Sew Professional
with Claire Shaeffer

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Claire Shaeffer is internationally known for her knowledge and expertise on haute couture sewing techniques and the author of many books about couture, including the much-loved book Couture Sewing Techniques. Expand your skills and introduce high-fashion finishes into your sewing repertoire by following her step-by-step tutorials. First, learn how to differentiate haute couture from ready-to-wear apparel in Claire’s in-depth article “Stitch to Stage,” which takes an inside look at designer garments. Then follow along as Claire demystifies and clearly explains several couture sewing techniques, including tips for matching a patterned fabric along the center front of a jacket, an illustrated guide to sewing a more flattering and less bulky fly placket and several methods for perfectly balancing a dart to eliminate ridges at the stitching line. These simple yet elegant couture details transform each garment that you sew into an artistic creation to be proud of.

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Couture is the engine that pulls the fashion train. It's the primary vehicle for getting publicity. In France, the term “haute couture” is regulated by the Chambre syndicale de la couture parisienne and restricted to couture houses in Paris that have workrooms with a minimum of twenty employees. (Designers Valentino, Armani and Ralph Rucci are not full members of the Chambre syndicale, but they make couture and are invited to participate in the fashion shows.) In America, any business can describe its fashions as couture. Many French and American designers describe their RTW collections as couture even though they’re actually RTW.

The luxury of couture doesn’t come cheap. There are big differences in the time required to make couture garments versus expensive RTW; naturally, this is reflected in the prices. For couture, a basic skirt requires 40 to 50 hours; a day dress, 70 to 100 hours; a suit, 100 to 150 hours; and an evening or wedding gown, up to 1000 hours. Costs begin at several thousand dollars and may go up to $200,000. RTW costs range from several hundred dollars to $25,000.

Creating Couture
Couture isn’t available in stores. Since each garment is designed and made for the individual who orders it, the differences begin long before the garments are made. Generally, the client selects a design from the current collection, and in many instances, can ask for changes in the neckline or sleeves and sometimes the fabric itself. For special occasion garments, the client may meet with the couturier to plan a one-off or one-of-a-kind design. The client can also tell the vendeuse (salesperson) what type of garments she needs for the season and let the vendeuse make all of the selections.

Once the design is ordered, it’s given to the premier or premiere, the head of the workroom, who will make the garment. In France there are two different ateliers (workrooms): flou for dressmaking and tailleur for tailoring. In Italy, the workrooms are determined by fabric weight. In dressmaking, light- and mediumweight fabrics are used to make dresses, blouses and skirts. Many times they’re soft or
draped designs. In tailoring, wools, linens, cottons and silk suitings are used for suits, tailored dresses and skirts.

**A couture workroom consists** of a few straight-stitch machines and several large tables where the *maîtres* (seamstresses and tailors) sew. The *premier* selects a *premier main* (first hand) in the workroom to make the pattern and supervise the garment construction. The first hand supervises several people who have different skill levels and different areas of expertise to make the design. **A couture pattern is made** by draping muslin on a dress form that’s padded to the client’s measurements. The design is proportioned to fit the client’s body attractively; if the client has an asymmetrical figure, the design is adjusted. To accomplish this, various elements, such as the width of the collar or pockets, are adjusted to improve the illusion of a symmetrical figure. During construction, the garment is fit on the client or on the dress form by the *premier main* and/or *premier*.

**The design itself can be unusual** and/or very complex since there’s no need to consider if or how it can be altered to fit other customers. **Often the fabrics for couture** and RTW are similar in quality, but couture materials are produced in limited quantities, and the couturier sometimes works with textile manufacturers to develop exclusive fabrics. Fabric patterns are positioned so they’re most attractive on the garment. It’s not unusual for fabrics to be cut apart and sewn back together to enhance the design or create special effects. Embroideries are designed and proportioned for each garment and the client’s figure, even though the fabric may be considerable. **Couture designs are made by hand** with an incredible amount of hand sewing. In addition to the hand sewing that’s easily seen on finished garments, all construction marks—stitching lines for seams, darts, pleats and notches—are marked with thread. The garment may be basted several times before being machine stitched. In fact, it’s not unusual for a garment to be completely basted together for the first fitting. After the fitting, the basting stitches are removed and the pieces are laid flat, corrections made, pockets applied, etc.

