



“Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional.”

~ Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*

The Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* is about appreciating the imperfections. It’s an important term to embrace, not just in daily life — imperfection is part of the human condition, after all — but also when sewing and crafting, as there will always be mistakes in anything handmade. You might accidentally sew the fabric pieces upside-down, there may be puckering along the seams, your embroidery stitches might be crooked and the cuddly teddy bear you make may end up looking more like a fire-breathing dragon! But could these “mistakes” be blessings in disguise? Would anyone other than you even consider them as faults?

Wabi-sabi also reminds us that nothing is permanent. By mending and repurposing old clothes and fabrics, you embrace the signs of age and prolong their longevity. As garments start to show the signs of wear and tear, why not make a feature of the



With sewing skills, you can repair your favourite garments and repurpose fabrics that you love to create something new.

Perfectly imperfect

With simple tools and salvaged fabrics, you can sew and create beautiful things. Just remember: imperfections are all part of the handmade charm.

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mends — to highlight, not hide, the imperfections? And, when the garment is beyond repair, the material can be salvaged and combined with other fabric remnants to make a quilt. Clothes and fabrics destined for the bin can have a new purpose and can create something comforting, functional and beautiful again.

Imperfections can be viewed as unique characteristics of handmade

items. You just need the right perspective. With a bit of a positive spin, mended garments have “customised detailing”, wonky quilt blocks are “pattern modifications”, crooked stitching can be “naïve embroidery” and fabrics salvaged from old clothes are “retro treasures”.

Wabi-sabi is a gentle reminder to forgive ourselves for making mistakes and also to be mindful of fabric waste.

Crafting with your wabi-sabi glasses on and making something by hand with what you have at hand offers other economic, psychological and environmental benefits, too.

MENDING

Creative thinking solves problems; creative stitching solves and beautifies problems. Mending is the act of repairing garments and can not only

restore clothes and furnishings to their original condition but make them better, courtesy of your own creative flair.

Visible mending is a way of showcasing the wears and tears as decorative features. For example, darning with contrasting coloured threads, covering holes with fabric patches in clashing or complementary colours and prints, or attaching crocheted or fabric appliqué motifs to damaged areas will restore life to has-been textiles while embracing the principle of wabi-sabi.

Textile designer Allison Dey Malacaria from SweaterDoll (sweaterdoll.blogspot.com) grew up in the American South and Midwestern farm country. She learnt her sewing skills from mostly Depression-era women whose “make do and mend” philosophy has inspired her sustainable sewing practices. Her work is low-

tech, using simple and few tools, mainly focusing on small hand-stitched projects for children and the home.

“I sat in the kitchens of the older women as they mended and sifted through the ‘rag bag’ and traded off fabrics and scraps,” she recalls of learning her craft. “There was a great necessity to use what was at hand as fabric stores were limited and money was carefully budgeted. Sewing and hand-stitched decoration was meant to make ordinary life more beautiful. I love to darn socks, patch clothing and linens and cover holes in jumpers with Swiss knit designs.”

Dey Malacaria especially likes to make a feature of the mend — like a torn vintage tablecloth, which she repaired with stitching in a conspicuous thread colour. “I love that the tear shows it was well loved and much used and also the delicious technique of

the visible darn, which shows a skill of historical significance,” she says.

Textile artist Mandy Pattullo (mandypattullo.co.uk), author of *Textile Collage*, also has sustainability at the forefront of her mind. She repurposes old and disintegrated materials into new fabric art pieces, garments and wall quilts. “I cut up old quilts, unpick them, darn and construct new textile collages, usually embellishing with simple embroidery and traditional appliqué,” she says.

During this process, Pattullo explains, she sometimes finds hidden treasures. “It is rare to find old quilts that have been darned but, if the surface has become too rough and unusable, they are often covered up with a new patchwork. It is exciting to unpick and peel back the layers of a quilt and find an older quilt within. I love that a piece of textile is passed along — used by one person, recycled by another, given to someone else — so the textile has a long life and doesn’t end up in landfill.

“I think it is important to love what we have already and prolong its life, rather than buying something to replace it. If you have a dress that you really love, then patch it up and keep wearing it.”

