

***Reconstructing
Clothes***
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Miranda Caroligne Burns



Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Reconstructing Clothes

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Reconstructing Clothes For Dummies®

Published by
Wiley Publishing, Inc.
111 River St.
Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774
www.wiley.com

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Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2007926404

ISBN: 978-0-470-12767-4

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Author

Miranda Caroligne Burns (San Francisco, CA) has donned a variety of hats in her young years: physical therapist, event producer, community activist, installation artist, author, performance artist, philosopher, and fashion designer. Mentored by her mother, Miranda has been sewing and creating her own clothing since she could hold a needle. Over time she developed a zest for re-use and heartfelt desire for truly unique design. This ethos is masterfully woven together to recall the forms of yesteryear with an otherworldly edge — a philosophy she calls “neoarchaic.”

Miranda’s life has been a bi-coastal artistic evolution. She became active in the alternative arts scene in Boston, where she introduced “living construction,” a live sewing performance piece staged in gallery window fronts.

Relocating to San Francisco in 2005, she quickly emerged as a bright new star in a constellation of provocative artist-designers. Her fashion shows are known for their performance-art quality, embodying political, artistic, and personal statements. These shows include Catwalk on the Wild Side (U.N. World Environment Day Gala “Walk the Talk”), Love Fest VIP Event (San Francisco City Hall), and Maker Faire (Swaporamarama and *Make* magazine). She has also had various individual performance art appearances at Supperclub San Francisco, San Jose Museum of Art, and Burningman.

Meander through San Francisco’s Mission-Deco Ghetto neighborhood and you’ll find Miranda reconstructing in the window-front of her boutique, *miranda caroligne — a living construction boutique* (www.mirandacaroligne.com), 485 14 Street @ Guerrero. You’re sure to be delighted by the local art and design, and step forward with the inspiration to do it yourself!

Dedication

This book is dedicated to you. Yes, you! You are a living, breathing work of art in full construction and reconstruction every day. Shed your fear and take off the blinders. Live fully in truth, clarity, and consciousness. Free yourself of waste and find time for your passion in life. Be inspired by the re-use artists and entrepreneurs in this book. Be an inspiration for others.

Author's Acknowledgments

The rebel in me is pulled to write something unusual but I honestly must express immense gratitude to my parents. Not only did they teach me about sewing and textiles, but also how to create a livelihood from “hobbies.” They never restricted my creativity and exploration of new ideas, even when I cut up my turtlenecks for miniskirts! Still they managed to instill a core ethic of hard work, humanity, and environmental responsibility. Thank you.

Much thanks to the trail of wonderful people who made this book happen: Lindsay Lefevere and Jennifer Connolly, my editors at Wiley Publishing, for your ever-positive spirit, guidance, and advocacy; Wendy Tremayne of Swaporamarama, for sending Lindsay my way; Steven Raspa for introducing me to Wendy (as well as being his inspiring self!); and the folks at *Make* magazine for supporting the Swap and DIY textile arts at their Maker Faire.

Thank you to my fellow artists for ideas, help in the boutique, signature hair-coloring breaks, coffee, and emergency computer aid: Anastazia Louise of Bad Unkl Sista, Dida Cudrnak of Dida Jewelry, Marc Scheff of Dangermarc, Mariefrance of Madusalon, Rachel Hospodar of Medium Reality, Rebecca Vandersteen of Venus Superstar, and Tammy “Tamo” Hulva of Greengirl and Wildlife Works. To Del Greger and Honne Heller; you are the divas of graceful play and I am truly humbled to receive your wisdom, brownies, and old clothes.

I owe my eyes to Loren Earle-Cruikshanks for his photographic genius in making the boring projects appealing and the good ones infinitely better. On the other side of the lens, thanks to Tamara Ja, Amy Leblanc, Lauren Borowski, Chris Ray Collins, and Ocean for your strength of character. Much thanks to the following artists for accessorizing the shoots: www.aikojewelry.com, www.didajewelry.com, www.fluidance.com, www.orelafey.com, www.rengaarts.com, www.venussuperstar.com, and www.zacharypryor.com.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to the people behind the shoot locations: Building Resources and for keeping building materials in circulation of use rather than in our landfills; Jens-Peter Jungclaussen, The Teacher With The Bus, for his veggie oil fueled mobile classroom; artist Nome Edonna for his work in found objects as an artist-in-residence at Sunset Scavenger; artists and all-around exemplary human beings Marcus Guillard, Melvin Occasio, and Chris Ray Collins for creating beauty with the scraps in their own backyard. Thank you for allowing me to share your work with others and to show the variety of ways we can *all* diminish waste for a more sustainable future.

