

A Sewingtime Story

HOW SEWING BEGAN

Sewing is one of the oldest crafts of mankind. Needles made of fish bone were among the first tools to fasten skins or other plane materials to each other. The oldest needles had split ends into which the sewing material, such as sinew, catgut, and veins, were clamped.

Needles with an eye were invented in the Neolithic period. They were made of bones, antlers or mammoth ivory. From the 14th c. we know of needles being made of wrought and hardened iron wire. For many centuries the needle was the most important tool for the making of clothes.

THE TAILOR 'S PROFESSION

The profession of the tailor did not exist before the middle of the 12th century. Before that clothes for wealthier citizens and noblemen were produced in monasteries by monks. Poorer people had to either sew their own clothes or have them made by a skilled but not trained village seamstress.

From the Middle Ages tailors were organised in tailors' guilds. Apprentices and journeymen worked under a master and were also sent away in order to perfect their skills abroad. A skilled tailor was able to make 30 stitches a minute.

For centuries tailors were subjected to mockery because they were said to do "women's work". In many satirical stories the tailor was coined as the loser. In a German card game one declares "schneider" [i.e. tailor] if one has no points. Tailors were often slight, often physically handicapped men who were unfit for hard work. We know the image of the tailor sitting cross-legged on the table – maybe because his legs were of unequal length – which in French and German is called "sitting in the tailor's pose".

With the invention of the sewing machine from approx. 1850 onwards the reputation of the tailor improved markedly. In the 19th and 20th centuries it meant a lot to a society lady to know the name of a good tailor.

Traditionally there was a difference in the training of ladies' dressmakers and men's tailors. The 19th century developed pattern systems for a correct seat and exact fit. To this day this complex craft involves high precision and a lot of sewing by hand. In older guild regulations specimen of sewing and ironing, the making of men's trousers, etc. as well as the preparation of a "lady's piece" were required for the master's examination. Ladies' dressmaking established itself as a separate profession in the course of the 19th c. Because there is but little demand today, the two professions were amalgamated again.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SEWING MACHINE

Like most technical achievements, the sewing machine has many fathers. First developments occurred in Germany and England towards the end of the 18th c. All the first prototypes

The first prototypes had needles with two points and an eye in the middle, and attempted to make a seam similar to chain stitch with just one thread.

This idea was taken up by the Tyrolean tailor Joseph Madersperger, who occupied himself with developing the sewing machine between 1807 and 1839. In the course of his experiments he decided on an eye pointed needle such as it is used today. His pioneering invention, however, was a device similar to a shuttle for producing a double stitch. But he never succeeded in creating an actually functioning sewing machine out of all these "correct parts". He eventually died in a poorhouse in Vienna in 1850.

The first manufacturer of sewing machines is said to be the Frenchman Barthélemy Thimonnier. In 1830 he patented his first fully functioning prototype and produced uniforms on a large scale. Rumour has it that the factory was burned down by tailors fearful of losing their livelihood.

It was only in the middle of the 19th c. that the sewing machine became a broad success in America. Based on existing prototypes and patents Isaac Merritt Singer founded his sewing machine factory in 1851, which made his serially produced machine popular on a large scale. The machine he devised used a falling shuttle instead of a rotary one; the needle was mounted vertically and included a presser foot to hold the cloth in place. It had a fixed arm to hold the needle and included a basic tension system. His innovative business plan included payment by instalments which was rather conducive to the introduction of sewing machines into private households.

After the United States, Germany became the country of sewing machine factories. In 1900 there were approx. 200, in Austria there were 40.

Upper Austria had a famous sewing machine manufacturer, too. This was Johann Jax, a tailor born near Hirschbach in the Mühlviertel. He began with selling American sewing machines, but in 1886 he started his own factory for sewing machines and bicycles at Linz which gained importance beyond the region.

Apart from the technical improvement of the sewing machines, their outward appearance played an important role. Whether operated by foot pedal treadle or crank handle, all of them were of patterned fancily moulded cast iron, decorated with inlays of wood or ivory or elaborately painted. Around 1900 concealable sewing machines became coveted pieces of furniture in the style of the time.

In 1899 it was again the Singer Company, that brought the first sewing machine with an electric motor to market. This development changed the design of the machines considerably. They became more easily manageable, and even portable. New materials such as aluminium or plastic were begun to be used. While industrial sewing machines became ever more specialised in the course of the 20th c. , household machines became more and more versatile. They could do forward and backward stitches, zigzag for securing the edges and other useful and decorative stitches.

When computer controlling reached the sewing machine industry in the 1980s the original vast number of manufacturers had decreased to just a few. Well-known names such as Pfaff, Dürkopp and parts of Singer are now owned by a Chinese company.

THE SEWING BOOM WHICH EVENTUALLY WENT OUT OF FASHION

The invention of the sewing machine had triggered a real sewing boom from the middle of the 19th c. It was the American Singer Manufacturing Company, founded in 1851, that produced sewing machines on a large scale and made them popular over wide areas.

Soon it was part of the image of a good housewife to produce clothes for her family and soft furnishings for her house. Being one of the few machines made specifically for the woman, it was lovingly cared for and integrated into the household as a decorative piece of furniture. A further advantage was the abundance of machine produced textiles which were available due to industrialisation. The numerous seamstresses/female dressmakers who used to go from house to house with their sewing machines on their backs for board and lodging were no longer important.

Fashion magazines and paper pattern charts invented in America in the 2nd half of the 19th c., were hugely popular. Aenne Burda's magazine "burda moden" spread them all over Central Europe from the middle of the 20th c. However, in the course of the gender discourse on the role of the woman from the 1960/70 onwards traditional skills such as sewing symbolizing "the little woman at home" fell into disrepute. Moreover, cheap imported ready-made clothes made sewing your own clothes comparatively expensive. Soon nobody took the trouble, but went into the next shop and was able to choose from a large selection of standardized models and styles.

Not only did this development bring about the disappearance of button boxes and other sewing utensils from the households, with which generations of children used to play, but well-founded knowledge, craftsmanship and a certain sense for quality were lost, too. It seemed as if the story of the sewing machine were at an end 150 years after its invention, but for some time a counter movement has been felt. In the course of the „Do-it-yourself-movement“ and an increasing awareness for social and ecological responsibility sewing is becoming attractive again. In many places small labels and "sewing cafés" are cropping up and make us curious how the "sewing time story" is going to continue.

Translation: Edda Hoefler

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