**Seam allowances are generally wide** and may not be precise widths; sometimes one is very wide and the other is quite narrow. This isn’t a problem since the marked stitching lines, instead of the cut edges, are used as a guide to assemble the garment.

**Manufacturing RTW**

**RTW is available in stores** and can be worn immediately. It’s designed for the manufacturer’s target customer with specific body measurements. It must appeal to many customers, fit a variety of figure types and sizes, fall into a specific price range and reflect the manufacturer’s image.

**From beginning to end**, the cost of RTW is related to its construction and quality. If the proposed design is too expensive to produce as originally planned, the designer must consider ways to lower the cost without sacrificing quality or compromising the design. This is usually done by reducing the number of buttons or pleats, changing or eliminating collars or pockets, or using less expensive construction techniques. A quality manufacturer will never cut sections off-grain to save fabric. **Unlike a couture workroom**, a RTW factory has many different sewing machines: straight stitch machines, blind hemmers and overlock machines. If they manufacture large quantities, they also have button-sew and buttonhole machines and coverstitch machines for knits. High-end manufacturers have a few hand finishers to sew hems, buttons, and hooks and eyes, as well as finish bindings; they rarely have a buttonhole machine. This is the reason why many expensive ready-made designs have bound buttonholes or buttonholes made on a home-sewing machine.

**In RTW**, many techniques are done by machine. Narrow hems are finished with a hemmer foot or machine-rolled hems instead of hand-rolled hems. Linings are sewn in by machine. Some linings are bagged (stitched completely by machine and turned through an opening in the sleeve lining); other linings are finished by hand along a small section on the hem.

**RTW seam allowances are precisely cut** so the raw edges can be matched and the seams stitched without basting. Seam allowances for enclosed seams are only ¼” wide. Narrow seam widths require a little less fabric, but the primary reasons seams are narrow are so they can be stitched quickly and accurately with little trimming. RTW garments have little hand finishing.
Can you look at finished garments and tell the difference between couture and RTW? You can if you know what to look for.

- The label provides a lot of information. Couture labels are always sewn in by hand (A). Most are simple with just the name of the couture house; i.e., Christian Dior, Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent. Some also have a number, which is helpful when dating garments. There’s no size listed, and only more recent garments list the fabric content.

- Seams on RTW today are usually finished with serging. On older garments, pinking or turned and stitched finishes were frequently used. On couture, hand overcasting is used most often because it’s flattest and least conspicuous.

- Better RTW dresses are generally lined to make them attractive on the hanger. Couture dresses are generally underlined instead (B). When made of soft fabrics, they’re rarely lined because it might interfere with the drape of the design. Since the seams are exposed, many think the inside looks unfinished.

- Waistbands on couture skirts and trousers generally have a separate lightweight silk facing, which is hand sewn to the bands with wrong sides together at the upper and lower edges of the band.

- Linings are machine stitched into jackets on RTW. In couture they’re hand sewn, and the fullness at the upper edge of the sleeve lining is not as smooth as on RTW. RTW linings are usually quality rayon or inexpensive silk. Couture linings are usually made from silk and many are made from silk charmeuse.

- The fly-zipper application on RTW is completely machine stitched; the application in couture is quite different. First the fly opening is machine stitched before the zipper is applied. Then the zipper is sewn into the opening by hand. This couture application is easy and you don’t have to worry about breaking a needle when you stitch over the zipper teeth.

- Couture skirts sometimes have two zippers instead of a single long
zipper so they won’t show below the jacket hem.

- Underpinnings, such as corselettes and petticoats, are frequently sewn into couture eveningwear.

- Purchased shoulder pads are used in RTW; in couture they’re hand-made from cotton batting and sometimes oddly shaped.

- Machine stitched buttonholes are never used in couture; instead, buttonholes are hand embroidered even when they’re hidden under fly pockets or on the inside (C).

- On RTW garments, topstitching is usually applied through all layers after the garment edge or section is finished. In couture, edges are topstitched, and then the lining is hand sewn in place (D).

