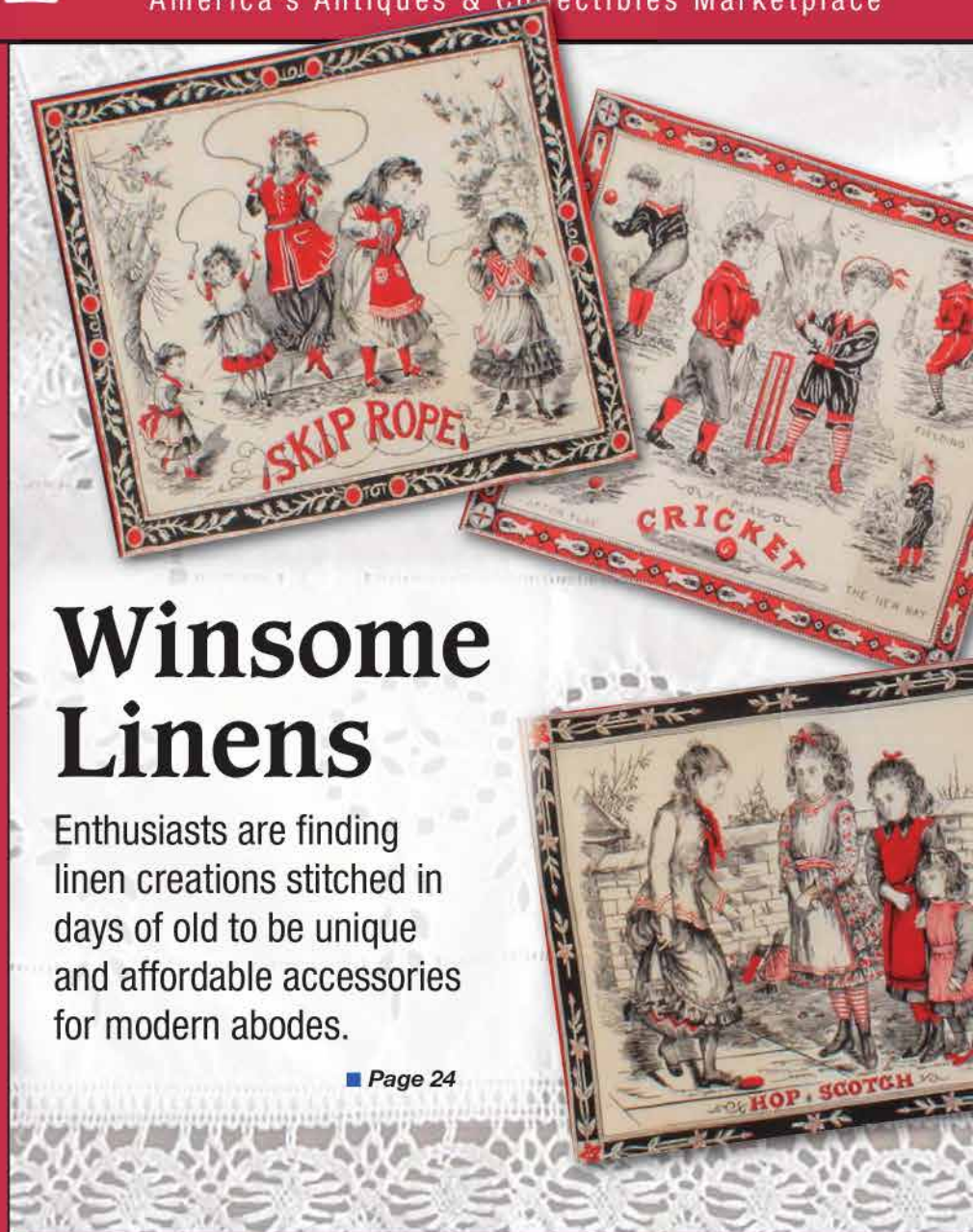


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## Winsome Linens

Enthusiasts are finding linen creations stitched in days of old to be unique and affordable accessories for modern abodes.

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*Vintage cotton runner, featuring classic French-patterned eyelet embroidery, edged with Cluny lace, 17 inches by 38 inches, Circa 1930s. Photo courtesy The Highland Lace Company, <http://highland-lace.com/>*

## Provenance brings vintage linens to life

Melody Amsel-Arieli

In days of old, girls wove and sewed a lifetime supply of sheets, dish towels, hand towels, napkins and tablecloths for their dowries. These treasured linens, however humble, were traditionally laundered twice a year, then sun-dried over bushes, near river banks or in fields.

By the 19th century, bed and household linens had become far more decorative, reflecting wealth and social standing. Bed sheets, coverlets and pillow cases, for instance, frequently featured ribbons, pleats, cutwork, lace, drawn work or elaborate embroidery. Tablecloths, tea towels, napkins, doilies, antimacassars and piano scarves were also embroidered or edged with lace. In contrast, handkerchiefs, once confections prized exclusively by rich and royal or as convenient, foldable, printed-silk textual aids for travelers or soldiers, were now within reach of all. Everyone tucked inexpensive, machine made ones in purses and pockets.

