

PATCHWORK BAG

NEEDLEWOMAN AND NEEDLECRAFT, NO. 20 (UNDATED, WARTIME)

The war was the big project, but women were busy at their needlework against all the odds, and despite shortages of fabric and threads. This was proving to be hard on readers who wrote away to magazines for the kitsets and transfers they needed for their projects, which also provided income for the magazines. A knitting and needlework supplier in Newcastle upon Tyne advised, 'We regret that, under present conditions, we have been compelled to close our Post Order Department, and cannot avoid the disappointment which this will give to our many valued customers.'

Instead of confident advertisements for sewing equipment, this copy of the magazine had one for a renovation service which advised, 'We turn and re-model coats and costumes just like new.' By 'turning' they meant unstitching the garments and making them up again, inside out, so the fabric looked new.

Now was a time when a woman's rag bag or basket would be essential, as new fabrics were needed by the armed forces ahead of civilians, and even old household rags were coveted for the war effort: they could clean guns. Against this background, patchwork came into its own, as women recycled pieces of worn-out garments and soft furnishings.

This project makes up into a useful kind of bag, one that could be a small evening bag at a pinch, as it might have been in wartime, or used to keep jewellery in. I used small fragments of 1930s and 1940s rayon crêpe that I can never bear to throw away; these fabrics can be hard to sew, but their colours somehow always look good together. For the second bag — I got enthusiastic — I used mainly 1950s and 1960s cotton scraps, which were much more straightforward to deal with.

YOU WILL NEED

a piece of light fabric, about 45 cm by 25 cm, to use as a foundation for your patchwork
small pieces of fabric from your rag bag, ideally including quite a bit of black,
(as it will hold the thing together visibly)
sewing cottons to match your fabrics, and also black sewing cotton
thickish cord, ribbon or thin buckram, about 1 m
stranded cotton, in many colours, to go with your fabrics
a bodkin, for threading your ribbon or tape
light fabric lining, the same size as your foundation fabric

METHOD

Cut scraps of fabric into pieces roughly 7 cm square, but don't be fussy about the shapes. Place these onto your thin backing fabric, arranging them until they make a composition that looks right to you, mixing colours and patterns. Turn all the overlapping edges under a little way, but leave alone any edges that won't be seen when it's made up. Pin these into place, then tack them loosely onto your backing cloth, which has to be completely covered, with no gaps. Hand-stitch the turned edges down in matching thread, to make miniature hems. If some of your fabric is a bit too thick, as mine was, you'll have to hand-stitch the edges without turning them under. Press, and remove the tacking. (I ended up leaving some tacking stitches in place. They

looked okay.) Embroider decorative stitches as shown, then machine-stitch parallel lines in black thread over the whole thing diagonally in two directions, leaving about 3 cm between the rows. Fold the work in half, and sew up the bottom and the side seams on the wrong side, rounding off corners at the base, and stopping short about 8 cm from the top. Trim any excess fabric before you turn the bag right side out and press. Turn the top (the 8 cm) in about 3 cm and stitch down, leaving a gap big enough for cord or ribbon to pass through easily. Turn holes at sides inward where the ribbon will go and hand-stitch to secure. Thread the cord through the top opening, joining the ends and hiding the join inside the seam. Line the bag in the usual way.

DANGERS

The small suggested size of the patches makes things tricky if they are made of reasonably thick fabric, like some of my vintage crêpes. As these were uneven-sized patches, I embroidered around them with stranded embroidery cotton after completing the black over stitching. The second time, I made bigger patches and used cotton, which was much easier to work with. It was also easier to make the bag in two halves, I realised, leaving both sides open at the top in the end to thread a double thickness of tape or ribbon through. You then knot the ends together and hide them inside, or join them neatly with small stitches, the way your mother did with your gym shoes bag — as I suddenly remembered.