

The sewing machine and the social history of women: parallel lives

by SÍLVIA PUERTAS NOVAU, graduate in Geography and History

¹ DERRY, T.K. and WILLIAMS, I., *Historia de la tecnología. Desde 1750 hasta el 1900*. Vol. II, Ed. S.XXI, Madrid, 1980.

The sewing machine entered into the history of technology in the last third of the eighteenth century, with a prototype created by the Englishman Thomas Saint in 1790. The design was refined in 1826 by the German-born inventor Charles Fredrick Wiesenthal. Three years later, in 1829, the French tailor Barthélemy Thimmonier invented a more efficient model and formed an association with the engineer Auguste Ferrand. In 1830, the corresponding patent was registered under the name Thimonnier&Ferrand¹.

On the other side of the Atlantic inventions were also appearing, with varying degrees of success. Elias Howe introduced significant innovations in stitching. Disappointed at the lack of success, however, he moved to the British Isles. In 1851, the American Isaac Merrit Singer, improved and patented a new sewing machine based on Howe's model, which he had manufactured and distributed to the US and European markets. This machine could be paid for in instalments, which boosted sales and brought considerable commercial success, establishing a formula that would be imitated by other manufacturers.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the sewing machine was a common sight in the homes and workplaces of industrial societies, including Catalonia. In 1862, Miquel Escuder Castella, a native of Terrassa established in Barcelona, manufactured and sold the first Spanish sewing machine with the model name "Aurora", based on the Wheeler & Wilson model, and distributed other brands.

At this time, textile machinery was used in factories and no longer found in domestic settings. By contrast, sewing machines occupied both old and new workplaces: the small workshops of dressmakers, tailors and others in the sewing trade, clothes factories, and homes.

The sewing machine in homes

Sewing machines were invented with two aims: to meet the needs of industrial production and to satisfy domestic requirements. Models now found in museum collections illustrate the fact that these machines were designed with aesthetics in mind. Decorative details in the wood, coloured flowers on the

Singer sewing machine, 1880.
Museu de la Ciència i de la Tècnica
de Catalunya





2. Aurora sewing Machine,
Miquel Escuder, Barcelona,
1862.
Museu de la Ciència i de la
Tècnica de Catalunya

2 CORTADA, Ester and SEBASTIÀ, Montserrat, “La dona i la institucionalització de l’educació” in *Mès enllà del silenci*, NASH, Mary (coord.), Generalitat de Catalunya, Barcelona, 1988, pp. 210–211.

metal framework, and the designs as a whole testify to this dual function as both practical and beautiful objects.

Initially, the domestic sewing machine was conceived as a luxury object, but it gradually began to find its way into more modest settings, among the sewing tools of young women who were preparing their trousseaux and housewives who bought them to sew their linens and clothes and, if necessary, to work for themselves or others.

Sewing machines made (and continue to make) it easier to learn needlework, embroidery and dressmaking. This was essential training for young girls who were expected to become competent housewives, as tradition demanded.

By the nineteenth century there were any number of handbooks of good manners and good housekeeping, aimed at a female readership. Publications of this type stressed that knowledge and skills for dressmaking were essential and inescapable, irrespective of social class. Hands occupied by needlework were considered a sign of virtue, and they also provided a means of dressing appropriately for those women without the financial capacity to contract the services of tailors and dressmakers or to buy ready-to-wear clothes. Sewing skills also provided an opportunity to carry out paid work.

Needlework became prominent in primary school programmes for girls in the second half of the twenty-first century. The first legislation to establish compulsory schooling of boys and girls in Spain, known as the Moyano Act (July 1857), established different syllabuses for each sex. Esther Cortada and Montserrat Sebastià² cite the handbook of girls’ education written in 1898 by Pilar Pascual, a schoolteacher from Barcelona, who recommended that “of

Màquina de cosir model *Princes of Wales*,
Newton Wilson Co., Birmingham, 1870.
Museu de la tècnica de l'Empordà.



Màquina de cosir *Bijou*
E. Brion Frères, Paris, 1870.
Museu de la Tècnica
de l'Empordà.



the 36 teaching hours per week in girls' public schools, 8 should be devoted to religion, 14 to needlework, and only 14 to other subjects". The situation changed little throughout the first third of the following century, until educational reform was brought about, with figures such as Rosa Sensat, who introduced mathematics and science into girls' education.

The end of the Spanish Civil War and the ideological context of the Franco dictatorship saw a return to the learning of traditional handicrafts and the establishment of a discourse enshrining domesticity and the return of women to the home.



Postcards.

3 MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M^a, "Blanc sobre blanc: treballs de dones per a dones" in *El fil invisible. Dones que cusen*, Catalogue 2, Museu de Lleida: Diocesà i Comarcal, Service Point FMI, S.L., Lleida 2015, pp.15-21.

