

Introduction

After visiting this exhibit, my client requested I write an overview of it for his company's blog. You can view the original post [here](#).

Sewn in America: An Exploration of Women and Sewing

Sewing has a long history in my family. My grandmothers sewed. My mother sews. My sisters and I can sew with different skill levels thanks to her teaching us since we were young.

Most modern American women have lost that ability. Mothers no longer teach their daughters how to replace a simple button, much less how to turn a pile of fabric and notions into a wearable garment.

The current exhibit at the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum shows how that wasn't always the case. Clothes, quilts, samplers, and more present how American women have used sewing throughout history to care for their families and others.

Exhibit Overview

The textile items making up the exhibit fill the long main gallery at DAR. Unlike most museums, most of the large garments and quilts aren't behind glass, allowing you to see the stitching and construction up close.

The exhibit is divided into three sections. First is Mastering the Skills, which explores how the ability to sew is passed from mother to daughter. Girls practiced these useful skills by sewing doll clothes and samplers, which later allowed them to make full-size garments and beautiful needlework decor.

Next is Making, which shows how sewing has evolved over the years. For hundreds of years, it was done by hand with a needle and thread, sometimes at home, sometimes by a dressmaker. With the creation of the sewing machine, clothes could be produced faster and allowed women to make more complex garments at home.

The final exhibit section is Meaning. Sewing, while a practical skill, is filled with subtle messages. This section explores how women have used meaning in textile arts, from early immigrant quilts to modern visible repair movements.

Thoughts from a Sewist

Visiting this exhibit was a joy as an amateur fashion historian and hand-sewing nerd. Seeing the time, effort, and skill women in the past put into everything from undergarments to fireplace screens was incredible.

An in-depth exhibit on a topic like this is rare. I wasn't the only one taking my time studying everything on display. While there, we met a group of middle-aged women who traveled from Delaware to see the exhibit. One told me she enjoyed seeing a young person like me so interested in the topic.

A few of the highlights of the exhibit include:

- The few dresses turned inside out so you can see the seams
- A soldier's housewife (or sewing kit) from the Civil War
- A Polish Jew's quilt showing the holocaust horrors she and her sister witnessed
- Items donated by private individuals from Maryland
- Early paper sewing patterns that look like they're written code

This exhibit does a wonderful job of highlighting the role of sewing in women's lives, which was necessary until the increased availability of mass-produced clothes in the last few hundred years. Though these women had neverending busy work, they still took the time to engage in non-practical sewing projects to show their skills and beautify their homes.

It's a fantastic exhibit to take your daughters to see while it's on display. If they don't know it, share your family's history with sewing. When you return home, let them try their hand at a simple project, such as a doll or a sampler.

Sewn in America is on display at the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum until December 31st, 2024. For more information on the museum and its hours, visit their website.

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