

Portia's designs are born from the latest trends, fabrics and shapes.



PATTERNLESS PERFECTION

As much as we love working from patterns, we can't help but feel the pulling power of freehand fashion. We speak to advocates of this growing trend to find out why going patternless is so irresistible.

Written by Judy Darley.

One of the joys of sewing is being able to create the beautiful clothes we covet without having to spend a fortune or contribute to the disposable fashion culture that's taken hold in recent years. Imagine, though, if you could take that a step further and recreate any garment you glimpsed or thought up without the need for a pattern? It sounds a little too good to be true but, in fact, with a bit of courage, patience and play, it's entirely attainable. This issue, four freehand fashion fans let us in on their top tips for mastering the art of patternless sewing, and how they first came to fall under its spell.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

First things first, having rock-solid sewing skills in your repertoire will really help as you step

away from the safety net of sewing patterns.

"Using patterns for a long time made me very familiar with how clothing is constructed, which helped me to better see finished garments as all of the parts that make up the whole," says Rachel Humbrecht of Made By Hand (www.madebyhand.blog). "It's pretty easy for me now to look at a piece in the store and break it down into what pattern pieces would be used to make it."

Laura Alice (www.lauraalice.co.uk) fell for patternless sewing while taking a Fashion Atelier course and recently collaborated with the ethical textiles company Offset Warehouse on a workshop draping eco fabrics into garments. She started sewing from a young age, thanks to her mum and nan. "It was in the family, but also I just naturally took to it and decided I wanted to proceed further with it."

Patty Young, author of *Patternless Sewing Mod Style* (www.modkidboutique.com), has been dabbling in patternless making for almost as long as she's been sewing. "Ever since I started sewing, I've always tinkered with simpler designs that require no patterns, such as gathered skirts made from a large rectangle of fabric, or simple shirred tops with spaghetti straps," she says. However, for Patty, sewing with a pattern definitely came first. "When I started sewing I was primarily using German indie sewing patterns. Those were all the rage back then and they really helped me develop my skills. Once I became more confident, I started tinkering with developing my own clothing designs, and the patternless ones just seemed like the easiest progression."

This isn't the case for everyone, however, as regular *Simply Sewing* contributor Portia Lawrie (www.makery.uk) reminds us. "I didn't learn to sew 'properly' until much later in life," she confesses. "But even when I was a child I knew how to hand-stitch a hem and insert an elastic waistband. I guess you could say that my first experience of sewing was patternless. So to revert back to that once I had some proper sewing skills under my belt seems pretty obvious now I think about it!"

If you already know some basic stitches and have a good grasp of construction, seams, darts and so on, it will make your patternless sewing adventures run all the more smoothly. To build your confidence, practise on a variety of fabric scraps to get used to different textures and weights, and you'll be ready in no time. A decent sewing machine will be your best friend in this scenario!

Portia also uses her freehand fashion skills to transform existing patterns.



CHOOSE YOUR METHOD

Figuring out how to fit a garment together can be a bit of a jigsaw puzzle, and you might find it simpler to sketch the item and all its different components before you pick up your needle and thread. You don't need to be a great artist to find this useful – it's just a tool to help you transfer your ideas into the real world. Rachel is a fan of this method. "I've always been fond of drawing, so I do lots of sketches before starting up a project," she says. "I also use Pinterest a lot to find similar pieces that have parts I want to include in my garment. If it's a particularly intricate piece, or it uses a new technique that I am not familiar with, I run a muslin sample after sketching."

Sketches are also Patty's process of choice. "My desk is basically covered in scratch paper with sketches of clothing designs," she says. "Sometimes I'll draw them on a napkin when I'm at a restaurant or wherever inspiration hits. I just sketch as they come to mind." Portia, on the other hand, starts by sketching a rectangle on graph paper. "That's kind of how I see a basic pattern piece – as a rectangle that represents half your front/back body with sections cut away or added to create the shape of a garment. I plot out the shape of the garment I'm trying to make using that rectangle as my starting point."

