

It's Hip to Hem

Sewing Makes a Comeback

As 'Project Runway,' Retro Fad

Inspire a New Generation

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Jennifer Culpepper, a hip Washington, D.C., 33-year-old who carries an iPod nano and uses a Mac laptop, has a new gadget on her holiday wish list: a sewing machine.

Ms. Culpepper, who recently learned to make a tote bag and a blouse at a six-week beginner's sewing class, is one of the young adults who are helping the craft of sewing make a comeback. She says she has realized "how creative it is, rather than it being one of those things that old ladies do."



A sewing class at the Stitch Lounge in San Francisco

Amid new interest among fashion-obsessed teens, as well as Gen-Xers settling down in their first homes, fabric stores that teach sewing are seeing their classes filling up and adding waiting lists. The renewed interest is also starting to give a boost to the sewing industry, which has struggled to stay afloat over the past few decades. Manufacturers are selling more sewing machines, and pattern companies, which have rolled out products geared to a hipper, more fashion-savvy set, report that those efforts are

paying off in bigger sales.

The sewing trend piggybacks on broader interest in home arts, from knitting to cooking, that has been building in recent years. It hasn't hurt that women's fashions now favor personalization -- encouraging people to sew appliques on their jeans -- and vintage looks, which inspire hipsters to reconstruct thrift-store finds. TV has thrown another wild card into the mix in the past couple of years: "Project Runway," a reality show that showcases pattern-making and sewing, as fashion designers compete to display their work in New York.

Toby Haberman, owner of Haberman Fabrics of Royal Oak, Mich., says interest in sewing picked up in recent years. But in the past year, "Project Runway" "really blew it away," she says. "Whereas years ago if you made something you didn't want anyone to know, now I hear people say, 'Yes, I made that!'" She has capitalized on the trend by launching classes for kids and teens modeled on the show.

All this is making the demographics of sewing younger and more urban than at any time since the 1950s. In high-tech San Francisco, the Stitch Lounge, an urban sewing lounge where people can rent machines by the hour, reports a big surge in interest since it opened its doors two years ago. Hope Meng, one of three co-owners, thinks computer and

BlackBerry-obsessed workers are yearning for something tactile and creative. At Vogue Fabrics in Evanston, Ill., a recent class in the niche area of corset making drew not only middle-age women and costume designers, but also young adults who favor the edgy "Goth" look. And Fabricland, a North Plainfield, N.J., fabric store that offers classes, will offer 27 different courses this month, up from five last November, and the "Absolute Beginners for Adults" classes have waiting lists.

The number of sewing machines imported to the U.S. doubled to 2.8 million in 2005 from 1999, according to the Census Bureau. Singer Sewing Co., now owned by KSIN Holdings Ltd., an affiliate of private-equity firm Kohlberg & Co., says sales of its electronic models priced at less than \$200 -- appealing to first-time buyers -- were more than 10 times as big in 2005 as they were in 2004. And Hudson, Ohio-based fabric chain Jo-Ann Stores Inc. reports an increase in sales of items such as dress forms and cutting tables in recent months.

It's a welcome turn of events for an industry that never fully recovered from the cultural and economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s. These included the movement of clothes manufacturing overseas, which made it cheaper for women to buy their clothes than to make them, and cultural changes that led women to give up sewing. As the women's movement took hold, dressing became more casual, and the sewing machine became a "symbol of subjugation," says Gary Jones, president of Singer. Accordingly, home-economics classes for girls were refashioned into "family consumer sciences" classes that emphasized nutrition and child psychology over sewing.

Now, the sewing industry is working to respond to the new interest. Makers of sewing patterns are trying to target young, fashion-savvy consumers. New York-based Simplicity Pattern Co. has rolled out six new patterns designed by Wendy Mullin, the designer behind the preppy-urban Built By Wendy line. The company has also reintroduced a "retro" line of five original patterns from the 1940s and '50s, responding to the backward-looking fashion craze. The retro collection boosted Simplicity's sales of suit patterns by 25% in the quarter ended Sept. 30 from the year-earlier quarter.

Meanwhile, at New York-based McCall Pattern Co., which offers Butterick, McCall's, and Vogue Patterns, sales of vintage patterns have risen 13% over the past year. Its "Sew Hot, Sew Now" line of patterns, launched in September under the McCall's label, targets a fashion-savvy beginner or intermediate sewer with such looks as an empire top and a bohemian dress. Gail T. Hamilton, a vice president, adds that pattern makers today are more quickly able to reproduce hot looks on the runway than in past decades.

1957 Vintage Vogue Pattern ▶
by McCall Pattern Co.

McCall has reissued over 30 vintage patterns from the 1930s, '40s and '50s under its Vogue Patterns label.



◀ **Built By Wendy line**
by Simplicity Pattern Co.

Simplicity Pattern Co. has so far rolled out six patterns by hip urban designer Wendy Mullin and has more in the works.

The U.S. arm of Swiss-based Bernina International AG, which makes sewing machines, is talking to its dealers about how to reach out to a younger generation. Gayle Hillert, vice president of education and training for Bernina of America, says that at a recent conference of dealers, she suggested stores try alternatives to traditional classes, such as wine-and-cheese sewing parties or quilt-making bridal showers.

Industry experts say that today's electronic machines make sewing simpler and less of a chore, with stitches that adjust their size automatically and "cruise control" features.

Plenty of sewing machines now allow beginners to do intricate embroidery -- and sometimes come with software that allows sewers to design their own stitches on home computers and transfer them to the machine. Machines have also gotten cheaper, with some good electronic sewing machines costing less than \$200.

Of course, it's hard to say whether the sewing fad will have staying power. Sewing continues to require a bigger initial investment than crafts such as knitting. A recent purchase to make a simple wool A-line skirt, which included thread, a yard of wool, a yard of lining material, a pattern, a zipper and a hook, ended up costing over \$30. And that, of course, doesn't include the time it took to make the garment.

But some sewers see endless possibilities. Judy Ni, a 28-year-old from Parsippany, N.J., started out as a knitter. "I did a bunch of scarves," she said, before wanting to go a little further. Since last winter, she has taken four classes. After starting with a portable tissue holder and progressing on to zippers, she recently took private lessons to learn how to design patterns that fit her own body. She says she was tired of fashions that seemed dull, repetitive -- and expensive. "Everyone's starting to look like clones of each other," she says. "Why pay \$1,000 for something that everyone else has?"

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