

Sewing Machine Museum

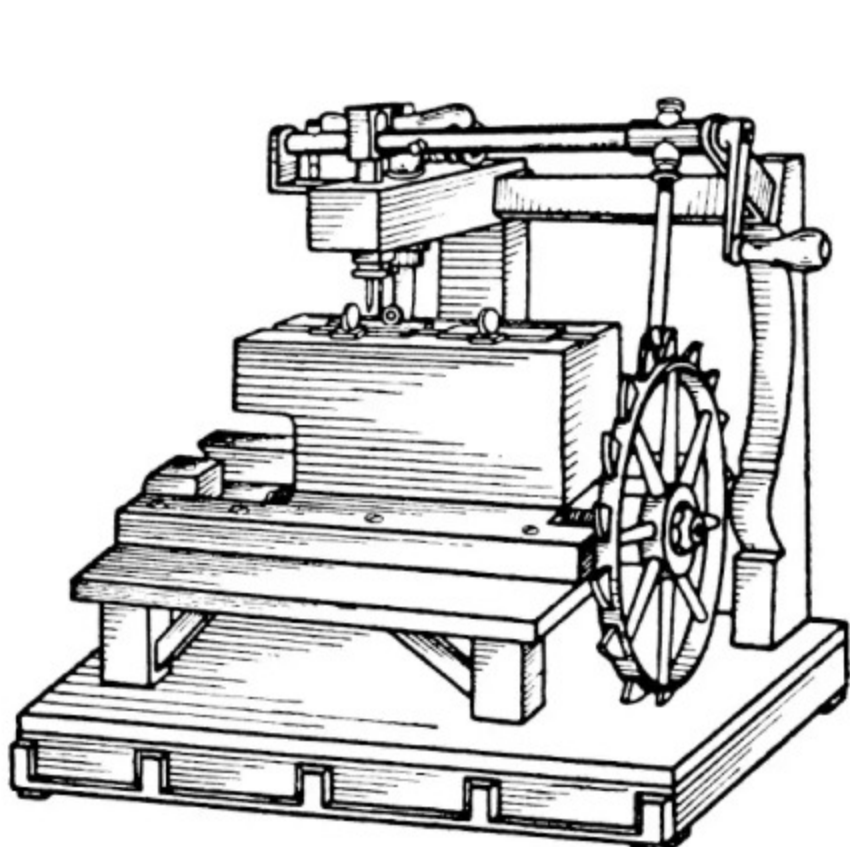
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It all started with the needle

The sewing needle could quite justifiably be claimed as one of man's first ingenious inventions. As early as circa 20,000 B.C., items such as split fish bones and thorns were used for 'sewing'. Needles were later made of pointed bones or horn with an eye, and then from bronze and copper.

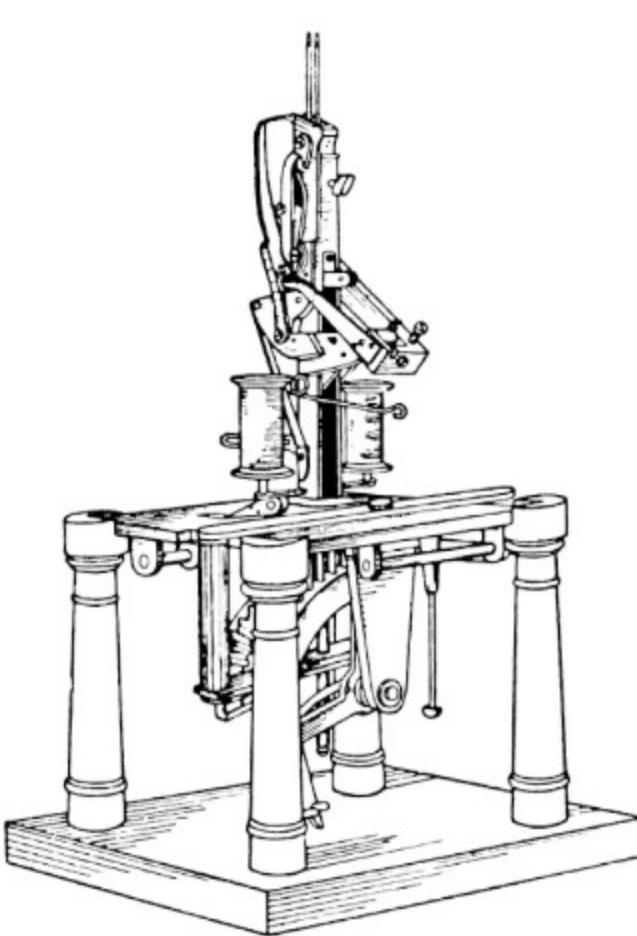
During the fourteenth century, needle makers in Nuremberg managed to produce a needle made from steel wire for the first time. The modest needle remained the tailor's essential tool for thousands of years, whereas helpful machines for spinning and weaving were effectively employed much earlier. It was only in the middle of the eighteenth century that attempts were made to put a sewing needle into motion with a machine.



