

>> PROFESSIONAL >>

**SOFT**

# FURNISHINGS

The complete guide to professional results

WENDY SHORTER



PROFESSIONAL  
**SOFT**  
**FURNISHINGS**

WENDY SHORTER



## Dedication

This book is dedicated to my daughter, Louise,  
in the hope that one day she will also enjoy my  
love of working with fabulous textiles.

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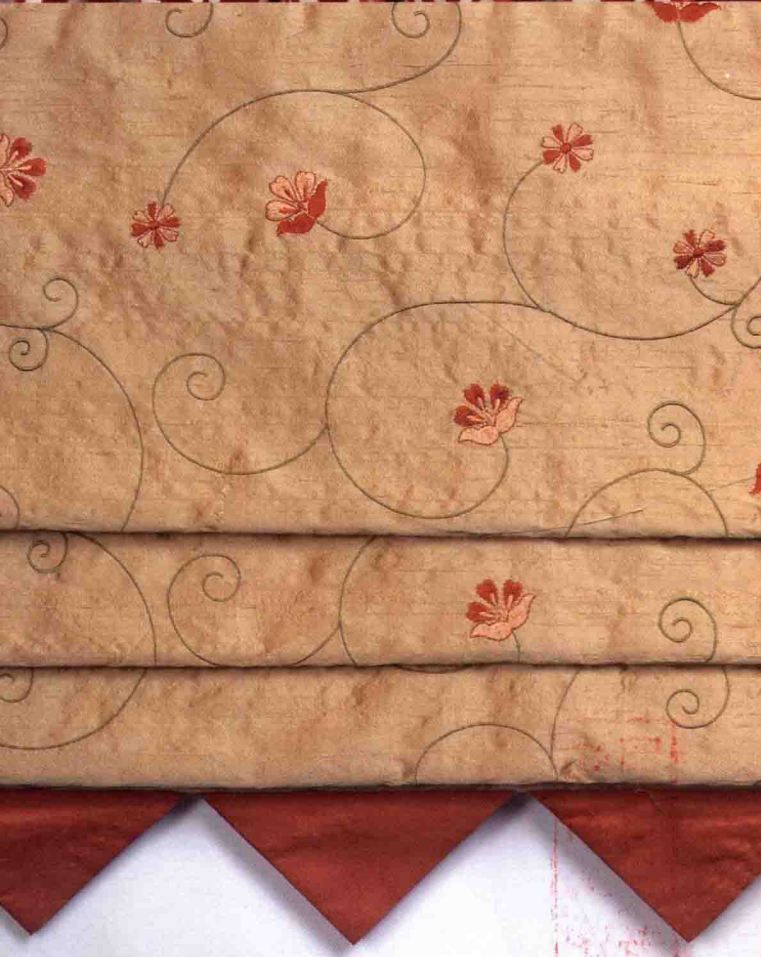
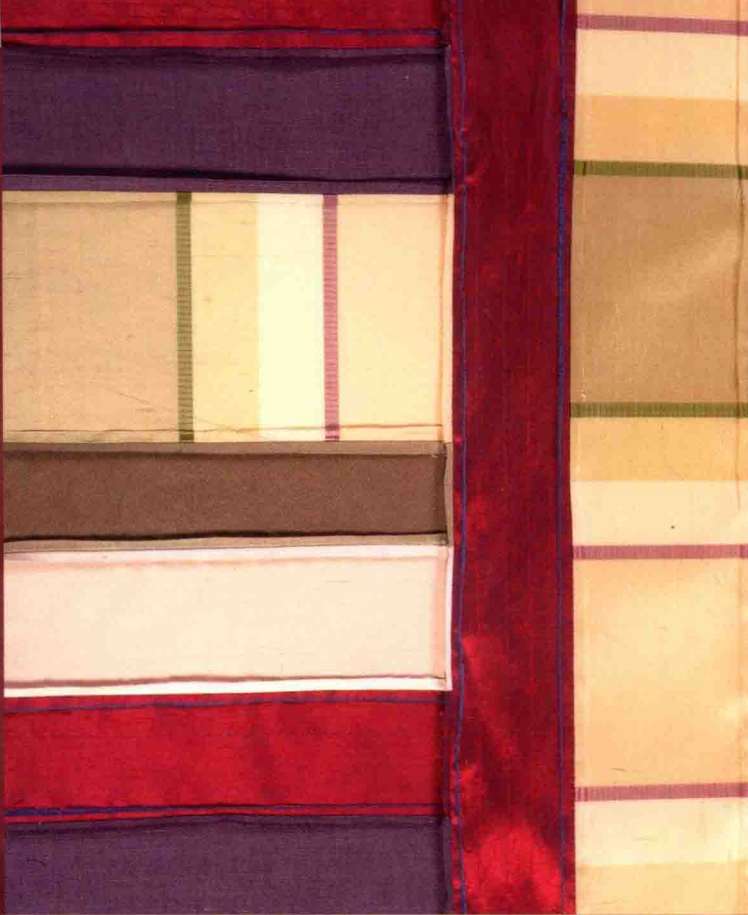
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