- On RTW, stand collars are cut with a concave curve so they hug the neck. In couture, collars are cut straight, and then steamed and eased into the desired curve. The advantage is that fabric patterns, such as plaids and stripes, are more attractive when shaped into a curve. (See the photo on page 56.)

- Couture dresses with center-front openings often have a very convoluted opening because a button/buttonhole or zipper placket below the waist at the center front rarely looks attractive when you sit. To eliminate this, the opening below the waist is moved to the side seam and the skirt waist is snapped to the bodice between the side seam and center front (E).

- To create special effects on couture garments, fabrics are sometimes manipulated without regard to cost and waste (F).

Claire Shaeffer designs couture patterns for Vogue. The author of numerous books, including Couture Sewing Techniques, she teaches haute couture workshops in Palm Springs, CA.
Lingerie Guards
Lingerie guards control the straps of undergarments to prevent them from showing or falling off the shoulders. They’re also used to control the upper part of the bodice to prevent the shoulder seams from shifting and sliding and the neckline from gaping. Lingerie guards are made of ribbon, narrow silk tubes, seam binding or thread.

Lingerie guards are usually located at the shoulders, but they can be placed at any strategic location. Garments with narrow shoulder straps can have guards at the corners of the neckline on the front and back as well as at the top of the shoulders.

Placement
To facilitate dressing, a snap is always located near the neck edge with the other end of the lingerie guard near the shoulder.

On regular-width shoulder seams, place the lingerie guard at the center of the shoulder seam. For a narrow shoulder strap, place the snap about ¼” from the neck edge. For a wide neckline, place the guard near the neck edge. For cut-away armholes, place the guard nearer the shoulder edge.

Thread Guards
Thread a needle with a single strand of waxed thread.

Sew the snap socket to the garment seam allowance, facing or lining. Sew two or three stitches in the first hole, then run the needle between the fabric layers and bring it out of the next hole (1).

Anchor the end of the thread about 1” to 2” from the snap socket.

Use your fingers to make a thread chain (2). To avoid unattractive dips on the shoulders when the garment is worn, make the thread chain about ¼” longer than the
distance between the socket and the anchored end, but not so long that the chain will show on very narrow shoulder straps.

**Pick up the snap ball;** then insert the needle into the last loop on the thread (3). Pull the needle through to end the chain.

**To fasten the thread** on the snap ball, make several blanket stitches in the hole. Make several backstitches on the last blanket stitch and cut the thread.

**Press the snap sections** together.

**Ribbon Guards**

For two lingerie guards, use 8" of ¼”-wide satin or grosgrain ribbon.

**Review** the instructions for making a thread strap.

**Cut the ribbon length in half.** Fold under one end of one ribbon. Cover the ribbon raw edge with the ball of one snap. Sew the ball of the snap to the ribbon (4). Repeat to sew the other snap ball in place on the other ribbon.

**Sew the snap sockets** onto the garment. If the shoulder seam is wide, sew the socket in the center of the seam. If the neckline is cut away, sew the socket near the neckline. If the armhole is cut away, sew it near the shoulder.

**Snap one ball** to one socket. Cut the guard the appropriate length. Fold under the raw end. Use a fell stitch to stitch the ribbon end in place on the shoulder seam, facing or lining. Then sew both sides about ¼” from the end (5).

**Repeat** to stitch the other guard in place.

**Fabric Tube Guards**

**Review** the instructions for making thread and ribbon straps.

**Sew** the snap sockets onto the garment.

**To make the tubes,** cut two 1½”x4” strips of lightweight silk on the lengthwise grain. Fold each strip in half lengthwise with right sides together; stitch ¼” from the folded edge. Trim the seam allowances to ⅛” (6). Turn the tubes right side out; press.

**Fold under one end** of one tube; stitch. Cover the raw edge with the ball of the snap; sew the snap in place. Repeat to sew the remaining snap ball on the other tube.

**Snap one ball** and socket together. Trim the tube end to the appropriate length. Fold under the end and sew the tube in place on the garment shoulder seam or lining.

