

# The History of Window Treatments

By: Sydney Schwartz Hardiman

The history of window treatments can't be explored without first discussing the history of the window.

Until the 1400's windows were little more than rectangles in the wall; open to the elements in the warm spring and summer days, and closed at night and in winter with interior shutters. The shutters were often closed with hook and strap hinges or iron bands which held the boards closed. Some shutters were opened and closed by the use of grooves in the sill and the wall plate which allowed the shutters to slide.

By the middle of the 15th century many large and important homes were using glass, but smaller and less moneyed homes would cover the window with waxed paper or oiled linen held in place by a wooden lattice. It was during this same period that elaborate drapes, canopies and cornices appeared, but they weren't found on the windows; they attached to the beds of the homeowners.

Finally, as glass became available to more people in the 1500's, curtains began to be widely used. Like a college freshman in his first apartment, these curtains were no more than a single piece of cloth nailed to the window. The cloth was pulled to one side when light was needed. The primary purpose of the curtain was to keep out drafts and insects.

The first big innovation in curtains occurred in the mid 1600's. As architecture became more important so did the idea of symmetry in the interiors of homes. Curtains that pulled to only one side spoiled that symmetry and the concept of splitting curtains down the center so they could be pulled to opposite sides of the windows was born. A 1673 Paris gossip and fashion journal called the *Mercur Galant* mentions this new invention, stating 'They are now divided down the side; and this fashion has been introduced because they are less inconvenient and because the windows become more decorative.'<sup>1</sup>

It was also during this time that a new curtain that could be pulled up by means of cords and pulleys was invented in France. Similar to today's balloon curtain, the festoon is described as a straight piece of fabric nailed to the front of a protruding board. Pulleys were affixed to the wood and pieces of tape with rings attached were sewn down

the sides, and occasionally the middle of the curtain fabric. Cords passed through the rings and went over the pulleys so the curtains could be pulled up and down. Some festoons had the tape sewn from the bottom center of the fabric to the top outer edges so when they were pulled up they looked like a casual swag and tail.

Soon valances and wooden cornices became widely used to cover the front of the festoon's board. Cornices, sometimes called pelmets were cut into many different shapes and sometimes covered in the same fabric as the festoon. Other innovations of the late 1600's and early 1700's were roller blinds and Venetian blinds (or slatted wooden blinds, very similar to modern wood blinds). The roller blinds devolved from blinds of straw and matting that were sometimes used on windows to keep out the heat. They were pulled up with strings and eventually were fitted with a spring that held the blind down. Roller blinds were later made with fabric that was often elaborately painted



In the late 1700's the French invented the French curtain rod, known now as the traverse rod. Finally curtains could be opened from the center by drawing them to the side rather than pulling them up with a tieback. Like the top of the festoon, curtain rods were covered with pelmets or valances, and even elaborate wooden cornices with overlapping swags. Muslin under-curtains (like modern day sheers) were also used, and the layering of the muslin, curtains, cornices and valances or swags was known as French Drapery, the use of which carried into the 1800's. Around the same time, a single set of draperies began to be used to unify several windows on a wall. Before this time each window was treated separately.

It is interesting to note that it wasn't seamstresses, or even specialized drapery workrooms, which made the window treatments, but rather, usually male, upholsterers. They guarded their cutting secrets so fiercely they were reluctant to even share them with their apprentices. Notably, most curtains were rarely lined or interlined, and when the pieces were sewn together there was no pattern matching being done. Pleats in curtains were irregular, if done at all, and some were gathered with the use of gathering tape.

It was in the early 1800's that large drapery poles and elaborate finials began to be used to hang valances and over-the-pole swags. Swags were also hung on holdbacks at various heights and angles. As Europe and America headed into the Victorian era (1830 to 1900), flat valances known as lambrequins were developed. Because they were cheaper to make and could easily unify two windows they were very popular. What originated as a small, flat valance soon developed elaborate scrolls and longer sides. The lambrequins were made with fabric stiffened with wood, buckram, or paper, and lined with chintz.

The Victorian time showed elaborate window treatments which typically included roller blinds, muslin curtains, regular curtains on a French rod, and large lambrequins embellished with trim. These treatments continued until about the later part of the century when a British architect and furniture designer Charles Eastlake published the book *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details*. Published in both England and the U.S., the book called for simpler window treatments, and a disuse of decorative poles. His book came out at a time when people were heading outdoors more and interiors were lightening up. Finally in the 20th century draperies became a much simpler affair, especially through World War I and II when fabric was actually rationed and catalogs and department stores began to stock ready-made rod pocket curtains.



Sydney Schwartz Hardiman is the owner of The Silken Scissor, a retail and wholesale workroom, based in Pittsburgh, PA. Sydney is the winner of PA's Best 50 Women in Business and Pittsburgh's Top 40 Under 40. She is also the founder of the Western PA Window Treatment Association. She can be reached at 412-734-1364 or visit her website at [www.TheSilkenScissor.com](http://www.TheSilkenScissor.com).

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