

**LOVE TO SEW?
SO DO THEY.**



These needleworkers pride themselves in creating 'Art to Wear'

By Roberta T. Vowell
The Virginian-Pilot

CHESAPEAKE

THE SCARF entered the room in glowing slashes of raspberry and peacock blue, rows of beads clattering, tassels flying.

The women drew in a collective breath, a sighing "Whoa," as Anne Humphrey unfurled her creation.

"Here's my show and tell," Humphrey told the gathered needleworkers. "My husband really doesn't like it."

The women laughed.

"Did he say it was 'interesting.?' " asked Noreen Dobratz, the group's co-leader with Humphrey.

"No, not even that," said Humphrey, a 51-year-old Beach resident.

"That bad?" Dobratz said.

The women laughed again.

"It's beautiful," one called.

Humphrey slung the heavy scarf around her neck, beads clacking.

"It's probably a little long," she said, "and I may take it up."

Dobratz leaned forward, touched the scarf and let the strings fall between her fingers.

"No, no, no, no," she told her friend. "It's perfect."

Every month, about 25 members of the Creative Inspirations sewing club gather in a Chesapeake quilt shop. While the talk veers into sergers and seams and the problems of puckers, these seamstresses are not thrifty moms whipping up A-line skirts.

What you have here are artists working in fiber.

"We don't think of our things as home sewing," said Shirley Rejtelbach, who is a volunteer liaison among local sewing groups under the umbrella of the American Sewing Guild. "And it has nothing to do with saving money. It's all about creativity."

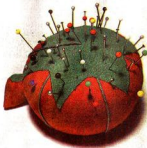
While craftsman's guilds have been around since the Middle Ages, the American Sewing Guild is actually a

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Katherine Wozniak, who comes from Elizabeth City for the sewing group meetings in Chesapeake



many members

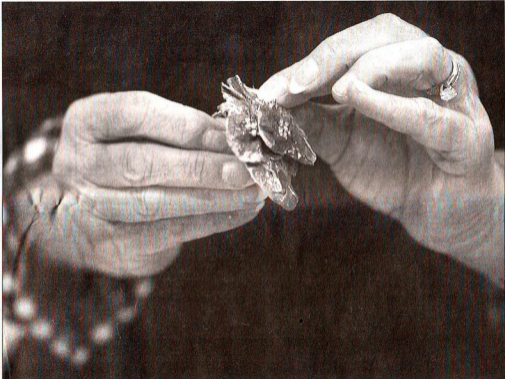
The Hampton Roads chapter of the American Sewing Guild has 300 members, divided into 12 groups.



"I'm making it for a friend," Evelyn Weinstein of Norfolk said of the quilted table runner she showed during a recent meeting of the Creative Inspirations sewing club.

BY BILL YERGAN/PHOTOS | THE VIRGINIAN PILOT

GROUP SHARES LOVE OF SEWING



Weinstein works on a club assignment during the meeting, at a shop in Chesapeake. The sewing club members were creating "embellished paper brooches."

How to find a local sewing guild group

The American Sewing Guild is on the Web at asg.org, or call (713) 729-3000.

Locally, there are 12 sewing groups, meeting in Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Hampton, Grafton and Williamsburg.

For more information, call Hampton Roads Chapter president Jane Hobart at (757) 481-8181.

modern creation, born in 1993 as an offshoot of a trade group for companies making sewing machines and notions and the like.

There are 20,000 members nationwide, and 130 chapters. The Hampton Roads chapter boasts 300 members, in 12 groups.

There are no "sewing circles" here. Group names tend toward a pun and a wink: the Stilettes in Portsmouth, Seamsters and Sew-cial Workers in Virginia Beach, Sewfisticates in Grafton and the Material Girls in Hampton.

The groups of women – there are no designing men in the local guild – work together on charity projects. They make children's pajamas for a Shriner's hospital in California, and last year they crafted 800 teddy bear outfits to dress stuffed critters for The Salvation Army.

But each of the groups has a slightly different focus – crafts, embroidery, quilting.

