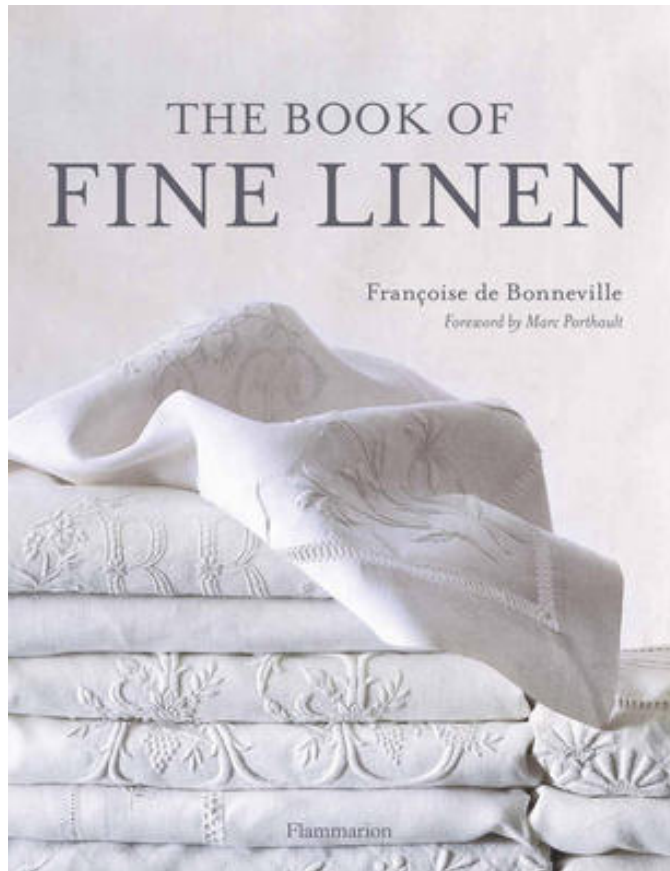


Modern home decor out of history's hope chest

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By KIM COOK - For The Associated Press | AP – Fri, Sep 16, 2011



This book cover image courtesy of Flammarion shows the cover of "The Book of Fine Linen," by Françoise de Bonneville. This book contains an in-depth look at the history and range of household linens. (AP Photo/Flammarion)

Contemporary home decor is yielding a little this season to a more traditional style evocative of the Edwardian and Victorian eras. We are seeing steamer trunks used as tables, Victorian illustrative prints and wallpapers, and new versions of period furniture.

If you are interested in experimenting with this look without going all in, consider vintage linens.

The craftsmanship and uniqueness of fine old linens draw collectors, as well as decorators who like to mix old and new: a vintage quilt on a modern slab bed, for example, or an antique lace tablecloth dressed with chic tableware.

Once considered an important part of a woman's personal belongings, vintage cotton and damask napery, bed and bath linens are often wonderful examples of the loom and needle arts. Textile weaving, lace tatting and embroidery could take craftspeople hundreds of hours; the resulting pieces were treasured, loved and passed along through families. And sooner or later, some are given up to the marketplace, for new owners to enjoy.

English-born Anna Redgrave of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, owns Highland Lace, a vintage linens web shop. Her lifelong passion for antique textiles was nurtured by her grandmother, a member of the Royal Needlework Society and a seamstress at Buckingham Palace.

"She was responsible for finding and sewing all the embellishments on the ball gowns," says Redgrave. The Society was the same group that, 60 years later, made the overlay of lace on Kate Middleton's dress.

Redgrave sells lace curtains, embroidered linen napkins, cutwork cotton cloths and a variety of items crafted of repurposed linens, from the turn of the century through the 1950s.

Jane Nicholson (<http://www.mrsnicholson.com>) is a designer and decorator, also in Annapolis Royal, who has created elegant yet welcoming spaces in Ottawa and Montreal that meld modern and traditional styles. She began her textile collection with a 90-year-old set of lace-trimmed bed linens passed down from her great aunt. They were made by an order of nuns for her aunt's trousseau in her small village in Belgium.

"But she never married," says Nicholson. "Her fiance was killed in World War I, and she never used them. They passed to my aunt who also never used them. Finally they came to me, and I have them on my two mahogany guest beds."

WHERE AND WHAT TO LOOK FOR

--There's a large vintage-linen fan base, Redgrave says, and French monogrammed pieces, linen napkins and vintage lace hankies sell out fast. "Monogrammed pieces were usually handed down, so they're highly valued," Redgrave says. A woman would have her personal and household linens embroidered with her initials because they were part of her personal wealth, and went with her when she married. Nicholson looks for linens with a nice weave. "If you're buying '40s and '50s tablecloths, look for good workmanship and strong color."

--Look for linens that have a "soft" hand and a "warm" smell, Redgrave advises. "Damasks should shimmer, and shouldn't smell musty or bleached," she says.

--Flea markets, tag sales, estate auctions, thrift shops and vintage stores are all good sources, but try to glean the provenance of your find. To whom did the piece belong? Was it woven in this country? Was it part of a trousseau? "Information like that makes the piece come alive," says Nicholson.

CARING FOR OLD LINENS

--Redgrave soaks yellowed or spotted pieces in warm, slightly soapy water overnight, then mixes up 1/4 cup Oxiclean, a stain remover, with 1 1/2 gallons of water. After a few hours of steeping the garment in that mixture, she rinses it with warm water, pats it with towels and lays it flat in bright sunshine.

Nicholson also is a fan of sunshine to bleach and dry linens naturally, but she uses Sunlight bar soap to gently rub soiled areas, then pours hot water through the stain before laying the garment out to dry.

STORING VINTAGE LINENS

--Redgrave recommends an old practice of rolling linens around a tube, often covered with a cotton print, to deter moths from nesting in creases. Nicholson rolls hers in soft white cotton sheets.

Place lavender sachets in the tubes or between the layers.

You can also store pieces in acid-free tissue, available at craft stores. Never store linens in plastic, which encourages mold.

HOW TO USE THEM

--If you find a linen item you love, but it is not in the best of shape, do not pass it by. Torn seams and holes can be darned; a stain can be hidden with a clever fold; a large piece can be cut and the salvaged remnant made into a pillow or mounted under glass.

Use vintage lace-edged sheets as curtains, bedspreads, even room dividers.

Put embroidered hand towels in powder rooms. They serve well as wine glass towels, too. Have a tailor make them into little pillows or baby quilts as gifts, if you do not sew yourself.

LEARN MORE

--"The Book of Fine Linen," Françoise de Bonneville's in-depth look at the history and range of household linens, was recently re-published in English by Flammarion (2011). Full of lively stories, information and images, it is an excellent resource for anyone interested in collecting or learning about the subject.

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http://images.salon.com/wires/allwires=/2011/09/16/D9PPR4DO3_us_fea_homes_fine_linens/index.html