

steam **ahead**

Pressing matters, so don't skimp when it comes to your iron.

# iron clad

by Daryl Brower



Two Cleaning Women by Edgar Degas

A PROFESSIONAL LOOKING GARMENT, as any serious sewer knows, relies as much on a quality iron as it does on a good sewing machine and solid sewing skills. Even the most finely honed construction techniques won't count for much if you don't have a good iron to smooth, shape and finesse your fabric—and your garment—with pressure, heat and steam.

If you're truly serious about sewing (or about doing a proper ironing job on the contents of your closet) skip over the bargain-priced irons at discount retailers—they're as light on features as they are in weight. Sure they'll do for quick touch ups and simple craft projects, but they simply don't have the weight or power required to give seams a proper steaming, shape curves or set a crisp crease. Most have limited (and often uneven) temperature settings, flimsy construction, and spotty steaming.

What the sewing room needs is an iron with some heft to it, plenty of steam power (essential for professional results), and a design that forces the iron, not your arms, to do the pressing work. Usually labeled as "professional" models (not to be confused with the gravity-fed steam irons of professional sewing studios) they're pricier than their household counterparts, but the extra features and design details they possess are well worth the expenditure. Keep in mind that the most expensive iron isn't necessarily the best and that as with sewing machines, much of the decision making revolving around an iron purchase has to do with personal preference.

So how do you find the right iron? We've outlined a few key features, from absolute essentials to nice, but not necessary extras. These will help you start your search but the only real way to find the perfect iron is to actually use one. Ask sewing friends to lend you their favorites (keeping in mind that those who sew can be as fiercely loyal to iron brands as they are to sewing machine brands), see what's available at your local sewing shop or get yourself to a sewing or craft show (the classrooms are usually outfitted with irons and manufacturers often have booths providing demos). If you can't get your hands on the actual iron you're interested in, head online for consumer reviews, videos and other information to help you make an informed choice. The right iron is out there, and when you find it, your sewing will be that much better for the effort.

## What to Look For

**Weight and comfort** are key considerations for any iron. The iron shouldn't be so heavy that it's awkward to lift, but it should have enough weight to flatten fabric without too much effort on your part. Look for a handle with a comfortable grip (cork and silicone handles keep cool and are often easier on the hands) and a design that makes the iron easy to maneuver. If there's a display model available, pick it up and try out basic ironing moves on a flat surface. You'll spend a good deal of time with the iron in your hands, so if it feels awkward or uncomfortable, consider a different model. The iron should sit securely on the heel rest when positioned upright—you don't want to worry about it tipping over or crashing to the floor every time you head back to your sewing machine. A long cord that swivels will make it easier to move around the ironing board.

Thanks to patented Auto-Lift technology, **Oliso Smart Irons** (\$99.99-\$169.99) eliminate the need for a

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Oliso

heel rest altogether. Touch the iron and it lowers to your pressing surface; let go and the iron pops up above the board on sturdy, scorch-resistant feet. All feature a roomy side-filling water reservoir, continuous and vertical steam, and an extra-deep detailer tip that easily handles pockets and cuffs and prevents seam marks, but the top-of-the-line T1600 is designed specifically for sewers and quilters and can rest for thirty minutes before triggering the auto-shut off feature.

Whether you're constructing garments or touching up clothes, **multiple heat settings** are a must. Different fibers require different degrees of heat so you'll need a model that outputs evenly at varying temperatures. Degree settings that range from 100 (silks and other delicates) to 400 (cotton and linen) will cover most of your projects; an easy to adjust (and easy-to-read) dial will make things easier to control. Digital

readouts are a nice touch (you'll know exactly how hot the iron is), but dial controls on good quality models are just as reliable.

**Rowenta Steamium** iron (\$149) features one-touch temperature settings set on the front of the iron for easy visibility. A pump system efficiently forces steam into fibers (and automatically adjusts for fabric type); the stainless steel soleplate coated with silicate provides a smooth, scratch-resistant ironing surface.

**Steam**, and lots of it, is essential for pressing and shaping. The best irons send out strong, even steam without dripping or sputtering. The iron's soleplate can give you a clue to the quality of steam output; look for an even distribution of vents across the surface. Most upper-end irons are equipped with what's called **burst-of-steam**, a nifty feature that allows the iron to shoot out a powerful jet of steam. You'll find it invaluable for setting seams and tackling tough wrinkles. Irons with vertical steam will produce steam with the iron in an upright position; something that's incredibly useful for smoothing wrinkles from window treatments still on the rod or shaping up finished garments on a dress form or hanger. **Cool mist** is another handy feature; push a button and the iron lightly sprays cool water on the fabric being pressed, eliminating the need for a spray bottle. One of the most exciting



developments in iron technology is the ability to steam on low temperature settings so you can safely steam fibers that won't tolerate a high temperature sole plate.

