

**The Free Knitting Pattern Collection:
Connecting to the Past – Shaping the Future**

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“Knitting clubs and guilds proliferate, and though members thirst for new designs and methods, they also act as preservers of an earlier culture, curators of old techniques, safeguards of bygone styles, and protectors of traditional patterns.”

Anne Macdonald, No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting

Knitting: An Introduction

Knitting, simply stated, is the interlacing of a single thread into a series of connected loops to create a fabric (Bush, 1994). People have been knitting for centuries – for personal satisfaction, relaxation, necessity or income. Before the industrial revolution, both men and women practiced hand-knitting. However, after the invention of the knitting machine, home knitting became the purview of women while factory knitting was considered “men’s work.” (Black, p. 29) In the 20th century, knitting fads occurred during and after wartime – when women were encouraged to knit for soldiers (Macdonald, 1988).

Despite its popularity, it is not known when or where the craft was first practiced, but many historians believe that the type of knitting we use today began somewhere in Egypt between 500 – 1200 AD (Bush, 1994, p. 11). Historically, hand-knitted garments were produced out of necessity – for income and clothing. Knitting was learned through apprenticing, children learned to knit from their mothers and grandmothers and important patterns and techniques were passed down through generations. All handwork, including knitting, has also been a significant part of women’s social and cultural history. Women often knitted in groups, sharing stories, getting advice and connecting to other women.

To knit, all you need are two sticks, string, and some ability to arrange those sticks and string into a simple knit stitch. It is in the combination of those stitches that patterned artifacts, recognizable to cultures around the world, have been created. Those knitting patterns take many forms, from national costumes like Norwegian louse coats to humble, but essential garments such as socks or mittens. The fundamental techniques, patterns and tools for creating these basic garments have changed little over the last centuries. To create a hand-knit sock, for example, a modern-day knitter employs the same techniques that were developed by knitters throughout history, passed down from one generation to the next, either verbally or through written patterns (Bush, 1994).

Therefore, knitting patterns, whether oral or written, are an essential conveyor of information for both the craft and the craftspeople. A knitting pattern holds not only technical information on how to construct a garment, but also cultural information on how the garment is patterned, such as particular religious symbols or yarn colors that should be used. Finally, a knitting pattern contains a certain amount of social history. It is a social history of women (history’s predominate hand-knitters) communicating in knitting circles, volunteering to knit during times of war, or simply finding a pastime that helps them relax in a fast-paced society.

The Collection: Free Knitting Pattern Net Ring

It is because of the importance, indeed the centrality, of the *pattern* to many knitting communities that I chose to focus on a knitting pattern collection that is housed on the Internet, the Free Knitting Pattern Net Ring¹. This pattern collection is both a reflection of the historical importance of knitting, as well as a contributor to the continued growth and vibrancy of the craft. It is a representative reflection of knitting as it is currently practiced, indicating how the craft has changed while holding on to its historical roots.

Purpose of the Collection

The Free Knitting Pattern Net Ring collection was created on the Internet in 1998. The purpose of a net ring is to link websites that have a similar theme (in this case, each of the sites offers free knitting patterns). Each member of the ring is required to display a net ring logo that allows visitors to link directly to other pages with the same topic. The purpose of this particular collection is to create a source of free

patterns designed by knitters to share with other knitters. The pattern sites in the collection range from historical medieval Muslim patterns and knitting stitches to patterns for knitted dishcloths. The sites have been developed by individuals who are fledgling designers, knitters interested in traditional knitting patterns and stitches, large yarn companies that are encouraging the use of their yarn, and charity knitting groups that post patterns on blankets, socks and caps. The majority of sites not only have patterns, but detailed knitting instructions, tips and hints, information on wool, web blogs and pictures of the site owner's knitting gallery.

Unlike collections of rare books or paintings, this collection isn't only collected because of its value – it is collected because of its use. It is a living collection whose purpose is to make patterns available to anyone interested: to encourage the craft of knitting, to encourage people to use the patterns and to encourage knitters to create and contribute new patterns back to the collection.

Care and Upkeep

Its owner, Chavie Fiszer, acts as the collection's curator. There are 135 pattern sites in the collection, with three new websites added per month. In order to be part of the collection, website owners must meet the following criterion: 1) they must apply to be part of the net ring collection; 2) they must make sure that they have at least one free pattern on their website and that pattern is easily accessible and obvious to visitors; 3) they must display the collection's logo; and 4) they must own the copyright, or have permission from the copyright owner to display the pattern ("Free Knitting Pattern Netring," 2002).

Chavie, who volunteers her time for this collection, spends on average five hours per week maintaining the integrity of the collection and searching for new pattern sites. According to Fiszer, "Starting up the net ring was easy because the software was available from RingSurf. Keeping up its integrity so that its popularity grows, entails not so much time as rigor."² Chavie reviews every site that is submitted and only adds those that meet the collection's requirements. She then checks all sites on the ring twice per month to make sure the site hasn't changed, that free patterns are still available, that all the links are working and the pattern collection logo is displayed. She removes any site from the collection that doesn't meet the criterion.

