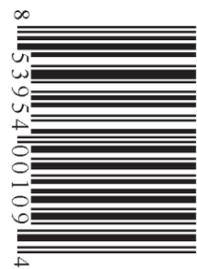




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Above Left (1): For a woman who possessed needle skills and a bit of cotton thread (if not a lot of money), a crocheted hostess apron could be hers. Crocheted aprons were made in different colors and a variety of patterns. Above Middle Left (2): A combination of cross stitching and embroidery resulted in a cheerful apron adorned with flowers. Above Middle Right (3): Gingham aprons often served as a canvas for a stitcher's artistry. Here, black thread was used to attach white rickrack. Above Right (4): Note the tucks and inlay on this white-on-white apron.

Tie one on this Thanksgiving with a festive apron

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

Call them pinafores, bibs, or smocks. Wear them for looks, or don them for their practicality. Collect them for their place in costuming history, or treasure them for sentimental or aesthetic reasons. For generations, men, women, and children alike have donned an apron, simple and utilitarian or frivolous and frilly, to better complete a task, to protect their clothing underneath, or just to make a fashion statement. From Freemasons to French maids, Grandmoms to Adam and Eve, people have tied something around their mid-sections. Is it any wonder that aprons, no matter how simple or out of step with modern life they may be, continue to be treasured by collectors, both serious and accidental alike?

Aprons take their name from a corruption of the Old French word for "napkin." Among the earliest documentations of the existence of these simple garments are literary references, including Biblical allusions, as well as pictorial representations ranging from ancient wall paintings to drawings dating from the Middle Ages. Suffice it to say that, long ago, people came to recognize the usefulness of an apron.

Throughout the years, aprons have been used by men serving in various trades (blacksmiths, stonemasons, and carpenters, for example), often identifying themselves by the color of their aprons. At some point, women adopted this garment-over-a-garment style as part of their wardrobe. By the mid-19th century, aprons assumed both an ornamental and functional role for Victorian women, as both the rich and the poor donned them as part of their everyday attire. Whereas women of the leisure class opted for somewhat fashionable shorter styles, often made of luxurious (and impractical) fabrics such as velvet and silk, working women chose full-length aprons made of fabrics that were practical and easy to clean. With the dawn of the 20th century, women enthusiastically embraced aprons and, across the board, tied one on. Not surprisingly, it is these aprons that today's collectors cherish.

As a retired family and consumer sciences teacher, Teresa Stone has studied the mechanics of apron construction and is well-versed in the variety of fabrics and trims, as well as patterns and techniques, used over the years. "I've always



An interesting contrast of fabrics: gingham and organdy on this half apron.

been fascinated with all things domestic," said Stone, an apron collector who resides in Washington state. Although she loves aprons for what they are, she also loves them for their place in domestic history. The study of aprons and the way they have evolved over time, she believes, is key to understanding women and their role in social and economic changes of the 20th century.

Aprons that survive from before World War I were generally handmade from solid white fabric that was narrow in width. Reflecting the style of women's attire, they were ankle length to protect underlying dresses with long hemlines. Stone pointed out that, at a time when laundry was a cumbersome household chore, it was easier to clean an apron than a dress. That women were corseted accounts for the small waistlines of aprons of the time.

After the War and into the 1920s, aprons were, for the most part, long, straight, and plain in design; many were made from fine fabrics such as lawn and exhibited a considerable amount of embroidery, cutwork, and pull work. White on white, hemlines were often ornamented with hand-sewn tucks. "Pinner" or "pin-ons" did not have ties. Belying the beauty of aprons from this era is the fact that they were practical in nature. "You really needed full coverage," Steele said, adding that kitchen work included "stirring big pots, scrubbing dirt from potatoes." Not considered a fashion statement, and not worn at the table ("except for Grandmom, who might be jumping up to go to the kitchen"), aprons were utilized "across the social strata."

A decade later, aprons took on a more elaborate design, influenced by the Art Deco movement. And because of the financial restraints that resulted from the Great Depression, it was not unusual for aprons to be fashioned from leftover fabric originally used for seed and flour sacks. As for their shape, a practical full pinafore was common; Stone confessed that some of her favorites were made during this era. With the onset of World War II, shortages further dictated austerity.

But after the war, everything changed. With soldiers once again civilians, and women back in the home, there was a renewed interest in home entertaining.

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Aprons

FROM FRONT PAGE

Additionally, Stone noted that meal preparation was easier and cleaner, so a full-length work-a-day apron was no longer the necessity that it once was. As the country enjoyed a celebratory mood, the nature of aprons, longtime utilitarian, were suddenly a fun fashion accessory, regardless of a woman's social status. Indeed, the late 1940s and '50s, marked the "heyday of aprons," according to Shirley Frare, who, like Stone, is an apron enthusiast, retired teacher, and resident of Washington state.

Bright colors reflected optimistic spirits: think pink and lime, gold and turquoise. Hostesses wore half aprons that tied in the back, made from fabrics that included tulle, organdy, and sheer nylon. But with the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s, the concept of a feminine apron with no real purpose other than as adornment took on negative connotations. And aprons in general lost their special appeal.

Below: Illustrations such as this one serve as valuable resources for those who study aprons. Note the "pinner" on the maid seen on the left.



Above: Detail of flowers stitched on a gingham apron.

Until now.

So what to collect? Some buy aprons just to use. Stone, who has a booth at Finders Keepers Mall in Olympia, Wash. is amazed at the number of younger customers seeking hostess aprons. "They wear them over black tops and capri pants when they host cocktail parties," she said.

Others get "hooked" on a specific style or a certain decade. Gingham aprons are always popular, she said, and many of them were intricately decorated with hand embroidery and cross stitching. Mother/daughter aprons are fun as well, she continued.

And then there are those who, like Stone and Frare, enjoy the "why's" behind the aprons. "I like to look at pictures of women wearing aprons and think, 'What is she doing?' Cleaning, entertaining, cooking?" remarked Stone. Utilitarian aprons with big pockets used for gardening ("harvest aprons," as well as "chicken house aprons"), sewing aprons with loops for scissors and compartments for thread and needles, reversible aprons that could be turned around when the doorbell rang, bridal aprons, crocheted aprons. . . they all have their own appeal. Condition, Stone noted, "matters more in those from the '40s onward. Before that time, they were meant to be used and many of them didn't survive."

Meanwhile, women like Stone and Frare continue to use aprons as a means for understanding the place of women in history. Stone is particularly interested in dated family pictures using apron styles as a hint. And Frare has offered talks meant to entertain



Above: So what was the function of the little pocket on the waistband of this apron? Maybe a place to stash a hankie?



Above: A ruffled bib apron that, for the lucky woman with a small waistline, was very flattering as well as practical.

and enlighten; "Gingham: Our Checkered Past" and "Oh Crochet Can You See?" are but two of her favorite topics. Frare, whose second 4-H project was an apron, is intrigued by the fact that "cloth got made into aprons before it was relegated to the ragbag." And, echoing the thoughts of fellow enthusiasts, she concluded, "With aprons, it's possible to trace the history of the world."

Below: Note the wide ties on this bib apron. As women had more money, they could afford to use extra yardage to make long ties, according to Teresa Stone.



Old aprons might have been white, but they were anything but plain, thanks to skillful needlework.

