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Circling Back To Sewing

By Anita Hamilton

The coolest new accessories for the style savvy may be a pincushion and a pair of pinking shears. Once relegated to little old ladies, the frugal-minded and neohippie handcrafters, sewing your own clothes is back in vogue. Inspired by the desire for a unique look and by reality-TV shows like Project Runway, in which aspiring designers compete for an entrée into the established fashion world, more young people are trying their hand at this traditional domestic art. The Home Sewing Association estimates that there are about 35 million sewing hobbyists in the U.S., up from roughly 30 million in 2000, and annual sales of Singer machines have doubled, to 3 million, since 1999.

And as sewing regains popularity, it's also evolving. Since many new sewers never learned from their moms--who were often too busy earning a paycheck to spend hours cutting out patterns on the dining-room table--they're looking outside the home for guidance. Sewing clubs on high school and college campuses are flourishing, and there are even summer sewing camps and after-school classes for kids as young as 9. Some older newcomers are heading to chic urban sewing lounges for classes on making handbags, lingerie and cocktail dresses. Others are joining virtual sewing circles on the Internet, in which strangers exchange tips on the best hem styles and where to find inexpensive fabric. (Try Wal-Mart for prices starting at \$6 a yard.) New books--such as Sew Subversive by the founders of Stitch Lounge in San Francisco and the upcoming S.E.W.: Sew Everything Workshop by Diana Rupp, due out next year--give step-by-step instructions for all kinds of projects, from making a raincoat for your poodle to transforming a pillowcase into a sundress. And while some women are starting with the basics, cutting from patterns or stitching a seam, others are reinventing the craft by altering their old clothing for a custom look.

For many, sewing their own clothes is a backlash against the cookie-cutter, mass-produced clothing available in stores. "People are really frustrated with the state of fashion now," says Aja Johnson, 26, who teaches sewing at Spark Craft Studios in Somerville, Mass., which opened in January 2005.

"They're really sick of not being able to find clothes they like that fit them the way they like," she says

What's more, making your own clothes now has a special kind of cachet, particularly among image-conscious teenagers. "When people say, 'Where did you get that?' it's like, 'Oh, I made it,' and people think that's really cool," says Taylor Ostertag, 14, who stitched a pair of pajama bottoms in her high school sewing club in Oswego, Ill., using a light green flannel with a Mickey and Minnie Mouse print

One of the hottest trends is reconstruction or refashioning, in which parts of different pieces of clothing are sewn together to make a one-of-a-kind T shirt, skirt or jacket. Leslie Kinson, 19, a sophomore at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, says she cut out a cross-stitch pattern from an old apron and combined it with lace doilies and an embroidered pink fabric to make a knee-length skirt. Maria Azarraga, 18, who lives in Leesburg, Ga., sewed together parts of a panda-print sweater she bought on eBay with a second sweater from Goodwill and some faux white fur she found at a fabric store to make a black-and-white, hooded wool "bomber" jacket. When she posted pictures to the Sew Hip community on the site LiveJournal.com in early November, she got raves from other members, including Shay Silver, 23, from Potsdam, N.Y., who wrote, "That is a freaking awesome sweater."

Other websites like joann.com reprodepot.com and sewingpatterns.com make it easy to find supplies while online sewing groups help people with niche interests find kindred spirits. The blog *Wardrobe Refashion* is dedicated to people who choose to use only pre-owned clothing in fashioning new styles and designs. The Dark Threads mailing list on sfgoth.com caters to people interested in making their own Goth-style clothes. Robert Blaque joined the group when he was learning to make corsets and costumes to wear onstage with his San Francisco-- based band, Secret Secret. Although Dark Thread is a virtual community, Blaque says, "there's a really neat friendship among the listees," some of whom meet up to go to fairs or participate in AIDS walks in the Bay Area.

Those seeking real-world contact on a more regular basis head for sewing lounges like Make Workshop on Manhattan's Lower East Side and First Samples in the hip SoCo district of Austin, Texas, where sewing machines can be rented by the hour and experienced seamstresses are available to share their expertise. At a recent Saturday-morning class for beginners at First Samples, most of the first two hours were spent learning how sewing machines work--how to thread, what kind of thread to buy, how to load a bobbin, how to load needles and clean various parts. The attendees ranged in age from 25 to 46. "Any other class I took in sewing was so dull," says Lauren McFarland, the eldest in the group. "This appeals to younger people, and it's not really something stuffy that gray hairs are doing."

With turquoise walls and elegant touches like the vase of pink roses and rosemary on the cutting table, First Samples attracts plenty of career women looking to try something new. Owner Shauna Smith, who opened the lounge in 2005, says she initially hoped it would be a place where friends and enthusiasts could gather and sew together, much like the "Stitch 'n' Bitch" knitting groups that were popular a few years ago. But teaching classes and renting out workspaces for \$10 an hour has proved to be a much better business plan. "People look at sewing differently now," she says. "It doesn't always save you money, but it does empower you."

Wanchen Chang, 34, wasn't looking for power so much as a skirt that fit. She enrolled in Smith's beginners' sewing class (\$120 for nine hours spread over two weekends) because she has such a hard time finding clothes for her petite figure. A textbook editor by day, Chang was hooked after her first session. Says she: "The class was great. We ended by making a little purse, and it felt great to walk out of there with something you had made."

That's one feeling you'll never get when you're heading home from the mall--no matter how good the bargains were that day.

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