Eco-fashion is a term that refers to clothing and fashion design that “takes into account the environment, the health of consumers, and the working conditions of people in the apparel industry,” according to the Sustainable Technology Education Project. Traditionally, there hasn’t been a lot of overlap between high fashion and environmentalism, and many people might wonder why they should worry about something as superficial as fashion. This is where the distinction between the fashion industry and the apparel industry becomes important – with only a very small number of exceptions, everyone wears clothing.

There are several reasons why clothing should be of more concern to those who are worried about the environment. Cotton, probably the most important fiber in the apparel and textile industry, is also one of the most ecologically harmful crops. While it occupies less than three percent of the world’s farmland, it accounts for nearly a quarter of the world’s agricultural pesticide and herbicide usage. There are many other fibers, both natural and synthetic, that can be grown or made in a much more sustainable manner than cotton, but for a variety of reasons, these haven’t yet posed any serious threat to cotton’s popularity.

Of a far more practical concern to most consumers is the disposable nature of clothing. In modern America, most people do not keep their clothing (except for a few specific types of clothing like socks) until it wears out. Instead, we buy new clothing as styles change, and stop wearing what we had before, even if it is still fully functional.
The average American discards about seventy pounds of clothing a year, and while a lot of this may initially go to secondhand shops such as Goodwill or the Salvation Army, secondhand stores receive far more clothing than they sell, and it is estimated that around 75% of discarded clothing ends up in landfills.

The idea of eco-fashion does not ask that people never update their wardrobes or throw anything out. Rather, it simply encourages people to update their wardrobes in a more environmentally friendly manner. This can include, but is not limited to, repairing or altering clothing rather than discarding it, shopping at secondhand stores, buying new clothing from sustainable and fair-trade sources, and creating new clothing from sustainable or recycled materials.

It should be obvious that none of the ideas on that list are new. Repairing clothing when it was damaged used to be the norm, and in the past, it was a common practice to raise or lower hemlines on skirts as styles changed, rather than buying a completely new garment. Although creating clothing from recycled materials sounds like it could easily go along with new ideas of green sewing, that, too, is nothing new. Shown here is a picture of a 1940s wedding dress, made from a silk parachute.

The main difference between eco-fashion today and what were simply...
common practices in the past is the motivation behind it. The maker of this wedding
dress, for example, used parachute silk because it was difficult, at that time, to buy large
amounts of good fabric. Today, people are more likely to recycle materials in this
manner out of concern for the environment, or out of a desire to have a unique piece of
clothing, than for economic reasons. Take, for
example, the relatively recent trend of altered t-shirts. Although t-shirts are very inexpensive and
would be simple to replace, books like the one
shown on the right are becoming very popular.
Rather than buying new clothing, people are
using techniques like the ones described in this
book to alter clothing that they already have and
make it more unique. Many events and organizations provide free t-shirts as a form of
promotion, but these t-shirts are often worn only once, and altering t-shirts helps them
to get more use, rather than be thrown out.

The side of eco-fashion that focuses on individuals creating their own clothing,
rather than buying from secondhand or fair-trade sources, is commonly called
sustainable sewing. Sustainable sewing “seeks to reuse and conserve existing materials,
use earth- and people-friendly fabrics, and develop self-reliance leading away from
predominant consumer preferences for disposable items,” according to SewGreen, a
local center which promotes sustainable sewing practices.

Sewing one’s own clothing used to be a very common practice, but with more
women working outside the home, and a sharp decline in home economics classes in the
1980s, home sewing’s popularity greatly decreased. But in recent years, it has been
experiencing a comeback. Annual sales of the leading brand of sewing machine have
doubled in the last ten years, and the Home Sewing Association estimated in 2007 that
there were 35 million hobby sewers in the US (meaning that these people didn’t make
money from their sewing), up from 30 million in 2000. While everyone who takes up
sewing has a different reason for doing so, a desire for sustainability and self-sufficiency
is definitely a major factor. Margo Martin, of the American Sewing Guild, attributes at
least some of home sewing’s increased popularity to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, noting
that other home-based hobbies, such as cooking, grew in popularity after 2001 as well.
While the economy has been a major reason for home sewing in the past, it is unlikely to
have been a major contributor to the recent trend, despite the recent economic
downturn. Today, most clothing items can actually be purchased new for less money
than it costs to make them, once the costs of fabric, patterns, and materials such as
buttons and zippers are taken into account. Repairing and altering clothing can save
money, but sewing new clothing usually cannot.
Ithaca’s SewGreen program was developed after an increase in the local demand for sewing classes. Wendy Skinner, the founder of SewGreen, had organized fashion redesign contests in 2006 and 2007, and noticed an increased demand for sewing classes in response to these contests and shows. The image at the bottom of the previous page shows the winner of Ithaca’s 2006 fashion re-design contest, made by Alice Fogel. The dress she is modeling is made from discarded men’s cotton shirts, which were purchased for $1.50 a pound.

Contests like this one are not unique to Ithaca – Portland, OR’s “Junk to Funk Trashion Contest” displays trash that has been recycled into far-out wearable art pieces. As can be seen from the image on the left, the pieces seen on the runway in Portland are decidedly impractical for day-to-day wear, or even for evening wear, but then again, so are most pieces seen in haute couture shows in Paris.

Contests like the ones described above are important to the sustainable sewing movement, as they encourage creativity and the sharing of ideas, and, as evidenced by the Ithaca competitions leading to the creation of SewGreen, lead to an increase in sewing. Many people would be content with purchased clothing if they didn’t get a chance to see what others could come up with, making clothing for themselves.

While SewGreen started out as a way to provide accessible sewing classes to those in the Ithaca area, it grew into more than just that. SewGreen describes itself as an organization which “promotes sustainability through the creative reuse of fabric, fiber, and fashion, as well as responsible consumerism and a rediscovery of self-reliant skills.” As well as providing a wide variety of sewing classes geared towards both children and
adults, SewGreen continues to host annual competitions, such as a recycled costume contest this past Halloween, provides free workshops on sewing machine repair, and has recently opened a “Rescued for Reuse” storefront in the DeWitt Mall downtown.

The new storefront will sell donated sewing supplies like fabric, yarn, and sewing machines, with proceeds from the sales going towards SewGreen’s education programs. Previously, SewGreen has held annual sewing re-use sales, which had proven quite successful.

Unlike previously worn clothing, which is easy to find at secondhand clothing stores, secondhand sewing supplies have always been harder to come by. Based on my own experience and on my acquaintance with many other people who sew, materials left over from a project will be kept until a huge stash of fabric is built up – people who sew recognize the value of the material and are reluctant to throw it out – but when space becomes an issue, fabrics that have sat unused for years are thrown out, rather than donated. Although Goodwill occasionally stocks fabrics, they only do so in quantities that most seamstresses would consider too large to throw out in the first place.

SewGreen’s “Rescued for Reuse” store has not been open for long enough to determine its success – it opened less than two weeks prior to the writing of this paper, on November 21, 2009 – but I predict that it will be successful at filling a need within the local community.
Works Cited


Image Sources

Parachute Wedding Dress:
farm4.static.flickr.com/3168/2630547714_7bodabee06.jpg

“Generation T:” www.newton.lib.ia.us/images/prog/2008prog/shirt/image

Junk to Funk Contest Entry:

All other images taken from the SewGreen webpage, cited above.