



The Influence of Technological Improvement in the Development of Ready-to-Wear from 1850 to 1920s: The Implications for the Future of the Apparel Industry

Youngjoo Lee, Georgia Southern University, USA

Keyword: Technology, ready-to-wear, sewing machine

During the Victorian era, there were a lot of political, social, technological, and cultural changes. The Romantic Movement began to be replaced by Realism. This changing was probably effected by industrial growth. Technological improvements in life were connected with each other like a domino effect. In the apparel industry, the invention of the sewing machine made mass production of clothes possible. And also the need of large scale of producing of garment could make effective and fast manufacturing system. The purpose of this study is to research the influence of technological improvement in the clothing industry after sewing machine was invented in 1846, in order to apply the interpretation of this research to the direction for future apparel manufacturing system.

The qualitative research method was used to find the answers for following questions: What did clothing industry do with sewing machine invention in their manufacturing system? What is current fashion industry doing with new technology in their manufacturing system? Will new technology change the shape of both fashion industry and our culture as it happened in the past? And it should be the same frame or it should the different approach? The most of this research was conducted in archives as primary sources: the catalogs of HYAM & Co.s' Clothing, Brooks Brothers Company, Richman's Clothes, and Best & Company's Children's Wear. Furthermore, secondary sources (i.e., literature) were reviewed to hear other researchers' historical perspective about the impact of technology improvement between 1850 and 1920s.

Ready-to-wear had been usual for men's tailors to make up a few clothes for immediate wear by the 1840s. Cloaks and mantles which don't need correct fit were the only acceptable ready-made garments (Byrde, 1992). After the invention of the sewing machine, some people had realized its economic merits. Severa's finding states "The machine sewing of cloaks and mantillas in the 1850s reduced the cost of making them by 80 percent and occasioned a consequent drop in prices" (Severa, 1995). Up to the end of the nineteenth century the scale of costume production was constantly expanding in both made-to-measure and ready-made clothes. Costantino (1997) also described the rise of mass production and quality of in the manufacturing system as following:

In both Britain and America it was at the end of the nineteenth century that the mass-produced clothing industry took off. The major technological advances in clothing manufacture brought about by the introduction of the sewing machine and fabric cutting machinery made it possible to mass produce credible copies of garments that previously, because of the skills required and the cost of labour, could only be produced in tailors' workshops. (p.22)

From an advertisement in the catalog of HYAM Tailor & National Clothier in 1851, it is found that they produced both made-to-measure and ready-made clothes. And also this company advised its readers that the quality of read-mad costume was the same as that of made-to-measure clothes as following:

The object of HYAM & Co. has ever been to render this department as attractive as the companion branch of their business; and let it be distinctly understood that the same cloth, the same cutters, and the same workmen as are employed in the bespoke department are here brought into service; an advantage which other houses do not even profess to hold out. (HYAM & Co., 1851)

The most technological improvement in manufacturing system of clothing industry was due to the use of the sewing machine. It could save time and money in labour intensive works of manufacturing. And it also helped the clothing business to expand rapidly. One men's clothing company, the Richman Brothers established in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1897 had an immense and impressive factory containing over five and one-half acres of floor space and extending a full city block in length by 1925. In their catalogue, they advertised their scale and system:

In this factory over 1300 happy, well-paid men and women are employed. Most of them own stock in the company and share in its success. In it, the volume production which the Richman planned, has become a reality. Thoroughly trained workers, using the most up-to-date machinery and working under ideal conditions, produce Richman's Clothes at the minimum cost. (The Richman's Brothers Co., 1925)

Interpretation and Future Work

Although the purpose of this research was finding the answers for questions and predicting where current fashion industry will go further with which types of new technology and strategy, this study also have led researcher to look at another direction for the future of apparel industry. Indeed, it is obvious that technical advances made it possible to produce production on a large scale and to sell them in low price to the market. However, the apparel industry in its current shape need to be refined with different approach and new technology since the market is flooding with over-production and it is believed that the current structure of production already have caused social and environmental issues.

References

- Byrde, P. (1992). *Nineteenth Century Fashion*. London: B.T. Batsford.
- Costantino, M. (1997). *Men's Fashion in the Twentieth Century: From frock coats to intelligent fibers*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- HYAM & Co. (1851). *Dress: HYAM TAILOR and National Clothier*. Catalogue of the HYAM & Co., London.
- The Richman's Brothers Co. (1925). *Richman's Clothes: All Wool*. Catalogue of The Richman's Brothers Co., Cleveland.
- Severa, J. (1995). *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion. 1840-1900*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.