

THE CULTURAL
BIOGRAPHY OF A

HANDMADE

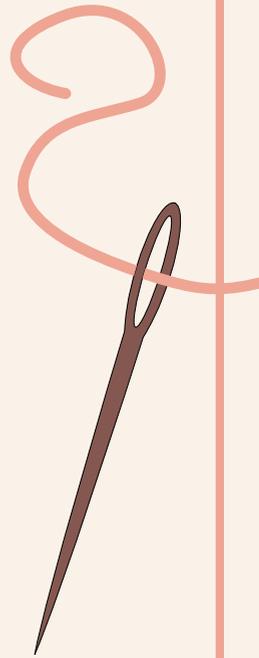


DRESS

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INTRODUCTION

What does the story of a handmade dress look like? In this booklet, I'll walk you through the biography of a dress I made as a gift for my sister. We'll explore some of the historical, social, and cultural aspects that shaped the dress's story by looking at six stages of its life: Pre-Production, The Design Phase, The Production Phase, The Gifting Process, The Utilization Phase, and The Disposal Process.



PRE-PRODUCTION

HISTORY AND GENDER

The story of this dress starts before its creation. According to research conducted by Emma Thompson in 2022, making and mending clothing for the family was considered a woman's responsibility until the 20th century. It was tied to femininity and motherhood. Sewing was not just a way of saving money, but a social expectation of women. However, the 20th century brought significant changes, including industrialization, economic shifts, and feminism. Women started working outside of their homes, ready-to-wear clothing became less expensive, and the idea of women being limited to household duties was challenged. As a result, sewing at home became more of a hobby by the 1970s (Thompson, 2022).

Since the 1990s, there has been a resurgence in home sewing. This revival has brought attention to the complex relationship between domestic activities and feminism. Today, there are varying views on sewing and feminism. While some see sewing as a flee back to old-fashioned gender roles, others simply consider it a leisure activity that can be enjoyable and fulfilling. Some individuals who sew might not even view it as a feminist act, yet their participation could be seen as such by others (Thompson, 2022).

When I was in the process of making this dress, I was not thinking much about the gender implications. I was mainly concerned with making a good gift and expressing myself creatively. Now, looking back, I can see how my act fits with a modern feminist perspective, as suggested by Jessica Bain's research. By choosing to engage in an activity that was traditionally expected of women, I resisted the old limitations and celebrated sewing as a modern leisure activity (Bain, 2016).

THE DESIGN PHASE

SINGULARIZATION

The process of designing this dress involved several unique decisions that made it singular. Firstly, the pattern was modified to give the dress a contemporary look. Additionally, the fabric, thread, and notions were handpicked to create a unique piece. The dress was also tailored to fit a specific body and was designed as a gift, which kept it out of the realm of exchange. All of these concepts align with Kopytoff's idea of a singular object, which exists outside of mass production and exchange (1986).

Though this dress also matches Kopytoff's idea of a non-commodity, it doesn't necessarily make it highly valuable. As Kopytoff explains, "To be a non-commodity is to be 'priceless' in the full possible sense of the term, ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless" (1986). Perhaps, by tailoring the dress to one specific person, it became highly valuable to that person while being of no value to anyone else.

So, how does this dress differ from high-end, haute-couture-designed dresses? Apart from differences in skill level and craft mastery, it could be argued that this dress is more singular than the ones seen on red carpets. When an item acquires a price and becomes a commodity, its singularity is undermined to some extent. When these dresses are sold for thousands of dollars, they become commodities and are less singularized. Furthermore, they are more readily available to the public eye and can be easily replicated and sold by other makers.



THE PRODUCTION PHASE

DIFFERENT WORKING CONDITIONS

My experience with making this dress was very different from the experiences of garment makers who sew for a living. My ability to sew as a leisurely activity is rooted in privilege for a few reasons. Firstly, I had not only the resources to make the dress itself but also the resources to learn specific techniques to perfect it. Secondly, I had the luxury of time to engage in this activity, without having to prioritize other things. Thirdly, I was able to create this dress in comfortable conditions.

The story of Dilma Chilaca and Lidia Garcia, Bolivian immigrants in São Paulo, sheds light on the drastic contrast between my experience with sewing and the harsh realities faced by many garment workers worldwide (E Noticias Financieras, 2023). Their narratives highlight the privilege inherent in my approach to sewing as a leisurely activity.