BORO

Running in the same vein as *wabi-sabi* is *boro*, a traditional Japanese way of mending textiles. In *boro*, you apply fabric patches to sections of garments that are damaged/threadbare/ageing and secure the patches in place with *sashiko* stitching, a decorative running stitch. The combination of patches



Boro purse by Jane MacDonald.

Photography Getty Images



and sashiko stitching reinforces and strengthens the fabric while adding interest and creating a textural collage.

Jane MacDonald is the owner of Australian company BeBe Bold (bebebold.com), which specialises in Japanese textile patterns, kits and supplies. MacDonald travels to Japan at least once a year to source materials and around the globe to teach workshops. Of her work, she says: "I am inspired by the aesthetic of Japanese cultural traditions, of the beauty in the simple and imperfect, particularly the heritage of Japanese textiles like boro.

"Boro is not a style or technique; it is a way in which clothes would have been historically salvaged and given new rigour by adding cloth and stitches to them. There is a lot of creative freedom in this work: you are really able to choose whatever colours, shapes and fabrics you want to create your own distinct look. It is a wonderful way of giving new life to discarded patches or garments, including old shirts. Any textile can be reused and re-created for a new use."

REPURPOSING FABRIC

Boro is just one way of salvaging odd-shaped leftover pieces of fabric. These



Ready to get crafting? You don't need new or expensive materials to make a start; sewing requires few tools and limited supplies.

seemingly useless bits of material can be reinvented in many different ways — as cushions, bags, quilts and garments.

Mandy Pattullo says, "I have come to a stage in my life when buying more and more doesn't give me pleasure. I do not want to buy new but use what I

already have. I like that I can transform something that's old and worn and would possibly be discarded by most people and turn it in to something special — a contemporary heirloom." She heads to charity shops, flea markets, vintage fairs and her family's wardrobes for worn-out clothes to use in her art pieces.

Allison Dey Malacaria shares this love of repurposing, but initially relied on the good nature of her neighbours for her raw materials. "When my best friend and I were making our first quilts, we ran out of fabrics at home and scoured the neighbourhood, begging for old clothes. Our parents were mortified when they found out but we can still point to some of the squares in the quilt and say, 'That was from Mr Benton's Bermuda shorts,' and things like that. It's a good laugh now."

These days, she finds what she needs in op shops. "I can find a metre or more of delicious linen as a woman's dress, for example, at the op shop for under \$5. I also make dolls from jumpers," she says. "I don't know if I'm reducing global textile waste but I do avoid buying new if I don't need it, which lessens the demand — at least by one person. In my own workspace, I have reinstated the 'rag bag'. When I buy a linen blouse from the op shop, for example, I cut all the seams off and save all the fabric, even the narrow strips of collars and cuffs. Even the smallest pieces can be used in small zakka-style patchworks [this style,

"I love that a piece of textile is passed along — used by one person, recycled by another, given to someone else — so the textile has a long life and doesn't end up in landfill."

again courtesy of Japan, combines different fabrics), as mending patches or decorative appliqué."

MAKING MISTAKES

Sewing is a tool used in occupational therapy as it's conducive to mindfulness and relaxation. However, if you're stressing about the mistakes you make, you may miss out on these therapeutic benefits. The key is to not let mistakes get you down: they are opportunities for some lateral thinking and may even turn out to be the best bits.

"Mistakes in handmade works are symbols of individuality, learning and not taking things too seriously," says Dey Malacaria. "I am not exempt from wanting my work to be perfect and seen as professional but at the same time I revel in the uniqueness of each handmade piece I make. The work will never be perfect but the whole of the work — mistakes and all — is a tactile diary of my time, my love and my enjoyment. I really, really, really don't think of them as mistakes. They are

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the nature of the beast. To allow them, accept them and marvel at the beauty of their individuality gives me a happy, stress-free attitude. That is an attitude I can take into the rest of my life."

