

What is LINEN?

Linen is a textile made from the fibers of the flax plant. Linen is laborious to manufacture, but the fiber is very strong, absorbent and dries more quickly than cotton. Garments made of linen are valued for their exceptional coolness and freshness in hot and humid weather.

Linen was sometimes used as a form of currency in ancient Egypt. Egyptian mummies were wrapped in linen as a symbol of light and purity, and as a display of wealth. Today, linen is usually an expensive textile produced in relatively small quantities. It has a long staple (individual fiber length) relative to cotton and other natural fibers.

Manufacturing

The quality of the finished linen product is often dependent upon growing conditions and harvesting techniques. To generate the longest possible fibers, flax is either hand-harvested by pulling up the entire plant or stalks are cut very close to the root. After harvesting, the plants are dried, and the seeds are removed through a mechanized process called “rippling” (threshing) and winnowing.

The fibers must then be loosened from the stalk. This is achieved through retting. This is a process which uses bacteria to decompose the pectin that binds the fibers together. Natural retting methods take place in tanks and pools, or directly in the fields. There are also chemical retting methods; these are faster, but are typically more harmful to the environment and to the fibers themselves.

After retting, the stalks are ready for scutching, which takes place between August and December. Scutching removes the woody portion of the stalks by crushing them between two metal rollers, so that the parts of the stalk can be separated. The fibers are removed and the other parts such as linseed, shive, and tow are set aside for other uses. Next the fibers are heckled: the short fibers are separated with heckling combs by 'combing' them away, to leave behind only the long, soft flax fibers.

After the fibers have been separated and processed, they are typically spun into yarns and woven or knit into linen textiles. These textiles can then be bleached, dyed, printed on, or finished with a number of treatments or coatings.

Applications

Linen uses range across bed and bath fabrics (tablecloths, bath towels, dish towels, bed sheets); home and commercial furnishing items (wallpaper/wall coverings, upholstery, window treatments); apparel items (suits, dresses, skirts, shirts); and industrial products (luggage, canvases, sewing thread).

Because of its strength when wet, Irish linen is a very popular wrap of pool/billiard cues, due to its absorption of sweat from hands. Paper made of linen can be very strong and crisp, which is why the United States and many other countries print their currency on paper made from 25% linen and 75% cotton.

Collection(s)

Silk & Linen