Paying attention to the garments you love to wear will help you to understand how

they're constructed. Turn them inside out and examine seams and other construction elements. You might even want to take some apart, lay out the individual parts flat, and put them back together again, just as a wannabe engineer might dismantle and rebuild a toaster (but less annoying for your family!). Rachel discovered the joys of sewing without patterns when she was in high school. "I always saw clothing that I liked in stores but didn't want to spend a lot of money on them," she says. "I started trying to recreate the clothing I wanted with fabric that my mother

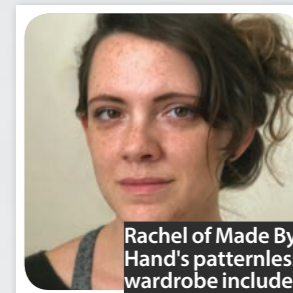
had in her stash, as well as using old clothing for material." This latter detail is perfect for honing your patternless sewing ability, using the process of deconstructing

garments to learn from them, as well as allowing a lot of trial and error – the best way to learn is by daring to make mistakes!

JUMP IN AT THE DEEP END

Completing your first patternless make is a proud moment, even if it doesn't turn out exactly as you hoped. "The first thing I ever made without a pattern was a tank top out of a men's XXL T-shirt," says Rachel. "I wanted the tank top to be fitted, so I had to make the sides curved, which was a bit challenging."

Portia's first experience of patternless sewing was somewhat more experimental. "I was about eight years old and decided

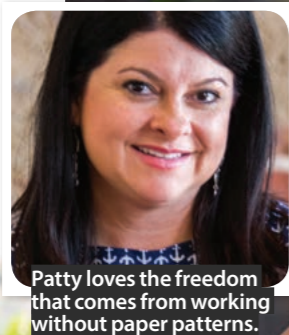


Rachel of Made By Hand's patternless wardrobe includes garments stitched up in both fabric and yarn!



Portia Lawrie is a pro at dreaming up patternless makes for the magazine.

Skirts, tops, jumpers, floaty dresses... your imagination is the only limit when comes to going patternless.



Patty loves the freedom that comes from working without paper patterns.



Patty is a fan of how quick patternless sewing can be: "I loved how much faster it went because you didn't have to cut a paper pattern first."



Photos: www.modkidboutique.com



I wanted a skirt," she remembers. "I wrapped a piece of fabric around myself to get the size, sewed it together to make a tube, added an elastic waistband at the top and then sewed the hem at the bottom. Et voilà, my first patternless project! Of course, I could barely walk in it, but the eight-year-old me didn't care about those minor details."

Patty's book came about following the release of her series of Mod Kid Boutique mini-patterns. They "were basically patternless designs. This forced me to think outside the box and create more intricate designs without actual pattern pieces. Those patterns were such a great hit that I decided to write a whole book based on the patternless sewing concept." Patty's favourite design is the Kimono Style Robe, which is also available as a single PDF pattern. "I adore it because at first sight it doesn't look like a patternless garment, but it's made from a series of rectangles cut based on your body measurements. The way they're sub-cut and then sewn together creates such a flattering look!"

The first patternless garment Laura made was an assignment as part of her Atelier course. "I made a green dress using draping on the stand and fabric manipulation," she says. "It required so many hours to get the dress complete, and I was really pleased with it." The project didn't go totally smoothly, however. "The night before the deadline, I asked my friend to try on the dress and she couldn't get her head through the neck hole. I was devastated!" The mistake was a great learning curve for Laura. "From then on,

functionality has always come first. Can you get your head through the neckline, can you move your body, can you get in and out of the dress and can you lift your arms? If you can't do that, there really is no point!"

A SENSE OF FREEDOM

Returning to patternless sewing as an adult, Portia was immediately impressed by the relative speed, ease, and simplicity of it. "Patternless projects can be incredibly complex and very skilled, but the simple ones are my favourites," she says. "When you're first learning to sew those are great characteristics in a project. It's a great confidence booster to be able to whip up a wearable garment independently of a pattern – it's kind of empowering." Certain elements of it are trickier than others, Portia warns, so keeping things simple is wise. "Armholes, shoulders and necklines for tops, and waistline and hips for trousers, are the key foundations to get right," she says. "I tend to steer clear of set-in sleeves or shaped armholes on patternless makes, and instead go for simple slash armhole openings or kimono-style sleeves."

