SEWING IS SEXY

Almost all of us have one memory of our grandmothers pedalling away furiously at a sewing machine to stitch on a loose button. Cut to 2012 — sewing, knitting and crocheting are no longer 'old-lady' activities, and sewing machines are a lot cooler. MOEENA HALIM finds young women who create clothes, jewellery and cushion covers, and friends who love them for it

MBA student Melagrin Francis sews whenever she has the free time. PC/SATYAJIT DESAI

LAST year, on my 19th birthday, my mom and sister gifted me a sewing machine," recalls Sonja Colaco. Most teenagers might have been a bit taken aback by the unusual gift, but not Colaco. The third-year engineering student had been keen on taking up sewing as a hobby, and the gift was meant to enable that. "But I had no clue how to use the machine," she says.

Even though her mother tried to teach her a little bit, the sewing machine was largely unused for about a year. Two months ago, she was finally able to take lessons, and since then, the machine has been in use every single day.

"I didn't know where I could learn to sew, until I heard about The Hab in Khar. I did three workshops with them," reveals Colaco. "That's where I learnt the basic stuff about how to use the machine. I also learnt how to make collars, seams and hems."

Always fascinated by the idea of making her own clothes, Colaco, who lives in Kalina, is now thrilled about the fact that she knows how to sew pleats. "I am making my own pleated skirt. I couldn't believe how ridiculously easy it is to do pleats — I just had to make my own skirt," she says excitedly over the phone.

Her mother Sandra is thrilled about her hobby too. "My mother used to sew clothes for us all the time when we were children, but I didn't have the passion to take up sewing. The hobby seems to have skipped a generation," laughs Sandra. "My mother is very excited about Sonja's hobby and even offered to pass on her old sewing machine. But I decided it would be more fun for Sonja to have a new, more advanced one," she adds. Her sewing machine, which cost about Rs 9000, lets her try different decorative stitches and sew button holes.

All in the jeans

Melagrin Francis had a bit of an advantage over Colaco. The 21 year-old MBA student has been sewing since she was 16. "My mother began teaching me how to sew right after I gave my 10th standard exams," says Francis, who learnt the basics on her grandmother's manual sewing machine.

"I enjoyed sewing a lot and began making bags out of my old jeans," she says, showing us her first 'experiment'. The denim sling bag looked perfect to our untrained eye, but Francis wasn't happy. "I used my old jeans as well as my sister's pants to make this. I tried to put a zip and add a pocket, but it didn't work out."

Since that first attempt, she has not only stitched several bags but also made clothes — including a frilly dress for her doll at 17.

Although it isn't a newly acquired hobby, it is one that Francis is determined to continue with. "I don't get much time to sew nowadays because I'm currently pursuing my MBA. But during the vacations, I will be back on the machine," the Kalina resident assures us.

Both Colaco and Francis take great pleasure in making personalised gifts for their friends and family. When she was a graduate student at Xavier's College, Francis gifted a denim bag to her friend Leanne Barretto.

"I felt like I was the lucky one. Others wanted the bag too, but then we got busy with our final exams and Melagrin didn't have the time to make more," says Barretto. "I had intended to give her an old pair of jeans to convert into a bag. But she made one for me before I could do that. She had carefully embroidered my name onto the bag, alongside a cute unicorn and rainbow. It was too small for me to carry to college, but I used to carry it with me when I went to the market or was in the colony."

Colaco's forte is making personalised pouches. "My sister loves the Union Jack, so I created a small Union Jack zip pouch for her. She loved it and I began making personalised pouches every time there was a friend's birthday. Sometimes I even wake up at six in the morning to make these pouches. Especially if I have a birthday deadline to meet," says the seamstress, sincerely.

Sew on the Internet

The Internet is a haven for DIY craft geeks. Colaco admits that Google is her one-stop-shop every time she wants ideas for a pattern.

Twenty four year-old Minna Hakim, a crochet and tatting buff, uses the Web a lot, too. "I usually log on to Google Images to look for different patterns. Although I don't have a favourite blog I follow religiously, I use StumbleUpon (.com) a lot," she says.

That's also how she keeps up with the latest trends. Her latest fascination is footless sandals. "These are sandals without soles. They can be used purely for decorative purposes. I crocheted a pair for my cousin who wore them on Eid this year," says the Baroda girl, who is currently playing personal assistant to her father. "Crocheting and tatting is still just a hobby for me and I usually gift the things that I make. But I am considering selling the earrings, chokers, stoles and other stuff I make," admits Hakim.

