

A History of the Paper Pattern Industry: The Home Dressmaking Fashion Revolution

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Tucked away in museums displaying and storing collections of dress and textiles there is often a subsidiary but significant collection of printed ephemera. This might encompass bills, trade cards, paper carrier bags, fashion plates and dressmaking patterns. The last category is the central theme of Professor Joy Emery's book and it is perhaps fitting that this book is being reviewed in the year that The Ephemera Society in the United Kingdom is celebrating its 40th anniversary. The founder of that Society, Maurice Rickards (1919–98) offered a pithy summation of ephemera as 'the minor transient documents of everyday life' and dressmaking patterns seemingly belong in that category. However, as this book and the various international collections which contain dress patterns can demonstrate, many of these documents are far from minor or transient. They may have been created from thin paper – the tissue paper that many of us can recall from domestic or professional contexts, but their survival indicates a strength which belies their superficial fragility. Such paper patterns alongside many other categories of supposedly ephemeral items are now studied within a variety of scholarly contexts, including that within which Joy Emery worked for many years at the University of Rhode Island as Professor Emerita of Theatre and Curator of the Commercial Pattern Archive.

She is a generous acknowledger of those whose work has informed hers including Betty Williams (1931–96) an early enthusiast and theatre designer who inspired Emery and Professor Kevin L. Seligman whose notable collection is held by Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All were involved with planning an exhibition seen at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York in 1997, 'Dreams on paper: home sewing in America' and Williams' research on the history of pattern-making informed both exhibition and this book. It is a carefully organised book with a clear introduction about its aims – primarily to consider American and English language patterns from the 1840s up to the present day, allowing for further research into collections held in other countries. The notion that patterns were too fragile to survive in quantity and that their production processes meant that topical fashions had passed before the actual patterns could be acquired is dispelled. Surviving patterns, according to Emery, also provide a visual source for defining and dating the terminology given to garments and their constituent elements, and an additional means of dating fashions accurately. All of the key English language sources can be found in the bibliography which is arranged into primary and secondary material; archival collections are limited to those found at the University of Rhode

Island.

Studying historic clothing and how it was constructed and disseminated is a hybrid discipline; it can straddle art, design, economic and social history and also be interrogated in the context of theoretical approaches to the body and its representation. Given that there is still much work to be done to identify and catalogue collections of patterns Emery chooses to examine the economic and social contexts alongside an informed knowledge of the changing fashions that a chronological and well-illustrated sequence of patterns offers the reader. This is achieved in an introduction, 12 chapters, an epilogue and appendix containing several historic patterns offered to the keen maker in an updated format. The last is a reminder that historic patterns, whether surviving in paper form or, from earlier periods, in patterns taken from extant garments, offer an opportunity to recreate accurate costumes for cinema, theatre and television productions. The long connection between performance and collections of surviving material – garments, patterns and textiles is integral to this book but the principal focus is informing the reader of the historical development of this remarkably democratic approach to stylish appearance.

Like all good performances this one has a beginning, middle and end, with the beginning offering three chapters of scene-setting. The first deals with early tailoring texts in Spanish, French and English and the various tailoring systems that culminated in the prolific number of tailoring manuals produced in the United Kingdom in the 19th century – most dress historians are familiar with the publicity-seeking Benjamin Read in the 1830s and 1840s and the many editions of works by T. H. Holding from the 1880s onwards. London was the acknowledged centre for exquisite, understated and timeless tailoring from the late 18th century onwards, and tailors' systems were a boon to the readymade garment industry, which had evolved in the late 17th century. Chapter two presents the early history of dressmaking patterns up to c.1860. The flourishing print culture of the early-to-mid-19th century and increased literacy produced a succession of short-lived and longer-lived books and journals which, in the main – there are exceptions, gave female readers advice on the latest fashions. Scaled patterns or pull-out sheets were included to encourage the home dressmaker; full-size sheets in one size only and with minimal instructions gradually replaced scaled-down patterns. In chapter three advances in 19th-century technology are examined and Emery attributes the success of the two earliest American pattern companies – Demorest and Butterick founded in 1853/4 and 1863/4 respectively, to a combination of technical innovations and changing attitudes towards home dressmaking. Between 1825 and 1850 the growing availability of the sewing machine, the introduction of flexible dress forms onto which clothing could be fitted, and an avalanche of publications made possible by the inexpensive paper which came from steam-driven paper-making machines offered ideal conditions for a boom in home dressmaking. The means to acquire patterns and transmit money securely came into being in both America and the United Kingdom as the postal systems offered nationwide services.

