

# USING IMPROV TO CREATE LACE FABRIC FOR SMALL PROJECTS

CREATIVE WAYS TO UPCYCLE OLD LACE USING À  
LA MARY IMPROV

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# WELCOME TO MAKING LACE FABRIC USING *À LA MARYIMPROV*

## LESSON ONE — FABRIC MATTERS

### WHY MIX LACES OF DIFFERENT AGES AND A LITTLE HISTORY OF LACE

If you are using vintage laces, they are probably of different ages and may be made from different types of thread. For example, synthetic thread became easily available in the mid-1950s. The type of thread your lace is made from—natural fiber, synthetic fiber, or a mix of the two—the age of the fibers, and their storage condition all influence how quickly and in what way the lace ages.

Mixing the types, colors, and designs of lace enhance the outcome of an improv project. One way to decide which laces to use, if you have a large amount, is to put them out on your worktable and audition the lace as you work. I have found that even the darkest lace—a coffee colored one in my case—can be layered under other laces to soften the color.



## LESSON TWO — PREPARING THE LACE



Chances are the lace has been kept in boxes, jars, plastic bags, or other storage that has wrinkled the lace. Regardless, pressing the lace before use will help to straighten it so it will lie in place quietly.

I divide laces into two broad categories: cotton or natural lace and Chantilly or synthetic lace. Chantilly lace is the name I was taught growing up. Any fancy lace that did not look like cotton was put in this category.

However, Chantilly laces had distinctive detail and were highly popular in the 19th century. These laces were made in Chantilly France. Production stopped in 1793 when the lace-makers were guillotined but began again in 1844 when a machine was invented that created laces almost impossible to distinguish from the real handmade laces.

The thick laces that look like cotton fabric with inlay designs can be pressed in the same way that cotton fabric can be pressed. I still use my pressing sheet to avoid damage, but that is optional

“Chantilly lace,” with its intricate detail can rarely be pressed without something to protect it. It melts easily, distorting the design. Too much heat and your iron will need a good cleaning. To press place the lace on your pressing surface, hand flatten it as much as possible, then cover with a pressing sheet. If you can see the lace through the sheet, you can hold it and gently tug at it to help straighten it out. If you do not have a pressing sheet, waxed paper will also protect the lace, but I always turn the heat down to avoid crimping or melting it.

## LESSON THREE — PREPARING THE BASE

If you have decided to make a light lace fabric rather than a quilted one, simply lay one piece of fabric on your workstation. I now put the fabric right side down. This gives me a piece with the lace on one side and the look of lining on the other side.



If you want to make items that require structure, make a quilt sandwich in the usual way: backing fabric (right side facing down), batting, top fabric (facing in whichever direction you prefer.) The wrong side of fabric often works because it is muted and allows the lace to shine.

Now you are ready to play! Let your lace designs and colors guide the rhythm, scale, and personality of your finished piece.

## LESSON FOUR — CREATING YOUR LACE FABRIC

Take your time and lay the laces down on the top fabric. I like to change the direction of the laces and mix the widths, colors, and lengths. I try to cover any raw, or cut, edges with another lace so that everything looks finished.

Keep in mind that lace has a right side and a wrong side. To tell them apart, look closely at the edges of the motif. The right side will have raised lines where the thread is stacked to finish off the edge. The wrong side, on the other hand, is flat.



Occasionally, two laces will blend so much that seeing the difference between them is difficult. In those cases, I layer a solid fabric, cut to fit the design, under one. Because I like to layer one lace on top of another, I keep an eye on how much of the bottom-most piece is exposed so I don't cover it completely.

Of course, if you don't have enough lace to layer the pieces, you can leave some of the top fabric exposed and cover it as much or as little as you want. And, you can add ribbon, thread, or cording.

Once you are satisfied with your composition, pin the lace to the fabric. Put at least two pins on each piece of lace so nothing shifts or moves as you sew. I avoid a great number of pins by trying to get two layers of lace with one pin. I use small straight pins but use safety pins if you prefer.

