Knitting

A Craft Makes a Comeback

by Phyllis McIntosh

The joy of "making a piece of string into something I can wear," as one knitter described it, has catapulted the ancient craft of hand knitting into one of the most popular hobbies in the United States. Once considered the province of grannies and expectant mothers stitching layettes, knitting is enjoying a 21st century resurgence, especially among young people. Knitting, it turns out, is a trendy, often eco-friendly pastime with a wide range of appeals. And, thanks to the Internet, modern knitters can share knowledge and ideas through virtual knitting circles that span the nation and even the globe.

History of Knitting

Historians believe that knitting originated in the Middle East and spread to Europe, via trade routes, and eventually to the western world as European immigrants settled there. The oldest known items of knitted fabric are socks dating from the 3rd to 5th century, excavated in Egypt during the 1800s. Likely created with a single needle, they closely resemble modern knits. The oldest surviving examples of true knitting, using the two-needle method popular today, are blue and white cotton socks, again from Egypt, that were fabricated somewhere between the 11th and the 14th centuries.

By the late Middle Ages, the craft was apparently quite popular in Europe, as evidenced by several paintings from that period that depict the Virgin Mary knitting. Knitted garments, especially stockings favored by stylish gentlemen of the era, were produced by professional guilds, in which young men apprenticed to become master knitters. The handicraft also thrived in the British Isles, especially Scotland, where entire families worked at producing woolen socks, sweaters, and hats to protect fishermen from harsh weather at sea.

With the invention of knitting machines and the advent of the Industrial Revolution, knitted items could be mass produced, and hand knitting was relegated to the home. For many women of the 18th and 19th centuries, knitting for the family was a chore to fit around household and child care duties. By the late 1800s, however, knitting had become a fashionable leisure activity for Victorian ladies, who strived to make the hobby look more ladylike by holding their needles like pencils rather than gripping them with their palms, as is customary today.

In the United States, the popularity of knitting waxed and waned throughout the 20th century, rejected by one generation as too old-fashioned for the modern woman and embraced by the next as a fun, even trendy, pastime. Some swings in popularity were dictated by history. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, for example, many women turned to knitting out of economic necessity. In wartime, Americans answered the patriotic call to knit socks, sweaters, scarves, mittens, and stretch bandages for soldiers on the battlefront.

During World War II, the American Red Cross supplied patterns for military wear that were shared among knitters, many of whom produced the same items over and over so they could memorize the patterns and maximize their output. In November 1941, *Life* magazine, then one of the most popular periodicals in the United States, featured a cover on knitting. Photographs of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt often showed her knitting or toting her large knitting bag. Even wounded soldiers sent home to recover were encouraged to knit as part of their therapy.

A Red Cross poster encouraging Americans to knit socks for soldiers on the battlefront during World War I

Yarn shops offer a wide range of specialty yarns and designs for items favored by young people.

Knitting Revival

Since 2000, knitting has enjoyed an unprecedented revival, especially among the young. According to the Craft Yarn Council of America, one third of all American women aged 25 to 35 now knit or crochet (a related form of needlework). In just three years, their ranks increased 150 percent, while the number of youngsters and teenagers taking up the needles doubled.

Knitting has begun to show up among art and craft classes offered at some schools, the Knitting Guild Association reports. Through a Needle Arts Mentoring Program, the Helping Hands Foundation provides knitting supplies and instructions to encourage more schools, after school programs, and inner-city organizations to teach knitting to youngsters.

At the same time, the craft industry is offering a wide range of specialty yarns and designs for items favored by the young, such as fashionable crop tops, bags, and cell phone and iPod covers.

Adding to knitting's appeal is its growing popularity among celebrities such as actresses Julia Roberts, Cameron Diaz, and Brooke Shields, and even tough guy actor Russell Crowe. Characters on popular television shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Criminal Minds* have been shown wielding knitting needles.

A chief advantage for all ages is that knitting is a completely portable hobby. Busy Americans knit on buses and subways, in coffee shops and during meetings, in doctors' waiting rooms, while watching sporting events, and at the bedsides of ailing loved ones.

The Lure of Knitting

The reasons people knit are as varied as knitters themselves. The number one reason for most is that it is simply fun. And like any craft, knitting is a creative outlet, a form of artistic expression that can be shared with others. Nearly half of those responding to a survey by the Craft Yarn Council of America said they especially enjoy making gifts for family and friends, knowing that their creations will endure for years and likely be cherished by the recipients. For some activist types, hand knitting even represents a form of rebellion against what they see as often shoddy mass-produced goods.

Blue scarf

Knitting for charity is equally popular. Through the Knit-a-Square project, knitters all over the world send squares to be made into blankets for

AIDS orphans and abandoned babies in Africa. In the United States, the Warm Up America Foundation recruits knitters to stitch caps for newborns and squares to be assembled into afghans that are donated to homeless shelters, nursing homes, hospitals, and day care centers. Other groups, such as Head Huggers, knit soft, warm "chemo caps" for cancer patients who lose their hair during chemotherapy.

