The Three Rs: Reclaim, Reuse . . . Really

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sustainability, reclaim, recycle, conservation

Concept. Reusing textiles has been practiced in many previous times and cultures due to their value and/or scarceness. My father told me that his mother made after-school clothes for her five children out of empty flour sacks (Anderson, ca. 1960). This was a common practice in rural America until the mid-20th Century (Adrosko, 1992).

Currently there is a growing sensitivity to the responsible reuse of materials in many fields: electronics, paper products, as well as the textile industry. Today the motivation is not in the scarcity of raw materials but in reduction of waste (Woolridge, A. C., Ward, G. D., Phillips, P.S., Collins, M., & Gandy, S. 2006; Gardetti, 2015), especially among consumers of fashion products (*Investment Weekly News*, 2017).

This project purposed to reclaim and then reuse textile products that would otherwise have been discarded. The thread and printed muslin used to make small (6" by 12") flour sacks were repurposed to make a woman's long-sleeved jacket.

Aesthetic Properties and Visual Impact. The colorful screen-printed labels were harvested and treated like quilt patches. After being attached end-to-end into two long bands, the *visual repetition* of their *shape* and *contrasting colors* achieved *unity*.

Process, Techniques, and Execution. Twenty-two flour sacks were deconstructed; then their fabric and thread were reclaimed for reuse. The lengths of thread ranging from 20" to 24" were steamed to remove the crinkles that resulted from months positioned as stitching in the sacks. The rectangles were attached with double rows of topstitching using the reclaimed thread. A topstitching needle with a large eye was used to accommodate this thick thread.

These rectangles of contrasting colors (orange and blue) were connected to form long bands: ten patches were connected vertically with one patch in the center of the band turned 180 degrees to emulate an epaulet. An external sleeve header was made from the instruction side of the flour sacks to hold the long band perpendicularly to the floor as it ran over the shoulders. Two labels were attached back-to-back and were used to make the convertible collar.

Cohesion. New textiles commensurate in colors and textures were combined with the reclaimed fabric and thread. Together they were redefined: The jacket base was made from canvas and adorned with the recycled flour sacks. From modest textiles was born a modern aggregate.

Design Contribution. Fashion is known to move in cycles. This design adaptation serves to illustrate true recycling through reclaiming textile entities that would otherwise have been discarded. Recently much attention has been given to textile recycling but many times what is reused was not truly a candidate for recycling in the purest sense. These flour sacks are usually discarded and end up in the land fill; this project provided a realistic alternative to that fate. Although not completely new, it is a return to rural community practices of the previous century with modifications appropriate for the present.

References

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