She recounts one of her most embarrassing mistakes, when she was making her daughter an ET doll. "We had to leave her ET doll behind when she was a child in a cross-country move and I decided to design and make another one for her for Christmas when she was 24. I was talking on the phone with her while I was sewing the face into the head and, when I was done, I realised I had sewn it on upside down. This meant ET's heart-shaped face was actually pointed on top and now had odd jowls. I just couldn't bring myself to rip the whole thing out and start over as I felt it would stress the fabric too much. I just finished the doll and gave it to her as is.

"She couldn't have cared less. She was so delighted I had remembered and made her a replacement almost 20 years later that it is one of her most-prized gifts. She doesn't see the mistake; she sees the love. I think the point of mistakes is it's only ourselves who judge them to be so."

MacDonald agrees. "Some of my mistakes have produced some of my favourite works," she says. "It is all a process of discovery and some of it will work and other bits won't, but try to enjoy the stitching process and the creativity that working with textiles can open up to you."

GETTING STARTED

Ready to get crafting? You don't need new or expensive materials to make a start; sewing requires few tools and limited supplies. "There is such a hype these days that to do anything new we need an arsenal of supplies, which means a lot of money spent," says Dey Malacaria. "And, as we know, most of us have high hopes to learn to do something new and then we find all these unfinished projects and mountains of supplies stuffed way back in the closet or in the garage.

"This is definitely not necessary with beginning hand-making. The simpler the tools, the more likely it is that budding hand-makers will not only complete a project but also take the time to enjoy the work itself. Hand-making, unless you find yourself completely immersed in glassblowing or jewellery making, starts with a few



SEWING PROJECTS FOR BEGINNERS

Some of the most elegant yet simple projects begin with vintage embroidered linens, says Allison Dey Malacaria. "Lavender bags can be made by cutting out an 11cm square from the embroidered or printed area and sewing this to an unadorned square (wrong sides together), leaving a small gap. Once turned right side out, they can be filled with lavender and then the gap can be stitched closed. They can be given as a lovely gift or placed in wardrobes for moth control and a gorgeous scent.

"The same technique can be used to make stuffed Christmas ornament shapes or decorative accents to hang from doorknobs. Vintage linens are easily found in every op shop. But I recommend not spending more than \$2 or \$3 each. Vintage printed tablecloths can often be found for about \$5. It doesn't have to be costly. Another easy project involves T-shirt yarn. I'm a basic-level crocheter but I crochet rag rugs for the kitchen and bathroom and soft frisbee toys using yarn made from T-shirts (see above)."

tools and a handful of materials from which to make marvellous things."

Whether you take inspiration from traditional Japanese crafts, the desire to relax, the need to save money or the satisfaction of making something uniquely your own, sewing has so many tangible and intangible benefits and bonuses to offer. So enjoy the sewing process, embrace the humanity in your work and see the beauty. Pop on your wabi-sabi-tinted glasses and create. 

■ *Feeling crafty?* Australian Homespun and Quilters Companion's new online store *Cosy Project* has a library of hundreds of patterns and step-by-step tutorials on quilting, embroidery, crochet, knitting and more. Visit cosyproject.com.

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BORO TUTORIAL

The Japanese boro process involves using pieces of scrap fabric and rows of running stitch. Jane MacDonald shares the steps in making a boro piece, which can be used for bags, jackets and more. This patchwork and stitching method can also be used to repair textiles.

1 First you pick your design: a bag or a garment perhaps. Make sure you cut the base fabric a little bigger because,

with all the surface stitches, it shrinks. You can stitch in any direction and the stitches can be as long or short you like. You will find your own rhythm.

2 You can use any threads you like — double thread, single thread, thick thread. I tend to use sashiko and crochet threads. Also an idea to think about is that by changing the colour of the threads you can make bars of colour. It is a really striking look.

3 Choose a base fabric that's thin. I generally use a Japanese muslin called sarashi but any fabric that's thin, like an old sheet, would be perfect. Place all of your chosen fabrics to cover the base fabric, overlapping and arranging them until you are happy with how it looks. Tack them in place, then stitch as you like. I tend to stitch in straight lines but it is entirely up to you. Some people have their stitching rows close; others stitch with their rows far apart. Once you have completed your sashiko stitching, take out the tacking, place and pin the pattern onto the stitched fabric then trim back.



Boro work in progress by Jane MacDonald.