

HISTORY OF BUTTONS

Buttons have been used in Europe since the end of the dark ages. Button-like knobs were used as ornaments to decorate belts and other leather objects at first. For many centuries it did not occur to people that they might use buttons to fasten clothes. Primitive man used thorns for that purpose. Buttons were accepted as a practical means of fastening clothing in the 15th century.

The earliest button making trade was established in the 13th century. Various guilds of craftsmen had laws governing them. Eleven men were appointed to enforce the rules and punish anyone who disobeyed them. The severity of discipline varied from confiscation of goods to a fine to be paid to the King.

Any young man more than 17 years of age, of legitimate birth could become an apprentice to a button maker. One tenth of his wages were paid to the King. Master button makers were allowed only one duly-approved apprentice; any hiring of additional non-guild help was subject to severe fines.

Button makers could not make flat buttons if their work called for convex ones. The apprentices were not allowed to sell any wares belonging to their masters, nor could they peddle their own products on market days without their master's permission.

The earliest buttons made, that were of any importance were custom made for nobility, the landed gentry and royalty. They were made of fine gold and silver, ornamented and embellished with gems, miniatures, and carvings of ivory. Some bear the insignia of makers predating the year 1300.

In the 13th century French clerks and any class of society below were not allowed to wear buttons of gold, silver or other metal. By royal decree they were limited to the use of cloth and thread covered buttons. In the 14th century France only allowed goldsmiths to make buttons of precious metal. It was the 18th century before there was free competition of button making in France.

To more than 60,000 people in the United States a button is more than a convenient way of fastening clothing. It is a collector's item, and while some button collectors do not ignore interesting ones made in the present century, a much older one is far more fascinating. Some collectors regard buttons as antiques in miniature. Because buttons are ornamental as well as functional, they are handmade and factory produced, fashioned from every possible natural material and decorated by every known art.

Among the earliest collectors were young girls of the late 1880s who wanted buttons for charm strings. They had a very special goal. The goal was a thousand buttons on a string. It was said that when a string was completed, Prince Charming would come to claim the girl for his bride.

Probably the most elaborate buttons were made during the 17th century, and all were worn by men. From steel, brass, and other metals that were stamped, etched, engraved or enameled, to cloisonné and decorated ceramics. Sometimes they were gold or buttons framed with garnets or amethysts, or centered with a diamond or pearl. No man during the 18th century needed 35 buttons on his coat or 17 to hold up his breeches. Yet a row of dime-sized buttons were sewn down the legs and three the size of a 50 cent piece for the front opening.

Women did not use fancy buttons before 1850. Prior to that time they used buttons covered with glass centers and metal rims on their waistcoats. The ladies liked glass centers with glass rims in a dewdrop motif of pressed glass.

During the 18th century the arts and crafts that had been known for thousands of years began to be employed in the making of garment buttons. Potters and silversmiths fashioned buttons with the same beauty as their vases and jewelry. Designs were put on copper, brass and tom back buttons, and silver and gold were heavily plated on these metals. Fabrics were embroidered with metal threads and beads. Artists painted button tops. Then late in the 18th century, new inventions and materials came into use for button making, like the stamping of brass and molding of pewter. Most buttons came from Europe.

In 1651 the General Court of Boston made a law, that a man had to be worth at least 250 £ or his family could not wear gold or silver lace on buttons. Exceptions were made for magistrates and military officers. After three years the law was repealed because too many other people made exceptions to this law.

In the United States buttons were made in New England in 1706 and in Philadelphia in 1750. In 1774 it was recommended papier-mâché buttons be used to reduce the use of "mother land" buttons. Pewter and horn buttons were made in the homes of the "new land", then peddled on the streets. By the 19th century buttons were manufactured everywhere with great competition.

The American button industry got a firm foothold during the war of 1812, when imports were cut off due to a British blockade. After 1812, the metal button industry made rapid progress. Button shaped discs of molds, covered with cloth, were introduced by a manufacturer from Massachusetts named Williston. Twenty years later horn buttons were made in the United States.

In 1864 the first factory to make vegetable ivory buttons was set up in Massachusetts. It was 1890 before ocean shell buttons were made. In 1879 when the slide fastener was invented, well-established button manufacturers kept it off the market -- and they were powerful enough to keep them off the market for the next 30 years.

The first decade of the 20th century brought the first practical plastic button, made of celluloid. Plastics lend themselves to mass production and there is little waste in the manufacture of plastics. Today, more buttons are made of plastic types than any other material.