Anna Halley, the owner of The Highland Lace Company based in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, finds that collecting Edwardian and Victorian linens is currently very popular. Pieces that can be incorporated into modern lifestyle are most collectible.

Heavily embroidered, late 19th century pillow shams edged in frothy lace, for example, currently cost between \$75 and \$100 apiece. Very fine lacy bedcovers in top condition command between \$200 and \$450. A set of crewel-work bed curtains (curtains arranged on frames around beds to insure privacy and protection from drafts) may run as much as \$500.

Tambour lace curtains, pure white to deep cream, airy creations featuring embroidery worked through fine mesh, are also very desirable. A set in perfect condition, perhaps intended for a French Nordic or Shabby Chic-style home, may fetch up to \$2,000 at auction.

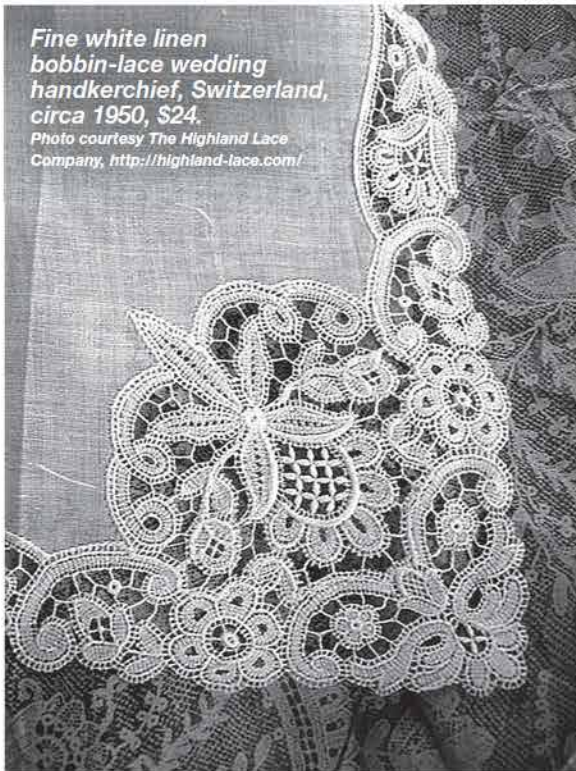
“Monogrammed linens, each a min-

ature work of art, also sell out fast,” observes Halley. “Since they were highly valued, they were usually handed down,” she adds. “Women traditionally had linens embroidered with their initials (leaving room for those of future spouses) as identification. This was because they were part of their personal wealth, that went with them on leaving their family homes.”

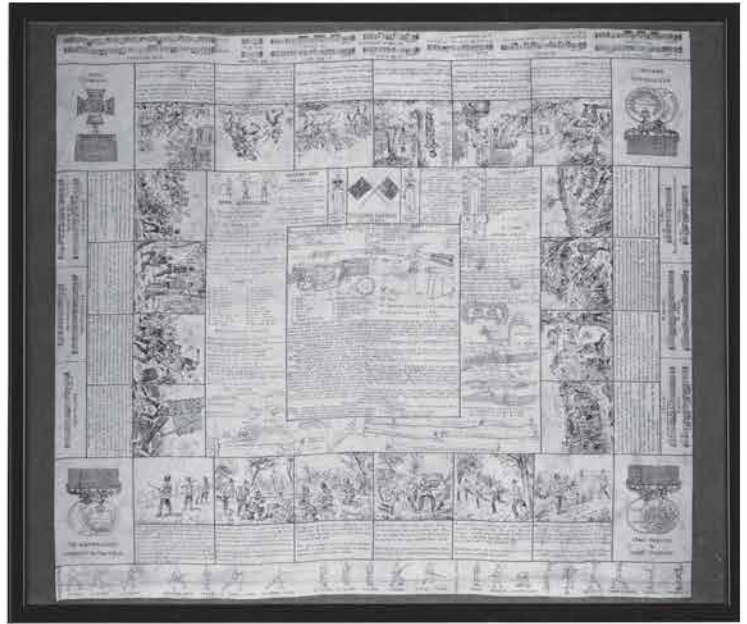
Everyday items, like dish and tea towels, might be marked with utilitarian red cross stitches. Fine bed linens, on the other hand, might feature exquisite white-on-white embroidered monograms.

If a number was embroidered near a monogram, it may have signified a household linen inventory system. Wealthy homes and chateaus kept extremely detailed logs showing where each piece of linen was, even while they were being laundered.

