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Sewing with Velvet

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What is velvet? Velvet is fabric woven as a double cloth with an extra set of warp yarns woven between the layers to create the velvet pile. The layers then are cut with a knife to form the pile. The background fabric may be plain, twill or a satin weave. Velvet originally was made of silk. Today it is more often made of cotton, rayon, acetate, nylon, polyester or a blend of these fibers.

Patterns

Because of the soft body and drape of velvet, consider simple classic lines of dresses, vests, jackets, coats and skirts with a minimum of darts, seams, buttonholes and topstitching. Decorative details get lost in the pile.

Preshrink

Preshrink the fabric best suited for the fiber content. For finished garments that will be dry cleaned, hang uncut velvet over a shower rod and fill tub with hot water to steam the fabric. Allow to dry before touching the fabric. You can ask the dry cleaner to preshrink the fabric. If finished garment will be machine washed, preshrink fabric by washing and drying before cutting.

Layout/Cutting

Make any fitting changes on the pattern before laying out and cutting. Ripped out stitches leave marks. Determine the direction of the pile you will use. You can cut with the pile running up or down. Velvet feels smooth with the nap running down toward the hem. The fabric looks lighter, smoother and shinier. It feels rough with the nap running up from the hem. The fabric looks deeper and richer. It depends on the look you want. Chalk mark the direction of the pile on the wrong side of the fabric. Use a "with nap" layout for cutting. Place fine pins in seam allowances of pattern with wrong side of fabric up or use lightweight fabric weights. Cut pattern pieces using a single layer of fabric cutting in direction of the pile. Velvet slips when folded. Remove pins as soon as possible to avoid marring the pile. Cut facings from lightweight woven fabrics such as lining fabrics, cotton or silk.

Marking

Transfer essential markings on the wrong side of the fabric using chalk, tailor tacks, marking pens or snip the notches. If marking on the right side, use silk thread.

Interfacing

Use lightweight sew-in interfacing. Examples include: silk organza, cotton batiste and good-quality muslin. If a ridge shows at the edge of the interfacing, pink the edges to have them blend better with the pile. Avoid fusible interfacing as the heat and pressure needed to apply them could crush the pile of the fabric.

Needles

Start with a new needle. Depending on the weight of the fabric, select size 60/8 to 80/12.

Sewing

Set the stitch length at 2 to 2.5 mm or 10 to 12 stitches per inch. Use a good quality cotton or polyester thread. The challenge of sewing velvet is to keep the two layers of fabric from slipping and sliding. Experiment sewing seams with fabric scraps on the lengthwise grain that are at least 10 inches long. The following are suggested ways to keep the layers of fabric together:

1. stitch in direction of the pile,
2. loosen the upper tension if the fabric puckers,
3. try a narrow zigzag stitch set at .5 mm and 10 to 12 stitches per inch,
4. decrease the pressure on the pressure foot if there is uneven feeding,
5. use an even feed or roller foot,
6. change to a round-hole throat plate if you have one for your machine,
7. pin baste with fine pins, or needles placed at right angles to the seam allowance,
8. baste with a diagonal basting stitch,
9. hand-baste with small stitches, back stitching every few stitches,
10. hold fabric taut while sewing, and
11. try stitching with strips of tissue paper between the fabric and feed dogs and/or between the fabric layers.

Stop stitching every 3 to 4 inches, raise the presser foot to allow the fabric layers to relax, then lower presser foot and resume sewing. Repeat as needed. Add additional basting when sewing velvet to a slick piece of fabric and sew with velvet on the bottom.

Seam Finishes

To keep the fabric from raveling consider overcast seams, pinked and stitched, zigzag or multi-stitched zigzag, bind with sheer nylon bias tape, use the Hong Kong binding method, or serge each seam allowance separately. Pink the edges if the garment is lined.

Pressing

Never touch the iron to the velvet. Use a low iron setting, but set so steam still will be produced. To keep the pile from being crushed, use a velvet needle board, a Velvaboard which is a synthetic velvet pressing board, a thick terrycloth towel or a large scrap of velvet placed over the ironing board. Steam from the wrong side of the fabric. Gently finger-press seams open. To avoid seam impressions use a seam roll or a seam stick. Before handling, allow the velvet to dry completely.

Hemming

Finish the edge of the hem using the Hong Kong finish, sheer nylon bias tape, or by serging. Hand hem using a blindstitch, blind catchstitch, or catchstitch. For heavier velvets, double stitch the hem by hemming the first row midway between the edge and fold of hem and the second row at edge of the hem. For a soft hem, interface the hem with a bias piece of cotton flannel.

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