Constructing Garments, Constructing Identities: Home Sewers and Homemade Clothing in 1950s/60s Alberta

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Home sewing is the most feminine of all the arts and crafts. It is an easy as well as a basic way for a woman to add to her femininity, whether she sews for herself, her children or her home. The woman who sews can be creative, make herself and members of her family attractive, and also stretch the family clothing budget.¹

The above paragraph is from a home economics thesis written in 1959. It neatly sums up the decade’s attitudes towards femininity and home sewing. In the years following the Second World War, the notions of public, active femininity that had prevailed during the war were rejected, and expectations of women returned to quasi-Victorian ideals of modest respectability and selfless devotion to home and family. Publications for women portrayed femininity as best expressed through the practice of three essential virtues: thrift, practical creativity and attention to appearance. Sewing, as an activity that was done at home and demonstrated female industry and service to others, was not only seen as inherently feminine, but as a way for women to increase their femininity through the practice of these virtues.

To understand how real women experienced home sewing in the 1950s and 60s, I talked to fifteen women from Alberta who sewed at home through the period. They were also kind enough to lend me their patterns, photographs and articles of clothing that they had made. This paper will explore the meanings that these women placed on their clothing, the activity of sewing, its impact on their identities, and how these meanings could change as accepted notions of femininity began to change in the 1960s. I have used the three “feminine virtues” of thrift, practical creativity and attention to appearance to frame this exploration.

The first half of the twentieth century saw a shift towards a consumer-oriented society in which it was a man’s role to earn money and a woman’s role to spend it. Women were expected to spend money wisely for the benefit of the entire family. Thrift and intelligent consumerism were considered essential feminine values, and as such were part of a girl’s training for her future role as a wife and mother. Women’s magazines and educational materials for girls repeated this message, and often linked it to sewing at home.²

The language of thrift and economy also figured prominently in the narratives of women who sewed through the 1950s. Alberta in the 1950s was not a prosperous economy. It was necessary to use and reuse household items as long as possible. Women spoke of remodelling old clothing, reusing flour and sugar sacks, purchasing remnants from the catalogue and purchasing all of their materials on sale. They also shared or traded resources such as patterns and old clothing to stretch their budgets and clothe their families. Many women noted that their families had limited financial means and that they were required to sew because there was no other way of obtaining clothing and other household textiles. Some also suggested that it was expected of them, with one woman stating that sewing at home was just a “matter of fact thing.”

There are, however, stories within women’s narratives that suggest perhaps sewing at home was not such a “matter of fact thing,” that even in times of economic stress, not all women would sew. Describing the general store at which she purchased sewing supplies in the early 1950s, one woman recalled:

_They had groceries on one side and I can remember they had material at the back, and they had a few ladies dresses there, because not every woman sewed, even then._

Joyce, who described great economic hardship on the farms in her area, identified women in her community who did not sew. Joyce’s sister did not enjoy sewing, so Joyce did all of the family’s sewing, including her mother’s. Joyce also sewed for other women in the community. Helen estimated that she made only about 25% of her family’s clothing. Her primary source of children’s clothing was trading back and forth with a cousin in Ontario. These stories show that there were some options for procuring clothing other than sewing for women who did not enjoy the activity. Women could choose how to spend their time to their own and their families’ best advantage. Those who did not enjoy sewing or had other priorities could make choices around whether or not they were going to sew. There was room within social networks to make decisions and strategic trades that would help stretch family budgets.

This is not to say that there were not women who sewed despite disliking it, either due to economic necessity or societal expectation. It is quite likely that there were. The women in this study, however, unanimously identified themselves as women who loved to sew. Because they found sewing pleasurable, most were willing to spend their time doing it, even if this meant sacrificing sleep. However, rather than classifying this as selfish work (because it brought them pleasure), which would be decidedly unfeminine, using the discourse of home sewing as feminine thrift, women could spend their time sewing without being considered selfish or unfeminine.

A discourse in which women’s sewing was indicative of their fiscal responsibility gave women a tool with which to construct positive identities. Women spoke about how their work was appreciated, both by their families and the larger community. Their use of statements such as “everyone loved it,” “that was her favourite” and “no wonder I couldn’t find anything like it” in stories about the clothes they made shows that the women’s skills and resourcefulness were important to the social standing and emotional well being of their families. Without women’s sewing the families would not have had clothes of the quality that they did (because they could not afford them), and would not have been as admired.

