

8 New Ways You Can Be Classified as Insane by *Constantino Diaz-Duran*

RENATA ESPINOSA

Hot Topics: [Fashion Beast](#), [Madoff Scandal](#), [Torture](#), [Photo Galleries](#)**In the recession, more people are learning how to re-cut a dress or alter their Levi's to look like Dior. Renata Espinosa on the new breed of DIY seamstresses.**

In eighth grade, practical classes like home ec or shop were a requirement, not an elective. My hometown, Orem, Utah, was a conservative place where traditional roles of men and women were pretty strictly observed, and this meant I ended up spending half of each semester in sewing classes, and the other half learning how to cook. I could have taken wood shop or welding, of course, but somehow the idea of running a sewing machine needle through my finger seemed easier to deal with than table sawing off the same digit.

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For years after the fact, I have had an aversion to sewing on the grounds that it forced women into these traditional gender stereotypes, but after living in New York and spending several hundreds of dollars on tailoring and mending my clothes at the local dry cleaner, I'm having a change of heart. Now instead of avoiding sewing, I'm avoiding shopping, and my new favorite vintage find isn't an Yves Saint Laurent blouse, it's [a '70s bible of all things crafty, from macramé to crochet.](#)

I'm not alone. Beyond turning to tailors to fix up their existing wardrobes, there's been an increase in both women and men learning to make their own simple repairs or taking sewing classes to learn how to do more complicated projects. Maybe it's the economy, or maybe it's just a return to simplicity after so many years of excess.

"We've had a steady flow," says Elissa Meyrich, founder of [Sew Fast Sew Easy](#), a small sewing school for the general public in New York's Garment District. "We're kind of recession proof. Our day classes have increased, because of a lot of people being out of work. They're taking classes to gain other skills or doing something they never had done before."

"The craft thing has been going on for years, but the DIY thing of 'I'll fix it myself, I won't go to the tailor' is coming up more," says Meyrich. "We call it survival sewing."

Likewise, as people have become more conscious of where their clothing is coming from and the associated carbon footprint—for instance, the U.S. imported about \$93 billion in apparel and textiles in 2008, according to U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration—more people have turned to sewing, notes Gregory Garvin, vice president of Sew Fast Sew Easy. "We were looking this morning at the Norma Kamali line made for Wal-Mart," says Garvin. "Yeah, it's \$7, but it may not be the fit you're looking for. People want more of a custom fit."

Garvin says the increase in the number of people taking sewing classes as Sew Fast Sew Easy in New York has risen over the past couple of years, but this year that number has rocketed up—especially men.

"We are getting a lot more guys who come in to hem their pants and make their own dress shirts," he says.

Plus, not only are people taking classes, but they're also buying sewing machines.

"I think *Project Runway* has helped that," says Garvin. "They see if that person can do it, I can do it. They identify with them. People are really sticking with sewing and going on to do more."

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Likewise on the west coast, Jenny Ryan, founder of [The Sewing Studio](#), shop within a shop at Reform School in Los Angeles that sells craft supplies and offers a variety of craft-oriented classes, from sewing to knitting to glass bead-making, says that people who never learned basic sewing skills have been coming to them in droves, because they want to learn how to mend a hem or sew on a button. "Especially now when people shop at places like Forever 21, where the clothes are made by kids in Malaysia making a few cents an hour, who's going to take that garment to a dry cleaner and pay \$40 to mend it?" says Ryan.

Home Ec, which has been offering regular four or five classes a week since February, was also approached by Andrae Gonzalo, a contestant on Season Two of *Project Runway*, who always liked the store, to teach a class. His class, "Survival Stitches," teaches people six basic stitches they can use to mend or alter a garment—perfect for extending the life of all those cheap clothes in disrepair clogging up space in one's closet.

Ryan doesn't necessarily see the interest for handmade clothing as completely tied to the current state of the economy: "It's cyclical," she says, "like DIY and grunge in the '90s or hippie homesteaders in the '60s and '70s—this is just another form of that expression." But she concedes that there's more of it now because people don't have as much money. "It's the way we should have been living all along. It's coming along at the same time as the whole slow food thing, and something that people are really hungry for now."

Then there are those who turn to DIY clothing because they're either looking for something that doesn't exist on the market or they don't want to spend a fortune tracking down a designer version of it.

Anthony M., a designer at Levi's, notes that what's happening in menswear at the moment is "a perfect storm" of trend colliding with economic necessity.

"We've been in this trend where people are into tailored clothing, with the focus on the intrinsic value of garments rather than the perceived value," says Anthony, "This has led to a revival of artisanal clothing."

"Menswear has been in a very trad cycle, so you're seeing designers look to Amish design or pre-World War II turn of the century design," he continues. "I've been seeing a lot of detachable collars, from Haversack at Opening Ceremony to Hugo Boss. It's not just a design detail, but a practical thing that makes the shirt last longer and not wear out as fast."

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Luckily for men, then, customized or handmade clothing kills two birds with one stone: Not only is it in keeping with the menswear zeitgeist, it's also a way to reinvent one's wardrobe without going out and buying something new.

"I've always been interested in making things, but the recession makes me try not to spend money," says Anthony, who has made everything from a hand knit sweater based on a turn of the century fisherman's sweater, to altering his 501's to fit like Dior Homme jeans. "It's expressing myself through a DIY thing rather than buying a Paul Smith shirt."

Necessity or not, handmade clothing possesses an incomparable emotional value.

Linda Rodriguez, a doctoral student at Harvard, cites a similar motivation for taking up sewing this year.

"I think that handmade clothes become more meaningful," says Rodriguez, who watched her mother and grandmother sew for years and recently decided to learn herself. "Once you have spent time constructing a garment, it is easier to become sentimental about it. For instance, the clothes my mom has made for me always remind me of her and her dedication to all that she does. You don't quite feel the same looking at a mass-produced Gap button-down."

Plus:

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