

A Brief History of the Button

The word button originates from the French word "bouton": a small piece of metal or other material used to connect different parts of a garment by means of a buttonhole. The button originated as early as 2000 BC in southern Asia around the Indus Valley region and was used as a decoration while pins and belts served as fasteners. It wasn't until sometime in the 13th century that the idea of a buttonhole and button was conceived.

The Golden Age of buttons

In the 18th century, buttons were truly tiny works of art. Button making became a profitable sideline for many of the artists of the day. Typically, the most exquisite of these buttons were about the size of a 50-cent piece. They were made by mounting a painting or carving under glass within a metal shell and fitted with a loop shank. At this time most buttons were produced in France. However, as with other fashions, French buttons were eagerly copied by the rest of Europe.

England

Birmingham gained fame for its metal and shell buttons. The Midlands produced horn buttons from the antlers of the stag. Dorset fashioned thread buttons. In Staffordshire, Josiah Wedgwood created his "jasper medallions." Perfecting stamping, molding and casting technologies, English button makers pioneered the mass production of buttons. This made buttons accessible to everyone, not just wealthy. While French buttons most often displayed scenes of romance or the arts, English buttons tended toward scenes of country life. Sporting buttons became popular, many featuring animals.

United States

In the 18th century, Americans imported most of their buttons from England. But a few small American button manufacturers did spring up in the 18th century. In Philadelphia around 1720, German immigrant Casper Wister began making brass buttons. Early American buttons were made of wood, pewter, brass, pearl, silver and Ivory.

Gilt.

In the 19th Century Buttons became smaller "about half the size of 18th century buttons". More often they were mass-produced works of craft instead of individual pieces of art. As France was slow to mechanize, England gradually became the world's premier button maker.

The first gilt buttons were made in Birmingham between 1797 and 1800. Being elegant, yet affordable, people took to them immediately. Americans began making gilt buttons by 1810, after stealing the gilding secret from the British: Five grains of gold per gross (144) of buttons was added to a mixture of mercury, and then brushed on the brass buttons, which were then cooked in a furnace.

Using this method, buttons could be gilt, double gilt or triple gilt. The new gilt buttons were the vanguard of a "golden age" of metal button making. Gilt buttons flourished in the first half of the 19th century and their quality has not been equaled to this day. Some examples of gilt buttons are: Sporting buttons for the gent, military buttons for the soldier, and even livery buttons for the household servant.

Queen Victoria

In 1861, England's Prince Albert died, and Queen Victoria went into a state of mourning that lasted the rest of her life. She took to wearing black jet buttons on her somber black outfits. This habit was imitated by her subjects and others around the world with black glass buttons, making them the most widespread buttons of the 19th century.

The Late 19th Century

Towards the end of the 19th Century, buttons were being produced in more varieties than ever before. Women rebelled against their staid fashions, turning to jackets, vests and boots, in more adventurous colors and with larger and more ornate buttons. Young girls began gathering buttons to use for "charm strings". Once a girl collected 999 buttons, her future husband would provide her with her 1000th.

In the late 19th century, most buttons were becoming mundane and mass-produced. They were made from a variety of cheap materials. In reaction to this trend, an attempt was made to revive some of the elegant button making techniques of the 18th century.

France began to produce "under glass" buttons. Italy contributed glass "paperweight" buttons with tiny bursts of kaleidoscopic color. From China came fancy enameled buttons. Many countries made fine porcelain buttons, with painted or transfer-printed designs. England created beautiful silver Art Nouveau buttons, often picturing women with flowing hair and willowy forms. Even the United States joined the revival, with calico buttons, made of china and featuring designs reminiscent of homespun checked calico fabric patterns.

But the most popular buttons at the turn of the century weren't the least bit elegant. They were "picture buttons," often worn in long rows down the front of coats or dresses, and picturing everything imaginable (Birds, Dogs, Cats, Portraits, Fairy Tales, etc.).

Modern Buttons

Around the turn of the 20th century, men adopted the 4-hole button as their standard. Women soon followed suit after the more tailored look became popular after World War I (due to the influence of the military uniform)

In the Roaring Twenties, flappers wore garter buttons (often featuring the face of Betty Boop). As longer and more feminine clothing styles became popular again, large glass and pottery buttons appeared.

In the 30s, the novelty button appeared. Novelty buttons took on the look of everyday items: a cigarette pack, a basket of fruit, a ukulele, a pork chop and even Mickey Mouse.

In World War II, patriotic buttons appeared: eagles, flags, stars. In England, "blackout buttons" which radiated light became tiny heroes, attached to the lapel and back of those on the dim home front. After the war, button manufacturers returned to the mostly synthetic, largely unassuming buttons we wear today.