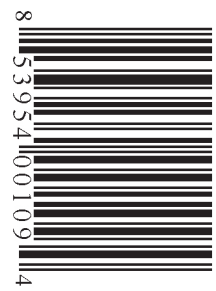


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Vintage tablecloths: More than a kitschy collection

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

The house has been thoroughly cleaned and the halls have been decked. The menu was set weeks ago. And the china, crystal and flatware are ready to go. Time for a holiday meal. But for many hosts, the most important question still remains: Which tablecloth shall grace the table? Will it be a new acquisition or a sentimental favorite? Matching napkins? Aprons? Most importantly, will red wine be served?

In the case of those who collect vintage tablecloths, every day is a holiday. For no special occasion, they glean through their collections, select one that strikes their fancy, and display it. "My table is always set," said Jimmie Bucci, president of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club, which was formed in 2002. "There's always something on the table - in the kitchen and the dining room." With the club's stated mission as "making the world a cozier place, one table at a time," would you expect anything less?

One thing about diehard vintage tablecloth collectors is surprising, though. Despite the fact that the focus is on cloths made in the 1930s through the early 1970s, the business of the club and the interaction between its members (with few exceptions) is conducted almost exclusively online. On a regular basis, more than 100 members stay in close contact, sharing their triumphs, answering questions, and seeking to learn more. The vast majority of the members are collectors, not sellers. The club has never hosted a national convention, although the possibility has been discussed and, for now, rejected. Otherwise, it's strictly tapping away on a computer that keeps them connected. Even the club's "Christmas party" is online, including the reveal of their "Secret Santa" exchange on a LiveChat session.

Members of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club turn to the website for three reasons, according to Teresa Stone, current secretary of the club. First, there's a listing that includes reliable resources. Then there are the forums where members can connect with each other ("there are many fascinating threads there," she noted, pun unintended). Many collectors keep private files on their research; there appears to be a free sharing of information among the members.

And lastly, there's the database, established in 2009 and closely monitored, with 1,631 (and counting) different vintage tablecloth patterns having been documented, each one once owned by a club member, and all accompanied by an image of the entire tablecloth, a close-up view of the identifying design motif, and a documentation of the label (which might include information such as size, fabric contact, manufacturer, and pattern name or number). Nearly 300 manufacturers have been identified, as well as 18 designers. Stone, a self-declared "label nerd," agreed that the importance of the database cannot be overestimated.

So what is it about vintage tablecloths that stirs such passion?

The beginnings are rather simple. For the most part, these vintage tablecloths were made in America (although some collectors focus on linens made in Ireland and England, as well as Sweden and Germany).

The manufacturing process was not elaborate, as rolls of fabric were machine printed (although some labels inaccurately suggest that the cloths were "hand printed"). The sides of the cloths, the selvage edges, were left "as is," but the beginnings and ends were finished with small stitches on 1/4-inch hems.

Research by dedicated club members indicates that companies relied upon a number of designers; even though their work is unsigned, many of them are recognizable because of their distinctive style, including Luther Travis, who outlined his designs in black.

Collectors are also drawn to tablecloths with whimsical designs and themes. Sometimes, "it's beyond belief," according to Stone. "Pink corn?" she asked rhetorically. Bucci echoed this sentiment, discussing the "out there" designs that have caught his eye over the years, including one cloth that featured chickens with a serving tray of egg dishes ("Who thinks of that?").

Other cloths, of course, are more traditional in design, Bucci continued. Springtime blossoms with flowered cloths on the table, followed by beach themes for the summer. Come fall, the designs include leaves and pumpkins, turkeys and acorns. And in the next few weeks, his tables will be sporting poinsettias, bells, and candles. All too soon, "Night Before Christmas" themes will be replaced with New Year's Eve cloths, complete with images of party masks, confetti and noisemakers. Or maybe even "months of the years" cloths. And so it goes.

In the beginning, the cloths were made to cover small kitchen and dining room tables, as well as card tables for bridge games. Consequently, the cloths are a bit on the small side for today's tables, but collectors do not seem to mind and deal with the size issue in a variety of creative ways. Not surprisingly, larger cloths are often considered more valuable than their smaller counterparts.