Knitters have rallied even to animals in need, fashioning sweaters for fairy penguins in Australia that were rescued from oil slicks. The little sweaters kept the birds warm and prevented them from preening and ingesting oil before their feathers could be washed by volunteers.

Many knitters say that turning to their needles and yarn is a great stress reliever, an escape from both the frenzy and tedium of daily life. According to Dr. Herbert Benson, president of the Mind and Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School, the repetitive action of knitting creates a state of relaxation similar to that brought about by yoga or various forms of meditation. Research indicates that knitting can lower the heart rate and blood pressure and can possibly delay memory loss in older adults. Keeping the hands occupied with knitting has been shown to help people stop smoking, avoid overeating, and cope with pain and depression. One California hospital teaches knitting to relax women confined to bed by high-risk pregnancies.

Whatever their inspiration or motivation, knitters are passionate about their craft. Some even see in it a larger symbolism. As one woman commented in Bernadette Murphy's book *Zen and the Art of Knitting*: "This is what my knitting tells me: That I have faith in tomorrow. That we are all joined together. That each stitch is vital to hold the garment together, just as each person is vital to this world."

New Trends in Knitting

Not content just to relax, some knitters like to go public in a big way. Across the United States, knitting groups hold Knit-Outs in parks, shopping malls, recreation centers—and even on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.—to demonstrate their craft and teach it to thousands of onlookers.

Yarn Bombing

An amusing new trend is graffiti knitting, also known as yarn bombing, in which hip, young urbanites wrap colorful knitted fabric around lamp posts, trees, and sometimes entire city buses to brighten the city environment. The fad reportedly started in Texas among young knitters seeking a creative way to use their leftover yarn and unfinished projects. It has since spread worldwide, as the "artists" photograph their installations and share them on the Internet.

Eco-Friendly Knitting

At work, at home, and at leisure Americans are encouraged to reuse and recycle, so it's no surprise that knitters, too, are "going green." More and more hobbyists are seeking out environmentally friendly products like organic wool yarn,

Woman knitting with "plarn" made from recycled plastic bags

Man knitting with red yarn

manufactured without chemical dyes or cleaning agents, and yarns fabricated from plant products such as bamboo and corn fibers, soy protein, and banana leaves and stalks. Remnants from the production of silk saris and cotton T-shirts are also recycled into yarns.

Some recycling opportunities offer the chance to do further good. Through the Afghan Hound Yarn for Rescue Project, for example, fur from show dogs, ordinary pets, and rescued Afghan hounds is turned into yarn, with the proceeds going to aid rescue efforts on behalf of abandoned or abused members of the breed.

For knitters who prefer to do their own recycling, various organizations and websites offer instructions on how to unravel wool sweaters, purchased for a few dollars at a thrift store, and reuse the yarn for new projects. Others advocate ripping up old sheets, rags, and T-shirts and knitting the strips into bath mats and other household items. For the truly dedicated recycler, someone has even suggested putting the knitting needles to old VHS tapes. A popular fad at the moment is cutting up plastic bags to create "plarn" (a combination of the words *plastic* and *yarn*), which can be knit into purses, placemats, and—what else?—reusable grocery bags.

Worldwide Web of Knitting

Knitters have always enjoyed gathering in groups, where they can chat and discuss their craft as their needles click and stitches multiply. The Knitting Guild Association reports that 88 percent of its members are social knitters, preferring to pursue their hobby in the company of friends, family, or knitting circles.

Thanks to the Internet, knitting circles have gone global. Numerous websites offer instruction videos, free patterns, and chat forums where knitters can ask questions and share information. At one of the most popular, www.ravelry.com, knitters can keep notes about their projects, obtain information about patterns, and participate in forums to "connect with people who love to play with yarn from all over the world." The site boasts 888,000 registered users and 2,800 people online at any one time. Through their own websites, purveyors of yarn and other knitting supplies market their wares to this vast audience.

Avid knitters maintain blogs with still more helpful tidbits. In addition to personal observations, some, such as *Wendy Knits: Adventures with Sticks and String*, include color photos of the author's projects and promotions of her books on knitting.

Male knitters are getting into the act, too. The popular www.menwhoknit.com site features blogs, a "shout box" message board, a gallery of projects completed by men, and information about weekend knitting retreats just for men.

Whatever a knitter's background, interest, or skill level, a compatible knitting circle is only a click away.

bind off – to finish a knitted item and take it off the needles

cast on – to place the first row of stitches onto a knitting needle; casting on is the first step in starting to knit.

gauge – the number of stitches or rows per inch that a particular thickness of yarn will create

knit stitch – the basic stitch in knitting, made by pulling a loop of yarn through an existing loop on the needle while keeping the yarn in the back; produces a fabric face consisting of a series of flat, vertical loops

purl stitch – a basic stitch that is the reverse of the knit stitch, made by pulling a loop of yarn through an existing loop on the needle while keeping the yarn in front; produces a wavy horizontal line across the fabric

ribbing – a combination of several stitches that allows the knitted fabric to be stretchy; used for waistbands and wristbands

stash – the yarn that a knitter has acquired over time with the intention of making certain items; knitters often keep accumulating more and more yarn faster than they can turn it into finished projects.

stockinette stitch – a pattern of knitting created by alternating rows of knit stitches and purl stitches

swatch – a small sampler knitted before starting a large project to test that the gauge is correct; ensures that the finished item will be the desired size

UFOs – "Unfinished Objects"; projects that for one reason or another were never completed (Every knitter has some!)