By the mid-1960s, prosperity and the standard of living had generally increased across North America. There was not as much need for thrift as there had been in the previous decades, and articles about home sewing began to reflect this. The younger women I spoke to who sewed only during the 1960s placed less emphasis on the economics of sewing than their older counterparts. To them, sewing represented something larger than a way of saving money. When not constrained by finances, home sewing represented for these women the potential to create exactly what they wanted.

The opportunity to exercise their creativity was one of the most appealing aspects of home dressmaking to the women I interviewed. The majority found much of their creative satisfaction from meeting the challenges that sewing posed for them. Speaking about remnant bundles purchased from Sears, one woman noted:
I just loved the surprise when they came’ cause you never knew what you were going to get, it was just sight unseen....

Another participant, a retired home economics teacher, spoke about a coat that she made for her daughter from an old coat of her own. She said:

It was a blue coat and I turned the material and I was very proud of it. That wasn’t a case of not being able to afford to buy new. I had a very, very good friend who did a lot of sewing and I think there was a little bit of competition between the two of us. She taught school too. She kept me going.

The use of patterns to produce clothing has removed it from the traditional understanding of what it means to be creative. The utilitarian nature of the objects produced may also have obscured women’s creative involvement in the process of making them. However, it may also be because it was through the process of meeting practical challenges rather than through developing unique aesthetics that women tested their creative abilities. Period photographs of the women in this study show them wearing attractive but unremarkable, commonly styled clothing.

Figure 1 (left). Anna wearing a dress made from Vogue Paris Original pattern 1376. Source: Anna Duncan.
Figure 2 (right). Vogue Paris Original pattern 1376. Photograph by Marcia McLean.

Figure 3 (left). Gordine (left) wearing a dress made from McCall’s pattern 5184. Source: Gordine Thomson.
Figure 4 (right). McCall’s pattern 5184. Photograph by Marcia McLean.
One photograph of the participant Anna shows her wearing a dress made almost identically to the image on the pattern envelope (fig. 1 and fig. 2). Another woman, Gordine (fig. 3 and fig. 4), commented on how similar one of her dresses was in colour and pattern to the drawing on the pattern envelope. But looking only at this evidence provides a distorted picture of women’s creative lives. Many women had limited financial resources with which to purchase their materials for sewing. Women also wanted themselves and their families to be respectably well dressed within the norms of Alberta society. Meeting budgetary limitations and societal expectations often required a great deal of creative ability, from inspiration for the garment to the finished project.

Women found inspiration for clothing from diverse sources such as pattern books, catalogues and other women’s clothing. One woman even admitted to going through stores and looking at how the clothes were made, down to the finishing on the inside.

It was not always possible for women to obtain patterns for the garments that they wanted. Often, they would mix and match pattern pieces, or adapt patterns to create the garments they imagined. Although women’s designs may not have been strictly original, being based on images from catalogues, magazines and pieces of existing patterns, they were conceived of by women without formal training in clothing design or pattern drafting and put together with the tools that these women had available to them.

In addition to creative enjoyment, many women cited a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with seeing a finished product as reasons for enjoying sewing. In contrast with much of the other work performed by women in the home, when sewing was finished, it was finished. Housework by its very nature is repetitive with the same tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, needing to be done over and over again.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote of women’s oppression within marriage using the concepts of transcendence and immanence. Transcendent activities are those that produce something long-lasting, enable individual self-expression, transform the world, or in some way contribute to the constructive endeavours of humanity. By contrast, immanent activities merely perpetuate life or maintain the status quo. In a decade that espoused domesticity and motherhood as ideals of womanhood, it was expected that all women would live in the sphere of immanence.

Unlike other household tasks, sewing had the possibility of being a transcendent activity. Sewing was a challenging, creative process that resulted in a durable finished product. Though women may have had to sew several garments, each one could be different. They never had to make the same item twice in the same way if they did not want to. Although in the broadest sense women’s home sewing may not have transformed the world, it did give women an outlet for creativity and self-expression that would have a lasting and tangible impact on their own self-esteem and the well being of their families. Through home dressmaking, women were able to step out of their immanent role, if only briefly, into the sphere of transcendence.

