

A Brief History of Linen

Description

This will be the first in a series of blog posts where we will take a closer look at natural fabrics such as linen, cotton, and wool, and their journey through the ages. Today, natural fabrics can be found in all shapes, styles, and forms from basic undergarments to high end fashion. In decades past, fabrics wereâ?? valuable commodities due to the time it took to process the raw materials and weave cloth. People were limited by what fabrics could be sourced locally unless they were very wealthy. For example, today, cotton is considered an â??everydayâ?• fabric ranging from cheap t-shirts to designer jeans. Centuries ago, it was a prized import fabric from places like India and China and made into fancy day dresses and house robes for wealthy men. â?? Exploring the history of fabrics gives us a glimpse into the daily lives of people in times past as well as the economic and social forces that shaped fashion.

First up is linen, one of the oldest textiles developed, dating back nearly 10,000 years. Most people associateâ?? linen fabric with more expensive clothing, fancy tablecloths and napkins. Historically, it was a staple of everyday clothing, especially undergarments, until the invention of cotton gin in the late 1700s made cotton production more cost efficient. Letâ??s take a moment and explore the rich history of linen.

Bast Fibers

Linen is made from the cellulose fibers of the inner bark the flax plant. These fibers are called *bast fibers* and flax is one of several types of plants including hemp, jute, and raime, which produce them. Materials made from bast fibers all have similar properties such as drying faster than either cotton or wool and being stronger when wet. This is probably a key reason why items such as rope and shipâ??s sails were made from bast fibers before modern synthetic materials were used.

Turning bast fibers into cloth is a long process. Unlike wool where raw fleece can simply be washed and then either carded or combed into a preparation for spinning, bast fibers need to be separated from their woody stems and prepared for spinning in a multi-step process.

After the flax is harvested, the seed pods are collected for planting next season. The flax must be soakedâ?? to soften the woody outer stems, called *retting*. Retting can be done through one of two methods. The first is by soaking the flax in a stream or a tub. The second is by dew retting, where it is laid out on a field in the fall where it is soaked by the dew. Careful attention must be paid to the flax as if it is left out too long, it rots and spoils the inner fibers. Stream or tub retting can take several days while dew retting can take a few weeks.



Flax laid out in a field for dew retting

The retted flax is then dried and ready for processing. First the dried flax is passed through the jaws of the flax breaker to loosen the strands of flax from the inner core, called the *boon*. Then the flax is scraped with a scrunching knife to remove the roots and blossom ends. Lastly, the flax is drawn through a set of spikes called a hackle. This separates the boon from the flax. Continued hackling separates the long strands of flax from the short bits called *tow*. Tow was used for coarse cloth such as sacking, packing materials like ancient packing peanuts, or caulk for seams. The resultant long fibers are bundled together as *flax strick* and stored until they are needed to be spun into linen. When the entire process is completed, over 85% of the flax plant has been stripped away to make strick for spinning.



