

Scissors: A Love Story

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Scissors are a very old invention, dating back to at least 1500 BCE, like this pair from ancient Egypt. If I correctly recall my high school physics, they are what's known in classical mechanics as a compound machine, combining two simple machines (the lever and the inclined plane). Ingenious!

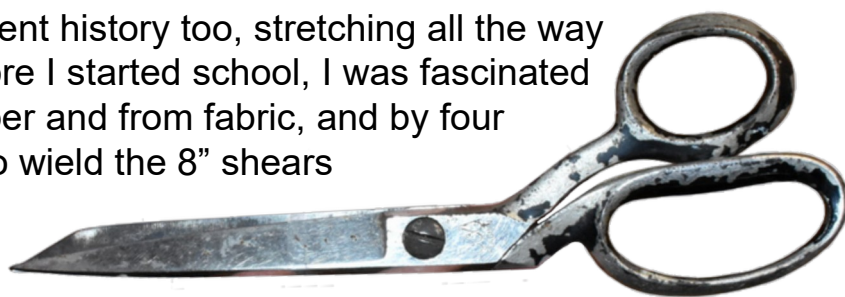
As one historian I read pointed out, it's hard to imagine a household over the past 3500 years that has not owned at least one of these indispensable tools. Most homes have several.



Funny story about that: some years ago, when visiting a friend, I asked to briefly borrow a pair of scissors. It turned out there were none in the house. No kitchen scissors, no nail scissors, no office scissors, no barber scissors. *Not a single pair of scissors of any kind!* I was aghast. I was flabbergasted. I was perplexed.

I still am. Far more than most folks, my own life was then, and is now, filled with these remarkable devices; I love scissors, and then, as now, I cannot imagine being without them. I keep pairs at hand in every room of the house.

My love of scissors is kind of ancient history too, stretching all the way back to early childhood. Well before I started school, I was fascinated with making things, both from paper and from fabric, and by four years old, I had already learned to wield the 8" shears that served as our household scissors.



(This is the actual pair, which I still own).



One of my most vivid memories of primary school is the box of kid-sized scissors that every teacher kept in her storage cupboard. We kids weren't allowed - I guess for safety reasons - to keep a pair of scissors at our desks. Instead, we used a pair from that box when needed for arts and crafts.



The scissors in that classroom box were round-tipped and small, scaled for awkward little hands that were unaccustomed to using tools of any kind. I didn't much like them.

Already used to working with full-sized shears, I found these school scissors pretty dull, and – unlike the ones I regularly used at home – they didn't cut cleanly or even all that reliably.

Even at the age of four, I felt in need of decent scissors. At home, I was always cutting something out of paper or felt or fabric, so scissors figured prominently in my daily activities. By then I had already learned how to sew by hand, to make doll clothes and little toys, and at any opportunity I made off with my mother's good shears and any available fabric scraps, along with needles and thread.



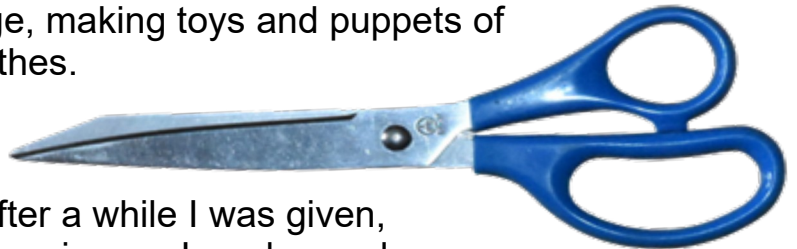
Although we were never discouraged from making things, this scissor business did cause some inconvenience for my mother, who as a result of my purloining them could never find her shears, or needle and thread, when she needed them.



Eventually, more or less in self-defence, she purchased a pair of gold-coloured shears, along with a couple packs of gold-eye needles, to be kept for her own exclusive use and off-limits to us kids. All the other shears and scissors in the house were fair game, much to my delight.

These were the real thing, not the dull little kiddy versions we used in school. I took enthusiastic advantage, making toys and puppets of all kinds, along with dolls and their clothes.

My passion for making things, and for the scissors that made it possible, continued throughout my childhood. After a while I was given, and I treasured, my own pair of sewing scissors. I made good use of them. As a young teen, I sewed on, mastering my mom's vintage Singer, and adding Christmas stockings to my repertoire of toys and puppets. I made all of these for younger siblings, for neighbours' kids, and for craft shops.



Eventually, in addition to designing and crafting toys, I was also making all my own clothes. I bought myself a really good pair of all-metal serrated shears, which I still own and use regularly.

(A similar pair today would cost somewhere around \$85).



Although for sewing I mostly prefer all-metal shears, I have also thrifted several colourful pairs of plastic-handled ones, including a selection of Fiskars distinctive orange pairs.



These lightweight plastic scissors – even the sturdier Fiskars ones -- are not as robust as my all-steel shears, but if kept sharp, they will cut light- to medium-weight fabric, and they come in handy when I need extras for a class or a craft session with friends.

Actually, some of these inexpensive scissors aren't half bad, like this favourite pair given to me back in the day by a friend who worked for Fabricland. When the scissors dulled in use, the store used to sell them off for \$1 apiece. My friend picked up three pairs, and they are really nice: balanced beautifully, feel good in the hand, and cut really well.



It's widely believed among sewists that you shouldn't cut anything but fabric with your good shears, since cutting the wrong materials is thought to dull or even damage them. So obviously, you need lots more scissors for other tasks.

For cutting thread, I prefer snips made just for that purpose. I keep a pair by every sewing machine.

(Many snips, like this black pair, are still made exactly the same way as the ones found in archaeological sites from 3500 years ago!)



And of course, in addition to sewing, I also need scissors for a host of other crafting and household tasks.

For cutting paper, gift wrap, and craft materials, I typically use inexpensive plastic-handled shears that can no longer be made quite sharp enough for cutting fabric. For crafting, I actually prefer shears over small scissors, even for fussy cutting – I suppose a throwback to those first household shears I used as a kid.



For other paper crafting, I was gifted with a whole set of fancy paper edgers a few years back; I keep them handy for card and tag making. Unlike my pinking and scalloping shears, these fun scissors are for use with paper and light-weight card stock only, and won't cut fabrics.

Not surprisingly, I also own a few novelty scissors: good shears with actual gold-plated handles; laser-guided ones to help me cut straight lines; tiny stork embroidery scissors; even some little folding scissors like the ones my grandmother used to carry.



And, though I'm not entirely sure why, my own box of all-metal kid scissors.



And how about these nifty pizza scissors, or this novelty fox-shaped pair?





I also keep a couple pairs of shop scissors for cutting thicker cardboard, light sheet metal, or leather.

And for cutting heavier metal items, such as tin cans, I reach for my specialized metal shears.



I don't use either of these for cutting wire, though.

Instead, I prefer a pair of side-cutters or end-cutters. Although technically I suppose these are pliers, their primary function is as snips, which makes them a kind of specialized scissors. As it happens, side- and end-cutters are also the best thing for snipping the shanks off buttons when needed.



(I keep a heavier pair on hand as well, for cutting thicker wire such as clothes hangers, which would break these small cutters.)

Scissors may be a very old technology, but even 3500 years on, most of us can't do without them. Throughout our homes, and especially in any art or craft studio or any tool kit, they are essential tools of creativity and survival. They have certainly been so to me, for the whole of my life.



It may sound goofy, but I can't overstate this: from their position at the centre of my creative life, scissors have helped forge my very sense of self and identity. I can't envision my life without them.

Makers gotta make. Sewists gotta sew. And scissors are at the very heart of it all.

No wonder I love them.