



# HOMEMADE HAPPINESS

A passion for fashion on a tight budget led Kelly Doust to a surprisingly charming hobby, which fulfilled her in more ways than one.

I have a habit – a hobby, if you will – which up until a few years ago was seen as deeply uncool. I craft. That's right, I make things. Not arty, edgy things that you might see in a museum of contemporary art or designer furniture store. Just homely, pretty items for everyday use, like shopping bags, rag rugs or hot-water bottle covers. And I'm not even in my 70s. I'm in my early 30s and, what's

more, I've been doing it for years. But it's only recently that I've begun to admit to it with a degree of pride, because, you see, craft is suddenly hip again.

As a child and then a teenager, I was always enthusiastic to try new things, but was quite an impatient and restless soul. I dabbled in so many pastimes; from playing guitar and scuba diving to ballet and

singing – even planting trees with a weekend “green group” – and (to the mirth of everyone who knows me) modelling. Few of the things I dabbled in then stuck, but sewing's one of them and it's largely borne out of my lifelong love of, and interest in, fashion.

Given the lucky country and generation I grew up in, it's no surprise that I'm a terrible consumerist; always wanting new things. But I didn't have the money for designer clothes and the modelling career never took off, so I didn't get all the perks that inspired me to become one in the first place. That's when I started customising fashion or, more to the point, the unloved items that ended up in my local charity store, to resemble more closely the highly desirable items I saw in magazines.

Deftness with a needle and thread certainly came in handy when I wanted to shorten the hemline of a heavily embellished 1960s caftan, or decorate the lapels of an old man's tweed coat; to be worn with a black shift, chunky Doc Martens and heavily teased fringe to a much-anticipated underage disco. It also helped when my fellow Catholic school girls and I discovered quite how much extra attention one could gain from the pupils at the neighbouring boys' college when we hitched up our positively Victorian skirts by a few centimetres. Sometimes we went too far and the nuns noticed the staples or masking tape we'd used as a temporary measure, earning us a stern talking-to and afternoon's detention. The ability to mask our treachery with small, professional stitches – swearing blind that we'd grown overnight – proved a godsend (although I'm not sure that He would agree).

For many years hence the sole crafting I indulged in involved dyeing pale lace underwear I'd accidentally turned a grubby shade of grey in the wash to a fabulous shocking pink or electric blue, and chopping bits off voluminous 80s cast-offs to better suit the times and show off my slim adolescent figure. I turned floor-length 70s silk evening gowns into Twiggy-esque numbers, and repaired painstakingly hand-beaded, holey cardigans that had had one too many run-ins with cashmere-loving moths into good-as-new beauties. I covered marks on pre-loved items with clever patches of floral fabric, and lovely, peacock-hued saris that still bore the faint smell of musk-scented incense from their days on the subcontinent were transformed into curtains in various student digs. I hid my sewing skills in my mid-teens, largely because I didn't

want to admit that so many of the clothes I wore were not brand new.

Later, the trend for vintage became popular and I wore my odd, salvaged crinolines and mended taffeta skirts with pride, paired with tiny boleros after the gridiron shoulder pads had been snipped out, and numerous silk flowers pinned liberally throughout my hair. But I kept customising, as most of the items I wore had usually been discarded for a reason and, truth be told, I enjoyed it.

Later still, my career as a publicist took me all over the world, but any disposable income I had tended to be spent on holidays I tacked on to the end of business trips in such far-flung destinations as Shanghai, São Paulo, Bangkok or Munich, as well as dining and dancing into the wee hours like the committed hedonist I was. Throughout my 20s, I continued to modify opportunity-shop discards and rummage gleefully in the charity stores and flea markets I sought out from Tasmania to the north of Scotland, and from New York's East Village to Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, idly daydreaming of all the heady sights my clothes had seen.

When, at the age of 27, I got married and settled down somewhat, I channelled my passion for travel into becoming a number one, bona-fide Suzy Homemaker. Previously an exuberant (but largely untalented) cook, I bought a copy of Nigella Lawson's *How to be a Domestic Goddess*, threw elaborate, rowdy dinner parties for friends and whiled away weekends reading interiors magazines or browsing through homewares stores like any other smug married. I kept tabs on affordable art, and purchased a statement piece of furniture or two. Then in 2007 my husband and I bought our first home together, a Victorian-era cottage in Sydney's inner suburbs, and the acquisition of new things drew firmly to a halt as our mortgage gobbled up all our disposable income.