**Repeat** to stitch the other guard in place.

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*When making permanent stitches or thread chains, wax and press the thread to make it stronger and to prevent it from curling or twisting as you sew.*
Sew Professional with Claire Shaeffer

There are dozens of ways to set a zipper into a fly placket, but this couture method delivers excellent results. I first discovered this application on a pair of Yves Saint Laurent pants, and you’ll find that it belies any notion that couture techniques are difficult.

The Fly Zipper

In this couture method, the fly opening is machine stitched first. Then the zipper is sewn into the opening by hand. This procedure allows you to set the zipper into any type of opening (slot, lapped, bound or fly) with the control that hand sewing permits, but without sacrificing the integrity of the design. The stitching also reinforces the edges and holds the layers flat. In couture, fly plackets are usually finished with extended facings that are cut as a part of the front, instead of with a separate facing like men’s trousers. The result is more flattering and less bulky.

Prepare the Placket

Mark the foldlines on the overlap and underlap pieces at the zipper opening with long hand-basting stitches.

If the opening has an interfacing pattern, fuse or sew the interfacing fly piece to the fly extensions on the fabric wrong side (1). If the pattern doesn’t have an interfacing pattern, create one by tracing the fly extension section that will be folded to the fabric wrong side.

Cut a ½”-wide fabric strip from lightweight silk to create a stay for the fly opening of each pant piece. The stay length should be approximately that of the pattern fly opening. Moisten and press the strip to remove the fabric stretch.

Position the stays over the marked foldlines on the fabric wrong side of each pant front piece. Pin the stay ends in place; then pin toward the stay center, easing the pant fabric as needed. Use a long running stitch to sew the stay in place (2).

Stitch the pant front pieces together at the center front, beginning at the zipper opening lower edge and ending about 2” from the pant inseams (3).

Fold under the seam allowances on both sides of the placket; baste ¼” from the folded edge beginning at the opening lower edge. Baste the waist edge. Press the folded edges.

Claire Shaeffer is internationally known for her expertise on couture sewing techniques. She is the author of 17 books including Couture Sewing Techniques, High Fashion Sewing Secrets from the World’s Best Designers, Claire Shaeffer’s Fabric Sewing Guide and Sew Any Fabric. Claire designs the Custom Couture Collection of patterns for Vogue Patterns. She teaches couture workshops in Palm Springs, CA. For more information, e-mail Claire at sewfari@earthlink.net.
Prepare the Zipper

Press the zipper tape to remove any folds. If the zipper is longer than the opening, measure beginning at the upper edge and mark the finished length. At the marked length, stitch a thread bar over the zipper teeth.

Cut off the zipper ½” to 1” below the thread bar.

Overcast-stitch or bind the zipper lower edge.

Set the Zipper

On the right pant front (overlap) piece, mark the fly stitching line using thread tracing or chalk. With the fabric right side up, stitch along the marked line, ending at the crotch seamline (4). Pull the threads through to the wrong side using a calyx-eyed needle. Knot and trim the thread ends.

On the left pant front (underlap), stitch close to the folded edge, keeping the overlap piece folded out of the way (5). Press.

With the zipper and garment right side up, position the closed zipper long edge under the underlap opening edge so that the zipper stop is ⅛” below the waist seamline and the zipper teeth are close to the folded edge. Baste the zipper in place (6).

With the fabric wrong side up, use short running stitches to sew the zipper in place permanently.

Lap the right front piece over the left front piece, matching the centers. Baste through all thicknesses close to the overlap fold.

Position the pant front pieces wrong side up. Baste the remaining zipper tape to the facing extension on the overlap without sewing through the overlap front (7). To avoid catching the overlap front, slip a narrow clear ruler between the facing extension and the pant front.

Use short running stitches to hand-sew close to the zipper teeth. Use fell stitches at the zipper tape edges to sew the tape flat against the extensions.

To reinforce the opening lower edge, make a tiny bar tack on the face side and cover it with buttonhole stitches.

Remove all basting stitches.

Fly plackets lap right over left. Aesthetically, this is often more pleasing for women’s pants because it continues the line of a blouse closure.
Sew Professional with Claire Shaeffer

Matching patterned fabrics at seams and openings can be a challenge, but flawless professional results are worth the extra effort. Learn the techniques for matching the pattern at the center front of a jacket and for piecing a patterned fabric.