It has been well documented that women were constantly reminded of the importance of their appearance throughout the post-war period. In the 1950s, this was often tied to the idea of dressing within the bounds of “good taste,” which involved appearing modestly and appropriately attired for every occasion.

While women’s magazines in the 1950s published fashion information, they were much more likely to focus on the economic benefits of classic styles and good quality fabrics. Similarly, women who sewed clothing in the 1950s did not describe themselves as being fashionable. While they generally hoped that their clothes were in style, more important than being fashionable for these women were comfort, fit and looking nice. Ruby rejected the characterization that she was “well dressed” in favour of being seen as “comfortable, clean and respectable,” while Anna considered:

“To me [clothing] was just something I liked and it was practical. It served a purpose to me. That was about it…. They were comfortable. And I thought they looked very nice, I thought they were flattering to the female figure.

Interestingly, of the five patterns that Anna loaned me two were Vogue Paris Originals and one was a Vogue Couturier Design. This would seem to suggest that on some level at least, Anna was quite fashion conscious. On the surface there appears to be a discrepancy between Anna’s account of herself and the material evidence.

However, Anna’s Vogue patterns shared the same straight, classic lines that were evident in the other patterns and clothing that she loaned me. It is possible that Anna chose these patterns because the designs appealed to her, because she knew that they would be well designed and that she had the skill level to make them, rather than because they were high fashion designs.

By positioning themselves as women who were not interested in clothing beyond its practical and comfortable appeal, Anna and Ruby placed themselves in line with the cultural values of Albertans. The majority of women I spoke with also spoke of themselves as “plain” or “simple” when it came to clothing.

Church argues that the cultural heritage of western women informs their identities as plain and simple and their value of informal, comfortable clothing. Moving west in the 19th and early 20th centuries freed women from many societal confines and enabled them to set aside conventional feminine dress. However, Alberta’s conservative political climate fostered a practical, modest femininity in the province’s women. Clothing and patterns loaned to me by the participants illustrated these qualities. Most of the dresses and patterns had very straight, simple lines, were not very revealing, and were made in muted tones of solid colours.

Although the younger women in this study also described themselves as plain and simple, they expressed more interest in fashion than the older group did. This change was also reflected in women’s magazines of the decade. Beginning in 1963, the emphasis of the Ladies’ Home Journal’s sewing features changed from speaking about clothing in terms of being classic and long lasting to focusing on qualities such as versatility and mix and match for the fashionable wardrobe. At the same time, they began to look more like fashion features, starring models and actresses or recognizably upper class locations such as debutante balls. As North American women became more affluent they could aspire to live the “good life.” Those who became teenagers in the early 1960s had not experienced deprivation and shortages through the depression and the war like their mothers or grandmothers. They could afford to take an interest

5. Church, 8.
in trends and attempt to keep up with ever evolving fashions, especially as those fashions became more directed towards a teenage audience.

By the 1960s, ideas about taste were beginning to change, especially among the younger generation. Standards of dress were relaxing and youth and ethnic fashions were taking over from the more formal styles that had been high fashion in the 1950s. Sewing and clothing manuals from the period that I examined did not acknowledge the relaxation of clothing standards or the new trends in fashion. By the late 1960s, denim was very popular for young people, especially patched, embroidered and appliquéd jeans.⁷ Appearing modest and respectable was not necessarily part of this aesthetic. Still the authors of clothing textbooks criticized the aesthetic based on older standards of good taste. This failure of clothing and sewing teachers to change with the times became problematic for some young women.

Studies have demonstrated that women’s identities and positive or negative self-images are closely related to dress.⁸ Only one participant explored this connection at any length during our conversations, however, her narrative of dress and identity conflict is so closely tied to home sewing and femininity that it needed to be explored. Cathy came from a long line of needlewomen and grew up to become a custom tailor. Yet her relationship with sewing was interrupted in the late 1960s because the discourses of femininity and sewing prevalent in the Faculty of Home Economics where she was studying did not mesh with how Cathy saw herself or her role as a female student at the university.

Cathy learned to sew at the age of nine. She loved sewing and her Home Economics classes so much that it was her goal to become a Home Economics teacher. She enrolled at the University of Alberta in 1968.