Dilma's story embodies the struggles many garment workers face. She was forced to endure "17-hour workdays, no rest days" for just "1.50 reais (30 cents) per garment" (E Noticias Financieras, 2023). She had to sacrifice her well-being, working through the night to meet deadlines, with penalties for delays. This is a major distinction compared to my ability to approach sewing at my own pace, free from financial pressures.

Lidia's experience further amplifies the issue. She describes being trapped in a cycle of debt, forced to work "without pay for months" to repay fabricated expenses (E Noticias Financieras, 2023). Such conditions would create constant fear and anxiety, much different from the comfort and safety I enjoyed while making this dress.

THE GIFTING PHASE

GIFTS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

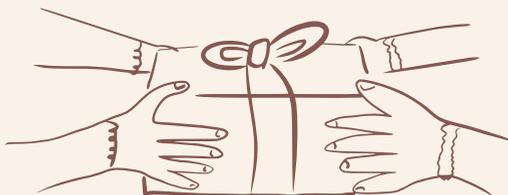
In gifting this dress, my intention was to show generosity and care. However, Marion Fourcade's analysis of Marcel Mauss' essay "The Gift" ("The Imperfect Promise of The Gift") suggests that gifting goes beyond generosity. Gifting is a social exchange that is woven into the fabric of relationships. While gift-giving should be voluntary and unselfish, Mauss argues that it is motivated by the obligation to give, accept, and reciprocate (Fourcade, 2020).

In making this dress for my sister, I might have felt obligated to strengthen our bond and reinforce my standing in our relationship. However, this act of gifting may not have been entirely positive, as it could have created some competitiveness.

Giving this dress as a gift may have made my sister feel obligated to accept it, as not accepting it would have impaired our social connection. However, by accepting the dress as a gift, it created an imbalance between us, and she might have felt like she owed me a gift, or like she was in debt to me. She felt obligated to reciprocate to reinforce her standing in the relationship.

Beliefs about gifts themselves are what keep gifts out of the sphere of exchange. Gifting with the intention of generosity and gratitude, not being too calculating, and having gifts with a special aura reinforce this.

Maybe the handmade nature of the gift also affects our relationship as well. According to "Handmade vs. Machine-made: The Effects of Handmade Gifts on Social Relationships", "Handmade gifts promote social relationships. This effect can be explained by the perceived uniqueness of such gifts" (Fan & Lai, 2024). My giving a handmade gift to my sister might have helped reinforce our social relationship more than a machine-made gift would have. Perhaps this also exaggerated her feelings of obligation to accept and reciprocate.



THE UTILIZATION PHASE

INDIVIDUALISM AND MEANING MAKING

Once the dress was gifted, what are some ways in which it became meaningful to the recipient? Perhaps the answer lies in its unique design and tailored fit. Self-designed products often fit the consumer better than mass-produced items, making them individual to that consumer. This individualism can make the garment meaningful, especially in a society that often tries to make us conform to mass trends.

John Fiske explores this theme of individualism in “The Jeaning of America.” Just like how the unique fit of jeans can provide a sense of individuality and social difference, a handmade dress can be special for the same reasons. According to Fiske, many jean companies try to market how their jeans fit the unique shape of the wearer because we live in a society “where the pressures of mass living and the homogenizing forces that attempt to massify us have produced a deep need for a sense of individuality and social difference.” (2010). Perhaps this dress is the same, in the sense that its unique fit on my sister makes it individual from any other garment she or anyone else owns.

However, it may take time for the dress to become truly meaningful to the recipient. As Kopytoff explains, the longevity of the relationship between the individual and the singularized item assimilates them to some extent, making parting from the item unthinkable (Kopytoff, 1986). Maybe my sister will develop an attachment to the dress as she wears it and utilizes it more. Its handmade nature and tailored fit may become more and more meaningful to her as time passes, making it a cherished item in her wardrobe.

THE DISPOSAL PROCESS

FAST FASHION VS. HANDMADE GARMENTS

How will the disposal of this garment be different from others? Looking at this dress in comparison to other garments from today, there are many differences. As Angelina Klepp discusses in her article “Ditch Fast Fashion, Shop Sustainably” from The Daily Tar Heel, many garments today are made cheaply and poorly. This makes it easy for buyers to trash or donate such garments shortly after purchasing them. However, this dress is different from these types of garments because of its homemade, gift nature. My sister may feel obligated to keep and cherish it for longer, not just because it’s a gift, but because she’s aware of the time and effort I put into making it. This sentiment and personalization behind the gift may keep it out of the realm of disposal for longer.



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