The first sewing apparatus was invented by the Englishman Thomas Saint and was registered on 17 July 1790 under patent number 1764.

His machine was made entirely of wood. It operated with a stitching awl and hooked needle to sew a chainstitch. Saint's invention has earned itself a place in history, despite his concept being in need of refinement.

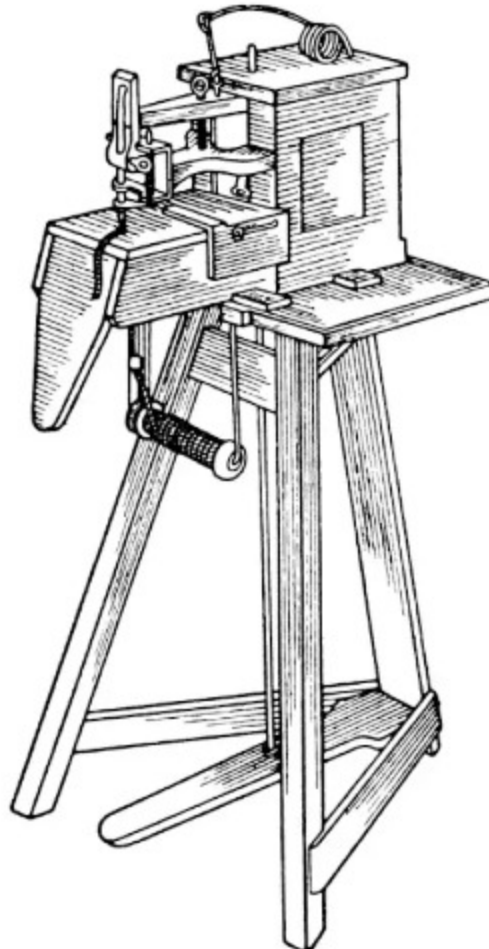
The original version of this first 'sewing' machine from 1790 no longer exists. Our museum exhibits a faithfully replicated version, which was built by our engineers Richard Nufer and Thomas Rückauf. The machine is even in working condition.



The Austrian Josef Madersperger also used an eye-pointed needle in his attempts, and was able to sew a stitch similar to a knotted double lockstitch with his machine from 1814.

The designs by Madersperger were groundbreaking and very advanced. Nevertheless, his invention brought him neither good fortune nor economic success. Madersperger died alone on 2 October 1850 at nearly 83 years of age in a poorhouse in St Marx near Vienna.

This machine is on display at our museum.



At roughly the same time as Madersperger, the French tailor Barthélemy Thimonnier from St. Etienne built a machine that could sew as many as 200 acceptable chainstitches a minute.

After B. Thimonnier had taken out a patent on his machine, he moved to Paris in 1831 and built approximately 80 sewing machines that were used in military workshops. French tailors feared this would lead to their unemployment and destroyed Thimonnier's workshop in blind rage.

He managed to salvage one machine and took it from town to town, demonstrating its function at fairs in return for a fee. Thimonnier died in poverty in 1857. This machine is also on display at our sewing machine museum.