Through the 1960s, new notions of femininity and appropriate roles for women were developing that did not propose home and family as women’s only calling. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women was underway, brought about by women’s political action, to examine the status of women in Canada and to determine how they thought their lives could improve. At the university, many students were taking note of the greater world and were becoming active in political movements such as the peace movement and feminism.

Not all women were interested in what feminism had to offer. A submission to the Royal Commission from some Alberta Home Economists did not go as far as advocating a return to traditional at-home roles for women, but did promote a traditional image of femininity that extolled behaviours such as modesty, self-abnegation and service.⁹

Cathy found this conservatism to be prevalent within the U of A’s Faculty of Home Economics. As a student interested in political events occurring on campus, she found it difficult to reconcile what was happening in her classes with what was happening outside. She recalled:

*I'd come back to class and most of the time I spent in Home Ec labs, so I'd say ‘Are you going to the Arts Teach-In on Thursday’ and they’d go ‘The what?’ And it was advertised all over*

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campus and it was a huge thing it was a big “all students come and learn how the university is screwing up your life” or whatever, it was the big radical thing right, and nobody had a clue so it was just so out of touch.

In addition to the political ambivalence of her fellow students, a large part of Cathy’s problem with Home Economics was related to standards of dress. The Home Economics standard was different from those of other faculties. For example, Cathy recalled being criticized for wearing jeans to her Home Ec classes, but receiving positive feedback from an Art professor for being the only Home Ec student in his class who did not “look like she was going to a tea party.” While one professor saw Cathy’s clothing as inappropriately unfeminine, the other saw her clothing as appropriate to her position as a university student, regardless of the fact that she was a woman. These two very different positioning of Cathy based on the same behaviour reveal how expectations were shifting in the late 1960s. Though Cathy identified both as a woman and a student, given the obligations and expectations of each position, she found it difficult to dress as both at the same time.

Notions of respectability have historically been based on middle class notions of acceptable femininity. It appears that while notions of respectability may have been changing elsewhere on campus, the acceptable femininity being espoused in Home Economics was still a traditional one. Although she was probably conforming to an acceptable look for Home Ec, the time that Cathy spent in the Faculty had what she perceived as a negative effect on her overall appearance. Speaking about a coat she said:

So this was not a very hip thing to have in 1968 but I also had a leather jacket that I wore a lot ‘cause I guess I was trying to figure things out. In 1967 we went to Expo 67, my parents took us. And so I was exposed to Montreal and my cousins in Montreal. When I started university in 1968 I think I looked quite hip. After a year of Home Ec, considerably less hip and after two years of Home Ec, whoa... Anyway. I had to get out.

After two years, Cathy left Home Economics. She changed her appearance dramatically:

Shortly thereafter I became I guess we could say a freak and wore a pair of overalls for about 8 years so, grew my hair long and had braids and hung out with freaks.

Around this time Cathy also stopped sewing. Cathy attributes giving up sewing to her dislike of polyester fabrics, which was probably a major factor. However I would also suggest that through her rejection of Home Economics, home sewing, and conventional dress, she was rejecting an undesirable way of being female and beginning to forge her own non-traditional feminine identity.

Cathy’s disassociation with sewing was brief. In 1972 she met a man who could sew. When he found out that she was a good sewer he could not believe that she did not use her skills, and she began to sew again. Perhaps by 1972 Cathy was comfortable enough with the identity that she was forging that she could again take up the activity that she loved. It is possible that her reintroduction to sewing in a different context, divorced from the connotations of 1950s femininity, enabled her to interpret the meaning of sewing in a way with which she was comfortable.

My analysis of women’s conversations showed that in the 1950s, the strong links between home sewing and traditional femininity gave home sewers the tools to construct strong feminine identities. Home sewers had high-level skills that enabled them to express themselves creatively, feel accomplished, and that were essential to the economic and social well being of their
families. They found their sewing to be a source of pride and empowerment. However, there is some evidence that as new possibilities for femininity began to emerge in the 1960s, women who positioned themselves against the old notions of femininity had difficulty constructing positive identities for themselves as home sewers. Home sewing was too entwined with traditional femininity. As a result, home sewing could be discarded in favour of other activities.

References