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A common thread: re-establishing home-sewing within creative industry

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The home dressmaker is a figure so constant in domestic history that one would be hard pressed to find, even today, somebody who cannot recall a woman from their family sewing at the dining room table.

Within a highly industrialised world people rely more than ever on the industry of the machine and it's endless whirring of fast consumption production. In the process, we have lost the respect for both the process and the product of the hand-made object. The fast-food, fast-living, immediate-access and instant-gratification of a post war America and Europe began an erosion of the morals-of-making which people have relied upon for centuries. Growing industries of cheaply produced clothes, shoes and fabrics from India and China have decimated these formerly strong South African industries.

This dissertation aims to address the continued role of home sewing- historically undocumented- as an 'invisible' economy and define its position as a driving force for change through a 'Skills Revolution'. Using the lens of a South African born, Johannesburg based and family run dressmaking and sewing teaching business, Italian Dressmaking School, this thesis aims at addressing the pressing social and economic needs of South African creative industries by providing a platform for personal and community skills development and learning. Italian Dressmaking School was founded in 1961 by my grandmother Irene Sansalvadore, and today continues to provide the tools for women to learn the craft of home sewing. This dissertation aims at providing both the space for women, in particular, to gain a skill in a craft that has historically been considered 'women's work' alongside aligned crafts of weaving and textile dyeing within the historic fabric trading area of Fordsburg.

South Africa no longer produces much in the way of textiles, bar traditional *shweshwe*, which is produced solely in the Eastern Cape and a handful of smaller mills scattered around the country. While pure cotton and linen is hard to come by, increasingly expensive and highly desirable, South Africa on a whole imports all of this fabric from China, Russia and India amongst others. The aim of this project is to build onto an existing nucleus already to be found in Johannesburg, providing South Africas' residents with the skills to start their own micro businesses centered around the production of cloth, the dyeing/colouring and/or printmaking of produced fabrics and the final garment construction with its dual phases of patternmaking and sewing.

This thesis does not aim to compete with industries like China but rather to re-establish a formerly successful craft based industry.

The autonomy of people in establishing their own identity is arguably one of the most essential needs after the most basic; survival. This dissertation is not for the fashionista but rather for the woman who has used her hands, for time immemorial, making the cloth that shrouds us all.

Irene Sansalvadore Stewart