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## The Evolution of a Button

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# The Evolution of a Button

*Shirliann Fortman reviews an unusual thesis on Handmade Buttons of Original Design written by Mary E. Kesler for the M.S. degree under the auspices of the Department of Applied Art*

**B**UTTONS, buttons—have you ever wondered just how man began to use buttons in the first place?

Button badges apparently existed before buttons became functional. In China in early times, as is today, the button badge was an official badge of state. In 1847 the word "liberty" and the motif, "star of freedom" were adopted as a symbol of hope by the people of Liberia. In America the button badges have been long used for campaign buttons and for Red Cross, tuberculosis, convention, and souvenir purposes.

Buttons as distinguished from button badges are illustrated by primitive man who used wooden twigs with leather thongs tied around the middle to fasten the animal skin he used for garments.

It is certain that buttons have been in use for thousands of years, but as a practical article of dress they are relatively modern.

Delving further into our history book we discover the Egyptian clothing was held in place by girdles, ties and loops, so it can be said with reasonable certainty that their buttons were ornamental rather than utilitarian.

Ancient history books reveal the buttons on the bridles of horses in Assyrian sculpture indicate that buttons had been known by the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. The Mycenaean civilization contributed buttons of paste, gold, and twisted wire.

According to Kate McKnight Elderkin, buttons were first used functionally in Greek Ionian costume as far back as the fifteenth century.

Button manufacturing on a commercial scale started in Birmingham, England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Buttons were highly praised as fashion accessories.

Most unusual to the generation of today, is the fact that it was the men, not the women, who were espe-

cially addicted to the use of buttons during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and forepart of the eighteenth centuries. Even the American Indian used the primitive button of a piece of raw hide tied around a stone. Soldiers of the Revolutionary War often carved crude, make-shift buttons from meat bones.

About 1790, large buttons adorned ladies' riding habits, and from that time until the present, buttons have been used copiously on women's costumes.

The cloth covered button of the eighteenth century was perfected in the early nineteenth. By the middle of the nineteenth century cut-steel buttons gained in favor. The approval of jet buttons and jewelry by Queen Victoria made jet very popular at that time.

In 1880 embroidered buttons in gay colors were followed by the use of large rhinestone buttons worn on double breasted fronts and belts. At the close of the century hand-painted pearl buttons were the fashion.

Buttons really assume individuality and distinction from 1860 as fashion favored chocteted buttons, as well as buttons of satin, silk, velvet, braid, vegetable ivory, porcelain and celluloid. Subsequently, buttons of shells, cork, rope and straw became popular. Plastics were used extensively before the war and will undoubtedly continue. During the present year, buttons are in more amusing and sprightlier form often too naturalistic to be fine design.

Today materials used for making buttons are numerous and comprise both natural and artificial products capable of being used just as they are found, or cut, turned, pressed, or shaped into various forms.

The process of elimination of all unnecessary, meaningless decoration is definitely influencing contemporary design. The modern designer endeavors to bring out the beauty of the material itself.

The media, such as pewter, copper, brass, and wood, used in the design of these handmade buttons are relatively few when compared with the wide range of available materials that could be used. The problem of button design offers an excellent opportunity for occupational therapy since they are small, easy to handle and inexpensive. The field of button construction promises a future as valuable and varied in scope as its past.

