

Sewing Machine, ca. 1900

An Exploration of the Treadle

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The sewing machine: a revolutionary game-changer that transformed how the world produced fabric. This machine mostly attracted women, as they were the ones left to manage the concerns of cloth-making, while the men went to work or to war. What once required hours of laboriously stitching each piece of fabric by hand, with the fear of a pin harming one's hand, could now be done in a fraction of the time. This innovation led to the rapid production of clothing, freeing up time for other tasks and transforming daily life. The introduction of the sewing machine marked a significant turning point, not only in household labor but also in the broader context of manufacturing, laying the foundation for many other advances in the clothing industry. The ability to produce clothing quickly and efficiently revolutionized the entire garment industry, changing the pace of fashion.

The at-home sewing machine was first produced in 1709, with various replicas and models emerging over time, which is why we refer to "The Sewing Machine, ca. 1900." It was most likely made by Isaac Singer, who industrialized the sewing machine and aimed to make it a household item. His innovation reduced the time it took to sew a piece of a shirt from 14 hours to just one hour and 16 minutes (Bayiler, 2021). As the sewing machine spread rapidly to households, more and more women became eager to purchase one, wanting to have this revolutionary product in their homes. This particular artifact is crafted from wood and metal, with floral designs delicately carved into the metal parts. It resembles a plain cabinet with treadles and five drawers, which likely served to hold sewing tools and machine parts (Benavides, 2018). The sewing machine is rectangular, with a flat top surface. The bottom

contains a foot pedal that, when moved back and forth, powers the machine and enables the threading movements. Produced in the early 20th century, this machine primarily catered to middle-class women, and to other factories. Its main purpose was to make it more convenient for women, particularly in Texas, to sew clothes for their families in a cost-effective and self-sufficient manner (Eves et al., 2019).

The sewing machine significantly reduced physical labor for women, who were traditionally responsible for a variety of household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and clothing production. With the advent of the sewing machine, one area of physical labor—hand-sewing—was greatly eased. As women's daily routines began to change, sewing machines became one of the many items to undergo industrialization during the Industrial Revolution. The shift from hand-made to machine-made garments revolutionized the clothing industry. Early on, the sewing machine was a luxury item, priced at up to \$120, making it out of reach for lower-class women (Histories, 2018). However, by 1902, the cost of the machine decreased enough to be affordable for the working class, which led to a shift in its perceived value. To maintain the interest of middle-class consumers, the machine was often designed to hide away in plain sight. It could be lowered into a compartment, converting it into a decorative table. This is why the sewing machine at the HCU Museum looks like a desk (Histories, 2018). Understanding the significance of the sewing machine requires recognizing its role in transforming the fashion industry. It marked the shift from custom-made clothing to ready-to-wear garments, making clothing more accessible, faster to produce, and more affordable. This shift didn't just influence personal wardrobes—it affected entire industries, including business attire and even military uniforms.

A sewing machine is one of those objects that almost everyone has encountered at some point. For me, it brings back memories of the machine my mother used in Nigeria. This artifact reminded me that the importance of sewing machines is global, and I hadn't realized just how deeply the U.S. embraced them. If the sewing machine had never been invented, I thought, ready-made clothes would never have reached the stores, and the world would have struggled to clothe its growing populations. If I had encountered the sewing machine in its historical setting, my impression wouldn't have changed much. I grew up in an environment where the sewing machine was highly valued, and every woman was encouraged to learn its use. The sewing machine was seen not only as a tool but as a skill every woman should have. Its value was taught to me from an early age. Today, the widespread use of sewing machines in households has decreased, especially in places like Texas, where ready-made clothing is readily available. The machine has transitioned from a household necessity to a specialized skill or profession. The sewing machine illustrates the Good, by relieving women of the physical burden of hand-sewing; the True, by showing how technological knowledge can improve lives; and the Beautiful, through the machine's designs and the artistry of the clothes it helps create. The sewing machine has helped to thread together the past and present, marking both a personal and cultural shift in how we approach work, craft, and self-expression.

It is important for one to see the beauty and the sophisticated act of using the sewing machine. Clothing is a big part of our culture, both now and in the past. It represents one's background and heritage and helps us connect to one another and to other people as well. This is why the sewing machine had such a huge impact on society. It brought us closer together because it was something that everyone could relate to. Even though in today's everyday life, the sewing machine is not viewed as important as it was in the past, it is necessary to see it as a piece

of the past that enabled us to connect to the future. As important as it was a piece of the past, it is just as important as a piece of our future.

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