Rachel has similar feelings about how empowering and exciting it can be to venture into the world of patternless. "The first thing that struck me was the absolute freedom and creativity to make anything I wanted," says Rachel. "That changed the way I shopped for clothes because I was always looking for ways I would alter store-bought clothes to make them more personal to my style." Rachel finds newsletters for online clothing shops a rich



Patty's book includes 24 fun and thrifty patternless garments for women and girls.

source of inspiration. "I'll very often see something in my inbox while having my morning coffee and save it to Pinterest as an idea for making something similar for myself," she says. "I also do a lot of window shopping. I often try things on in a store that I'd never think of buying just because I want to see how the garment looks and fits on me."

Speed was part of the attraction for Patty. "I loved how much faster it went because you didn't have to cut out a paper pattern first," she explains, "And I love how easy it is to make things to fit your specific body shape because you're basically cutting out the pieces based on your own measurements, which is a huge plus in my mind."

Laura finds the entire process of patternless sewing creatively satisfying, from the initial idea to sewing the last stitch. "Draping on the stand, and creating the final piece straight away, allows you to see the design changing in front of your eyes," she says. "You know the garment is fitting perfectly as you go along, and you're working with the fabric, not against it, to create shapes that sit beautifully."

FACING UP TO CHALLENGES

When going patternless, things won't always turn out perfectly, but that's just part of the challenge. On the flip side, you're far more likely to end up with something that suits your style, personality and measurements. "Store-bought clothing often fits me a bit off," Rachel explains. "I try and recreate items in a more flattering way, so the fit of the piece gets most



of my attention. I love being able to recreate expensive pieces in my own style, and coming up with originals that you can't find in stores."

Laura recommends imagining the fabric as a cylinder that wraps around the body. "In between the cylinder and the body there are gaps, so you need to remove volume to create fit," she says. "This is known as suppression, and includes darts, seams, pleats, tucks and gathers." The trick is to get rid of the excess, "but in a flattering and attractive way."

The number one rule that all our sewists

"DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRY SOMETHING NEW OR MAKE A MISTAKE - IF IT DOESN'T WORK OUT, TRY AGAIN."

agree on is to start your project with an accurate set of measurements. "A detailed set of body measurements is key to have on hand," says Patty. "Sometimes it's best if you ask someone else to take these so that you're not bending your body to see that number on the measuring tape." It's also wise to allow yourself a generous seam allowance, just in case your fabric decides to misbehave, or you change your mind about the style.

"It's challenging when you want the fabric to do a certain thing and it won't move or hang in the way that you want it to," Laura says. "And once you have cut into the fabric,



Laura Alice regularly runs patternless sewing classes including a collaboration with Offset Warehouse on a sewing workshop draping eco fabrics into garments.



you're limited by those cuts, which is going to be a problem if you change your mind!"

Portia advises us to figure out how much ease we like in a garment. "Use your existing clothes as a guide to shape and size when marking or cutting your fabric," she says. "It's better to start too big than too small. Baste it and try it on as you go and it should all work out fine!" Quite simply, it pays off to be brave. "Don't be afraid to try something new or make a mistake – if it doesn't work out, try again," says Patty. "I love to experiment with new ideas, fabrics and techniques. That's what's so fun about sewing this way!"

Successful patternless sewing takes a bit of nerve, but it's definitely worth it to create finished garments that are entirely individual to you and your style – not to mention all the new dressmaking skills you'll pick up along the way. "Fashion is a large part of my self-expression," says Rachel, "so being able to express my style exactly the way that I want to is liberating." And, if you decide that you don't like how your patternless project has turned out, the beauty of no-pattern sewing is you can just deconstruct it and transform it into something completely new and totally you!

Photo top left: www.modkidboutique.com; Photo top right: www.lauralice.co.uk and www.offsetwarehouse.com