Creative Inspirations members dub their work "Art to Wear," and they pride themselves on the extra touch – a kimono-inspired blouse with contrasting silk patterns in the open sleeves, a shimmering jacket with designs hand-stamped and painted, a dragonfly pin pieced of gingham, its wings crocheted from gossamer thread.

"A lot of the technical help I need I find at this group," said Katherine Wassink, a retired college professor who comes from Elizabeth City for the meetings. "But there's also so much stimulation, so much creative energy here."

Their only lament is that more younger women haven't caught on; the guild members are mostly older than 50.

"We're trying to encourage younger women to sew," Dobratz said, "but they don't grow up with it the way we did."

Dobratz – she is 73, a former teacher, real estate agent and professional clown – remembers her first project, a corduroy hobble skirt for junior high.

"Two seams and a zipper," she cracked.

Humphrey remembers making a swimsuit for her doll in her native Australia at age 12.

"Blue with white spots. I ran it up on a treader machine."

Creative Inspirations meets once a month at A Different Touch, a spacious shop on Military Highway, right on the Virginia Beach/Chesapeake border.

The women file past bolts of fabrics and racks of buttons into a classroom filled with tables. They discuss upcoming group projects – “We need to coordinate so that we have boy bears, too,” Humphrey warned them at a recent gathering. “We can’t have all girls.”

The heart of the gathering is what they call show and tell, when the women stand in turn and display their latest works.

Dobratz, a Williamsburg resident, slid a white jean jacket from a dry cleaning bag. She turned it slowly in the air, light catching the golden fish, waving grasses, starfish and bubbles, a tropical aquarium embroidered on gleaming denim.

“It’s my summer project,” Dobratz said with a grin. “Ten thousand hours later ... ”

"Cute," one woman said.

"So cute," another replied.

"So Noreen," chimed in a third.

Reitelbach, a 68-year-old retired shipyard worker from Norfolk, modeled the new jacket she made to go with her sisters to London. The fabric was so expensive, "it took me weeks to get up the courage to cut." It's fully reversible, of course.

Then she pulled out a rectangular pouch, about 4-by-7 inches, stitched in a yellow print with contrasting trim.

"This is an aero-pack," she explained, hanging it around her neck. "Your passport goes here, and the ticket in back, and there's a sealed pocket for your ID – you know how you're always digging around for your ID? – and then if you need a little mad money, there's a little Velcro compartment."

The women were rapt – retirement has its perks, and travel is definitely one of them.

“I want that,” a woman called.

“I know you do,” Reitelbach said, “so I’ve brought instructions for it.”

Wassink brought in fiber art panels, including an impressionist tic-tac-toe image made from tiny strips of pastel fabric. “Part of a series I did called ‘The Games We Play.’ ” She also brought the story behind the work.

“About 15 years ago, I bought a skirt because I loved the colors. But when I got home and tried it on, it was a circle skirt, and I thought, ‘Now, why did I want to look like a blimp?’ I put it away and eventually made a blouse out of part of it. But there was still about three-quarters of a blimp

left. I kept looking at the scraps in the trash can, and I still loved the colors so much. I fished them out, and I made this."

The women applauded both the work and the story.

Show and tell rolled on: a frog-themed tote bag ("Oh, cute." "Really cute."), a fall-themed tote bag ("Handbags always fit.") and fabric notecards ("What a great idea.").

Roslyn Weinstein, 68, of Norfolk showed off a table runner, well over 6 feet long, quilted cream with red tulips.

"I'm making it for a friend."

"Wow," a woman commented. "You are one great friend."

Lila Hendricks pulled out a nearly complete blouse. Hendricks, 60, of Virginia Beach had crafted rectangular panels of a wavering watercolor-print blue, then connected the fabric panels with evenly spaced beads.

"Hopefully, you won't see too much of my underwear between the beads," Hendricks said. "Or I'll wear a tank top under it. How about a black bustier, girls? My husband would think I'd lost my mind."

Another meeting, a few laughs, a lot of advice from those who have faced the same sewing challenges.

"These women," Weinstein said, "really know what they're doing."

Roberta T. Vowell, (757) 446-2327,
roberta.vowell@pilotonline.com