4 MONSERDÀ DE MACIÀ, Dolors, "La calamitat de lo barato" *Revista La Tralla*, Year V, 15/1/1907.

Learning of needlework continued outside the school in the family environment and in dressmakers' workshops in the neighbourhood or town, where girls made their own trousseaux³. They sewed by hand and learned to use sewing machines at home and at the dressmaker's. If the opportunity arose, the family added a sewing machine to the dowry. At the same time, sewing machine distributors began to take a part in the education of young women, offering free machine sewing classes in their commercial premises, which were generally at street level. Thus, these companies implemented a two-pronged strategy to promote sales.

The sewing machine and the work of the seamstress

The introduction of the sewing machine into the production of consumer goods was not entirely seamless. Just as the mechanisation of nets and textiles was met by the opposition of craftsmen and workers, various documents from the time highlighted the hazards of this new device. Job losses due to machines replacing manual labour were forecast, as was the closure of businesses that could not compete with mass production at low cost.

The first mechanical dressmaking workshop is attributed to Thimonier, who equipped it with 80 machines of his brand. However, the place was plundered by tailors who opposed mechanisation of the trade, as they felt their products and jobs were under threat.

In Catalonia, Dolors Monserdà de Macià wrote the following in her 1907 article "La calamitat de lo barato"⁴:

If we focus on just one branch of women's production, we should say that when the first sewing machines arrived in Barcelona, we believed in good faith that the new inventions would be a beneficial item in the field of women's work; but after long years of practice we must confess that the sewing machine has been a real calamity (...) Thirty years ago, working on linen in her own home,

“Manual de Modisteria práctico y sencillo para todas las edades” by Laura Noves, with illustrations by Elena Ramos. Ametller Ed. Barcelona 1955.



5 VENTOSA, Silvia, *Modelar el cos. Treball i vida de les cotillaires de Barcelona*, Altafulla, Barcelona 2001. 266 p. CAPDEVILA, Fiona and SOLANO, Rosa, *Dones visibles invisibles*. Casa Elizalde. Gràfiques Alpes, Barcelona, 2016.

a woman sewing by hand earned on average four or five *reales* a day. Now, the cost of living has tripled in Barcelona, and a woman working the same number of hours would obtain the same wage, but would have to have invested at least 25 to 30 *duros* in purchasing a machine. Undoubtedly, those who consider just this information, will find it bad enough that, to earn the same amount of money, women have had to add the trials that raising or rather struggling to raise this money represents for a poor person. But worse than this, the invention is so wonderful that, as you sew, it produces consumption so that, sooner or later, it will bring an end to the arduous life of the undernourished women who use such machines continuously.”

The sewing machine bore witness to the harsh conditions endured by seamstresses, who were poorly remunerated, subject to the whims of bosses and mistresses, the seasonal nature of the consumption of their products, and self-exploitation⁵. Craftspeople and needleworkers struggled between peak periods when their sleep and health suffered due to the long working days or slack periods when demand dropped and they had no work or income.

Garment production took place in workshops and factories, using a female workforce, and some of the processes were transferred to the home. Working from home was presented as an ideal solution as it provided cheap labour, with



La reina abandona el trono.

En el Parque se desahoga toda la alegría que pueden contener unos cuerpos jóvenes y bellos. Se baila, se cantan, se escuchan gritos a las voces de papel más originales. Ya pueden sentirse figurarse lo que sucede. Las modistas se van de allí a sus casas, y luego a los obreros, desde su alcohólica grande destrucción con jolines y champagne. Por la tarde, antes de las seis, tienen que estar en el Palacio de Bellas Artes para dar una inabarcable ración de baile y para ver si alguna de ellas resulta elegida reina de la fiesta. Y, en otros casos, en los otros salones, se dan de ellas las más bellas. Astoriza Serrano, la esposa del año pasado, que ya es una reina de modistas, dejó su corona en manos de otra bella astoriza. En un momento efímero que dura una hora, la reina de la fiesta se llama Cristina Velasco, y tiene diez y nueve años como diez y nueve de carácter, ojos y fragancia.

Una reina de belleza con novio formal.

Cristina Velasco prometió hace algún tiempo a un legítimo modista que como en su casa. Ahora trabaja ya en un gran taller en una casa de moda del Paseo de Gracia. Inabarcablemente así ha pasado de modista a Reina bonita. No se separa ella nunca de su novio.

CRÓNICA

Fiesta de Santa Llúcia, Patrona de las modistas, en Barcelona.

Las "lucietes" barcelonesas han elegido su nueva reina...

... Es de Burgos, se llama Cristina Velasco, se casa en Mayo próximo y sueña con poner un taller con un letrero muy grande que diga "Robes et manteaux".

Modistas y "lucietes".