A woman demonstrates flax processing at a festival in Finland



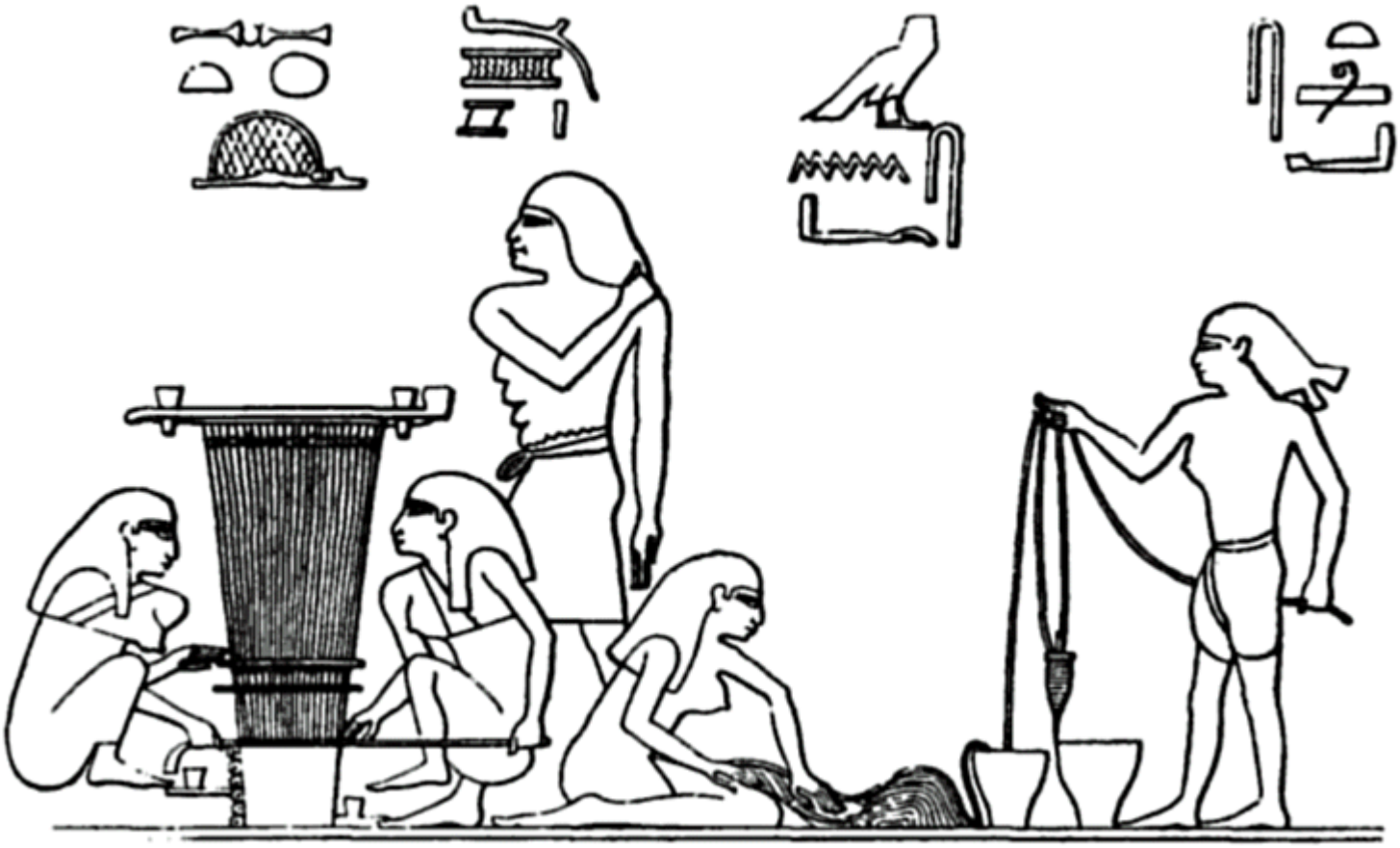
A Russian peasant woman processing flax around 1910s

It wasnâ??t until the 1830s when a mechanical means for hackling was first invented. Until then, flax production and preparation was done entirely by hand.

Linen in History

Flax was one of the first crops to be cultivated in the fertile crescent as far back as 7000 BCE. Linen artifacts have been dated to the Dead Sea as far back as 6000 BCE. The earliest linen artifacts in Europe date back to around 4000 BCE in Swiss lake finds. It was the Babylonians who first started weaving flax and are credited with starting the linen trade. But it was the Egyptians who are known for linen in the ancient world.

Because of the extremely dry climate of the Egyptian desert, textile finds in Egyptian tombs have been remarkably well-preserved. In addition to the miles of linen wrapping the mummies, bolts of linen cloth have been found in pharaohâ??s tombs as well as fine linen dresses, tunics, and linen housewares.



Line drawing of an Egyptian tomb painting showing textile production



Kerchief from Tutankhamunâ??s Embalming Cacheâ?? ca. 1336-1327 B.C.

After the Ancient Egyptians, linen continued to be a staple of clothing in the Western world for manyâ?? centuries. It was commonly used for undergarments and sleepwear for all classes of people in Europe in all climates and seasons. Linen was also woven into bedsheets, napkins, and other household fabrics. Itâ??s no wonder that during the Middle Agesâ?? the term â??linensâ?• became to be synonymousâ?? for household items such as bedding, tablecloths, and towels. The term survives to this day

cs.



Medieval women hackling flax, spinning flax, and weaving


1669


1669

Work Bag,â?? Linen worked with wool thread; double running and herringbone stitches, Great Britain 1669

In the American colonies, linen production was common in farm households. Aâ?? family would have their own plot of flax, which they would harvest, process, spin, and weave each year. Homespun cloth would be combined with commercial cloth in the household to make clothing and linens. Self-sufficiency was a source of great pride for the American colonists and textile production was one way of showing it.





Mid-18th century, American, Linen Wool Girlâ??s Dress



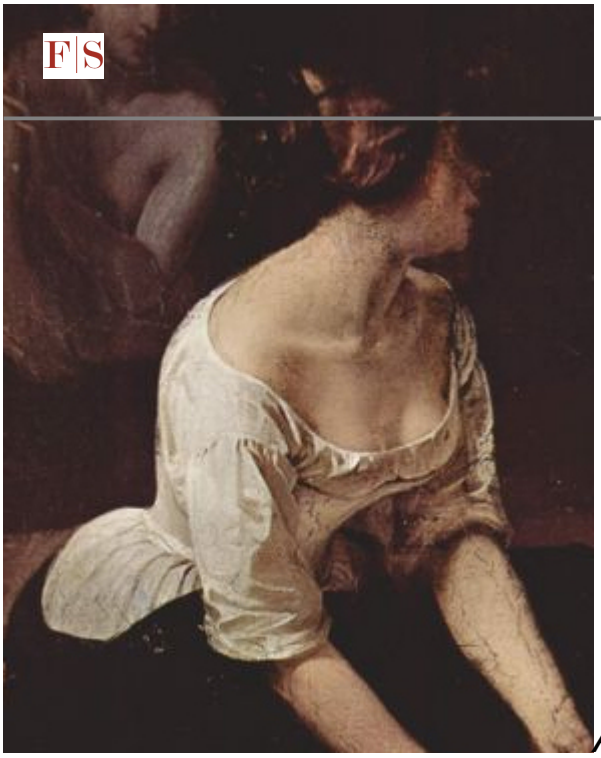
Phebe Warner Coverlet,â?? Probably Sarah Furman Warner Williams,â?? ca. 1803



