

## my sewing notions



**ABOVE:** Writer Judi Ketteler inherited her passion for sewing from her mother, and it remains her favorite creative outlet. She is pictured (in front of draperies she made herself, of course) with her trusty sewing machine in her Cincinnati apartment. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** Judi always keeps an eye out for pretty fabrics to add to her collection.

### I grew up watching my mother

at the sewing machine. It was magic to me. She'd lay out a piece of shapeless cloth on the kitchen table, fretting about making the pattern pieces fit as she measured and cut. Then she'd take it to her machine, coax the pedal in just the right way, and make music. The result was an actual piece of clothing—an Easter dress for me perhaps or terry-cloth shorts for one of my sisters. I think she sewed for my older brothers and sisters out of economic necessity. But by the time I came along (I'm the youngest of seven), the lean times had become a little meatier. Then it was her creative outlet, and she wasn't about to stop.

In high school I decided I wanted to learn how to sew. None of my siblings had taken to it, so my mother was delighted to teach me. But I wasn't exactly a dream student: I was stubborn, and I hated measuring and doing any kind of hand-sewing. But in the end, the fabric got me.

Stitching may be cool again, but this writer's passion for needle and thread has run hot since high school.

written by JUDI KETTELER

By the time I graduated from high school, I was sewing my own clothes and dreaming about batik and crepe. Though I had a medley of odd jobs during that time, it was my job at a fabrics store that paid most of my way through college.

College proved to be a funny thing, though. As I took more and more women's studies classes, I read books and articles that said traditional women's work, such as housework—and by extension, sewing—was part of the problem. Relegating women to domestic life was a means of oppressing them and taking away their choices. I read *The Feminine Mystique*, wanting to understand my mother's generation, and it seemed right on. Obviously, women should be able to pursue lives outside of the home. Having limited options, and forcing a smile about it while wearing pearls, stunk. But sewing? I thought about my mother at the sewing machine. She never looked oppressed. Usually, she looked content. I filed this strange inconsistency away in my head, unable at 20 years old to really figure it out.

In the years to come, I would read scores of essays by Virginia Woolf, write oodles of feminist-leaning papers, cut my hair short, wear only hiking boots and long, flowing skirts, and gain a political consciousness. But I never gave up sewing. It was mine. In fact, after each semester, I couldn't wait to load up on fabric to fashion bags and skirts, make stuffed animals for my nieces and nephews, and design funky wall

hangings. I would sew for weeks straight, almost possessed, fingers searching out the grain and foot glued to the pedal. I was sure it wasn't oppressing me. I knew it was releasing me.

Right before graduation, I remember having a discussion about sewing and other stereotypically feminine crafts in a women's lit class. The professor made a crack about how sewing was "so 19th century," and everyone groaned in agreement. I felt a little ashamed but then angry that I should feel that way. As women, weren't we supposed to be fighting these kinds of stereotypes and absolutes about our behavior? I decided just to live with this contradiction and the contradictions that life after college brought. Hiking books became strappy sandals, and instead of writing hard-core essays about power, I started writing pieces for women's magazines. I was the same me, just

tweaked a little by real-world experience.

Even in my career-focused state, I kept amassing my fabric collection, always interested in creating pretty things. But I guess I wasn't paying as much attention as I once had to what was going on in the world of pop culture and feminism. So, you can imagine my delight a few years ago when a trusted source on all things hip told me that sewing and crafting were the new "it" things. I looked around. Sure enough, knitting stores were popping up everywhere as celebrities cast on. HGTV programming and shows like *Trading Spaces* were making fabric, fringe, and beads into stars.

At this point I didn't care if I was hip or not, but I was thrilled by sewing's new status. And I was gratified to see that finally people who believed in empowerment and women's equality realized what I had always believed. The key

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judi Ketteler has a master's degree in English. After deciding teaching wasn't for her, she began a career as a freelance writer and editor specializing in home, garden, health, and fitness topics. Besides sewing, she enjoys running and judging gymnastic competitions .

thing that differentiates a scenario where the domestic arts are an ideological trap from a scenario where they are empowering is choice.

Along with the choices women now get to make about education, careers, and kids, they also get to make the choice to be creative. The needle and thread no longer bind us to any certain domestic path. They're just the pretty blooms along the way.

My mother knew this in the '70s when she and I picked out the pattern for my favorite pink-and-white broadcloth Easter dress. The dress is long gone, but lucky for me, my mom's knowledge and her example have stuck.