Front & Center

Choose a relatively simple jacket pattern, such as the garment featured at right (1). The silk jacket has no center front buttons or buttonholes, so the fabric’s pretty pattern can remain uninterrupted. This jacket is unlined, lightweight and easy to pack—the perfect accessory for a black dress or pants.

Examine the chosen fabric to determine where the pattern repeats. The featured jacket’s fabric has two patterns to contend with: an alternating chiffon and satin weave stripe as well as an allover floral pattern. The fabric has even repeats in both the vertical and horizontal directions, but on the crossgrain, different flowers appear on the satin stripes. It was important that the satin stripe fall at the jacket opening rather than the chiffon in order to provide body and stability.

On the vertical stripes, the flowers are always the same, so the center of one satin stripe was marked with a hand basting stitch (2). This step would also apply when working with a plaid or vertical stripe.

Cut out the jacket front paper pattern piece. Mark the pattern center front. Align the pattern center front with the basted line. Add seam allowances or extended facings before cutting.
out the front pattern piece. Flip over the front pattern piece and align it so that the pattern will match at center front along the basted line. Cut out the other front piece.

**Assemble the jacket** according to the pattern guidesheet.

**Perfect Piecing**

Occasionally you fall in love with a patterned fabric only to discover that it’s too narrow for the particular pattern you want to use—but don’t despair! By piecing the garment with an inconspicuous matched seam, you’re free to use any fabric you like.

*Vogue 8449* from Claire Shaeffer’s Custom Couture Collection is a gown designed to be cut from a single piece of 54”-wide fabric. The dress is cut on the bias and has only one seam at the center back. I found an unusual silk brocade with a bouclé yarn to make the dress, but it was only 45” wide. It took some creative problem solving and piecing to make the fabric work for the pattern.

**Spread out the fabric** on a large, flat work surface. Position the pattern pieces over the fabric to determine where the garment will require extra piecing. Align the pattern so the piecing seam will be in an inconspicuous location. For this gown, it was necessary to add a small piece at the pattern lower left side.

**Find a large fabric scrap** from the remaining fabric that you can use for the extra piece.

**Cut out the pattern.** With the pattern still positioned on the fabric, fold under the fabric scrap selvage edge. Match the fabric scrap to the pattern at the location where the dress will be pieced. Try out different placements until the patterns match exactly at the seamline. Pin the scrap in place.

**Mark the new seamlines** on both the pattern piece and the scrap with a hand-basting stitch.

**Align the basted lines** on both pieces; pin.

**Baste the pieces together** using a slipstitch. Finish cutting out the dress.

**Mark the darts and zipper placket.** Remove the pattern. Baste the piecing seam a second time.

**Stitch the seam** (3) and remove the basting. Press the seam flat, and then press it open.

**Assemble the garment** according to the pattern guidesheet.

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**On thick or bulky fabrics,** basting with a slipstitch doesn’t hold the layers securely enough to prevent them from shifting, so it’s important to baste a second time with shorter stitches.
A button stem is an essential element on professionally sewn garments. The stem provides enough space between the button and the garment fabric so the button can be fastened without creating strain or puckering around the buttonhole. The stem length depends on the thickness of the garment section, usually the right front. Most stems are 1/8" to 1/4". On heavy coats, stems can be 1/2" or more; on shirts they’re usually less than 1/8".

The button stem can be made by several methods. A braided stem, which is used on couture jackets and coats is more durable, firm and easy to sew. It’s particularly good on men’s jackets, which are fastened much more frequently than women’s garments.

**Select and wax the thread.** Use a single strand of buttonhole twist or two strands of regular thread. When using buttonhole twist, use polyester because it wears better and doesn’t twist or kink badly.

**If using two strands** of regular thread, cut two lengths of a good quality thread—either cotton (50/3) or polyester (100/3). Knot the ends you cut; then thread the unknotted ends into the needle eye. Two strands threaded with the twist of each in the same direction tangle less than a single double strand.

**Rub the thread firmly** with beeswax to strengthen it and reduce twisting. Place the thread between two paper towel layers. Press the thread to melt the wax into the fibers.

