

Silk Corset

Ann Fisher Rhodes, Ceredigion and Online Guilds

After reading the syllabus for the Certificate of Achievement in spinning, I instantly had an image of making a shot silk corset; I have no idea why, but I knew that it had to be my test piece. When I first learnt to spin four years earlier I had been in awe of a two-tone piece of cloth made from very fine spun wool. One day, I thought, wouldn't it be amazing to make something like that... but quite why it had to be a corset I will never know. A corset needs to be made from yarn that has very specific and demanding tolerances in order to make it a sound cloth which is able to give support and structure.

I asked for advice from the weavers in my local Guild about weaving shot silk, as I have little weaving experience. Also, I contacted a specialist corsetière in France to find out the requirements of cloth suitable for a corset. The corsetière said that it was not important what the material was made from, as long as it was a fine fabric. I made more samples and did more calculations – still far too much to spin. The weavers from the Guild told me that the two-tone shot effect in plain weave was very challenging to accomplish. Not wanting to give up, I calculated how much yarn I would need to spin. A lot... ever such a lot. I hadn't even spun silk before, so the prospect was quite daunting. After some more research I found out that shot silk fabric is usually woven with reeled, rather than spun, silk. Well, that let me off the hook; I now had to find an alternative fine fibre I could spin into a suitable yarn.

I spun samples from ultra-fine Merino, smooth with a subtle sheen, but it was not slick or shiny enough. I tried Bluefaced Leicester (BFL), a lustre wool, but it was still too fuzzy and not lustrous enough. Perhaps a wool and silk mix would suit. The syllabus did not specify that I could not use a commercial top, so, I tried fine Merino blended with silk; Polwarth and silk; BFL and silk. None were quite right.

Although I came up with several alternative project ideas, none gave me that same excitement as the idea of making the corset. It had to be a corset, and a silk one at that!

I spun samples of silk yarn and asked weavers if it would be suitable to weave. The comments were that the thread I had made was too fine. The weaving would involve too many ends and be too big a job; it would take forever to weave. They advised me to go for a yarn thicker than the 24 wraps per cm (60 wraps per inch) I had envisaged. However, the best fabric for the tailor was a fine fabric, with an absolute minimum of 10 ends per cm, especially as silk is so slippery. I realised that I would have to weave the cloth myself, as I couldn't entice anyone to do it for me. Feeling the need to avoid the challenges of two-tone plain weave, I looked at other structures that would give a similar interplay of shimmer and movement between the colours within a patterned shot weave.

The yarn

For a workable fabric the silk had to be firmly spun; I made it 14 twists per cm (36 twists per inch). To speed up my spinning I modified my wheel's whorl to give a ratio of 27:1, although this was still slow going. I treadled so quickly the flyer was invisible and the draught considerable. I had permanently cold feet, so I sat with a hot water bottle on my lap under the silk scarf

I used as an apron. The silk scarf did not attract or hold the fly-away silk fibres like other materials can do.

I spun using a short forward draw with a firm hand to keep the twist in check. With this silk I had to maintain a firmer grasp on the fibres than I normally would use and as such it was a very new spinning experience for me.

Before spinning, I dyed white A1 mulberry silk top using acid dyes in a combination of four colours.



Dyed mulberry silk top for the weft, drying
Photos: Ann Fisher Rhodes

The same four colours were used throughout, but I altered the proportions to give a purple, a pink and the in-between gradient purple for the edge binding. The colours harmonised perfectly. The colour movement in the main fabric would come from the difference between the two strong colours; but the band for the edge binding was to be a tightly woven plain weave.

To bring visual movement to the band fabric I dyed the silk tops from the same colour palette for a purple bias, but with areas of different colour emphasis and shade. I spun and plied that fibre completely randomly and achieved colour variation and movement without blocks of colour or repeats of pattern.