Other factors that affect pricing include unexpected colors (color schemes of pink, purple and turquoise "drive the prices up" on Christmas linens, Bucci noted). And, of course, condition is important, although a small yellow spot or snag might be overlooked. Tablecloths are considered to be in "mint" condition when never used and bearing an original paper label in addition to a sewn-in tag ("poor" is the lowest rating). "It's amazing how many cloths you find at yard sales that were never used," he commented. "Many of them were kept in a china cabinet or hope chests." Both Bucci and Stone noted that it's always exciting to find a tablecloth bearing its original price tag. "When I see one that sold for \$1.79, I wonder why they didn't buy 10," Bucci laughed.

Souvenir cloths are highly sought after, he continued. Some states are "almost impossible" to find, including South Dakota, Montana, Alabama and Arkansas. Examples from Washington, D.C., are relatively bountiful, but those from neighboring Maryland and Virginia are not. Longtime vacation destinations, such as Florida and California, are easy to find.

"Some cloths are for eating, some are for decoration," Bucci continued, "but we like to use our tablecloths." It's not unusual to find a member's house with tablecloths used as valances, dresser scarves, bed covers, or runners on side tables. "We get creative."

Which leads to the question of caring for these vintage linens. The quality of the vintage cloths make their care relatively easy, but do not

SEE TABLECLOTHS ON PAGE 16



Above: Vintage tablecloth collectors welcome Thanksgiving, a holiday centered around the table. But they know that Christmas is just around the corner.

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Tablecloths

FROM FRONT PAGE

machine wash rayon or shiny metallic tablecloths, Stone warned. To dry or not to dry is a personal preference; when carefully line dried, or gently dried on the “permanent press” setting, the cloths can be smoothed and ironing may not be necessary. “The cloths were originally intended for casual use,” she reminded. On the subject of care, Bucci agreed that ironing is “the big drawback.”

But these fun kitschy cloths “set the mood. They’re conversation starters,” the president concluded. “Young people are intrigued by them. They’re obsessed with the graphics, and they look upon them as art.”

Many club members, though, agree that they are obsessed for another reason, as defined by Clare Dunn, a “fellow sufferer.” She wrote, “Our obsession has been diagnosed!! – Tactile Textile Disorder (TTD): A little known syndrome characterized by the uncontrollable urges to acquire and hoard vintage tablecloths, tea towels, hankies, and other textiles for the purpose of petting them. Left untreated, TTD leads to full blown Textilosis (our disease), an all-consuming love of vintage tablecloths and textiles. In addition to hoarding and petting, victims of textilosis display other chronic symptoms and behaviors, such as forming online support groups, writing and reading books and articles about the objects of their

Below (Top): New collectors should not be scared off with the thought of ironing cloths, as the older fabrics require little more than smoothing.

Below (Bottom): Vintage tablecloths were originally meant to add color and style to informal dining, but today, they are the object of many collectors' affections.



Above: Vintage tablecloth collectors can enjoy their collections, one (or two or more) cloths at a time. There is always a cloth on both the kitchen and dining room tables at Jimmie Bucci's house.

Right: The question isn't so much “what's for dinner?” as it is “which tablecloth shall I use?”

obsession, festooning their homes with tablecloths, spending inordinate amounts on stain removal products, openly dealing in textiles and even traveling to fraternize with other addicts under the guise of conventions. Happily, there is no cure!”

For your information:

Some of the choicest tablecloths sold in the last few months include:

Souvenir of Oklahoma, 33 by 40 inches, cowboys, symbols of Native Americans and a drawing of Will Rogers, a few age spots, \$275.

Geranium-themed cloth with bold red colors, 50 inches square, mint, \$195.07.

Souvenir of South Dakota, 30 by 38 inches, \$145.



Right: Boughs of holly are not the only thing to decorate the halls with. . . collectors enjoy their vintage tablecloths year around.

Spring cloth from Wilendure (post 1958), “Apple Blossom,” mint with tag, \$125.

English hunt scene tablecloth, damask, with horses, foxes, steeplechases and country scenes, complete with napkins, measuring 68 by 82 inches, \$100.

This represents the most desirable of tablecloths, but careful shoppers can begin a collection for \$7 to \$10.

For more information visit www.vintagetableclothsclub



Above: 'Tis the season to be jolly, as reflected in the cheerful traditional patterns of these Christmas tablecloths.

Below: Some collectors get creative with their cloths, using them to cover spaces over than their dining tables.

