

Vintage finds and what they're worth—including fireplace tools valued at \$5,600!

## Show Towel Showdown

Whether you're of the "be my guest" or "hands off" persuasion, one thing's for sure: These nostalgic linens add personality-plus to any powder room.



### HUMOROUS PHRASES

These guest towels from the 1960s redefine the phrase "dry wit." Though the linen duo's hand-stitched letters (likely guided by a DIY iron-on transfer kit) are far from perfect, the end result reflects a relaxed host—and earns an appraisal of \$8 for the set.

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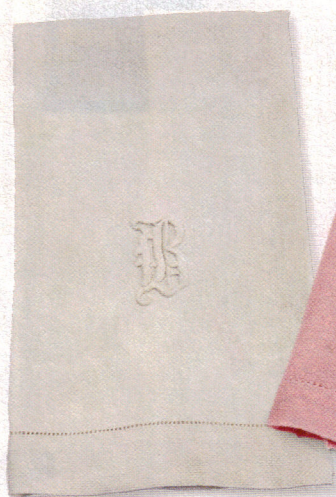
**To use or not to use?** With so-called “show towels,” that’s been the question for more than 700 years. The practice of putting out fancy guest linens dates back to 14th-century European royalty, but it wasn’t until the mid-20th century, when American housewives co-opted the tradition, that these refined (and sometimes racy) hand towels became a staple in middle-class lavatories across the United States. So what’s the answer to the age-old debate? It’s hardly cut and dried. Though the linens no doubt broadcast their owners’ good taste, guests were often left perplexed,

hesitant to sully such pristine cloths. Says EllynAnne Geisel, author of *The Kitchen Linens Book* and the founder of [apronmemories.com](http://apronmemories.com): “I often come across antique towels so stiff, it’s clear they’ve never been exposed to wet hands; but others are incredibly soft from decades of use and laundering.” Nowadays, eBay, Etsy, and flea markets are awash in both mass-produced and homespun varieties—almost all remarkably affordable. The show towels shown here, which date from the early 1900s through the ’60s, will only set you back \$8 to \$15 apiece.



### FLORAL MOTIFS

Among the most enduring themes, blooming embellishments evolved from the late 19th century’s sedate roses to bolder, postwar designs like these vibrant tulips. Despite the mint condition of this 1950s cotton-blend example, its simplistic, factory-sewn pattern limits the towel’s value to less than \$10.



### WHITEWORK

This elegant style of white needlework on white fabric, typically reserved for monogramming fine linens, flourished during the late Victorian era and remains popular today. The damask version above, which dates from the 1920s, boasts a three-dimensional B—advanced handiwork that sets the piece’s estimate at \$15.



### HIS-AND-HERS

Coupled guest towels were a fashionable bridal-shower gift from the 1930s through the ’50s, and this pair (snagged for \$8.50 on Etsy) sports a rosy hue popular for bathroom tile during those decades. The fact that the set is made of loose-weave cotton—probably from a kit—suggests it hails from the ’30s or ’40s, when luxurious fabrics were scarce.



### RISQUE FIGURES

Voluptuous ladies began to reveal a little leg—and, occasionally, cleavage—on towels produced right around the 1953 launch of *Playboy* magazine. Mass-manufactured in the ’50s and worth about \$15 today, this linen number delights with a relatively demure game of peekaboo: The lass’s tartan skirt lifts to expose her sheer knickers.



### Plus, Towel Transfer Kits!

**Hand-embroidered guest towels** were often created with a little help: Transfer kits, which included iron-on motifs the home seamstress could stitch atop, surged in popularity during the 1950s, as mass-produced sewing patterns became readily available. Purveyors like Vogart, Walker’s, and Aunt Martha’s sold the packets for 10 or 15 cents each. Now they go for \$5 to \$10 on Etsy and eBay.