**Reliable's Digital Velocity** models V50 (\$99) and V100 (\$179) have a patented heating technology that heats up the soleplate and water separately, providing voluminous steam at low temperature settings without spits, drips or leaks. The V100 ups the ante with a digital display that tracks everything from temperature setting to steam volume; steam is released via motion sensor as you move across the garment.

You need water to create steam and choosing a model with a **large-capacity water reservoir** will help cut down on the number of trips you need to make to the sink for refills. (The drawback to a large tank is that it can take longer to heat up.) Pay close attention to how the water tank fills and empties. Some models fill from the upright position others from the horizontal: The latter can be easier the first time you fill up, but if you have to refill mid-pressing it may cause spits and splatters from the soleplate. A removable tank may be easier to fit into the faucet, but you can easily burn yourself trying to remove or replace the tank with a still-hot iron (the safest option, of course, is to let the iron cool down between refills, but most of us don't have the patience for that).

Another big consideration is the **soleplate**, the metal surface that conducts heat to fabric. Teflon® plates slide smoothly over the most textured of fabrics and are easy to keep clean (something you'll appreciate when you've gunked up your iron with fusible residue). But don't fret if the model that's right for you on all other points doesn't have this feature. You can easily remedy the situation by purchasing a Teflon® shoe to slip over the soleplate. The shape of the soleplate also matters. A pointed tip and groove along the edge is helpful for pressing around buttons, along piping or under pleats; some models have a slot near the front of the soleplate that allows you to get into hard-to-reach areas.

The patented microsteam soleplate on the **Rowenta Pro Master** (\$99.99) sports 400

micro-holes for precise vertical and horizontal steam distribution. An extra-large water tank keeps refills to a minimum and a self-clean feature removes mineral deposits. One drawback for sewing: the iron switches off in eight minutes when left vertical and 30 seconds if left horizontal or if tipped over.

From the sewing enthusiast's point of view, **automatic shutoff**—the timing feature that tells the iron to shut down after resting on its heel for a certain amount of time—was a source of contention. Though it has great value in keeping the absent-minded from burning down the house, it can be a source of constant frustration as you move from sewing machine to ironing table, only to discover that your iron has gone cold. Some models allow you to override the feature; others simply eliminate it altogether. If you feel confident in your ability to remember to turn the iron off when you've finished sewing, choose a model without it. If on the other hand you're the sort that spends an outing away from the house worrying that you've left the iron on, give yourself peace of mind by choosing a model with the auto-off feature. You can keep your iron from going cold by periodically getting up from the machine and tipping the iron flat to keep it powered on.

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**Rowenta Pro Master**

## Room and Board

Where you do your pressing is almost as important as what you use to do the pressing. Invest in the largest board your sewing space can accommodate (the bigger the board, the easier and more efficient the ironing) and set it up close to your sewing station to save yourself steps (some sewers like to create an L-shape with the ironing area and sewing table and swivel between the two). To ease strain on your back and arms, set your pressing surface at hip height. Positioning the board near an electrical outlet will eliminate the need for extension cords. For easy shut-off, consider plugging the iron into a power strip with an on/off switch rather than directly into the outlet.

Ironing boards are the most obvious choice for a pressing surface and these come in many styles and sizes. A mesh or vented top will allow steam to pass through fabrics quickly and more evenly than a solid style; cover it with a reasonably firm pad as one that's too soft will make it difficult to press a sharp pleat or seam. Pretty printed covers are attractive, but a solid

color will make it easier to see the pieces you are working on. A cover marked with gridlines is handy for referencing measurements and covers made from Teflon® or other non-stick materials are good for those who work frequently with fusibles.

You can create a custom ironing space by setting a tabletop or board atop file cabinets storage units or trestles and covering the surface with a pressing pad or board. These pads are available from most sewing and quilting suppliers and come plain or marked with grids for easy measuring.

A vacuum board is the ultimate sewing indulgence. Motors built-in to the board pull heat and steam down from the iron, suctioning the fabric to the board and allowing steam to fully penetrate fibers. Since they pull, rather than press, wrinkles, they're ideal for velvet, corduroy and other piled fabrics. The ironing table stays dry—the key to a sharp, crisp finish. Some models also have an "up-air" feature that blows out air preventing impressions in the fabric and crushing of nap.



**Reliable's Longboard** has roomy surface and a tube and honeycomb construction for good ventilation, strength and stability. It also comes with two covers—one with a fire resistant surface on one end that allows you to place the iron facedown for extended periods of time.



**Reliable's C81 board** with vacuum and up-air provides the user with the same tools that professionals count on.