

By Hand, or By Machine?

It's a common misconception that accurate clothing for the 1860s must be stitched by entirely by hand. While this does hold true for the pre-1850 eras, such is not the case for the later 1850s and forward.

Were Sewing Machines Used?

Sewing machines were used in factory settings as early as the 1840s, helping to speed the process of constructing ready-to-wear clothing. Some dressmakers and particularly tailors saw the advent of the machine as a threat to their skilled trade; if just anyone could produce a decent seam at home, they would be less likely to use professional help!

Sewing machines for home use were marketed heavily in the 1850s, and by the 1860s, the likelihood of having a machine at home, or knowing someone who did, was growing by leaps and bounds. Period magazines and newspapers have frequent advertisements for sewing machine dealers, incentive programs, and other promotional campaigns to get sewing machines into the home.

Even dressmakers eventually succumbed, and added home-model sewing machines to their workrooms. Some processes were done entirely by machine, with the finish work and other important steps given to workroom girls for hand sewing. (Tailors held out longer... there are few steps in tailored clothing that can be done on a machine.)

What Stitches Can I Use?

The physical process of forming a lock-stitch on a period machine versus a modern lock-stitch machine is identical. (What you won't often find these days are the chain-stitch machines that were also used mid-century.) You can use your modern Singer (or any other favorite machine) for much of the construction of period styles. (There are many steps I do on the machine.)

Use a basic straight stitch... and that's about it. You may want to set your stitch length somewhat short, to about a 2mm length in many cases.

You'll need to avoid:

- **Zig Zag and Sergers:** the technology for these stitches was still a ways off (the first machine idea capable of zig-zagging was patented in 1872), and the processes can compromise the structural integrity and drape of your historic clothing.
- **Decorative machine stitches:** ditto the above—and, the stitches never look like handwork, or period machine work.
- **Auto-buttonholes:** these lack the purl edge of a worked buttonhole, and won't stand up to as much use as a worked hole will do.
- **"Lace":** again, the decorative "lace" or "eyelet" capabilities of a modern machine don't come close to either period machine work, or period hand work. Avoid the modern stuff.
- **Reverse stitching (back stitch)** is optional; it does create a bulky lump at the stop/start point, and is largely unnecessary if you get in the habit of quickly tying off your threads by hand. Any time you have a machined seam crossing another machined seam, you can skip the backstitch on the first.

Can I Use a Machine for Everything?

You'll still have handwork with period clothing, even using a machine for some steps.

You'll want to secure facings and bindings by hand. Machine stitching has too many stitches, making for a visible, stiff-looking finish.

Hems are less prone to ripping out if set by hand. The hand stitches will give way without tearing the fabric; a machine stitched hem will rip all along the stitching line, destroying the fabric.

Piping around an armhole can be easier by hand, because you can feel the piping very clearly.

Buttonholes and hooks/eyes must be done by hand for a good, strong finish.

Gauging and pleating (setting skirts)

must be done by hand for the technique to work. You cannot get the "hinge" effect when using a machine for any part of the process.

Gathering by hand allows you to condense fabric without the same bulk as machine gathering. In machine gathering, there is a row of thread on either side of the fabric; when gathered, the bulk is trapped and squashed between these two threads. With hand-gathering, the fabric folds are not trapped, because a single thread runs through the middle of each gather. You can condense great amounts of fabric into tidy little "pleats"—including a virtually zero-bulk 170" petticoat for a 28" waist!

You'll want to set trims like ruching and braiding by hand, for easy removal without damage to the fabric or trim. This handwork causes the trimming to sit lightly upon the surface of the garment—secure, but not necessarily permanent. You'll be able to re-trim or remove the trim for easy laundering.

If you need a seam finish, use a hand-overcast stitch. It's light and flexible, and does not puncture the fabric too much, so you won't shred the weave.

Basically, use hand work any time you need a light finish, or a strong finish!

What's More Accurate, Though?

There is nothing inherently virtuous in hand-stitching every particle of your clothing, nor will it make things automatically more accurate than something with appropriate machine stitching.

Accuracy comes in combining techniques, styles, and fabrics into a set of garments appropriate for your impression and scenario. Whether you use 100% handwork, or a combination of hand and machine work to reach that goal is something you have to decide.

Use a machine if you like; but don't be afraid of handwork, either! The combination of the two will produce great results.