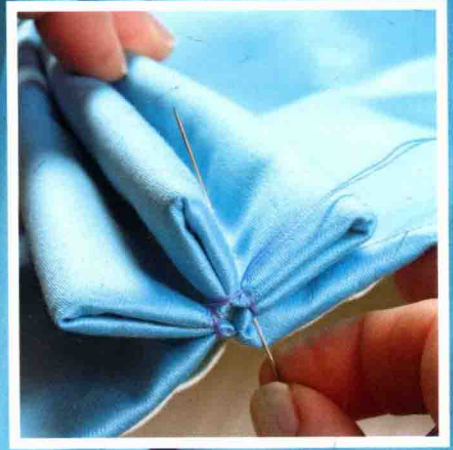
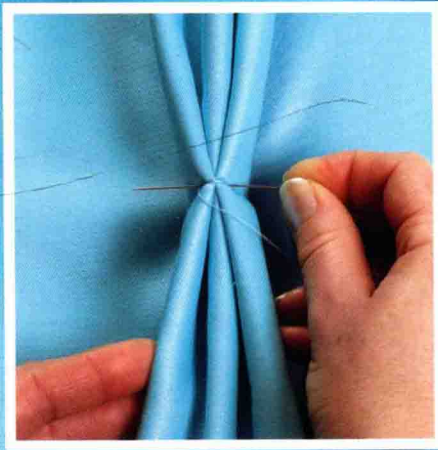
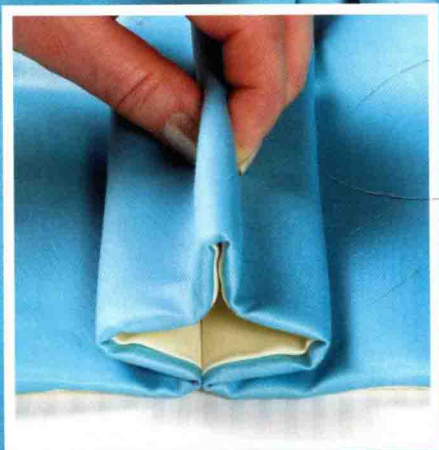
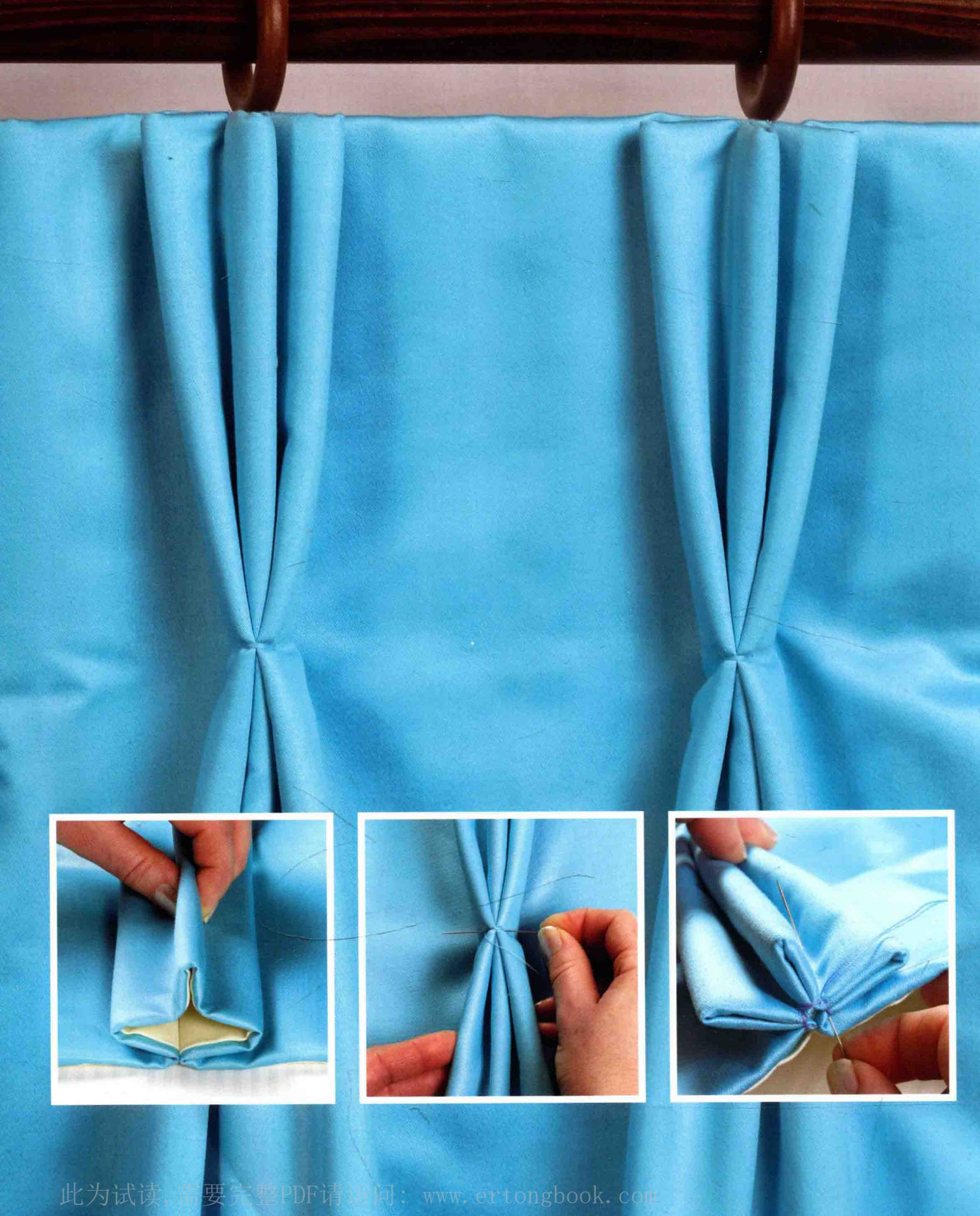
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# Introduction