Rukhmini Bhatia, an illustrator at Landor Associates, a brand consulting firm, loves surfing the Web for craft ideas. "Through StumbleUpon I found Craftgawker (.com) and I was hooked. It is a site that features like-minded people who enjoy experimenting with craft. I love Pinterest (.com) too, where I devour all things DIY," she says. The 26 year-old, who works mainly with paper, is very keen on learning how to sew. "I plan to get hold of my grandmother who lives in Borivli to teach me to sew. She is a typical grandmother who knows how to sew, knit, do crochet, everything," laughs the Santacruz resident.

"I have a lot of ideas in my head which I am waiting to execute. I know that once I buy a machine, nothing will stop me from getting to work on them

ANAIS DESCHAMPS

Thirty three year-old who learnt how to sew at The Hab

A customer learns basic sewing from a sewing expert at The Hab. PC/SUNIL TIWARI

Sonja Colaco surfs the Web to find new patterns and ideas for the pouches she sews. PC/PRADEEP DHIVAR

Have fun with haberdashery

When The Hab (short for haberdashery) opened up in May in Khar, their idea was to "lure young school and college kids into exploring the world of sewing through workshops and demos," says Chhaya Shriram, director, USHA International. "We want to inspire people to create, innovate and experience the art of sewing." Since inception, the store has been offering DIY workshops such as Laptop Cover Making and Cushion Cover Making, apart from basic introductory courses in sewing. "On an average about 60 per cent of the attendees are young people in their 20s or 30s," shares Arwaah Attari, senior manager, The Hab. Clearly, young people do enjoy sewing.

The store is now planning to extend its services. Soon they will introduce knitting and crochet workshops too. "We plan to increase the number of workshops from 11 to 23 soon," reveals Attari.

Attari, who was in the fashion retail industry before she joined The Hab, admits that she used to be quite condescending about sewing as a hobby. "The mentality in India is to relate sewing to tailoring, but that's not so. When I realised all that I can do on the sewing machine, I took to it instantly. People also tend to think it is really tough but it isn't," says Attari, who often conducts workshops at the Hab herself.

Social stitch

For Anais Deschamps, a 33 year-old French expat, sewing workshops at The Hab have been a great way to make friends. "I followed my husband to Mumbai 10 months ago. At first I was desperate to find a job. But when I didn't get one I decided I might as well have fun while I'm here," says Deschamps, who wanted to learn how to sew ever since she was a little girl.

"Expats in the city tend to socialise with other foreigners, and since I don't work, I didn't have an opportunity to get to know many Indians at all. Taking up this hobby has helped me meet some Indian people and get to know more about Indian culture," says Deschamps, who recently learnt about Raksha Bandhan because of the rakhi-making workshop they had at the Hab.

Deschamps, who doesn't own a sewing machine yet, says it is extremely frustrating sometimes. "I have a lot of ideas in my head which I am waiting to execute. I know that once I buy a machine, nothing will stop me from getting to work on them," asserts the mother of a three and a half year-old.

Attari has the last word. "Our mothers and grandmothers all knew how to sew. But somehow the hobby got lost. It just never got passed on."

Today, The Hab's workshops are attended by people between the ages of 6 and 70. "Now, ready-to-wear clothes are so easily available that people consider it time-consuming to stitch their own. But what's great about knowing how to sew is that you can always personalise your clothes. For instance, you can buy a simple top and dress it up with a little bit of embroidery. Also, you can create so much more than just apparel — stoles, sling bags, chokers and even clutch purses."

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THE EVOLUTION OF SEWING

- 1791: Thomas Saint patents a machine that can sew leather and canvas, but never builds it
- 1841: French tailor Barthélemy Thimonnier's invention of a sewing machine causes a riot among factory workers sewing uniforms for the French Army, who feel their jobs are at stake.
- 1889: Singer introduces the first practical electric sewing machine. By the 1920s portable electric sewing machines are available, but they're still too bulky and expensive
- 1940: Usha, India's first sewing machine brand, is introduced
- 2000s: Usha introduces its Memory Craft 11000 machine. Costing Rs 2,07,500, the machine has a USB slot and an optional ATA PC card to import custom designs