Prices vary. Monogrammed linen bed sheets, depending on their size and quality, currently range between \$75 and \$200



*Fine white linen bobbin-lace wedding handkerchief, Switzerland, circa 1950, \$24. Photo courtesy The Highland Lace Company, <http://highland-lace.com/>*



▲ *Convenient, foldable, printed-silk handkerchief depicting useful maxims for soldiers, England, 18th century, 22 inches by 26 inches, sold for \$555 in 2014. Photo courtesy Sotheby's*



◀ *Collaged pictures transferred, embroidered, then hand-quilted on scrap fabric, backed with circa 1960s-70s vintage bed sheets. Photo courtesy Jill Cockerham, private collection*

▶ *Hand-embroidered linen textile with embroidered corner tassels, circa 1920, 8 feet, 4 inches by 4 feet, 10 inches. Photo courtesy Melissa Levinson Antiques at [www.1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com)*



each. Table linens, due to the popularity of “Downton Abbey,” the acclaimed British drama television series, are also in vogue. A 12-piece set of giant (26-by-26-inch) monogrammed napkins (or lapkins as they have become known) commands between \$125 and \$175. Yet monogrammed handkerchiefs, a great way to start a linen collection, are often found for \$10 or less at estate sales, antique stores, flea markets or thrift shops.

“Collecting these decorative initialed pieces can be absolutely fascinating,” says Halley. “With a bit of sleuthing, whole

family histories can be tracked by one monogrammed initial!”

Indeed, determining the provenance of any vintage linen — discovering whom a piece belonged to, and where and when it was created — adds greatly to its value. It also brings it to life.

Vintage tablecloths and runners, especially soft, fine weaves in prime condition, are also desirable. Because most were seldom used, then passed on to heirs, huge quantities of attractive ones have survived. Newer, lower-end table cloths and kitchen textiles — well-loved, well-

used — are also widely available. Even when slightly yellowed, faded, pin-holed or frayed, their floral, fruited or whimsical printed or embroidered themes can add charm to contemporary homes.

In fact, many collectors actually prefer slightly damaged, less costly vintage linens, because they can be repurposed into imaginative creations. Some collectors, after repairing or cleverly concealing imperfections, transform vintage sheets into attractive curtains, pillow shams or dresser scarves. Some turn tablecloths into napkins, aprons or chair covers.



◀ *Linen lace doily, circa 1910, 47 inches, \$225.*

*Photo courtesy Anthony's Fine Art and Antiques at [www.1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com)*

▶ *Printed handkerchiefs of children playing skip rope, cricket and hop scotch, circa 1870, conservation mounted and framed with UV Filter Glass, 40 1/2 inches by 17 1/4 inches, in remarkable condition, \$2,000.*

*Photo courtesy M. Finkel & Daughter at [www.1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com)*

Others trim lacy coverlets into doilies, skirts, shawls or sashes.

Additional projects might include covering lampshades with hand or tea towels, creating table cloths from handkerchiefs, turning quilts into table runners or dresser scarves, or fashioning cosmetic or gift bags.

Even if vintage linens are very distressed, craftspeople can often salvage attractive scraps of lace, embroidery, monograms and cutwork, highlighting them in wall hangings, evening bags or on articles of clothing. Wedding and lingerie designers frequently seek appealing pieces as well, to inspire or enhance their creations.

Jill Cockerham, a self-styled “maker of repurposed goods” based in Weaverville, North Carolina, creates one-of-a-kind pieces from repurposed pre-1970 linens found in thrift stores, estate sales and Goodwill clearance stores. “The apparel and textile art I make,” she explains, “reflect a personal philosophy of zero waste that defies fast fashion and disposable culture. I juxtapose graphics, logos and color into items full of personality and humorous feminist undertones on vintage linens. I also work a lot with vintage tea towels, table cloths, table runners, bed sheets, doilies, embroidered bits and vintage ‘cutter’ quilts, ones that though seriously worn, feature areas still in great shape. I cut around damaged areas, appliqué over them, or, if they have small holes, I emphasize the beauty of their worn look.

“Repurposing these handmade items from the past,” Cockerham adds, “also honors the tradition of women’s work, sewing circles and ways that women created functional items from scraps, clothes and a little thread. And it is the perfect way for me to honor my mother, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, who were all sewers, quilt-makers and artists in their own ways. Each piece of clothing that I assemble from vintage linens is a wearable collage with a unique, tactile story to tell.”

Cockerham wears her own creations, and markets them in stores, craft shows and online. Visit her at [www.restitchwear.com](http://www.restitchwear.com). ■

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*Melody Amsel-Arieli is an Israeli-American freelance writer whose articles appear in collecting, genealogical, and historical magazines across the US, UK, and Canada. She is the author of *Between Galicia and Hungary: The Jews of Stropkov (Avotaynu 2002)*, and *Jewish Lives: Britain 1750-1950 (Pen & Sword 2013)*. Visit her at [www.amselbird.com](http://www.amselbird.com)*