I entered the world of professional upholstery and soft furnishings in 1995 after many years working in the film industry as PA to the film director, Stanley Kubrick, and as a freelance Production Co-ordinator.

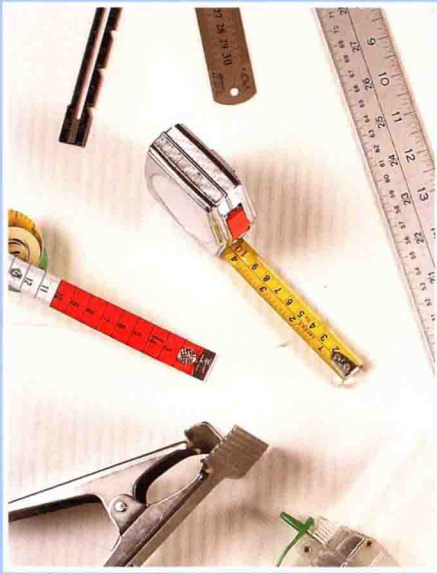
Having sewn since school, I decided to return to my roots studying at the London Guildhall University, now known as London Metropolitan University and at West Herts College in Hemel Hempstead. I achieved my professional qualifications gaining distinctions for my work, and in 1998 was awarded the Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers Student of the Year Award.

Since then I have worked on individual commissions in both upholstery and soft furnishings and was approved for membership of the Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers (AMUSF) in 1999. My work has been demonstrated and exhibited at the NEC in Birmingham and the Living Crafts Show at Hatfield House. I am also a visiting lecturer at KLC School of Design at the Chelsea Harbour Design Centre in London. My association with the AMUSF has since lead me to become an active board member and I am currently their Director of Training. I am a Fellow of the AMUSF and in 2009 had the honour of being made a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Upholders (the archaic word for upholsterers).

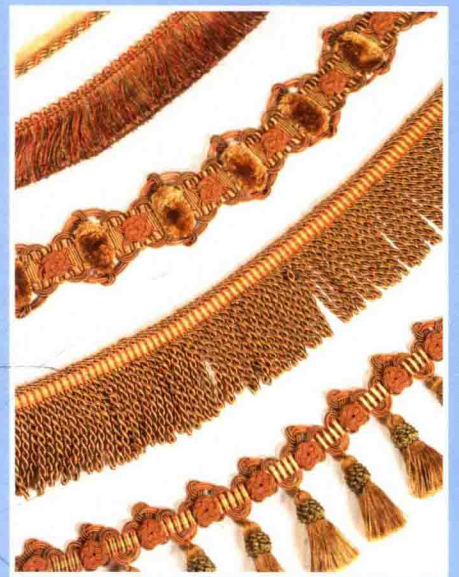
I started my teaching career in 1999 at West Herts College and then back at London Metropolitan University. In July 2006, with the support of some fantastic students, I decided to start my own Training Centre in Hertfordshire. I now run a full range of upholstery and soft furnishings courses for both accredited and leisure courses. The Training Centre has gone from strength to strength, with many of my students achieving credits and distinctions for their work and many have since gone on to start their own very successful businesses.

This book is aimed at those with experience of sewing and soft furnishings who are looking to move onto the next level, or looking to break into the industry. But most importantly, they should have a keen interest in producing good quality decorative furnishings.

I have tried to include as much detail as possible in this book, but nothing can ever take the place of good quality 'hands-on' practical training with a good tutor or practitioner. The projects are based around the training offered at my training centre and will take you through the basics to more complex projects: hand-stitched curtains, decorative detailing, fitted and tailored bedding and loose covers, which I hope will inspire you to create beautiful, professional looking furnishings of your own.



# GETTING STARTED





# EQUIPMENT

Life as a soft furnisher will be made so much easier with two main pieces of equipment: a cutting table and a sewing machine. There is a large choice of machines available, but don't be dazzled by all the fancy stitches and computerization as you may never need them. Think carefully about your specific needs and choose one that best suits your budget.

## WORK BENCH

Like many of my students, my love of soft furnishings started at home with my sewing machine on the dining room table. However, when working on large projects I found it difficult working on my knees on the floor. A bespoke cutting table is very useful but if you can't afford one or don't have the room for one, invest in a 15 mm thick 240 x 120 cm (½ x 8 x 4 in) sheet of MDF (Medium-Density Fibreboard) which can be placed over an existing dining or kitchen table. Cover it in a plastic-coated fabric to protect it. It can then be stored against the wall when not in use and brought out when needed, providing you with a large working surface. If you are fortunate enough to have a designated workroom, then this MDF top can easily be transformed into a workbench with storage underneath for your fabrics and linings.



## DOMESTIC SEWING MACHINE

Please do not rush out to buy the 'all-singing, all-dancing' expensive sewing machine. As a soft furnisher you won't need one that has hundreds of fancy stitches. What you will need is one that has a good stitch quality, that can take the thickness of fabrics that you may be required to use, and that has a selection of feet you'll find useful.

