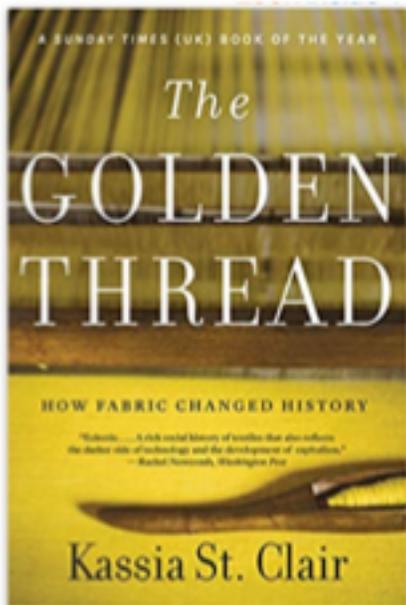


# Book review:

## *The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History*

by Kassia St. Clair

*Review by Mary Ferm*



There's a limit to how much screen time I can take, so I have been alternating that with reading. I love books about how my (mainly ordinary) ancestors would have lived. In my family, one Methodist preacher in early Virginia apprenticed as a tailor, a single mom in early Pennsylvania was bequeathed a loom, and the Kilpatricks of Newmilns, Scotland were weavers and lace makers. As far as I know, all my recent ancestors wore

clothes. Interesting and well-written, “The Golden Thread”, did not disappoint.

St. Clair divides the book into chapters on archaeology of ancient fabric, shrouds of Egyptian mummies, silk in ancient China, the silk roads, Vikings' woolen sails, wool in medieval England, lace and luxury, cotton in America, clothing for extreme cold, the history of rayon, space suits, sports fabrics, attempts to use spider silk. For each type of fabric the author explains how it was created and used by people, its meaning in society, and how the economics of manufacture and trade affected history. In accessible language, she explores the science behind how fabric is initially created and then later re-discovered and analyzed. A bonus for me was that the discussion often highlighted the roles of women. Even the chapters not immediately relevant to my personal genealogy were fascinating.

Some of the gems from this book:

- The first evidence of weaving comes from a cave in the Caucasus Mountains. Over 32,000 years ago, people created fibers that were 2-ply, twisted and dyed.
- Early Egyptologists, eager to cut through the shroud to get to the mummy, totally missed the significance of the elaborate patterns by which a mummy was wrapped.

—Scraps of woolen sails used by Vikings dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century were first discovered by archaeologists because they had been reused as filler between wooden boards in the roof of an old Norwegian church. Making the textiles would have required more work than making the ship itself. Two shipwrights could make a longboat in a couple of weeks. It would have taken two skilled women a full year to make a sail.

—Wool was the engine of England's finances. When Richard the Lionheart needed to be ransomed, much of that ransom was paid in wool, a devastating financial blow to the Cistercian monks who lost two years worth of wool production.

—Enslaved people in the American south went to considerable effort to wear clothes other than "white plains" and osnaburg. This upset white peoples' sense of settled order of nature and society. The mix of colors and styles created by black women was unappreciated by white people who found it garish.

This book is completely enjoyable. Kitsap Regional Library has it, or a paperback edition is now available.