Thanks to my community for being fantastic beings of inspiration and endless support. So many others to thank for their smiles, patience, needles, adventure kidnappings, healing hands, glitchy beats, hugs 'n clown kisses, open hearts, and bright eyes to swim in . . . you know, all that gushy stuff!

Publisher's Acknowledgments

We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

Some of the people who helped bring this book to market include the following:

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Reconstructing Clothes For Dummies

Introduction

The projects in this book all develop from one essential story. Let me illustrate: Have you ever kept a sweater because it had some significant meaning to you? Maybe at one time it carried the scent of a loved one, or it reminded you of adventures you had in Paris? It may have even been passed down from your favorite grandpa. The clothes you wear are an extension of yourself and all that happens to you. The projects in this book are my way of recycling those moments and integrating them together into a new form. Just as we individuals are transformed by these life-altering experiences, our clothes can be a reflection of those transformations as well.

Although reconstructing clothing is a new hot trend these days, I really hope it sticks. I have been chopping up my clothes since I was a kid and have always been showered with compliments from people of all walks of life. In both my commission work as well as my “living construction” live sewing performances, I have interacted with everyone from CEOs to people living on the street. Everyone I come across is intrigued in some way by this concept. Reconstructing existing clothes is an easy and affordable way to customize and individualize a garment to your own special size and style needs. Reconstructing clothes is truly for everyone

Beyond the practical perks of reconstructing old clothing, there are many environmentally sound aspects as well. With every piece you reconstruct, you are helping to diminish waste in a world overflowing with it. On top of that, every time you wear a reconstructed garment you are promoting re-use and sustainable living philosophies to every person you meet and even the ones who just pass by you on the street. While it may seem cliché, it’s true that we never know the full impact we have on this world. Make it a positive one!

About This Book

I think of this book as a group effort. I like to learn something from everyone I meet, and then put my own spin on it. *Reconstructing Clothes For Dummies* is a culmination of my experience up to this point, with so many avenues yet to explore.

This book provides you with the basics of taking things apart and reworking them to yield a brand new look. There are a slew of projects, and oh-so-many more in my head. The project instructions are simplified to provide you with the basics. Honestly it was a struggle for my creative self to keep it as bare-bones as possible for you. But I did this intentionally to allow for your own creativity to rise to the occasion. Part of reconstruction is, after all, making something unique and fully individualized.

I've included a list of decorative variations, either variations to the instructions or decorative touches to finish off the project. The variations I list are just my ideas so please don't think of this list as complete.

Most of the projects in this book require sewing. Whenever applicable, no-sew options to certain steps within the directions have been emphasized. There are also lots of decorative variations that do not involve sewing at all. Additional variations touch on other needlecraft and textile art techniques that you might be interested in exploring further. I encourage you to take this as a platform to spring off of with your own ideas and creativity. Always feel free to expand on the variations with your own personal talents and interests. The possibilities are endless!

Beyond the basics and practical projects, I've plugged in conscious reminders of sustainable living practices. I think it's important to have fun with what you're doing, but also know *why* you're doing it. While Chapter 2 discusses some of the reasons to reconstruct clothing, I've also embedded my own experiences and intentions throughout the book. I don't necessarily just want you to regurgitate my feelings, but I hope to inspire you to look into yourself and figure out your own intentions and aspirations for living a fulfilling life. It won't necessarily change the look of your piece, but will certainly affect how good you feel in it!

How to Use This Book

This book is not meant to be read cover to cover. If you are anything like me, you just don't have the time or patience for that! Personally, I like to figure things out with logical thought and what seems to me as common sense. With that, I completely understand others who work in the same manner and don't feel compelled to read anything more than the directions of their chosen project. While you might be able to swing this, it will make your life a lot easier to take a quick glance through the chapter in which your project is located. While mistakes and mishaps can be fun adventures to lead you in a new direction, they can also be daunting, especially to the perfectionist. I want you to find success in this reconstruction adventure so I urge you to read a bit and learn new lessons from my mistakes rather than having to make them on your own.

