



Brief history of the pincushion

Step back in time and learn why tomatoes are best placed on the hearth, soldiers sewed the prettiest pincushions and why a pin pillow could increase the pain of childbirth!

Whether you're a sewing newbie or an established seamstress, you will undoubtedly have come across the classic tomato-shaped pincushion. It seems quite surreal that something so essential for storing sharp pins and needles would be modelled after a foodstuff! But it turns out there was a very good reason for the choice that dates back to Victorian times.

BEST OF LUCK

In a lady's parlour room a collection of pincushions would be displayed with pride, showcasing all different sizes and shapes, but the tomato would be the crown jewel of her collection. According to tradition, placing a tomato on the mantel of a new home ensured prosperity by warding off evil spirits. They made excellent housewarming gifts. When tomatoes were out of season, people weren't totally out

of luck: they simply improvised with red material, sawdust, and a little bit of ingenuity. The manmade talismans soon transitioned from good omen to useful tool, with the sawdust stuffing helping keep the pins bright.

While the tomato contains stuffing perfect for keeping the pins safe and upright when they are not being used the little

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strawberry contains emery powder designed to help polish your pins when stabbed. Emery (or corundite) is a dark granular rock used to make abrasive powder; you might know it better from emery boards used to file your fingernails. Over time your pins will tarnish and build up residue that can snag your fabric but, by twisting your pin as you pass it through the strawberry, the emery powder will work its magic! It's a commonly mistaken

assumption that the emery powder sharpens your pins but in reality it's only cleaning your pins and helping them last longer. You cannot salvage a truly blunt pin or needle as this means the tip has become damaged.

ESSENTIAL STORAGE

In the 1300s needles were carried around in leather pouches, before being



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upgraded to delicate containers made of bone, wood or tin. Pins and needles were extremely valuable (albeit crudely made) and men often had to set aside 'pin money' for their wives' sewing supplies. At the beginning of the 1700s, pin pillows came into use. Shaped into a ball and hung from a ribbon tied to the waist the cushions were eventually mounted into a stand.

Clamp pincushions were decorative and functional – they were screwed onto a table edge and would help hold fabric in place. Some ornate versions were shaped like birds with the beak clamping the fabric while a velvet pincushion sat on the bird's back. A decorative example, with animal paws forming the grips of the clamp, was probably intended for domestic use in a female setting, such as

“Many pincushions were made by British soldiers during WWI and sent home to wives, sweethearts and mothers”

a boudoir or sitting room, rather than a commercial workroom. It may have been a love token since preparations for marriage included substantial amounts of sewing, for a trousseau and household linen. As they were often given as presents, clamps were made of attractive material, such as

ivory, metal or Tunbridge ware, which were then carved, painted or inlaid with metal foil. Sometimes small engravings were printed or glued onto the surface. Wooden clamps, turned on a lathe, were fitted with pincushions, containers for needles, bobbin winders, or reels for holding thread.

THE SWEETEST GIFTS

Layette pincushions were rectangular and gifted to new mothers after the baby had arrived, as there was superstition they could increase the pain of childbirth for the mother. The saying went 'For every pin a pain' or 'More pins, more pain'. The V&A collection contains a variety of styles including some from 1830-50 made of ivory twill, stuck with pins in a design of a rose, thistle, shamrocks, acorns, and a verse which begins "May HE whose cradle was a manger..."

A biscornu is a small, eight-sided pincushion made from Aida cloth and decorated with embroidery or cross-stitch. A button is typically secured in the centre and pulled taut to create a dimple. The name is derived from the French adjective, biscornu, meaning skewed, quirky or irregular.

You might imagine women during WWI sewing gifts for soldiers to keep their spirits up, but instead many pincushions were made by British soldiers during WWI and sent home to



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wives, sweethearts and mothers. The Imperial War Museum houses a collection of 'sweetheart' pincushions that were possibly commercially produced as kits for convalescing and disabled soldiers as well as civilians. One heart-shaped pincushion was decorated with glass beads, sequins, and two embroidered panels with a 'Think of Me' inscription that read 'Think of me, when the golden sun is sinking, and your mind from care set free, when of others you are thinking, will you sometimes think of me'. It also included paper découpage of the Essex Regiment crest and was decorated with bobble ribbon around edge. It's reported that the idea was thought up by Queen Victoria who believed textile arts would provide a great distraction to soldiers stationed abroad, and comfort to those brought home by injury.