Throughout this book Emery, whilst including limited discussion of British and European pattern companies, concentrates on the rise and fall of American companies; there are useful chapter summaries and charts dealing with costs of patterns, sizing of patterns and a valuable list of 'Major American Pattern Companies in 1900' (p. 73). The early history of pattern companies in chapter four introduces familiar and unfamiliar names, the best-known being Butterick, named for its founder Ebenezer, a struggling tailor who began with clothing for boys in the early 1860s. Butterick, unlike European tailors, embraced the new technology – in France sewing machines installed in 1840 to make uniforms for the French army were destroyed by tailors fearful of a future in which mechanized tailoring threatened their livelihoods and, for some years it was women who saw the many possibilities of sewing machines despite their high cost. Butterick patterns, despite their minimal instructions and lack of an illustration of the finished garment quickly became successful and, drawing upon his tailoring skills, Butterick was the first pattern-maker to offer sized patterns. Also, if Emery's choice of examples is anything to go by, the two boys' outfits ('Boy's Single-Breasted Garibaldi Jacket. Ages 3 to 10 years. 8 sizes; 20 cents each' (p. 42) and a 'Boy's Zouave Jacket' (p. 50)) swiftly capitalized on the taste for what we might term 'celebrity fashions'. Such patterns were marketed through magazines expressly set-up for this purpose. Between 1880 and 1900 six major American companies were producing patterns and each published a magazine as a promotional tool for their wares. Together they provided patterns for various skill and income levels; patterns were offered for non-

tailored menswear but the principal emphasis was on children's and women's clothing and underclothing with a 'mix and match' approach to selling patterns to offer a degree of individuality to makers. The missing ingredient was named designers, the magazines and patterns preferring to mention designs based on Paris fashions rather than house designers.

Any discussion of home dressmaking, even if many of the actual firms were run by shrewd businessmen, cannot avoid mention of changing female expectations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and Emery covers these in chapter six. By 1900 readymade garments were readily available through mail order or from specialist or department stores, and younger women worked and had less inclination or time to sew, though this did not prevent inventive companies expanding or entering the market for the first time. Condé Nast (1873–1942) a lawyer with a background in magazine management acquired *Vogue* in 1909 and recast it as the magazine for rich 'women of taste' (p. 73). At that time it offered just one pattern in each weekly edition though this had risen to 200 per year by 1911. This was a tiny out-put compared to Butterick's 700–900 new patterns each year and McCall's 620. Retail stores broke restrictive contracts and began offering patterns from several companies while mainstream, non-fashion magazines and newspapers promoted syndicated patterns often aimed at those with conservative tastes and/or lower incomes. The appearance of patterns was also changing; more space was given to instructions enclosed in an envelope with an image of the garment on the outside.

The growth of female education in colleges with courses designed for training in home economics provided pattern companies with new partnerships, as did correspondence courses for those unable to afford a college place. The Women's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences was founded in Scranton, Penn. by Mary Brooks Picken (1886–1981) in 1916 and this indefatigable author of 96 books on needlework and textile arts is another of the influential figures who appear in this book. The impact of warfare on pattern production is discussed in two of the chapters, and again it is ingenuity and changing social attitudes which ensure continued success. Patterns were provided for women's uniforms and specialist working clothes and McCall's 'Dress of Patriotism' of 1918 (p. 90) recalls similar initiatives in Great Britain such as the National Standard Dress of the same year. An obvious breakthrough was the acceptance, grudging perhaps, that women might wear trousers without attracting the ridicule of the 1850s when Mrs Amelia Bloomer introduced her experimental loose trousers under skirts. Practical clothing or the lack of it is a strand that runs throughout the book. Pattern companies liked fleeting fashions and seasonal variants because they ensured constant sales of their goods but when fashions became simpler as in the 1920s and 1960s they found other innovations and harnessed other technologies. The introduction of electric irons and sewing machines provided easier ways of caring for and making of clothing after the First World War.