En los días de modistas. Una vez son las modistas, otras las modistas precisamente dichas. La distinción no la señala la propia profesión. Es más una cuestión de edad, de situación, de posición. En Barcelona y en Madrid y en otros puntos se encuentran las modistas que trabajan en sus casas o en otros locales. Son las que actúan con una especie de majestades que les dan una cierta altivez, del barrio chico y con sus modistas. En las modistas hay un aire de nobleza y una mujer habiéndose alba. En el momento que se elige una reina de modistas de una o de varias de ellas se elige una reina de modistas. Naturalmente, la fiesta no se hace para estas tres modistas de la fiesta, sino para las modistas, para las modistas de las grandes alturas. Naturalmente, la fiesta se hace para las modistas. Naturalmente, la fiesta se hace para las modistas. Naturalmente, la fiesta se hace para las modistas.

Mucha alegría, mucha juventud.

Como alegría, al que tiene alegría de verla en esta fiesta de Santa Llúcia, abogada de los ciegos y de las modistas. En Barcelona había un día de modistas, un día de modistas que se celebraba en la Plaza de la República, en el Ayuntamiento. Pero bien, todas estaban allí. Todas las modistas de las grandes alturas y algunas alturas de otros sitios que se habían pasado a la fiesta de los ciegos. De haber sido un día normal, sería un día de modistas en un momento, un tiempo de modistas, un día de modistas. Pero la fiesta de Santa Llúcia no tiene nada que una vez al año. Las modistas, con sus modistas de papel, modistas, se preparan a su Patrona en modo de la calle.

Para que se den un momento de lo que se celebra, las ve y a dar una referencia. Efectivamente la fiesta de la República, abogada por un círculo de modistas adineradas con flores y con las caras de las modistas más bellas de cada taller. Las modistas de la Casa de Caridad toman algunas cosas para que la fiesta se prepare de lo que está pasando, y la banda de la Guardia del Regimiento de Dragones de Montaña acompañada a toda el barrio con sus charcos marciales. La coronación se pone en marcha enseguida, precedida por una gran multitud de modistas y modistas que siempre parecen los mismos. Baja por la calle de Fribourg hasta las Escuelas y luego a la Plaza de Cataluña, calle Fontanella, Ronda de San Pedro, Ronda de Ferrerías Calles. Después de la Cruzada. En la plaza de la Gran Calçada, del Parque, se prepara a las modistas y se pone una gran multitud.



CRÓNICA

- 6 INSTITUTO DE REFORMAS SOCIALES, *Preparación de un proyecto de ley sobre el trabajo a domicilio en España*, Sobrinos de la sucesión de M. Minuesa de los Rios, Madrid, 1918.
- 7 PUERTAS, Sílvia *Artesanes i obreres*, Gràfiques Dalmau, Lleida 1994.
- 8 VOGUEL, Laurent, *La salud de la mujer trabajadora en Europa*. Desigualdades no reconocidas. ISTAS, Madrid 2006, p. 47.

women who were unlikely to protest and ready to deal with a highly variable production volume. The sewing machine spread alongside the growth of this kind of industry, and with it the social repercussions of a job that was entirely unregulated, as stated in the report by the Social Reform Institute in 1918⁶. The option of working from home was considered the most suitable for the industry and for women. It enabled the industry to reduce costs and adapt production to demand, while it allowed women to combine work with caring for the family and domestic tasks. At the same time, it kept women shut in the home, away from the dangers and temptations of the street⁷.

The discourse of domesticity permeated opinion in Catholic reformism and the workers' movement. An increase in men's salaries was demanded, on the grounds that men had to sustain their families so that women could return to the home, which they had been forced to abandon in order to supplement the low pay of their husbands. At the Socialist Workers' Conference of Marseille in 1879, discussion was generated about how harmful it was for women to work in factories and workshops. One example that was given was the injurious effects of sewing machines on the health and morality of seamstresses, due to the continuous movement of their legs on the pedals, which caused sexual excitement of such magnitude that they even had to take cold baths to be able to contain it. In his study on the health of women at work in Europe⁸, Laurent Vogel referred to contributions by the historian Michelle Perrot, who cited a medical report from 1868 that was the basis for the union representative's comments at the Conference.

9 ZABALA, Iris M (coord.): *Breve historia feminista de la literatura española (en lengua catalana, gallega y vasca)*. Vol. VI, Rubí (Barcelona), Anthropos, 1993-2000, p. 81.

The sewing machine has continued to be prominent, both in Spain and further afield. Occasionally, it is the subject of headlines, due to the collapse of precariously built factories and workshops. Such news articles illustrate, once again, the difficult living and working conditions of women employed in this sector. This situation has been common since the emergence of the sewing machine in the history of technology.

Literature has also left a record of the prominent role of the sewing machine in the life of women. Benito Perez Galdós and Carme Monturiol⁹ are two of the authors who have addressed this topic in their works. To conclude, we cite a novel by Rosa Regàs *La canción de Dorotea* (2001). The purchase of a sewing machine in instalments enables the author to unleash a series of passions that sweep along the main characters, and demonstrate, with subtlety, the importance of this device in daily life at a time that is not so distant from our own recent history. ●