

Vintage tablecloths are more than just table covers

I can't remember seeing the surface of my grandmother's dining room table (I believe it was mahogany, but I wouldn't swear to that). Every time I visited her, whether for a family dinner with added leaves to accommodate my grandfather's large family or for just a casual drop-in snack (French fries and Coca-Cola in greenish glass bottles), she always had a cloth on the table.

Those cloths were not fine linens: They were what we now call mid-century vintage tablecloths. In the meantime, I have come to realize that those tablecloths are quite special in their own way.

The other day, I chatted with Jimmie Bucci, president of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club. Is there any way to enjoy these cloths other than on tabletops? I asked. And, as it turned out, there are.

Jimmie and many of his fellow collectors seem to have taken the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. With tablecloths that are not making it onto the dining room table, there are other non-invasive ways in which they can be used, according to Jimmie. He suggests folding them to use as runners or scarves. Think dresser tops and buffet tops, coffee tables and accent tables.



Above: A small chair can be given a makeover with one tablecloth and one clip – no sewing required. Photo courtesy of Jimmie Bucci

VINTAGE STYLE

BY BARBARA BEEM

Furthermore, with careful folding, tablecloths can be transformed into window valances. And members of the club, who “meet” online, have reported basting favorite cloths to backings and using them as bed coverlets. Or just fold a favorite cloth and place it at the foot of the bed.

Most creative, in my mind, is Jimmie's folding a cloth onto a smallish upholstered side chair, thereby making something of a slipcover, no cutting or sewing required. This, he adds, is particularly fun to do on a seasonal basis to match holidays.

But then there are the “cutters,” the tablecloths with faded designs, holes, and tears. (Confession: Jimmie has never, ever cut a tablecloth, mainly because he claims to have no sewing ability). Even so, those seemingly useless examples can still have a place in the home of a tablecloth aficionado. The obvious is to rescue them from the ragbag and repurpose them as pillow covers and shams. But that's not all. Clever folks have taken advantage of the strong graphic nature of these cloths and have framed portions that are particularly attractive (I think this is my favorite idea of all). Similarly, pieces of tablecloths can be trimmed out and sewn together to make a quilt (also pretty intriguing, in my mind). Kitchen curtains and “sheers” for glass doors announce that vintage tablecloth lovers live in this house, Jimmie said.

Super crafty people have reclaimed other cloths that are far gone and transformed them into tote bags. Talk about wearing your collecting obsession on your shoulder! And then there are those who, with varying degrees of success, use the fabric, often of a high quality, for constructing children's clothing, blouses and vests. And here you thought tablecloths were only good for the dining room table. . . To paraphrase the Mary Poppins song, “It's a jolly holiday with Jimmie.”



Above: This memory table, spotted at the Westminster Antique Mall in Maryland, is a charming way to honor a special person. Photo by Barbara Miller Beem.

Right: Jimmie's coffee table is, as he noted, “all dressed up.” Members of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club seek to make the world a cozier place, one tablecloth at a time. Photo courtesy of Jimmie Bucci

Some other thoughts:

I spied a memory table on a recent foray through the Westminster Antique Mall, and I thought this might be the answer to two problems. First off, it's a solution as to what to do with a brown butler's table that's not in great shape and has no real place in a modern household. Secondly, this is a great way to display a selection of special letters and greeting cards, as well as photographs, pressed flowers, hankies, old report cards. . .the list goes on. Make one in honor of your own Mom or Grandmom, or assemble your own mementoes and give a table to a young person to serve as a reminder of your life.

And finally, Julie Robbins of Replacements Ltd. reminds us to pamper Mom on Mother's Day with estate silver pieces such as a bon-bon dish or compote, which she can use for her jewelry. “Or indulge her with estate jewelry.” I give all Moms permission to share this suggestion with their families.

Barbara Beem welcomes suggestions or questions about using antiques and collectibles in decorating. You can reach her bbeem@antiqueweek.com



Above: A tablecloth-turned-valance can make dishwashing a bit more pleasant. Photo courtesy of Jimmie Bucci

Circa

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trunk? Obviously, the woman could find a much cheaper tote to store those Legos in; but she wanted something that would also make a statement in her home. Cost was not an issue; the only thing that mattered was that she liked how it looked and that it was the right size to store Legos.

A woman wielding a tape measure was shopping in another antique mall and she was looking for a sign that had to be a very specific width to fit a spot above her stove in her newly remodeled kitchen. She looked at a vintage Pepsi

sign priced \$75 and made-in-China faux barn wood signs with “homey” sayings on them priced at \$10. She didn't care whether what she was buying was old or new. She just needed something the right width with an “antique look” to fit that specific space. Sadly, none of the signs in this shop were just right and she moved on, tape measure in hand.

The good news is, people are shopping for things in antique shops. Those of us who grew up in the trade in the 1980s and 90s might not understand this type of buying. But, that's OK. What is important is that either one of these women could have purchased the item they needed in any big box store. Instead, they chose to shop vintage.

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