

## ***“Sew, What’s Cooking?”***

In the April 2003 issue of Sew News magazine, Cindy Kacynski is quoted as saying, “Make a mess, protect the dress.” Now, I can understand, and even identify with that statement, but it puzzles me as to why I’ve found so many aprons with a sewing motif. Just what gets messy when you are sewing? Too many drops of blood from pricked fingers? I don’t know about you, but other than stray threads, I don’t get too messy when I sew.

When you think of aprons, do you recall the television series of the 50s when proper housewives wore them? Remember June Cleaver in Leave it to Beaver? Or do you picture your Mother or Grandmother in one? I have a favorite photo of my maternal grandmother standing at a stove wearing a full body apron. Aprons seem to conjure up conflicting images, though – that of a simpler life versus that of the hard working times the past. The saying “tied to mother’s apron strings” seems to imply the apron may symbolize tying unwilling women to domestic duties; or even tying sonny boy to momma because she did everything for him, wearing an apron while doing so.

One of the oldest articles of clothing, aprons have served not merely as protection for the body, but also as a surface that can display needlework. In earlier times, an apron’s design and ornamentation would reflect the social and marital status of the wearer, her age, and the type of occasion on which it was to be worn.

The word apron comes from the French naperon, which means a small tablecloth or napkin. Aprons have been worn as protective work garments and as ceremonial indicators of social status, group affiliation or social status. Sounds similar to thimbles, doesn’t it? History contains records of aprons being worn by Cretan fertility goddesses for sacred ceremonies, ceremonial aprons were worn by Assyrian priests and Egyptian rulers wore jewel-encrusted aprons. Trades people also wore aprons for protection: blacksmith, fishermen and tanners are just a few examples. In Western Europe, tradesmen could be identified by their apron: gardeners, spinners, weavers and garbage men (what’s the tie in, there?) wore blue aprons, butlers wore green aprons, butchers wore striped aprons, barbers wore checkered aprons, and masons wore white aprons as the color blended with the dust of the trade. Even today, a member of the fraternal organization of Masons wears a ceremonial apron.

Historically, women were restricted in creativity as they could only express themselves within certain boundaries. The 1920s was a time when refined ladies were still expected to possess and display needlework skills. Making and decorating an apron was an acceptable creative outlet for women.

Aprons were also made from recycled dress fabrics, as shown in a 1945 booklet on aprons by the Spool Cotton Company. Booklet #S-20 sold for 10 cents and shows the logo for Clarks ONT as well as J&P Coats. One of the patterns encourages women to refashion old dresses into useable aprons.

And you know what? Aprons are making a comeback today! Interest in vintage textiles can lead you down the path of collecting aprons, or apron patterns. Vintage aprons are now “retro chic” according to a Wall Street Journal article on 12 August 2005. There are a number of speakers who specialize in the topic of aprons, such as Carol Elmore of Manhattan KS who presents, “Aprons – Necessary Yesterday – Optional Today.” The premiere issue of “Apron-ology” was published in Spring of 2009. This is a new quarterly magazine that “flirts with the many uses and looks of the apron.” A search of the internet will reveal other references, articles, sites and publications on the topic of aprons. Sure looks like there is interest out there, so aprons may be around awhile in the collecting world.

When I was in high school, if you took Home Economics, you learned to sew by making an apron. Do they even teach sewing in school any more?

Let’s take a look at some of my collection, loosely categorized by:

**Handkerchief apron** (Figure 1). Popular in the 1940s thru 1960s, they were made from three or four hankies. Handkerchiefs were also used as pockets or decorative trim on fabric aprons. The saying, “everything old is new again” is certainly true when you read, “Hanky-time Apron” by Meg Sorenson in the March 2005 issue of Clotilde’s Sewing Savy magazine. This article gives directions on how to turn a collection of vintage hankies into a “sweet little apron.” According to the author, “you can make one in a matter of minutes.”

**Embroidered aprons** (Figures 2, 3, 4). Although many were individual creations, kits were available in the early to mid 1900s to exhibit the skill of the wearer.

**Full bib no waist.** This style was popular in the 1940s and commonly found on the home front and in the commercial world. Because so many remember their grandmother wearing this style, they have been nicknamed the “Grandma Apron.” This style was usually left for the messiest jobs, such as laundry. Way too hard to photograph due to size and details, but Figure 5 shows a cobbler type apron, which is similar.

**Organdy and Tulle (Figures 6 & 7).** It was easier to maintain clothing in the 50s with washing machines. In addition to the kitchen apron, women could now have fancy aprons for special times. Because of the sheerness of this fabric, it wasn't very practical – it was purely for special occasions. Notice there is no waistband, which gives the apron the flow of an evening gown, making it more an accessory than a functional piece. You KNOW that green apron was meant for me, as it has an embroidered Scottie sewing (Figure 6). Scotties on thimbles; Scotties on aprons...to the dismay of my husband, there is no end! ☺

**Kitchen Influences.** Colors of the 60s were different than any time before. Colors like pink and turquoise were found in “modern” kitchens. Aprons seem to reflect that time period with their colors, too.

**Text (Figures 8 & 9).** Aprons with slogans were also popular in the 60s. A Stitch in Time is certainly a familiar slogan to thimble collectors and it appears on a number of aprons in the collection.

**Gingham.** Gingham fabric was popular for several decades, but especially favored in the 50s and 60s. The gridded background of the fabric would lend itself to needlework techniques of cross stitching, smocking and embroidery. Gingham comes in the colors of the rainbow, but pink and turquoise were the most popular in the 50s and 60s.

**Appliqued (Figure 10).** This is a type of ornamentation that is achieved by cutting shapes from cloth, laying them on a background fabric and stitching them in place – either by hand or by machine. Normally a technique that requires great skill, I think this apron may have been created by a novice as the edges are frayed and the stitching is primitive. But, what better way to learn a new needlework technique than on something useful, like an apron.

**Towel** (Figure 11). Many housewives tuck a towel into their waist bands when performing household chores. This towel apron is much more attractive than a plain towel. These were popular in the 70s through the 90s. Don't they remind you of the towels with crocheted tops you fasten to drawer pulls so you always have a towel handy?

**Sewing.** Embroidered words like “notions” or “pattern” often decorated the pockets of sewing aprons popular in the 60s. Figure 12, which shows the cover of two Simplicity sewing patterns, illustrates this. Pattern #6808 shows an apron on the bottom left where the words “Patterns” and “Notions” appear on the two pockets of the apron. Note the pattern was fifty cents. If you sew, you know it's been a very long time since patterns were under a buck! Pattern #2751, from 1957, shows an apron on the left that depicts actual sewing notions (scissors, tape measure, spool of thread, threaded needle and a thimble) on the pockets.

I'm sure you've all heard of signature or memory quilts. Well, this sewing apron seems to be a signature apron (Figures 13 and 14). I wonder if all the ladies had matching, signed aprons from their sewing group, or if this is a one of a kind given to a member as a memento. Gee – I wish I knew!

Figure 15 is a display of five different aprons with the fabric print in different color ways as the only commonality. Each one is of a different, individual style. Do you have any sewing motif aprons in your collection? If so, perhaps we can trade? I have a few duplicates in the 50+ (and growing) collection.

The topic of aprons, let alone sewing aprons, may be misconstrued as a sexist topic – appealing only to women. I apologize to the male members who may be reading this, as that certainly is not the case. I would like to illustrate that real men DO wear aprons, and in fact, wear THIMBLE aprons.....(Figure 16)

And if that isn't enough, let me show you my new area of interest – SEWING ITEMS FOR MEN!!! (Figure 17)