



Christie's, South Kensington. A French nineteenth century gilt-tooled red leather sewing box with thimble, pin cushion, a bodkin, a pair of scissors and stiletto. £8,050.

# The Sylvia Mary Groves collection of sewing tools

By Zita Thornton

Sylvia Mary Groves Collection, Phillips, 2nd December.

## “Linking women of history with women of today”

Sewing implements have changed little over the last three centuries, except that today, they often lack the beauty and workmanship of those produced in the past. Many of those interested in producing fine work today, enjoy these implements which link women of history with women of today.

Sylvia Mary Groves began sewing at the end of the nineteenth century and over the next seventy years amassed a great many historic needlework tools. In the 1940s and 50s she wrote many articles about their history for *Country Life*, illustrated with photographs of her collection taken by her husband, until in 1966, they produced a book *History of Needlework Tools and Accessories*. This was the first book of its kind, reprinted twice in the next decade, and still considered a ‘must have’ for anyone interested in the subject.

A first edition of her book sold at the Phillips Sale for £127 whilst a third edition fetched £94. They headed a successful sale of the collection of needlework tools from the late Sylvia Mary Groves, along with properties from other vendors. The sale included many items illustrated in the book and items were presented in lots which followed the chapters of her book.

### Chapter One - Needlecases

Needlecases made from a variety of materials including wood, brass, silver or ivory, were used to keep needles tidy in the sewing box. A smaller version was made for pins, known as a pin poppet. An eighteenth century Georgian poppet was sold for £598. Needlecases were cylindrical or rectangular, finely decorated with inlaid materials, carving, gilt wire or beads. The sale included a nineteenth century mother of pearl and abalone cylinder needlecase (£46). Two metal eighteenth century French cases decorated with cherubs, leaves and scrolls sold for £242. Colourful nineteenth century beadwork cylinder cases were £86 and £132. Imaginative, novelty needlecases were popular from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Furled umbrellas were a popular shape, but also animals, people and other objects. These commanded higher prices. A seventeenth century brass fish, made to be suspended from a girdle sold for £943. A silver steam train was £242 and examples of ivory men and women from the late eighteenth century were £345 and £495.

From the mid-nineteenth century, needlebooks were fashionable, including those made from card, leather, ivory and Tunbridgeware. An example from the Groves collection included an Edwardian ivorine needlebook painted with Kate Greenaway style children, and a leather needlebook, a replica of one given to Her Majesty the Queen in 1924 sold for £30. Needlebooks were also used for advertising. The sale included three printed books in the shape of bottles advertising Holbrook & Co Worcester sauce, fruit sauce and Corona drinks. (£30). Needle boxes to contain packets of needles were a feature of the collection, made from wood or mother of pearl, a Victorian tortoiseshell example selling for £196.

### Chapter Two - Thread and Thread Winders

Threads were sold in skeins which tangled easily during use, so thread was wound on to snowflake shaped winders. A set of a dozen such winders including some rectangular examples in mother of pearl, sold for £219. Cross form Tunbridgeware winders for silk fetched £299. Various fruitwood winders sold for between £69-£92. This part of the sale also included a set of reels complete with thread and original paper labels which fetched £173, and a lot of 10 reel stands and holders fetched £230. Boxes to keep reels tidy and clean went from £150-£250 and barrels for individual reels of thread in wood or ivory £98-£196.

**Chapter Three - Thimbles and Yard Measures**

No hand sewer would be without a thimble. These were made from all kinds of material including pewter, porcelain, gold, silver, ivory, brass and steel. Silver thimbles were the most ornate, with decorations of flowers, scrolls, leaves and fleur-de-lis. Sometimes they incorporated polished stones such as a Scottish example with two others, £403, or glass, one in a lot of six, £173. Typically, thimbles, especially later versions, were sold in larger lots. The sale included some early thimbles, a sixteenth century bronze thimble (£67), and a seventeenth century thimble (£55). However, medieval examples remained unsold. There was also a collection of Royal Worcester thimbles from the late John Board and his wife Anne. Ranging from 1880 to 1953 these were decorated with birds or flowers and some were signed. These were sold in a variety of lots and dates and ranged in price from £35 for a single 1941 thimble to £518 for three thimbles, one signed from 1920-30.

