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Archives in the News

The Archive Saving Home Sewing History from the Trash by Mia Sato, published online on June 20th, 2022 through The Verge provides a brief contextualization of the history of sewing patterns. Sato discusses the work of the Commercial Pattern Archive, a resource administered by the University of Rhode Island that documents sewing patterns in English with over 56,000 objects from the 19th century and later. As Sato points out, sewing patterns are not typically intended to be saved. Often made from tissue paper that is susceptible to damage, many of these articles are now lost to us. Pieces of tissue are cut, pinned and used to cut fabric and can be adjusted depending on the desired size, so when they are cut, parts of the original pattern can be lost as well. These patterns were used often by working-class individuals as it was often a cheaper option to sew one's own clothes rather than purchase them, and for many people, sewing was an every-day reality of life. As the author notes, most museums don't include garments from working-class people as they are less likely to be saved over more glamorous attire of the wealthy. Without access to original garments or patterns, there is a huge loss of history related to average people.

The archive can be accessed physically, though the author notes that many prefer to view patterns in the collection through their online database. The range of use is very wide with some more surprising ones noted such as a graphic novel creator who was seeking period-accurate clothing depictions. The archive itself has been in operation since the 1990's, though the recent

passing of the collection's founding curator has concerned some with its future. As addressed in the article as well is the issue that materials such as sewing patterns are sometimes categorized as women's or craft related in a negative way, diminishing their value to some. There is also the issue of access. As of 2017, the collection is now free to use, however the fees associated with use had been used by the university to pay students to work on developing it.

This is an especially interesting article to me personally, as I have been sewing since I was a teenager. I have very few patterns that I have saved over the years as the patterns tend to be destroyed in use. Not only are you locked into a particular size once you start cutting, but many patterns also require that you mark dart or seam lines and it's often easier and more accurate to mark them by punching through the paper. Not only is this a concern, but many less beginner-friendly patterns do not label or explain techniques with the assumption that the reader knows enough already to fill in any gaps in knowledge. It is also not uncommon to see terminology that is not explained. The article notes that accompanying materials such as magazines and pamphlets are used to help date patterns, but there doesn't seem to be much mention of context. I would be curious to know about processes in collecting and associating any information with sewing techniques as they are related to patterns in the collection, since this would be valuable information as well.

The discussion of museum pieces is an especially important point as not only is it more common to find more expensive garments in a museum, but there are often a lot of situational issues about understanding and displaying clothing. During my brief time at the Texas Fashion Collection, I was introduced to issues I had never previously considered. When displaying a garment, how should it be worn? Should jackets be buttoned or open? How do you tie a scarf or belt? Is the mannequin or other support used to display the object appropriate to the context of

the object? Is there accompanying jewelry, hats or other accessories that are important to keep associated with it? The work that collections like the Commercial Pattern Archive do could be crucial in helping to determine the answers to some of these questions, especially when considering that many of them include illustrations and other clues to the actual use of particular sewing patterns.

References

Sato, Mia. (2022, June 20). *The Archive Saving Home Sewing History from the Trash*. The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/23169321/commercial-pattern-archive-home-sewing-database>