If you are a proficient sewer, have a solid handle on textiles and how to care for them, feel free to just dive right into the projects. In doing so, it's helpful to refer to the Part of Tens for some quick tips, do's and don'ts that are special to reconstructing clothing. If you are new to sewing, reconstruction, or just need a refresher, I recommend reading Part I before you begin the projects.

Whenever I talk to people about reconstructing clothes, often a light of realization comes across their eyes. Just about everyone seems to have *something* in their closet that they don't wear anymore but can't bear throwing or giving away for whatever reason. Because of this, I've organized this book by the starting garment. This may be pants, a skirt, or an old favorite sweater. On the flip side, there are before/after photos, as well as a color photo insert for you to check out and choose a desired project. From that point, you can either search your own closet or your local thrift store for the starting garment.

Conventions Used in This Book

In the throes of creation, you can easily lose attention with a tangential idea. Not all of us have the luxury of a private studio or workspace free of distractions: ringing phones, hungry pets, playful children and other loved ones. With this in mind, I've used a few conventions to help keep your mind and projects organized.

- ✔ **Every chapter starts off with care instructions.** This care section often references Chapter 4 for general care instructions, but I note within each chapter individual differences among the garments that are important to take note of.
- ✔ **Every project includes a before photo and ends with an after photo.** The before photo is located after the introductory paragraph of each project, while the after photo is located after the instructions and before the list of variations for that project. Please note that these project photos are for the barebones basic version with no variations. In other words, some of them are ugly. The artist in me apologizes. The teacher in me hopes that you appreciate the clarity. In some cases, some “fix-a-stain” or “making the most of wear and tear” tricks have been implemented to create a functionally sound piece.
- ✔ **Every project includes a list of necessary materials presented in bulleted format for easy reference and check-off.** I confess that I don't use all of these materials. If you are proficient with these tools and feel okay substituting, go for it! If not, it's best to have everything on the list ready to go, and wait to fudge it until you have more practice with reconstructing.

- ✔ **Directions for each project are listed in numbered steps, making it easy to keep your place.** Each step begins with boldface text telling you the general action for that step — the text following the boldface text explains the step in more detail. Feel free to write in this book, make your own notes in the white space and margins, and check the steps off as you go along. This book is for using, not putting on a shelf somewhere to look pretty.
- ✔ **At the end of each project is a bulleted list of variations for that project.** These can be repetitive and in no way include all of the possibilities for decorative variations. I've simply compiled some creative ideas that I tend to use and plugged them into the projects that they work best with. Do not let this list limit you. If you are compelled to try the stripey spray-paint technique on a knit — go for it! Just because it isn't listed in the variations, don't assume that it's not an option. You are always free to try new things as long as you are willing to accept the consequences that it might not turn out so hot.
- ✔ **The projects photographed for this book have been completed with an overlock machine whenever this method is an option.** While I love using an overlock because of its capacity to create the visibly constructed look that I prefer, I in no way want you to feel that you have to go out and buy an overlock just to complete these projects. I chose to use the overlock for these projects so that it was easier for you to see the seams and better understand how things are constructed. It is my primary tool, and thus I must apologize for the horrific sewing on the regular sewing machine. I am not exactly what you would call a good sewer!

Foolish Assumptions

I've assumed a few things about you in writing this book:

- ✔ You are open-minded, creative, and excited to try new things!
- ✔ You are not a complete novice to sewing. While this book provides brief sewing lessons, it is not a “how-to” book for sewing skills. It is about using those skills, as well as a collection of other techniques, in a novel way.
- ✔ You either are familiar with the tools, materials and verbiage of this craft *or*
- ✔ You are capable of becoming familiar with the tools, materials and verbiage of this craft via the Internet, library, local craft/fabric store, and so on.
- ✔ You have heard about reconstructing clothing and want to play around with it in your own personal wardrobe.

- ✔ You want some clear and simple instructions to get you started on reconstructing clothing. You may even have a particular garment in mind already.
- ✔ You live on this planet and care about its future.
- ✔ You're tired of your sweetie's holey T-shirts and underwear and are determined to do something with them besides making them into rags.

Sound like you? Great . . . let's get on with it!

How This Book Is Organized

I have broken this book up into seven parts. The first part includes introductory chapters for sewing basics, deconstructing and reconstructing. The following five parts are organized by the type of garment you are starting with in your reconstruction project. Finally, the Part of Tens is a *For Dummies* staple that provides you with some quick tips to refer to in a pinch.

Part I: Let the Reconstruction Begin! But First . . .

