

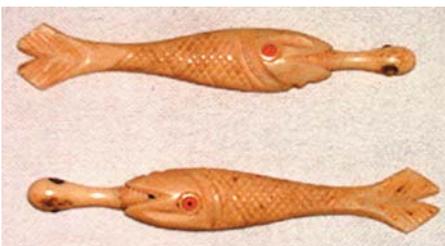


Collection of Victorian bobbins, thread winders and pincushion barrels.



Early 19thC decorative work box of French origin.

When Needles were Toys! by Jack Tempest



Two bone needle holders designed as fishes. Their screw stoppers are 'Stanhopes', with peepholes to study micro photographic scenic views. Useful holiday souvenirs!



Wooden knitting sheath, the equivalent of a Welsh love spoon. These were popular in the north of England in the 19thC, usually personally made as love tokens by young shepherds for their lady friends. Knitting was a major industry then in the north.



Chatelaine for attaching to the housewife's waist belt. They might carry keys but usually include receptacles for sewing tools - scissors, thimbles, pin-cushions, etc.



Edwardian wallet for holding a selection of needles and tools for elastic threading, etc.

There would be a real to-do today if needles were again allowed to be described as 'toys'. There has been enough said about dangerous playthings, sharp tin toys and their like, in the safety-conscious days we live in! The fact is that needles were once classed as toys and offered for sale in toy shops! It's perfectly true because toy shops in Victorian times were dedicated to the needleworkers of the day. Needlework, lacemaking, sewing, tapestry working and similar handicrafts were the prerogative of the housewife, wealthy as well as humble. All kinds of what were then thought of as 'toys' were sold in the toy shops, none of them being the playthings we now recognise as the 'toys' of today!

These would include the tools for tackling everyday sewing and knitting, as well as implements for crocheting, embroidery and tating and the various tools for carrying out such tasks. The women of various stations frequented these toy shops. The higher classes treated the work as a leisurely pastime, for the lower classes needlework was a simple matter of necessity. Even the young schoolgirls needed the toy shops, not to buy dolls from, but to obtain the materials needed in schoolwork, particularly for the samplers they were encouraged to produce.

Their skills in the production of samplers may be appreciated in surviving examples. They were the products of great patience and artistry and usually contain beautifully stitched coloured letters of the alphabet. Examples usually give the name and age of the child who produced the sampler, often with details of the school attended. Samplers are very collectible today, especially if they picture a stately home or manor house, perhaps the home of the girl responsible for such a delightful example of needlework?

All manners of tools and accessories had been created over the years as aids to the intricate business of sewing, whether carried out for practical or decorative reasons. The commonest of such implements must certainly be the needle, a simple instrument that has been known since prehistoric times. Primeval clothing was created by using primitive needles to take the thread through the animal skins which were sewn together to form the earliest examples of wearing apparel.

The first needles were probably made from fish bones. Small animal bones were carved to a point and given a hole at the opposite end to take the thread. The original pins, a most necessary aid to sewing, were once the natural thorns of various plants. Constant improvement in the production of these basic tools and accessories have given us the more refined versions we see today, but the technique of hand sewing has differed very little.

Collectible needlework tools today include needles, pins, tape measures, thimbles, thimble cases, shuttles, cotton barrels, and reel holders, scissors, and waxers. Waxers were for 'waxing' the thread, which was often homespun and not always of good quality. The use of beeswax or even candle wax acted as a lubricant and made the thread easier to handle. In the mid-eighteenth century cotton was generally available in hanks, though it was possible to buy it in the form of tiny balls or on reels. The housewife used a pair of winding clamps to hold the hanks while she wound the thread on to small flat star-shaped disks. Alternatively the thread could be wound on to a spindle which, when full, would fit into a wooden 'cotton barrel'.

Eventually the toy shop made its appearance dealing in all the materials and tools of the sewing business. Why the name 'toys' and why are playthings so called? Well the English language is pretty well related to the Germanic language. Even today a German calls a 'plaything' a 'spielzeug' and a tool a 'werkzeug' - a 'work-thing'. Saying 'zeug' in German the word is pronounced as 'tsoig'. It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to realise how our word 'toy' developed from 'tsoig' - or how a toy shop could also sell tools for needleworkers!

Wooden cotton reels made their appearance during the first quarter of the nineteenth century and often came in wooden boxes fitted with pegs to hold the reels. Each reel would take threads of differing gauges that could be pulled out through its own individual eyelet. Polished wooden reel-holders, often referred to as 'cotton roundabouts', were also available from the toy shop. These were designed to take differing numbers of bobbins and would often incorporate a thimble-holder or a pincushion, or both.

Pincushions were to be found in a variety of sizes and shapes and they proved indispensable to the ladies. They were called 'pin balls' in the eighteenth century and they usually had a knitted cover and were intended to be hung from the user's waist by a ribbon. The ancestors of our present-day wooden or plastic bobbins were the bone reels that were equipped with matching reel-covers that were usually comprised of two decorative disks joined by a spindle to connect through the centre of the bone reel. These disks were often made from mother-of-pearl, ivory and even silver.

There were 'pinwheels' too, consisting of two disks sandwiching a felt centre to take the pins. Also there were barrel-shaped examples, and some even occupying small portable boxes. Many ornamental novelty pincushions could be acquired often designed to sell as souvenirs of a visit to a seaside or other popular holiday resort. The pincushion had its look-alikes in the form of a type that had no soft centre but was filled with a compressed abrasive powder. This type was particularly useful in removing rust and actually sharpened any needle pushed into it. Collectors generally tend to find these items more difficult to find than the ordinary soft-centred pincushion.

Sewing cabinets, also referred to as sewing boxes or work-boxes, were available in many sizes, from free-standing items of furniture to handsome table-top cabinets fitted with a variety of tools. Many of the sewing-tools are still used though much of the creative fabric business has been made easier since the invention of the sewing machine, knitting machine and their like!

Editor's Note: An extensive illustrated price guide to textiles, including samplers appeared in our January/February 2004 edition.



Various tools for holding thread, an earl needle packet, and a pair of button hole scissors.



Edwardian wallet containing various sewing tools.



Chatelaines date back to the medieval period. They became important day time 'jewellery' for women through the eighteenth century and were made in gold, pinchbeck, painted enamels, steel etc. A chatelaine consists of an ornamental arrangement of hooks and chains. The chatelaines shown here carry sewing accoutrements but at their finest would be hung a matching watch and key. Other details may include an etui, (tweezers case) smelling bottle etc. They became popular again around 1850.

Additional information: The Nécessaire is more or less the dressing table equivalent where the etui is in the form of a box which may hold personal trifles such as scissors, a memo slip etc.