**Thread the needle** using a needle threader if needed.
Mark the button location(s) using the buttonholes as a guide.

Secure the thread. Begin with the garment right side up. Insert the needle into the fabric ½" from the button location. Run the needle between the layers and bring it out at the button location (1). Secure the thread with three small stitches one on top of the other at the button location.

Fasten the thread securely without sewing through the facing. This may take a little practice, but the garment inside is much more attractive when there are no exposed threads on the facing. Don’t use stay buttons on the facing side except when sewing leather or suede.

Begin the button stem. Insert the needle into the button; then pick up a short stitch on the garment so the two threads are ¼" apart and parallel to the buttonhole. Shorten the thread until the button stem is slightly longer (about ¾") than the desired finished length. Braiding will shorten the stem slightly.

Hold the button away from the fabric, and then sew back and forth between the button and garment three times. If the button has four eyes, sew through each eye twice.

Braid the stem. Beginning at the top of the stem, work toward the garment so you can fasten the thread at the bottom. Divide the threads into two groups and make a buttonhole stitch around one group (2).

Pass the needle under that thread group (3) and out through the center (4). Then make a buttonhole stitch on the second thread group.

Repeat, alternating between the two thread groups until you reach the base of the stem.

Fasten the thread in the fabric. Make several small backstitches at the base of the button stem.

Hide the thread end. Insert the needle at the base of the button stem and run it through the fabric layers for ½". Pull out the needle. Hold the thread taut and cut it close to the fabric. The thread end will disappear between the fabric layers.

Cut away the thread knot. This knot is called a “waste knot” because it’s discarded after the thread is permanently fastened.

When sewing several buttons, cut and wax all threads at the outset. Immediately knot the end you’ve just cut to be sure that you thread the end that comes off the spool into the needle eye.
Sew Professional
with Claire Shaeffer

On couture garment designs, the darts are balanced in order to eliminate any ridges at the stitching line. This can be done using one of three methods:

- Slash the dart center and press it open
- Press the dart so it's centered over the stitching line
- Use an extra strip of fabric to balance the dart

**Slash & Press**
This is the most common method for balancing darts. It can be used on both lined and unlined garments. It works best for larger darts, as it can be difficult to slash neatly to the point of a narrower dart and tricky to press it open smoothly.

**Stitch the dart** and knot the threads at the dart point. On an unlined garment, insert the thread ends into a calyx-eyed needle. Run the thread ends back into the dart point.

**On the garment wrong side,** press the dart flat as it was stitched.

**Slash through the dart fabric** center to the dart point. To prevent raveling, overcast stitch the cut fabric edges.

**Wrong side up,** position the dart over a pressing ham. Press open the dart fabric (1).

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Center & Press
This method is a good choice for unlined garments because it leaves no raw edges.

Stitch the dart and knot the thread ends at the dart point.

Instead of pressing the dart flat, center the dart fabric over the stitching line on the garment wrong side. Press only along the stitching line, avoiding pressing folds at the dart fabric edges.

Baste the dart center along the the stitching line (2).

Wrong side up, press the dart lightly over a ham.

Remove the basting stitches; press again over the ham.

Add a Fabric Strip
This is method is generally better for lined garments because of the additional fabric strip. Cut the strip from interfacing or self fabric. If the garment is unlined, use self fabric.

Measure the dart length. Cut a narrow strip of fabric or interfacing that’s this measurement plus ½”. Cut the strip on grain unless the garment is unlined. For an unlined garment, cut the strip on the bias to reduce raveling.

Baste the dart.

Center the strip over the basted line so that it extends ½” beyond the dart point. Baste again along the stitching line (3). Use a different thread color for this basting so that it’s easier to remove the first basting stitches.

With the garment as the upper layer, machine stitch the dart and knot the thread ends at the dart point. Remove the basting stitches. Press the dart flat as stitched.

Position the dart wrong side up on a ham. Press the dart in one direction and the strip in the other. Trim the strip at the lower edge (4).

Baste using a soft, unglazed cotton thread. This thread won’t disturb the machine stitching when you pull out the basting stitches.
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