In 1921 'the biggest invention since the sewing machine' (p. 100) was announced in *McCall's Magazine* referring to printed patterns – each printed sheet was an exact replica of the original rather than a machine-cut version. This new process was patented but other firms jostled to get around the legal niceties. The 1920s was a notable decade of innovation; from 1922 colour images for pattern envelopes began to appear and were usual by 1928 and McCall's arranged licences with Paris couturiers in 1925 so that the actual designs, and the names of designers could be directly used. Alongside changes and mergers a new company, Simplicity was launched in December 1927 with an affiliated publication *Simplicity for Smartness & Thrift*. In the same year Reader Mail, a syndicate offering patterns to magazines and newspapers was formed, again to widen markets and access to patterns. All the major pattern companies had London and Paris offices. Simplicity like Butterick benefited from dynamic leadership and was in full production by 1931 and quickly convinced the public that its styles and patterns were the simplest to make. It offered 'Three patterns for the price of one. Make any or all Styles' in 1931 (p. 119), reducing it to two patterns by 1934; it had a London branch by 1932 and established contracts with various pattern stores and chains like F. W. Woolworth & Co. for which it provided Dubarry patterns. By acquiring two titles from Hearst in 1936-7 it also obtained equipment for printing patterns, and built strong educational links. In the same decade, *Vogue* and Butterick, seeking fresh impetus brought out or collaborated on designs connected with the cinema with *Vogue's Hollywood Pattern Book* emulating popular film magazines. Colour illustrations were usual for all companies excepting Butterick, and photographs of finished garments worn by models began to appear

alongside fashion drawings.

Second World War government restrictions are considered in chapter nine; a changed export market simplified approaches to pattern design using un-named American designers. It was as late as 1950 that Advance patterns created its 'American Designer' series. The emphasis on 'Make and Mend' in America was not dissimilar to 'Make-Do and Mend' in the United Kingdom with ingenious re-use of existing clothing, small differences in the form of accessories or additions to or subtractions from garments ensuring continued home sewing. 'I'm Wearing Dad's Old Suit' captures this inventive attitude in an illustration of a Butterick pattern from April 1943 (p. 150).

Chapters ten to 12 examine the impact of changing life-styles on pattern companies and home sewing. In America, as elsewhere in the developed world there was a shift from rural to urban or suburban living and once rationing had ended, energetic consumption. The full skirts of late 1940s New Look fashions act as a metaphor for such consumption and a wish for escapist glamour also found in a newly formed company, Spadea which specialised in named designer fashions and had a link with the Duchess of Windsor. Leisure clothing, found amongst European elites in the 1920s and 1930s was offered to a wider audience, and teen interests were fostered through special promotions and magazines catering to their interests. The growing emphasis on experimentation and individuality in the 1960s and 1970s found expression in clashes over the use of natural or synthetic fibres, natural or psychedelic dyes alongside more naturalistic styles and the rise of small niche companies. An interesting phenomenon was the growing influence of the German company Burda, founded in the late 1940s as a magazine with patterns but quickly gaining international appeal. Increased competition for markets, a rise in cheaply produced clothing and a shift from home sewing as a necessity to a hobby, had considerable impact on pattern companies throughout America and Europe. By 2011 just two mainstream companies – McCall and Simplicity – owned five brand names between them; however, there were also a number of small independents and two German companies all using new computer and sewing machine technologies to stimulate interest.

A short epilogue acts as a conclusion to this skilful examination of how home dressmaking changed expectations about and the means to be fashionable on a limited budget. The well-chosen illustrations, most but not all from the Commercial Pattern Archive at the University of Rhode Island, are an essential and well-integrated complement to the text and provide an extra layer of information on the evolution of the pattern-making industry. Menswear is mainly represented by leisurewear and informal garments and accessories – gloves, hats etc. are only occasionally mentioned; possibly no company specialized in these items. The natural accompaniment to dressmaking patterns, certainly for many skilled home economists, was knitting patterns and archival collections contain examples of these as another method of stretching budgets in the production of garments for all family members. Professor Emery has not included them in her book but a companion volume on home knitting patterns surely beckons?

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