

FIBER FACTS



Linen Fabrics... Timeless Look and Luster

What is Linen?

Linen is a natural cellulosic fiber derived from the flax plant, *Linum usitatissimum*. Since it is made from the stem of the plant, it is considered a “bast” fiber (as are jute, hemp and ramie).

Linen samples have been found in the remains of Swiss lake dwellings dating back some 10,000 years. In ancient Egypt, the use of linen is commonly documented in tombs, in pyramid inscriptions and in other monuments. The burial wrappings of the Egyptian kings were also made of linen cloth.

France is the major producer of flax. It is generally agreed that the best linen fiber comes from Normandy (northern France), Belgium and The Netherlands. Though China is a major producer of linen fiber, the quality is not suitable for high end textiles. Linen textiles woven in China commonly use fiber from France or Belgium.

Linen fiber is soft and lustrous. It is somewhat stronger than cotton. When wet, the fiber becomes as much as 40%

stronger. Linen has little elasticity, which is why linen fabrics have a tendency to wrinkle easily.

Linen Stylings

Like cotton, linen is found in many different styles. It can be left in its natural color, bleached, dyed or printed. Linen can be transformed into a complex velvet construction or appear as a simple woven.



Textile designers value linen’s strength and luster and often blend it with other fibers—especially cotton and polyester—to enhance the characteristics of all the fibers.

Linen fabrics can also be finished by various washing methods, giving a somewhat fuzzy surface and softer hand. Calendering creates the popular “glazed” linen fabric.

Natural Linen

Linen is often seen in its natural (unbleached, undyed) color, ranging from light cream to grayish brown. In this form, cellulosic browning can occur if water or water-based substances are introduced. This browning is caused by the high amount of lignin in the fiber.

Natural linen often contains unrefined “straw-like” fibers, which are visible in the yarns. These fibers have a tendency to get darker with age and can even become unsightly. In some cases they can make the fabric feel scratchy and uncomfortable against the skin.

Dyed Linen

Cellulosic browning is generally not an issue when linen fabric has been dyed because much of the lignin is removed in the dyeing process.

Although all dyed linens can bleed when wet, dark-colored linens pose the most risk. For this reason,



selecting a dark colored linen for a piece that may require a lot of cleaning might not be the best choice as it could look lighter or “faded” over time. Pre-testing for colorfastness in the selection process and before cleaning is always a wise idea, especially if the fabric will come in contact with a lot of moisture.

Linen Velvets

In a velvet construction, linen creates an especially elegant and lustrous fabric. One problem specific to velvets in general, however, is the tendency to develop shading, based on the crushing of the fibers.

Because they are so lustrous, linen velvets are particularly susceptible to this type of shading or light reflection. Regular brushing with a velvet brush can help minimize the problem.

Glazed Linen

When linen is put through a calendaring process, the fabric surface becomes somewhat glossy. The effect of this “glazed linen” is reminiscent of the polished cotton fabrics that were common many years ago.

All glazed finishes are considered “semi-durable.” They are dulled by day-to-day use. The finish can also be affected by cleaning, especially with water-based methods. Cleaning by a professional is a must.

Maintenance

Linen is durable and long lasting when given the proper care. Flipping and rotating cushions, damp dusting, vacuuming, timely cleanings and a quality fabric protector can extend the “like new” appearance of linen fabrics.

Cleanability

Most linen fabrics are labeled with the “S” cleaning code, which means solvent clean or dry clean only. Unfortunately, dry cleaning will not remove water-based spills or heavily-soiled areas on linen fabrics. However, the majority of linen fabrics can be cleaned with water-based methods by an experienced upholstery cleaner who understands fine fabrics.

A few of the natural linen fabrics, because they can tend to brown with water, are truly “dry clean only.” Also, fabrics containing linen in a pile construction (velvet, chenille, etc.) need to be cleaned with the utmost care. Linen in pile form can

lose its resiliency when moisture is applied, causing the nap to flatten. This condition may not be correctable. Pre-testing is essential on these types of fabrics.

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