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## **True Fabricated Stories**

**by Professor Janet Albert**

Influenced by the great antiquities of textile crafts and the transient immediacy of fashion, the terminology of textiles and clothing provides glimpses of the history of many different peoples and places. The etymology of these terms and the true or invented stories and traditions associated with them are often ignored in class teaching, but they can add interest and promote understanding.

As a teacher of fashion merchandising and textiles, I have always been fascinated by the history behind fashion and textile terminology. Etymology is the study of linguistic change, as applied to individual words, or an account of the history of a particular word. Etymology, of course, is not my specialty, but to keep my classes enlightened and lively, where

possible I like to include some of the more interesting derivations and stories relating to fashion and textile terms.

When we study the topic of spinning in my textile class, the etymology of *spinster* always seems to bring out many smiles. Centuries ago, spinster included all unmarried women, regardless of age. Each young woman was taught to spin and weave and was not considered “marriage material” until she had woven an entire set of linens. Customs changed and, gradually, spinster came to mean only those women who never married. Unlike married women, who were busy with household chores, these women were preoccupied with spinning as their primary responsibility and, hence, continued to be known as spinsters. Even in the twentieth century, the meaning of spinster continues to change. Last year, when I was sorting out some personal items of my recently deceased mother-in-law, I unearthed her diary of her 1931 trip to Europe. Her first entry stated that she was celebrating her 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday and was most definitely now considered to be a “confirmed spinster” – in the 1990’s, one surely would not be considered a spinster at that tender age.

Words often take us through history and reflect human customs. *Silk*, for instance, takes us back to ancient China, where the secret of turning a certain caterpillar’s cocoon into soft, lustrous cloth was first discovered.

According to Chinese history, silk was discovered accidentally around 2700 BC by Princess His-Ling-Shi. As the story goes, the princess was strolling in her garden when she picked up a white cocoon from a mulberry tree. This cocoon had been smothered by caterpillars. While inspecting it, the princess accidentally dropped the cocoon in her tea. She then found that boiling water enabled her to pull out a long fiber. Hence, a new textile industry was begun.

The story behind the earthy fabric *tweed* concerns a careless London sales clerk who misread the label on cloth from Scotland. A shipment of twill fabrics supposedly was labeled *tweel*, a Scottish form of twill. The clerk read it as tweed. The new name caught on and by the mid-eighteenth century, it was accepted by the public.

The story of the origins of the word *denim* always seems to generate interest in my classroom. Denim, the coarse cotton fabric, is named after the town of Nimes, in southern France, where the cloth was originally woven. When manufacturers first were introduced to the fabric, they learned that it came from ('de') Nimes: thereafter, it became generally referred to as denim.

Many other textile terms are named for the geographic areas where they were first produced, such as *damask* (Damascus, Syria), *chambray* (Cambrai, France), *muslin* (Mosul, Iraq) and *calico* (Calcutta, India).

Other fabrics are named after certain types of animal, such as *cashmere* for the Kashmir goat, and *chenille* for the Old French word “chenille”, meaning a hairy caterpillar.

Some textile words relate to famous people. A sportsman might be unhappy to know that the *tattersall* design he wears receives its name from a horse blanket. The design is named after Richard Tattersall, who ran a horse market in eighteenth-century London. He designed the chequered blanket to distinguish his horses from others.

Even terms now used in highly technical sense can have quite romantic origins. Warp knitted *raschel* fabrics, for example, takes its name from the stoles worn by the French classical actress Rachel Felix, who was the star of the Paris theatre in the 1850’s.

There is also drama and tragedy attached to many words. *Cardigan* recalls the Crimean War and the shocking story of how a feud between two aristocratic brothers-in-law led to the tragedy of the Charge of the Light Brigade. The cardigan is named after the Earl of Cardigan, said to have worn such a jacket during the charge. *Raglan* sleeves, another design of

clothing, also came out of the Crimean War. The raglan sleeve, a loose sleeve extending to the collar, is named after Lord Raglan, the British Commander in Chief, who wore an outer coat with this style. The same war also gave us the *balaclava*, a knitted helmet from the location of one of the key battles in 1864.

As with so many stories, however, the traditional version does not always accord with the strict truth. In his well researched *History of Hand Knitting*, Richard Rutt notes that the term balaclava did not come into use until 17 years after the battle, yet the design was patented in 1848 – six years before the start of the war. Similarly, there is no record of the word cardigan, used in its present sense, until 1868 – the year of the Earl's death in retirement in England.

The famous *chesterfield* coat, a velvet collared top coat, is named after the Earl of Chesterfield, who also gave his name to a couch. The *derby* hat was named after the famous race held annually at Epsom Downs. This race and the Kentucky Derby are, in turn, named after the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby.

There's not much question that *jeans* derive their name from a medieval English pronunciation of Genoa, where the fabric was first made. Many times jeans are called *Levi's*. Levi Strauss was a San Francisco clothing merchant who lived during the gold rush era. He designed rivets

for the corners of pockets, so miners would not tear them when they were loaded with samples.

The story of the *cravat* goes back to the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) a power struggle that tore much of Central Europe apart. Croatian soldiers, well known for their strength and sparkle, were hired by the French as mercenaries. They wore long linen scarves around their necks tied in a bow with long ends. The scarf was named a *cravat*, from the word for Croat, and it became a fashion item throughout Europe, since it was far more comfortable to wear than the starched ruff of the Elizabethan age.

Continuing on costume history, one finds the word *coat* was derived from the Latin word “*cotta*”, a rough, heavy outer garment. The *cotta* seems to have been a cloak with sleeves.

In the Middle Ages, knights began to wear a long sleeveless coat over their armor, probably to protect them from the sun’s rays. Some called this garment a *surcoat*, while others called it a *coat of arms*, because it went over the knight’s armor. As time passed, the knights painted heraldic symbols on their shields to distinguish themselves in battle and soon they had these same symbols embroidered on the coat of arms. Eventually, coat of arms came to refer only to the heraldic symbols.

A *turncoat* is a person who changes sides in a war, or a traitor. This term goes back to the sixteenth century, when soldiers were given distinctive colored coats to wear. Supposedly, some soldiers when seeing defeat, turned their coats inside out to make their escape as civilians.

These are only a few of the many fascinating stories and derivations behind clothing terms and expressions. Fashion and textile etymology is rich in stories relating to many different peoples, languages, places and things. It entertains and stimulates discussion in class. Certainly, most Fashion Merchandising students would not ordinarily find this information in academic merchandising textbooks.

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