in place one at a time. I've discovered that if you are willing to stitch all the seams by hand, you won't need to remove or replace any sequins, except at the tips of darts, as I'll describe in a moment, and the work will go much faster. This method is also somewhat alterable, since most of the fabric isn't damaged.

As you can see in the drawing at right, the basic technique is simple: With wrong sides together and the seam allowances folded at the seamlines and tucked in between the two layers, stitch using a very loose ladder stitch. About every 1½ inches, stop, and pull the stitches up tight on the previous section. When the stitches are tight, the sequins at the seamline will merge together, flattening out the folds and completely concealing the stitches. Take a few stitches in place to lock the seam at this point, then proceed with very loose stitches for a few more inches, pull up, and repeat.

For darts, remove the sequins in the seam allowances wherever there is less than 1 inch of total dart seam allowance, which may be the entire dart length on narrow darts. Don't cut the thread that attaches each se-

TO HAND-STITCH SEQUINED SEAMS

Fold under seam allowances and place fabrics WSs together, then join with a loose ladder stitch, only pulling stitches tight after every 2 inches or so of seam. This will merge the sequins and flatten the fabrics.



Piped edges equal comfort: Machine-sew a narrow piping to the outer fabric, then hand-sew the lining to the piping (see the full garment at top right).



quin. Instead, snip the sequin, then pry out the remaining half, so you don't compromise neighboring sequins. Cut along the dart centerline only where, and if, the dart width is greater than 1 inch. In any case, stitch the dart closed by hand, so you can get right to the tip, then sew single sequins back over the tip and any areas where sequins are visibly missing, using a matching thread. I avoid using invisible nylon threads, because they're too hard to handle.

Linings, facings, hems, and zippers

A sequined garment should be lined to protect the wearer from the sequins in the seam allowances, to support the hand-sewn seams, and to prevent snagging the threads holding the sequins in place. The outer edges of a sequined garment need to be handled in a way that retains the beauty of the fabric and is comfortable for the wearer—since small circles of sharp plastic are involved, the discomfort potential is significant.

Necklines and armholes can be bias-bound in the usual ways, as shown on the facing page, either before lining, or after lining and including the lining in the binding. I machine-stitch the binding



to the right side right through the sequins, then hand-catch the binding's inside edge to the backing or lining fabric.

A less obtrusive method is to pipe the edges, allowing the sequins to extend right to the edge, but providing a significant separation between skin and sequins, as shown in the photo below. To form a fine piping, cover sport yarn with a bias strip of fabric. Remove the sequins in a ¼-inch-wide swath at the stitching line, baste the piping in place, then stitch it by machine. Hand-sew sequins over the seamline, allowing a small amount of the piping to show, and hand-sew the lining in place.

For hems, cut a facing 2½ inches wide, then use a 2-inch bias maker to turn under ½ inch on both long edges of the facing. Turn the hem up and baste it in place, then remove the sequins in the hem for ¼ inch above the fold. Place the facing over the hem and slipstitch it in place close to the fold of the hem, then slipstitch the upper edge to the garment or lining.

Both lapped and invisible zippers work well in sequined garments. Turn back the seam allowance, and hand-sew it in place. It's a nice touch to add a zipper guard behind the zipper. And, of course, hand-stitch it in place! ♦

Karen Howland writes and teaches in Chillicothe, Ill.