The corset was not intended to be underwear but a fashionable outer layer. The colours therefore were chosen to be deliberately vibrant. Originally I aimed for a variegated and random yarn throughout to add motion and interest, partly because the silk samples I had spun seemed to lack lustre and I wanted to compensate for that. Once I had sampled the weave I realised I hadn't got the effect I wanted, so I dyed more fibre which was still variegated, but much more solid in colour. Thank goodness for sampling!

The fibres were dyed before being spun as I didn't want to risk any problems in the dye bath after such a lot of spinning. I found out the hard way that not all A1 mulberry silk top is the same quality. Silk from one source turned into a stiff board after dyeing, I think because of gum residue; it was almost impossible to draft. I returned to my original fibre source and had no problems thereafter.

To produce yarn to weave fabric for corset tailoring meant quite specific tolerances. I would need a sett of 11 ends per cm (28 ends per inch (epi)) with 2 ends per dent in my 14 dent reed, and a twill pattern meant the yarn needed to be 17 wraps per cm (42 wraps per inch). At that size the yarn is 850 m/100 g, which is what I spun to. As I spun I continually checked the size with a cm/inch wrap gauge and that the skeins were the right count. The skeins were kept to no more than 25 g to avoid any changes through a lack of concentration. Most skeins weighed between 15 and 20 g (see below and right).



Above: Small skeins of purple warp thread



Above: Weaving on the loom, with pink weft skeins and bobbin ready for the shuttle

The yarn for the binding was a different specification. The band needed to be inelastic and firmly woven, but with still enough flexibility to shape around the edges of the corset. I spun finer yarn (1100 m/100 g). This yarn with the same sett (28 epi) in a plain tabby weave would give me a weft-faced fabric with 30 picks per cm (75 picks per inch). I needed 2.4 m of binding and although it was only 30 mm (one and a quarter inches) wide this would be a lot of weaving. To check the yarn, I warped the loom and did a small sample. The yarn stood up to it well and I had no problems weaving it, despite using a high warp tension (see below and right).



Left: Finer yarn for the binding, 1100 m per 100 g. Dyed randomly with the four colours, spun and plied for non repeating colour changes

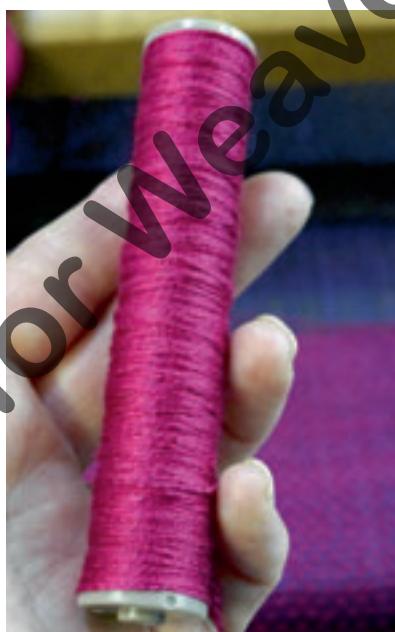


Right: The finished binding, 2.4 m at 30 picks per cm (75 picks per inch), weft faced cloth

