

Fashion Outlook

Goodbye, dry-cleaning

Washable silks mean no more fuss

By Joan Lebow

Silk. Love it and dry-clean it. That's the stand most women take when it comes to this fine and fancy, luxurious-feeling fiber. Once primarily for elegant occasions, silk soon moved into the office with the advent of "power dressing." Now this natural, status-look material has gone casual and washable.

Washed silk garments don't retain the smoothness most people associate with silk. (Silk crepe de Chine, for example, one of the most widely used silk blouse and dress fabrics, is sought after for its sleek, even drape.) Designers say the textures that naturally occur with washed silk are desirable, especially in the newest casual sportswear.

"Customers are attracted to washable silk because they want the texture and surface interest that's in fashion right now," explains Ellen Daniel, vice president of corporate design for Liz Claiborne, Inc.

Claiborne's washable silks will be in many stores by November and December. A Liz Wear silk blouse retails for about \$60. For spring, Claiborne is adding washed and crinkled rayons and even pre-washed linen and gabardine.

Washed silk isn't the only example of the fashion industry's recent focus on texture. Puckered nylon trench coats, nubby handknits and cable sweaters, acid-washed denim, suede shoes and reptile-print handbags and belts all demonstrate how surface interest is at the fashion fore today.

Washable silks are often (but not exclusively) made from fabrics that have a more cotton-like feel than the more delicate silks. This spring, designer Cathy Hardwick uses some lightweight washed silks; instead of "garment washing" those silk designs, Hardwick "fabric-washes" the material before it's cut and sewn.

"The look is still casual, but it doesn't look quite as bunched up and textured," she says.

Tony Lambert, who designs washable silk men's and women's clothes, is pre-washing his fabrics, then garment-washing the clothes. "We tell the consumer to wash the silks in the washing machine, then cool-dry them," says Lambert. "The fabric is great because people love silk, but it's also washable, sensible and economical."

Some manufacturers suggest washed silk can be lightly ironed to look neater. But a touch of unfettered sloppiness is part of the fabric's appeal. Americans are following the Europeans, particularly the Italians, who have taken to washed silk in all

its crumpled glory.

"Garment-washed silk can look pleated or shirred," explains Renee Doumarr, vice president of Kikit, a sportswear company that introduced its washed silks last year. Kikit's garment-washed silks include fashionable items such as oversized tunics and short skirts, which generally re-

tail for under \$100. Coming for spring are Kikit's patterned pre-washed silks.

Silk and colors always go well together, and pre-washed silk retains the vibrancy silk is known for.

"Silk takes color so vividly, we're using orange, fuchsia and turquoise silks," says Danny Noble, another sportswear designer making garment-washed silk fashions.

Noble likes the idea of mixing the silks with coordinating cotton jersey styles to create an interplay of textures.

"If you wear a top and bottom all in silk, it's dressier," he says. "I like to see the silk brights mixed with knitwear for a casual daytime look."

Noble's washable silk clothes, including wrapped ballerina tops, short full skirts and loosely flowing trousers, will be in stores in January and February. Prices are also generally under \$100. Many designers want their washable silks in stores for "early spring" because they see silk as a good transition fabric to perk up winter wardrobes and ease into the warmer season.



WASHABLE silk is hot. Tony Lambert's 100 percent silk creations include a "washer" miniskirt (\$80) and knitted applique pullover (\$100). The designer's silk men's-wear line boasts pants (\$164), knitted tee with roll collar (\$48) and solid cardigan (\$85).

No, this is not a how-to guide for "fine washables," a primer for those patient souls who will hand-wash and damp-iron their dresses, and who have the confidence to remove the inevitable tomato-sauce spatter from that new white silk blouse.

The newest silks are truly "easy care." Designers are turning out care-free, pre-washed silk garments, treated much the same as pre-washed blue jeans. Typically, these fashions are wrinkled and crinkled or just subtly textured all over — with the sumptuous feel that silk lovers crave. And they don't come with a hidden price tag that escalates with every trip to the dry cleaner.

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