The true inventor of the sewing machine



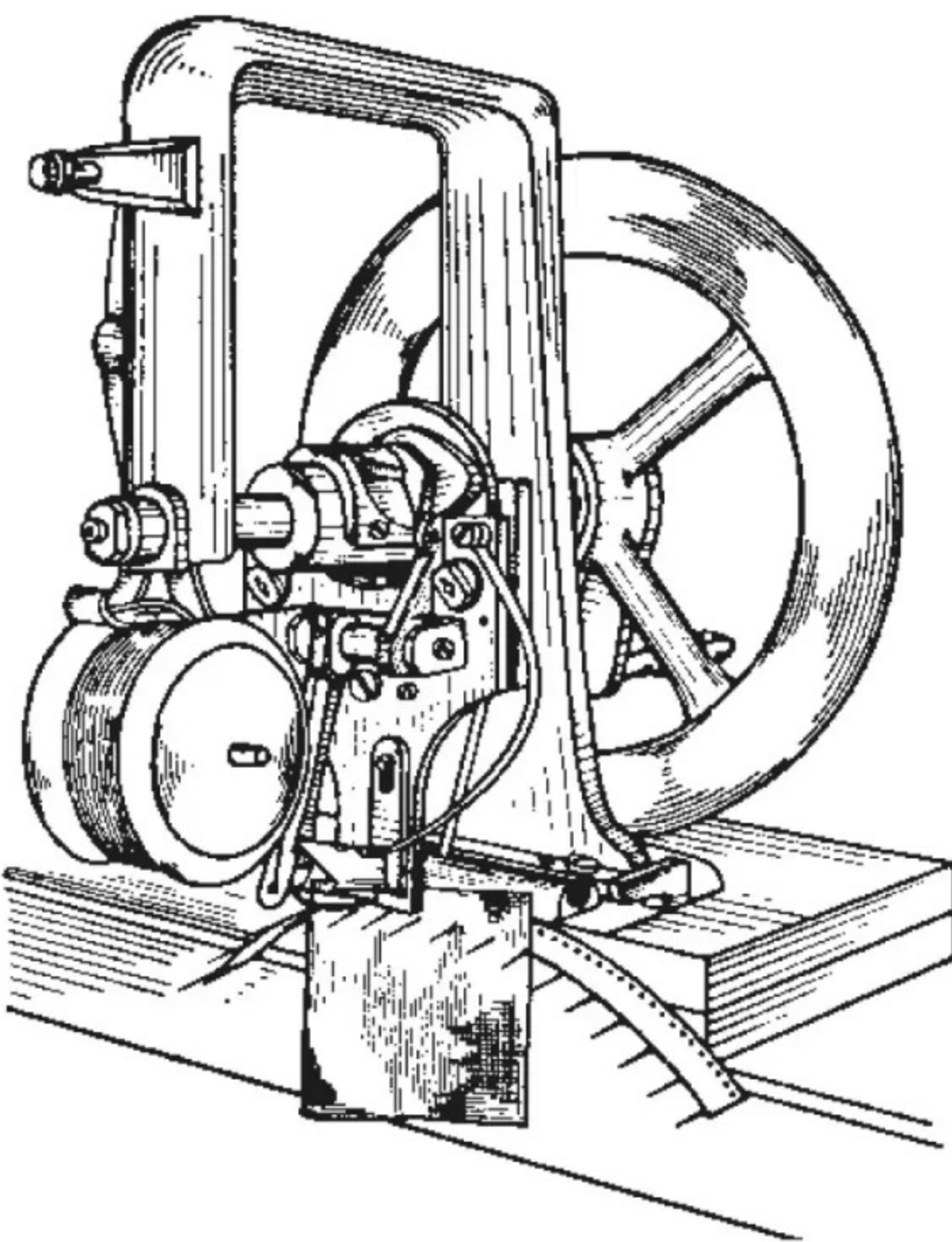
Of all of the inventors who grappled with the problem of constructing a working sewing machine, American Elias Howe deserves to be recognised as the actual creator of the sewing machine.

He was born in 1819 in Spencer, Massachusetts. As a young man, he left his family home to learn the trade of machine construction. In Boston, he worked at a factory that produced spinning and weaving machinery. It was his knowledge of the weaving process, namely the combination of weft and warp yarns, that put him on the right track. The machine he developed had a curved, eye-pointed needle that was guided through the fabric with a swinging arm and created a lockstitch using a shuttle.

He was awarded a patent on 10 September 1846. Despite all efforts to market his machine, Howe found there was hardly any interest in America. As a result, he sent his brother Amasa to England to sell his invention there. After running out of money, he was forced to sell his patent.

Quite a lot had changed in America in the meantime. Howe's machine had become popular and was being copied. After Elias Howe found a financial backer, he repurchased his English patent and sued his competitors. After several lawsuits, he was awarded the property rights to his invention in 1854. All 'patent thieves' had to pay royalties and Elias Howe became a wealthy man. Before his death in 1867, he did not extend his patent as he was already extremely wealthy.

A faithful reproduction of this first functioning double lockstitch sewing machine is on display in our exhibition.



Did you know that Adam Opel, founder of the Opel Plants, never saw a car from his own production?

He died on 8 September 1895. The company was originally founded to produce sewing machines and bicycles. It was not until three years after his passing that Adam Opel's sons began producing automobiles.

In 1857, the young Adam Opel began travelling. After his time in Belgium, he arrived in France, where he saw a sewing machine for the first time. He returned to Rüsselsheim in 1862. With painstaking attention to detail, the first Opel sewing machine evolved into a functioning device by the spring of 1863. An Opel No. 1 can be admired at our museum.

Tailors' apprentices in the area soon heard about how reliable the Opel sewing machine was said to be. When Adam Opel took the ferry to bring his second machine to the other side of the Main River from Rüsselsheim to Flörsheim, enraged tailors' apprentices, who feared losing their jobs, greeted him by pelting him with stones. Opel was forced to return home and was only able to deliver his machine under cover of darkness on a later occasion.



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