It sounds incredibly dull, but for one whole year we documented every dollar we spent. We did the maths and realised we frittered away thousands each year on gifts. Think about it: a wedding here, a baby shower there and birthdays aplenty ... it all adds up. Especially when you leave it to the last minute, panic, and run into the nearest store on your way to the party. We didn't want to stop buying presents for friends so thought about how to be more canny with our cash. We decided that making rather than buying some gifts was one solution (along with switching to tea; those takeaway lattes add up to well over a thousand over the course of a year ... who knew?).

And that's when I really started crafting, and not just pre-loved clothes. I began making cute, whimsical things for friends

and their children. Tentative at first, I soon threw myself into it when my one-offs elicited genuinely enthusiastic responses. I embellished tiny vests and made soft toys for new babies from old jumpers, or brightly patterned beach bags and floaty cotton tops, homewares and accessories of all sorts, and hand-decorated cards and wrapping paper. I sourced vintage and remnant items I knew my friends would appreciate, or fashioned them into something I knew they didn't have or could put to use, always making sure I had them in mind while I stitched or painted. And I realised that it often took less time to craft something than buying it would have. With a linen cupboard full of deliciously soft old jumpers that had seen better days or fabric and ribbons that caught my eye, as well as a minimal sewing kit, I had all the ingredients I needed for constructing gifts at any time – even half an hour before I was due somewhere.

In addition to that, our old/new home inspired me. We simply could not afford all the designer items we wanted, so I turned my hand to making them myself and created all sorts of things: from paintings and collages on canvas to fill the walls, to cosy lamb's wool throws and cushions made with gorgeous Fornasetti fabric for the sofa. I taught myself to renovate sombre, tired furniture with milk paint and beeswax, and covered chairs and lampshades with luscious remnants. I discovered that necessity is indeed the mother of invention, and felt intensely happy surrounding my family with things we had made or reconditioned ourselves. I bought a stack of craft and decoration books for inspiration but discovered I have a kind of dyslexia when it comes to reading patterns. So I tried making things in my own trial-and-error way, sans instructions. They still turned out beautifully ... most of the time.

When I visited the new wave of fabric and craft supplies stores popping up all over town, I met other young women – from filmmakers, artists and mothers to bankers and company directors – who had, like me, discovered just how satisfying it is to make things by hand, particularly in a time when so many of our purchases are put together in a factory. Forging new friendships over morning or afternoon tea, I found these women had largely been driven to crafting by the beautiful range of materials on offer, as well as tighter budgets as the financial

crisis hit. While a lampshade can cost hundreds in a store, making one yourself (even with the most expensive, fashionable fabrics) still only costs a fraction of the price. And making it yourself means it is exactly what you want, rather than the compromise so many items we buy often are.

I can trace my own first non-clothing-related sewing adventure back to buying a length of divine Florence Broadhurst running-horses fabric in a sale and turning it into a shopper bag. My clever friend Rebecca – a writer, social researcher and company director – whiles away the evening hours with her husband, small daughter, a few balls of baby alpaca wool and her knitting needles for company. A producer friend – a gorgeous, girl-about-

town type – gets a kick out of making insanely difficult knits (the likes of which you might see on a model sashaying down the runway for Comme des Garçons or Yohji Yamamoto) and made the most divine scarf for her boyfriend's birthday gift from the softest merino wool she'd ever come across.

Since I've started crafting, I've been amazed by the beautiful, inspiring things I've been introduced to on a daily basis. Crafters are prodigious bloggers, and are more than happy to share new finds. My favourites include Yarnstorm ([www.yarnstorm.blogs.com](http://www.yarnstorm.blogs.com)), Posie Gets Cozy ([www.rosylittlethings.typepad.com](http://www.rosylittlethings.typepad.com)) and Six and a Half Stitches ([www.sixandahalfstitches.typepad.com](http://www.sixandahalfstitches.typepad.com)); or heavily craft-influenced design web sites such as Design Sponge ([www.designspongeonline.com](http://www.designspongeonline.com)) and decor8 ([www.decor8blog.com](http://www.decor8blog.com)). These sites feature items that are no more redolent of your grandma's creations than the chic items you'll find in an upmarket boutique. I'm also grateful for the new people craft has brought into my life. I've become so passionate, I wrote a book about it, *The Crafty Minx* (Murdoch Books), and I also maintain a craft blog ([thecraftyminx.com.au](http://thecraftyminx.com.au)) that keeps me constantly interacting with other crafters.

When time is a commodity we value so highly, spending it on someone you care about resonates far more than a store voucher. But most of all, I've found it intensely satisfying to indulge in the sense of calm that stitching up a storm can bring, and in surrounding myself and my family with these special items. For me, at least, it's where happiness lies. ■

I modified op-shop discards, rummaging in charity stores and flea markets from Tasmania to the north of Scotland, New York's East Village to Istanbul