Aluminium thimbles sometimes carried advertising by Nestles, Cerebos, Lyons or Crawfords, for example. There were two lots of advertising thimbles, one set of ten for £170 and a set of 39 for £167. Good quality thimbles were kept in cases of wood, tortoiseshell, mother of pearl and brass, lined with velvet. Their round, oval or octagonal shapes were decorated with veneer or transfer prints. Acorns, barrels and other novelty shapes were popular. The sale included a beautiful, beaded thimble egg, part of a lot for £196, an ivory acorn case with thimble £253, eight novelty cases including a globe, girl and light bulb £184 and a silver bucket to be hung from a chatelaine from 1892, £60.

Tape measures, developed in the nineteenth century, were used by milliners and seamstresses. They were not marked in inches until the mid century. Before then, tapes were marked in 'nails' an equivalent of 2½". One of these sold for £115. The tape itself was linen or silk in a decorative housing made from a variety of materials, often in a tall cylindrical or rectangular shape, carved or inlaid. Most of the measures in the Groves collection were fashioned from ivory and ranged in price from £150-£200.

The Victorians loved novelty shapes with gimmicks, such as windmills whose sails turned as the tape was pulled. The sale included novelty shapes such as a coffee grinder (£138), brass squirrel (£190) and two tapes fashioned from real shells (£75). In the twentieth century technology was represented in the form of cars and aeroplanes, but after the First World War, the fashion for novelty declined. Measures become more compact and a spring loaded mechanism took over from the winding handle. Tape measures were popular tourist souvenirs and the sale included examples from Crystal Palace, Worthing and York (£184).

**Chapter Four - Scissors.**

The earliest scissors in the collection were the most basic seventeenth century shears, undecorated and operated by grasping the handles with the whole hand. These were sold in a lot (£115) which included later bone handle, folding scissors popular in the nineteenth century, Chinese snipping scissors identified by their large swan loop handles and also buttonhole scissors. These are recognisable by a rectangular gap in the blade adjusted to the size of the buttonhole by a screw between the handles. Made from steel, scissors like these were developed from 1816. In the eighteenth century, scissors became more ornate. There was a fine example of heavily decorated scissors for £219. The well known stork design was not made until the nineteenth century in Sheffield and Solinger, Germany, but has been continuously made since. Victorian storks have their tails attached to the bows for strength. Earlier birds were slimmer with unattached tails. A pair of stork scissors, one miniature attached to a penknife fetched £109.

**Chapter Five - Pincushions**

Pincushions of silk or velvet were often stuffed with sheep's wool to prevent pins rusting. Their heyday was in Victorian times when they were large and heavily decorated with lace, beads, sequins or made from patchwork. Sometimes they contained mottoes and were given to



*Phillips, London. Sylvia Mary Groves Sale. Mid 19thC mother of pearl needlebook £86. Early 19thC oval cut card needlebook £63. Mid 19thC ivory needlebook and pin cushion £242. Two cardboard needleboxes £121. Georgian ivory needlecase £150. Early 19thC ivory French pedestal reel stand top revealing a compartment and needlecase £207. 18thC French or Dutch silver hanging pin cushion £437. Late 19thC Sheffield silver handled scissors, Georgian silver sheath and brocade sheath £87. Two pairs Mother of pearl handled scissors £190 and £217. Exhibition steel scissors with engraved figure of Christ on cross £357. 17th/18thC steel scissors £219. 17thC shears Chinese snipping scissors, part lot £115. Miniature stork scissors with penknife and Solingen stork scissors £109. 18th/19thC gilt scissors £138. Fish scent flask 19thC £104.*

All prices quoted include a buyer's premium of 15%.



*Christie's, South Kensington. A selection of Edwardian pin cushions in the sale. A pug £529. A swan £287. A wall £598*

## Sewing Tools Market &amp; Price Guide Sewing Tools Market &amp; Price Guide



Sotheby's South, A collection of bone and ivory sewing utensils, nineteenth century, £690.