I recommend a machine that will enable you to lift the presser foot that extra bit higher, in order to take a curtain heading containing lining, interlining and heading buckram, doubled up as it would be for a hand-stitched curtain heading. Always try out the machine before you purchase it, and take along your own samples, as the samples provided tend to be dress-weight fabrics that are too thin and won't give you a realistic idea of the machine's capabilities.



## Sewing machine feet

Sewing machines often come with a range of feet and accessories. I prefer a machine that will allow you to use the larger thread spools and that has a good 'walking foot' attachment. A walking foot allows equal pressure on the fabric as it moves under the presser foot and will help alleviate the problem of the fabric slipping, which is particularly important when using silky, shiny fabrics or when you are trying to pattern-match long lengths of fabrics. A walking foot attachment is essential when doing large areas of quilting.

Other useful machine feet are:

- Zip foot that will allow you to stitch close to piping, if the machine does not have a designated piping foot.
- Designated piping foot, if available.
- Concealed zip foot for inserting concealed zips.
- Darning or embroidery foot for free-hand quilting.
- Pin tuck foot.
- Edge foot.

## Sewing machine needles

The purpose of the sewing machine needle is to penetrate the fabric, by moving the yarns apart without damaging the fabric. The needle has a long groove on one side, which aids the thread through the yarns, and a small notch, called the scarf, just above the eye of the needle on the other side. This aids the passage of the rotary hook when forming the bottom thread stitch.

Always check that you are using the correct size needle and thread for the fabric you are sewing. The finer the needle, the less damage to the fabric, but if too fine it will blunt and break. Check and change your needle regularly; a blunt needle often causes missed stitching.

Use sharp needles for all woven fabrics and ballpoints for knitted fabrics:

**Lightweight fabrics:** 70–80 (10–12)

**Medium weights:** 80–90 (12–14)

**Heavy weights:** 90–100 (14–16)

### MACHINING TIPS

Never push or pull the fabrics through the machine. Instead just guide the fabric, allowing the feed mechanism to take the fabrics through at its own rate. On standard machines, the fabric in contact with the feed mechanism will be taken through faster than the top fabric. This can be a problem when sewing different weights of fabric together. In this case, place the lighter weight fabric underneath and gently apply pressure to this fabric so that both go through at the same rate.

## OVERLOCK MACHINE

An overlock machine neaten the raw edges of fabrics, using either a three- or four-thread stitch. This machine is particularly useful when raw edges may be seen or for neatening raw edges on cushion covers. Although not essential – as a good zigzag stitch will suffice – it is a very useful and efficient machine.



## INDUSTRIAL MACHINES

Once you start to produce work on a professional basis, you may wish to invest in an industrial sewing machine that is built for continuous use. If you go down this route, take your time and do your research to find a machine that fits your requirements as well as your budget. Although more expensive, I always recommend an alternating compound feed walking foot machine.



### SEWING FAULTS

Here are a number of common faults that can occur when using a sewing machine and their possible causes.

#### Thread breaks

- Incorrect threading of the machine.
- Thread waste fouling the looper.
- Worn or damaged hole in the throat plate.
- Thread too fine or contains knots.
- Worn or damaged needle.

#### Needle breaks

- Thread too thick for the needle.
- Operator pulling or pushing the fabric.
- Bobbin case incorrectly fitted.
- Needle is bent.
- Inadequate needle quality.

#### Irregular seam

- Needle incorrectly fitted.
- Bobbin spool badly wound.
- Bent needle.
- Poor fabric feed.

#### Poor fabric feed

- Presser foot pressure too low.
- Worn or damaged feed dog.
- Feed dog set too low.
- Inappropriate feeder mechanism.

#### Missed stitches (the looper does not catch the needle thread):

- Incorrect threading of the machine.
- Incorrect needle or thread.
- Bent needle.
- Incorrect looper settings.