The woven sample cloth

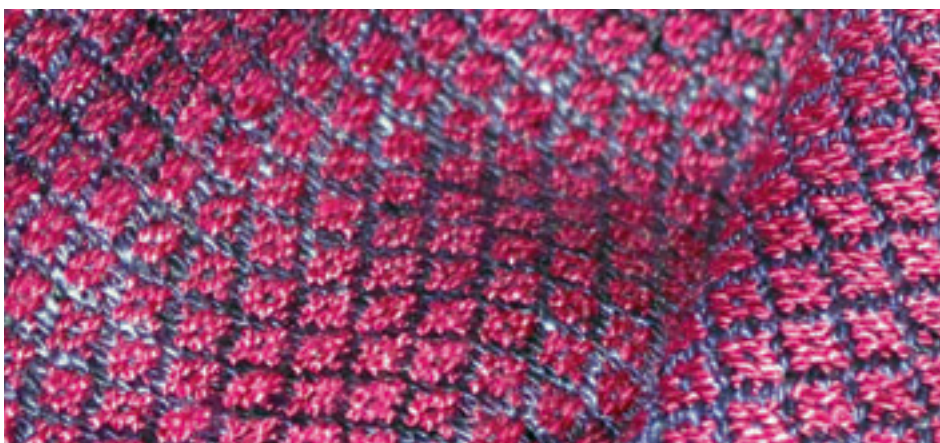
I have always liked herringbone twill and felt that a mini herringbone would be just the right thing for the corset. To minimise the number of warp threads and reduce loom waste I opted for a long narrow piece of fabric. As a result, to get the herringbone pattern moving in the right direction across the fabric, the loom threading would be much more complex. As a novice I felt this gave more scope for errors. A plain zigzag twill would be easier to manage, so I warped up for the sample and wove some zigzag pattern. I discovered the diamond trellis weave by a happy accident with a wrong sequence of lifts. It was not in the pattern book I had and it used a more complicated sequence of lifts. However, comparing the two designs in my sample I decided to use the diamonds. It produced the shimmering interplay between the colours in different light and angles perfectly (see below).

Below: Sample weave to test for patterns and yarn suitability



Left: Pink weft thread

Below: Detail of the finished cloth, wet finished and pressed. Balanced twill 28 epi / 28 ppi



Weaving the sample gave me a good idea of colour and pattern effects, plus it helped me ascertain whether the yarn would stand up to the rigours of being woven and tailored. I had borrowed a 4-shaft table loom, but only for four weeks! Having found that the sample yarn worked I still had to produce enough yarn and weave the cloth for the corset in that time.

When the sample was off the loom and finished I was able to calculate and spin the main yarn based on my results. I was happy with the yarn twist and size, so set off spinning the 7 kilometres that I needed.

I also decided to dye the yarn in more solid and intense colours for the final garment. I was glad I did; the two-tone shot effect is vibrant and the garment all the more striking. When I wear it, I want to be noticed after all my hard work.

The final cloth

The sampling taught me a lot about weaving, mostly about what not to do, and served me well when it came to making the final cloth. There were 522 ends in the cloth, which finished at 45.5 cm wide and 154 cm long, enough fabric for the corset itself including the modesty panel behind the laces and a piece left over for an accessory. The corset was deliberately made with extra size allowance so it will fit me for longer – I am intentionally losing weight.

When I took it off the loom I was very happy with the cloth and lived with it for a few days before taking the plunge and wet finishing it; another delight. Once washed and pressed the fabric really came to life and it was quite an emotional time for me. Knowing that it had to withstand the rigours of being made into a corset, which involves a lot of cutting and sewing, I decided not to treat it too gently. I steam pressed it, which was useful as I was able to assure the corsetière in France that it was safe to use steam to iron out the creases which had developed in transit.

The cloth itself had to be inelastic and firm without being hard so it would flow round the contours of the body, and not so coarse that it would fray as it was cut. There were lots of small pattern pieces to cut and sew. The corsetière was happy with the way the fabric cut and with how it worked up. Although they make a lot of period clothing, it was the first opportunity they have had to use a truly handmade piece of cloth (see below).



Right: The finished corset, tailored by Jane's Wardrobe specialist corsetière

In conclusion

Producing the cloth for my test piece was a life changing experience for me. It has given me the courage to have confidence in my ability, even for new challenges.

Everything about this project was new for me: the dyeing, spinning silk, weaving. Without the incentive and goal of the Association's Certificate of Achievement I would still be dreaming of a truly handmade shot silk corset rather than being able to wear one.

Editor's note:

Ann received a well-deserved distinction for what is a truly outstanding piece of work.

About the author:

A self-taught spinner with an inquisitive mind and technical approach Ann's spinning has always been project led, producing a wide range of different yarns with integrity and suitability for purpose. She dyes, knits and has started to weave. She is a popular teacher, running regular groups locally, and Guild workshops.

www.spinwise.co.uk www.janes-wardrobe.com/corsets.htm