Leading up to the Revolutionary War, the boycott of British goods was in full swing. Women, such as the Daughters of Liberty, routinely held spinning bees in town squares to show off their self-sufficiency and spinning excellence. This was an especially harsh smack in the face to the British textile industry, which dominated all of Europe at the time.

Homespun linen production continued through the early 1800s but waned as textile production became more industrialized. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made cotton production more economical than linen production. Cotton production in the United States doubled each decade from 1800 because the cotton gin meant that fewer slaves were needed to process cotton thus they could be sent to the fields to plant and harvest it instead. Mechanization in the spinning and weaving of cotton further fueled the cotton industry so that it quickly overtook linen as a cheap, everyday working fabric. For example, spinning mills for cotton in Lowell, MA were in operation in the late 1790s whereas mechanization of linen spinning did not come about until the 1830s. Even with the mechanization of flax processing, spinning, and weaving finally starting in the 1830s and 1840s, flax would never catch up to cotton production.

By the mid-1800s, most small farms in the United States no longer grew or processed their own flax and there was plenty of commercially available cloth. Home textile production saw a small revival during the American Civil War but died down again when the textile mills went back to producing civilian goods and supply routes were reopened to the South. Linen was still used for specific-use fabrics such as buckram, bedding, and canvas as well as work clothing and underclothes. Production became more specialized focusing on fine linens for tablecloths, drapery, and napkins as seen with the famous Irish linen. Linen was also used for finer clothing as it was perfect for starched uniforms and crisp cuffs or nice summer clothes. Towards the late 19th century, one of the trademarks of men in the upper classes was a warm-weather suit made of light colored linen. Women also had summer or warm weather linen suits, dresses, and riding habits, especially in the Southern United States and warmer climates such as the Caribbean and Mediterranean.

*A woman in a linen chemise or shift*

(underwear) from the Bath of the Nymphs by Francesco Hayez, 1831

Linen Today

Today linen is being rediscovered as an everyday fabric as well as a luxury fabric. â?? Improvements in linen production have made linen more affordable and it is seeing a return as an everyday fabric. Clothing made of linen and linen blends are now found in popular box stores like H&M and Old Navy.â?? The linen suits for men are also making a come back for the summer months, especially since vintage-inspired styles of *The Great Gatsby* and *Boardwalk Empireâ??* are popular on the runways.

In recent years, linen has made its way back into high fashion. Stella McCartneyâ??s 2011 collection included a silk-linen blend blazer and Valentino had a cotton/linen dress. For the discriminating bride, Lanvin offered a $6000 cotton and linen wedding dress. Linen is going strong for the 2015 spring season as major designers like Michael Kors, Donna Karan, and Lanvin, all have linen pieces in stores. Linen is currently only grown in few regions in Europe so fashion designers often advertise their linen from where it is produced such as â??Belgian linenâ?• or a specific region in France to

increase its appeal.

Independent designers have also embraced linen.â?? Out in California,â?? designer Jessie Kammâ??s Spring 2015 collection is full of easy wearing, airy linen pieces that will fit into any wardrobe. The company Flax specializes in linen clothing for women and puts out several collections each year in a range of fabric weights. Their annual barn sale attracts devoted fans of the clothing lineâ?? from all over the United States. Vivid Linen is another modern clothing company that uses only linen. They carry a wide range of selections for both men and women from casual resort wear to menâ??s suits. Faircloth and Supply are another favourite of ours, based in Los Angeles they are a womenâ??s season-less charitable company who make the most stylish, comfortable and gorgeous linen only collections. Apart from soft and timeless clothes, every purchase helps a Nepalese girl out to get through education. â??With every purchase you give one Nepali girl a school uniform, school supplies and a scholarship to attend school for one year to empower herself through education.â?•





Faircloth & Supply



Jesse Kamm Linen Trench

Linen has certainly come a long way from being wrapped on mummies to everyday underwear to fine tablecloths and summer suits and now back to every day wear again.

CATEGORY

1. TEXTILES IN HISTORY & ART

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deb-fuller