If making quilted fabric, be extra careful to pin all the layers, especially around the edges. I missed one corner and had to rip several seams to loosen it and re sew. It's a good idea to turn the piece over and check the backing fabric.

## LESSON FIVE — SEWING YOUR LACE FABRIC

Now that the composition is in place and you have pinned it well, take the piece to the sewing machine. If the piece has only one layer of fabric, you can follow the edges of the designs to sew them down. Although you can use any motif you want, keep a close eye on how the motif is affecting the fabric. For example, circles can quickly pull and bunch up. It can become a mess that you will want to repair, so go slowly and look back often. An unquilted lace project is also wonderful for slow stitching. I highly recommend it.



If you are creating a quilted piece, now is the time to decide how to quilt it. I have quilted using the edges of the lace as my guide, which looks great, but does not provide enough structure for some projects. For the bookmarks that I made in the video, I quilted straight lines about a quarter-inch from edge to edge to provide enough structure for bookmarks.

## LESSON SIX — USING YOUR LACE FABRIC

You can use the fabric just as you would for almost any project. Keep in mind, however, that the stability of your fabric is only as good as the least stable lace that you use. In other words, the piece will begin breaking down with the oldest, thinnest, weakest lace that you use.

### Unquilted lace fabric:

- Make decorative wall hangings
- Sew small purses with snap closures or drawstrings
- cover a box to use as a decorative item or to hold small items
- make Peter Pan collars for little dresses
- make baby doll clothes
- mix with other vintage items to make a table-scape
- give “something old” to a new bride
- use strips on the edges of pillows
- use as a base for other slow-stitching projects

- add length to a skirt by cutting
- strips of the unquilted lace fabric, open the hem and sew the lace fabric in its place. Then hem the lace fabric. Another option for this application is to sew an open lace to the bottom in place of a hem. I must admit that, however, I did exactly that—sew lace to the bottom of a skirt—the lace was not as stable as I originally thought, and it eventually turned into shreds. (Which dripped off my skirt.) To do this again, I would choose my lace more carefully.



### Quilted lace fabric:

- make wall hangings for your sewing room
- make small bowls to hold items
- bookmarks—cut quilted lace fabric into 2" X 6" rectangles, finish the edges with a zigzag stitch or serger stitch
- Christmas stockings and ornaments
- pillow covers
- use as a base for other slow-stitching projects



Five of the bookmarks that I made from the quilted lace

TRUST YOUR HANDS. FOLLOW YOUR CURIOSITY. MAKE SOMETHING ONLY YOU CAN MAKE.

## ZEN NOTES FOR IMPROV

LET THE FABRIC LEAD. You don't have to know the whole path — just the next step.

PRESSING IS A PAUSE. Use it to breathe, reset, and see your work with fresh eyes.

VARIATION IS THE POINT. If everything matched, it wouldn't be improv.

TRUST YOUR HANDS. They know more than your brain does.

LET GO OF PERFECT. Perfect is boring. Improv is interesting.

TRUST YOUR HANDS. FOLLOW YOUR CURIOSITY. MAKE SOMETHING ONLY YOU CAN MAKE

## Resources

I included only a bit of historical information about laces. If you are interested in reading more, here are some good places to begin:

Britannica — [Lace | History, Types & Uses | Britannica](#)

msn — [Amazing America: Scranton Lace legacy lives on as factory becomes a village](#)

Pinterest [Mary's Pinterest board "lace embellishment accessory"\]](#)

Wikipedia —

<https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=b4d3d9184cba8ac16a77450452ec2dc9abe00fb0e74064476257223b9f5c26cbjmltdHM9MTc4MTEzNjAwMA&pntn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=223413cb-d685-6b78-13a6-04bed7816abf&psq=history+of+lance&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnL3dpa2kvTGJjZQ>

### Places to Find Lace

- Antique and vintage stores
- Baptismal and wedding dresses
- Estate sales
- Etsy and eBay
- Fabric markets
- Fabric stores
- Friends and family members who sew
- Local thrift shops
- Sewing communities
- Specialized online stores
- Used clothing stores

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