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Sewing, So Fashionable

Projects Once Humbly 'Homemade' Are Now Touted As 'Handmade'

By Denise DiFulco
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Seventeen-year-old Jaimie Mertz of Gaithersburg found the perfect dress to wear to homecoming last year at Richard Montgomery High School: a strapless frock in burnt orange silk with a sash of cream-colored crushed velvet. Perfect, except for the nearly \$200 price at Anthropologie.

So Mertz made a similar version of the dress herself. Oh -- and without a pattern.

"I had made a bodice of that type before," says Mertz, who learned sewing basics from her mother and grandmother. "I bought an auburn-colored Dupioni silk, and I had fabric for the lining in my basement."

As she was fitting the dress she broke the zipper, so she positioned a bow on the back to hide her mistake. "It didn't look bad," she says of her dress, which was accented by rhinestone earrings and a swept-up hairstyle. "My friends said it looked like Carrie from 'Sex and the City.' "

The old-fashioned hobby of sewing -- long considered the frumpy cousin to now-chic knitting -- is undergoing a dramatic image boost. Years ago, sewing clothes was seen as a way to save money; such garments were "homemade." Now it's a way to express a personal style, and the results are "handmade."

Participation in sewing classes is on the rise. After years of stagnant growth, according to Singer, a major manufacturer, the number of machines sold in the United States rose from 1.5 million in 1999 to nearly 3 million in 2005. Sales are rising even among high-end, computer-like models that can cost \$5,000 or more. Online sewing clubs, blogs and other resources have proliferated, as have sewing studios or lounges, where hobbyists can take classes, buy fabric and notions, or just use a machine for their latest project.

Teens and twenty-somethings, in particular -- influenced by celebrity designers, DIY media and reality shows such as "Project Runway" -- are shunning patterns and precise measurements in favor of sheer inventiveness, says Mary Mikrut, a spokeswoman for sewing-machine manufacturer Bernina of America.

"We see young people jumping in without any rules, patterns or information," she says. "They'll just puzzle through it until they get to the end."

Embellishments, such as buttons, embroidery and fancy trims, are especially popular as sewers attempt to create one-of-a-kind garments. Increasingly, sewers take their store-bought clothes, literally rip them at the seams and reconstruct them with new materials.

"In my head I just picture the grandmothers cringing and gritting their teeth," Mikrut says.

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Previous generations adhered to a methodical approach to sewing. They set pattern lines in chalk before cutting their material and basted panels of fabric by hand before applying the final stitches with a machine. They ironed open their seams and finished their work with linings and hand-stitched hems.

If you're aiming to make a professional-quality garment, or a couture piece worthy of Armani, you're still going to have to follow the rules. But fun, casual wear can be whipped up easily, as can pillows, fabric screens, unstructured curtains and other decorative home accents.

"Sewing can be very technical and complicated, but it doesn't have to be," says Melissa Rannels, co-author of the new book "Sew Subversive: Down & Dirty DIY for the Fabulous Fashionista." "It's okay to have an unfinished edge because, quite honestly, it's much easier."

Rannels and her cohorts, Melissa Alvarado and Hope Meng, encourage this intrepid approach at their San Francisco sewing studio, Stitch Lounge. Similar sewing salons, with a convivial, coffeehouse atmosphere, have popped up in Chicago, New York and a few other cities. They offer a common sewing area with industrial-grade machines and cutting tables, served up with community and conversation.

Locally, G Street Fabrics offers more than 700 classes in about 220 different subjects at four locations, says Donna Smith, the store's director of education. Enrollment has been climbing, she says, particularly among the younger set. The number of summer camp attendees jumped more than 10 percent in the past year.

Hancock Fabrics, with 13 stores in Maryland and Virginia, also reports a higher demand for instruction, particularly for private lessons, says Sally Hile, director of education for the area. Many people are working with patterns and want to get a proper fit, she says. But there also are plenty of aspiring fashion designers. "Mothers are requesting private lessons for their teenagers," Hile says. "We've also had groups of home-schooled kids."

Customization and personalization definitely are a motivating factor for the new generation of home sewers. Welmoed Sisson of Boyds, who has a lot of experience making clothes, took some trade-show courses, bought an industrial sewing machine and turned her hobby into a business. Through her workroom, Sewing Seams Easy, she now custom-designs interior decor. "I enjoy giving my clients -- and myself -- something they're not going to see anywhere else," she says. "Your neighbor isn't going to say, 'Oh, I got those curtains at J.C. Penney, too.' "

Smith says G Street Fabrics has classes called "Balloon Shades for Beginners" and "Beyond Basic Pillows." She says the store's best-attended sessions are the high-end embroidery classes, using machines with computer programs that do detail work that might otherwise require weeks of effort. The store even conducts basic courses in Microsoft Windows for embroiderers for men and women with little computer experience.

Today's state-of-the-art machines can reproduce elaborate embroidery patterns from scanned-in photographs. But if you just want to jump in and have fun, says Karen Koza, a Home Sewing Association spokeswoman, a machine that can sew a straight line is pretty much all you need. Be as bold as you like, she says. "Just don't start with your wedding dress."

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