This is the part in which you will find out the who, what, where, when, why, and how about reconstructing. Okay, well maybe not the “who,” because that’s you and you know that already. As far as “when,” well, that’s easy too . . . *right now*.

Part I lays out the basics of this book. In it you will find the reasons behind reconstructing, how to find good stuff to start with, what to look for, where to find it and how to take it apart. Last is a quickie sewing review of the techniques you can use to put it all back together in a new form.

Part II: Shirts: Sluggish to Spectacular

What a better place to start than at the top! This part is all about reconstruction projects you can do with commonplace shirt styles: T-shirts, button-downs, and pullovers.

Part III: Breathing Life into Dead Pants

Pants come in all shapes and sizes, and this part lets you know what you can do with all of them. Jeans are turned into all sorts of creations, while basic slacks and stretch pants find new life in your wardrobe.

Part IV: Salvation for Your Sweaters and Other Knits

Sweaters and knits provide unique sewing challenges. I present these challenges and show you how to conquer them, amid a slew of projects for both cardigans and pullover sweaters. I even include a chapter to help you figure out what to do with those old afghans!

Part V: Skirts and Dresses (re)Done Right

This part is all about revamping old skirts and dresses. I show you some projects for several styles of skirts, that hideous bridesmaid dress, and multiple options for any old dress.

Part VI: Now What to Do with All These Scraps?

If you are a sewer, or just an all-around pack-rat, you likely have lots of fabric scraps taking up space in your life. Being both of these things, I have not only gotten my own collection, but a virtual family tree of scraps passed down from generation to generation. In this part, you can find lots of ideas for lots of different sizes and types of scraps. It includes chapters on home décor projects and accessories for your own personal wardrobe.

Part VII: The Part of Tens

The Part of Tens is a good quickie referral section of this book. Bring it along with you on thrift-store scavenging trips to find out what to avoid. Trust me, after years of perusing thrift stores there are some definite trends and pitfalls, and I've got stacks of them in storage unable to be used but too fantastic to cut up for scraps! It's often hard to say no when you should. Having this book on hand can help you sort it all out. It's also a succinct reference for general tips and clever ways to fix stains.

Icons Used in This Book

These cute little drawings are not just here for your entertainment. They serve to emphasize important points. Think of them as a big flashing sign begging for your attention.



The Tip icon points out just that, tips! Next to this icon you will find additional suggestions for either doing something better, faster or beyond the basics in some way.



Eeek! Forget to read this and you may lose a finger! But seriously, there are some dangers in reconstructing clothing, whether to yourself, your tools or your garment. Read this to avoid injury!



Sometimes we forget, being human and all. This icon points out areas in which this might be common, and helps keep you on track!



There are few projects that can be completed without at least *some* sewing. Many, however, have components in the main pattern and even more variations that can be done without a needle and thread. You can find all of these easily just by keeping your eyes peeled for this icon.



Three cheers for recycling! Saving your scraps from these projects can propel you onto yet another project. This icon is next to every opportunity to do this. It lists at least one suggestion for the particular scrap. The option is always open to use your scraps in any way you choose as long as they are kept in circulation and out of our landfills as long as possible!

Where to Go from Here

While there are a growing number of books with ideas and patterns for reconstructing clothing, I encourage you to explore your own ideas. Think about what is lacking in clothing for you, either in the fit or the style. Are sleeves always too short? Do you love fleece but the styles are always too sporty? Or do you find yourself saying, "I love this top but I just wish it was *<insert adjective here>*." Well find those garments and then plop open the pages to the applicable chapter to find some projects to get started on pronto.

If you're wanting to know more about reconstructing clothes before you begin hacking away at your own pieces, just turn to Part I. This book is a great way to get a hold of some basics and get a running start on inspiration.

My other hope with this book is that it will get you thinking about all sorts of ways you can re-use and diminish waste in your daily life. While the problems of the environment can seem overwhelming and just too much to make a difference as an individual, every little bit helps. Wearing reconstructed clothing is a publicly visible reminder of re-use ethics. It's also a great trigger for conversations about creative re-use. I've included lots of references, especially within the color photo insert, to re-use facilities, programs and individuals: an artist-in-residence program at my local dump, two facilities that sell salvaged building materials (great stuff like antique claw-foot bathtubs!), a revamped veggie oil school bus, and a variety of artists working with recycled materials. These types of things *are* within your reach to take part in, if not establish, in your own community. Your children will thank you.