Women and Sewing: Integrating Object Analysis with Documentary Evidence

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Women and Sewing: Integrating Object Analysis with Documentary Evidence

Abstract
For centuries, sewing was a central feature of women's lives, education and employment. The story of sewing and its significance can be told through written records, however, to truly weave together an account of its importance, it is essential to include a variety of evidence, with the material culture of dress adding richness to the analysis.

Keywords
sewing, sewing education, women, exhibitions

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Women and Sewing: Integrating Object Analysis with Documentary Evidence

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For centuries, sewing was a central feature of women's lives, education and employment. The story of sewing and its significance can be told through written records, however to truly weave together an account of its importance it is essential to include a variety of evidence, with the material culture of dress adding richness to the analysis. A recent exhibit, “For Homemaking and a Trade:” Sewing in Women’s Lives, 1870 to 1920, focused on women and sewing, with an emphasis on apparel rather than fancy work. Three themes were illustrated: sewing education, sewing for family and home, and sewing as wage-work. The themes were addressed through fashion publications and other published sources, but also with the objects women produced, the technologies they used to produce them, and the records they left behind in the form of sample books, invoices, ledgers, photographs, and instructional materials.

The gallery space for the exhibit is relatively new, and although exhibits are usually planned years in advance, there existed a need to develop an exhibition in a short period of time that was both visually and intellectually stimulating. Two members of the gallery committee offered to mount an exhibit related to the role of sewing in women’s lives, especially as their previous scholarship in the area shortened the normal research time. A number of factors were considered. These included the existence of collection holdings that came with substantial provenance to support the research, the ability to borrow some objects as visual support for the narrative, and a rich collection of photographs from the library archives. In addition, an exhibit based on the culture of home sewing was of interest to a broad audience of students, faculty and the community; important considering the need to promote and publicize the new gallery space.

While most of the research undertaken prior to the exhibit was documentary - based on newspapers, advertisements, fashion magazines, home economics literature and trade literature - the exhibit provided an opportunity to integrate object-based research with these existing sources. The department collection, with a wide range of garments, as well as classroom sewing samples and other sewing education materials from the history of the college’s textile and clothing department, provided an opportunity to complement and enrich the story, and indeed to provide evidence that would otherwise have been overlooked when the research relied exclusively on two-dimensional sources.

Women and sewing: The narrative
By the end of the Civil War, women were no longer responsible for making men’s clothing, as most, if not all, was purchased ready-made. However, throughout the nineteenth century, women relied on seamstress, dressmakers, or their own sewing skills to clothe themselves and their children. This custom production ranged from simple garments made at home, either by a family member, seamstress or dressmaker, to elaborate fashionable gowns made in an exclusive dressmaker’s shop. The manner in which women clothed the family depended on financial resources, sewing skills and individual interpretations of fashion and class. They used the resources available, and balanced budget needs with other factors, including time and desire. By the 1890s ready-made clothing had significantly entered the wardrobe decision-making process for women in the form of shirtwaists and skirts.
While ready-made clothing lessened the need for expert sewing skills, as Martha Bruere pointed out, “even the moderate use of the needle that all housekeepers need to know is no instinctive or inherited feminine function.” Young girls were offered sewing classes in both public and trade schools to provide them sewing skills not learned at home. Although women’s sewing skills are difficult to assess, it required more than just a mastery of basic stitches to produce an acceptable garment. Cutting and fitting were a challenge for all but the most accomplished. The advent of commercial patterns and pattern drafting systems did not completely solve the problem. Even with these new systems, to achieve a properly fitted garment remained a challenge.

The needle trades employed significant numbers of women well into the twentieth century, with occupations that included dressmaker, mantuamaker, tailoress, milliner, and seamstress (both factory and non-factory). These trades could be widely divergent, and clearly differed in status and class associations. Dressmakers were considered the aristocrats of the needle trades, although that position began to change in the early 20th century, as the work environment in large shops became more like factory production. Women chose dressmaking for a variety of reasons, and work environments included everything from large businesses and department stores to private homes. As a result, dressmakers engaged in work practices and processes that ranged from the most exclusive hand work to factory style, assembly-line production.

Women and sewing: The exhibit objects

From display of garments in mid-alteration to exquisite pieces with intricate patterns and lace work, the exhibit demonstrated the ingenuity of both home sewer and dressmaker. The curators discovered a significant number of garments in the collection that could be firmly attributed as made-at-home, some with intriguing and sometimes amusing stories as told either through donor files or unusual “fixes” to common dressmaking dilemmas. Many of these also had evidence of one or more alterations; one dress included some of the original fabric scraps with the accession, another included dressmaker notes for bust and hip dimensions scribbled inside of the seams. Telling the story of sewing for wages were several dressmaker labeled dresses, and pattern-drafting and other professional sewing equipment. A ready-made suit from the National Cloak and Suit Company, and a shirtwaist with manufacturer’s label demonstrated the growing importance of ready-to-wear. This contrasted with a home-sewn shirtwaist that had an additional set of sleeves, adding impact to a sleeves-only McCall’s pattern from the same period.
Classroom images of women sewing and making patterns, along with sample books and sample garments offered insight into sewing as a critical component of women’s education.

A history of the role of sewing in women’s lives, 1870 to 1920, informs us of the demands, challenges, and opportunities experienced by the homemakers and workers of the past. The integration of object analysis and documentary evidence through gallery exhibition provided a more complete picture necessary for greater historical understanding and design in


2See For example, “To Teach Cooking: An Outgrowth of the Work of the Sewing Schools,” The Baltimore Sun, 8 September 1899, 10.