Phillips, London. Sylvia Mary Groves Sale. Eighteenth century agate needlecase with semi precious press stud £621. Brass needlepacket box in the form of a wheelbarrow, silver casket needle packet sleeve, Victorian needle packet £265. Georgian silver thimble in red leather case, horn handled ivory crochet hook, pair early nineteenth century ornate scissors £190. Plastic covered advertising tape measure 'Colman's' 1805-1905 (one of six) £127. Collection of miniature pieces including two silver thimbles £161. Rocking cradle novelty pin cushion £109. Hedgehog brass pin cushion, large yellow harp shaped pin cushion, Victorian gilt brass tape measure £265. Nineteenth century cardboard child's sewing box, with contents £104. Austrian sewing companion fitted with silver tools £276. Child's sewing companion in the form of a pail, with silver thimble £334. Set of six nineteenth century steel tambour hooks in ivory cylinder container £150.

new mothers. One such example, a large purple velvet heart, with pearls, beads and a lace border inscribed with pins 'Welcome sweet babe' sold for £92. An earlier, rare example pin stuck with the inscription 'God bless the babe', sold for £265. A rocking cradle (£109), reflected the Victorian love of novelty. Other novelties included bellows, boat, wheelbarrow, brass pig, tea cup and saucer and swan (£50-£180). Pin cushions were given as presents to sweethearts, such as one from the eighteenth century embroidered on silk with mottoes each side (£345) and also sent home from wars, one inscribed 'To my dear mother' (£63).

#### Chapter Six - Needle Clamps.

Clamps have disappeared from general use today but they were a versatile and useful sewing accessory in the nineteenth century. They were used to clamp all manner of tools to the table, including hemming appliances in brass, steel or wood clamps which held pin cushions, winding tools, skeins or reels of thread and guides for the craft of netting. Whilst most clamps sold for about £100, an unusual example in ivory from the eighteenth century in the form of a kneeling man below a pincushion fashioned as a wig, went for £1,995.

#### Chapter Seven - Workboxes

Beautiful sewing tools deserved to be kept in beautiful boxes, finely made and decorated. The best were made from mahogany, walnut or fruit woods, although paper maché was popular in the nineteenth century. Sometimes they had legs and served as a work table too. Others had a satin bag suspended underneath in which to place the sewing implements. Early examples had several compartments arranged as a tiny chest of drawers. Later, trays opened on brackets. Although sewing boxes seem to have originated in Europe in the seventeenth century, the Groves collection had only one which sold for £794. Others were from the nineteenth and twentieth century (£250-£575). However, many of the sale's most valuable examples came from the collection of Sir Francis and Lady Winnington. A mid-nineteenth century burr maple and rosewood, French bead box with a variety of continental glass beads, more than doubled its estimate and sold for £1,495. A French walnut sewing box with a large array of fine implements almost trebled its estimate at £1,426.

Smaller etuis were used as portable cases and sometimes hung from a chatelaine. Popular in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these were elaborate chains for holding small objects and cases, and were suspended from a waist sash. Victorian examples sold for around £150 with earlier chatelaines worth at least twice that figure.

#### Chapters 8-14

These included needlework tools for a variety of crafts other than sewing. There was a fine selection of East Midlands lace bobbins, some with names and messages, which sold in mixed lots for around £300.

Implements for other crafts included beadwork, braiding, tating, cord making, knotting and knitting and reflected the wide variety skills and interests fashionable in the nineteenth century. The final chapter of the book and the sale consisted of patterns for canvas work and Berlin woolwork and sold for £121 and £201 respectively.

#### Other Collections

Needlework tools are sold at dedicated auctions, textile sales, house sales and general sales. Bonham's will have a large collection of bobbins for sale in May. Last October, Sotheby's sale of the contents of Arreton Manor included sewing utensils (£690). Christie's highly successful sale of thimbles and sewing accessories last June saw items widely exceeding their estimates. Edwardian silver novelty pincushions sold for between £300-£600 each.

Linda Pullen is a collector of needlework tools and displays her collection on her web site:

<http://freespace.virgin.net/linda.pullen/homepage.htm>