Websites of Interest

Craft Yarn Council
www.craftyarncouncil.com

Sponsored by the yarn industry, this website features projects, instruction, forums, and information about charity projects and upcoming knitting and stitchery shows.

Knit Guild Association
www.tkga.com

The official website of The Knit Guild Association—which bills itself as the largest knitting association in the United States, with 10,000 members—offers free lessons, message boards, links to retailers and knitting clubs, and a peek at its magazine, *Cast On*.

Knitting Help
www.knittinghelp.com

The place to go for knitting instruction, this website offers free how-to videos on everything from "Getting Started" to "Advanced Techniques."

Knitty
www.knitty.com

This free online magazine has an extensive archive of back issues that you can search to find what you want to read (feature articles) or knit (patterns).

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Knitting Know-how

Knitting with wooden needles

For would-be knitters, there are ample opportunities to learn the craft—from friends, from books, through classes at community centers and yarn shops, and on the Internet. All the novice needs to get started is some medium weight yarn, two mid-size knitting needles, and a mastery of two basic stitches—the knit stitch and its companion version, the purl stitch. For more advanced knitters, literally hundreds of stitches and probably thousands of patterns exist for making everything from intricate lace to boldly designed sweaters, using a variety of yarns.

Yarn made from sheep's wool is the yarn most preferred for knitting because of its warmth and elasticity. This elasticity makes it easy, even for the beginning knitter, to maintain a consistent tension. Other animal-based yarns use the hairs of goats (cashmere), rabbits (angora), llamas, alpacas, and even cats, yaks, and musk ox. Silk fibers produced by silkworms are also used for knitting.

Plant fibers used in yarn include cotton, flax (linen), bamboo, hemp, jute, raffia, and yucca. Synthetic yarns, such as plastic-based acrylics and polyesters, are popular because they are durable, washable, and available in a wide variety of colors and textures. Unfortunately, fabric knitted of synthetic yarns does not keep its shape as well as wool, does not "breathe" like natural fibers, and has a tendency to pill, or form little fuzz balls on the surface. Many yarns now available are blends of wool and acrylic or cotton and polyester, which capture the best properties of both natural and man-made materials.

Knitting yarn, usually sold in balls or skeins, is available in six different "weights," or thicknesses, from lace weight (the finest) to super bulky. Thinner yarns are best for delicate projects, while thicker yarns produce dramatic effects, and the knitter using them can finish a project more quickly because they produce bigger stitches. Thickness of the yarn determines gauge, the number of stitches and rows of stitches per inch. Savvy knitters make a test swatch to ensure that their gauge matches the pattern; such a match is essential for the finished garment to be the intended size.

Yarn is available in almost every imaginable color, either as a uniform hue or in variegated forms. Heather or tweed yarn, for example, contains flecks of a different colored fiber. Other variegated yarns may contain two or more distinct colors or strands of closely related

Variegated yarn

Aluminum knitting needles

hues. Yarn dyed with lengths of different colors automatically creates stripes in the knitted object. While man-made dyes produce the most brilliant colors, some knitters prefer to tint their own yarn with the more muted colors of natural dyes made from flowers, ferns, vegetables, and the husks of nuts.

Today's knitters enjoy experimenting with a variety of novelty yarns, such as boucle, which contains little curls that give the finished fabric a loopy appearance, or eyelash yarn, which features long strands that create a hairy look. Some knitters even choose to work with ribbon, metal wire, or, increasingly, with a host of recycled materials.

Knitting needles, too, can be made of various materials, although the most common are metal, wood, bamboo, and plastic. The diameter of the needle, which can be anywhere from about a tenth of an inch to an inch, determines the size of a stitch. Needle length ranges from 10 to 16 inches. The longest needles are used for large projects such as shawls, which require hundreds of stitches.

Knitting is done with a pair of needles, one held in each hand. Needles come in three basic styles. By far the most popular are slender shafts that are tapered at one end and have knobs on the other. The shaft holds stitches that are not yet woven into the knitted fabric to prevent them from unraveling, the knob keeps them from slipping off the needle, and the tapered end is used to create new stitches. The knitter does this by inserting the tapered end of one needle through one of the stitches on the shaft of the other needle, catching a loop of new yarn, and drawing it through. The second style of knitting needles, double pointed needles, are tapered at both ends and are used to knit small tube-shaped items such as sleeves and socks. A third kind of needle, circular knitting needles, has two tapered ends connected by a flexible cord that holds the unworked stitches.

Skeins of hand dyed yarn