Audience and Accessibility

The patterns are free and, consequently, available to anyone who has access to or interest in using the Internet. Individual knitters, knitting circles and guilds all use and contribute back to the collection. Patterns range in level of difficulty, so both novice as well as experienced knitters are part of the collection's audience.

Most patterns in the collection are in English. However, knitting instructions are often written in symbols, charts, through schematics or using a specialized, abbreviated language³. For the unfamiliar, a knitting pattern can be intimidating to read, but has the advantage of being in a semi-universal language. Consequently, for experienced knitters, the patterns are accessible whether they are "written" in English or not. For the novice knitter, who doesn't yet know or understand "pattern language" and needs more narrative descriptions, the collection's patterns are really limited to English-speakers.

Methodology

The primary source of research for this paper was the collection itself. I reviewed the 135 sites in the collection to assess the range and types of patterns available. In addition, I conducted multiple interviews via email. I interviewed the collection owner to determine how the collection was started, is maintained and used. I interviewed two pattern designers who have contributed, with the purpose of understanding how and why they got involved in the collection. Finally, I had email and instant message conversations with 27 knitters on a knitting listserv who use free Internet patterns.

For secondary sources, I first did a literature search for current popular articles on the craft of knitting. Second, I looked at resources documenting the social history of knitting. Finally, I did some reading on traditional knitting patterns and their significance, specifically Nordic, Fair Isle and Aran patterns.

Social Systems around the Collection

Written knitting patterns are not new. Nor is a collection of those patterns new. However, this virtual collection is different. It is neither a collection based on genre nor provenance. Patterns are collected for their use. Fiszer collects and encourages the distribution of free and accessible patterns from around the world. Historical patterns, traditional Nordic patterns, patterns that employ new techniques, and patterns using unusual yarns or fibers are all collected and compiled in a single repository. It is in this combination and compilation of patterns with information on stitch techniques, instruction and advice; that a new type of product has emerged. It is a product that is no longer a solitary conveyor of technique; instead it has a socially constructed and shared meaning to the social systems that are using it (Belk, 1995, p. 55).

Instead of being passed down through families, communities or guilds; this collection has facilitated a pattern sharing that spans multiple communities, skips generations and crosses cultures. Knitters are no longer limited to the patterns, tools and wools that are available to them locally – they now have access to materials and instruction that is world-wide. Indeed, many of these patterns are now taken out of a historical context, they haven't been passed down from one generation to the next, and the knitter hasn't learned the pattern by watching its creator. However, despite this change in practice, the meaning the patterns share for the social systems using them very much mimics how knitting patterns have been used historically. And, although the context of modern knitters is different from their foremothers, the social systems surrounding that knitting are very similar. Multiple social groups are using the pattern collection to create knitting circles, knit garments that have historical or cultural significance, or to learn a craft by a virtual apprenticeship. Indeed, all aspects that knitting has had since its inception.

A Huge Knitting Bee

Forming communities of practice has a long history in knitting. Anne Macdonald, in her social history of American knitting writes, "With cloth manufacture such an indispensable home function, sharing the more arduous tasks with neighbors substituted conviviality for solitary sewing, spinning, carding and knitting, and turned the cooperative social activity or 'bee' into a highly anticipated affair" (Macdonald, p. 13). Although most American women no longer knit out of need, they continue to knit together. Modern knitters join knitting circles, guilds, listservs, and classes to both learn and improve their skills, as well as to connect to others interested in the craft. Many of these contemporary knitting bees have used and are influencing the use of the free pattern collection.

Virtual Knitting Circles

The free pattern collection is highly integrated into an active knitting listserv, KnitList. Its members often refer to the list as a global knitting circle. One knitter told me, "We're just a huge (10,000+) knitting bee and its very natural for the topic of conversation to wander around away from knitting to how to handle certain situations with in-laws, spouses or children."⁴ Although the collection and listserv are independent entities, listserv users often discuss patterns in the collection and, alternately, the collection grows through pattern contributions from listserv members. While these virtual conversations may first be restricted to the pattern, "I got stuck, what does PSSO mean?"⁵ soon conversations just turn into talk. These virtual knitters discuss anything from their significant other's lack of compassion for their large yarn stash to global politics.

Virtual knitting circles fulfill the desire for knitters to form into communities of practice that are not restricted by time or geography. The reality of modern knitters is very different from their foremothers. Face-to-face knitting groups are becoming increasingly difficult to fit into the lives of knitters who have complicated schedules and responsibilities or live in remote areas. One woman told me, "I don't belong to any knitting groups or local guilds 'in the flesh' my work and my personal life is such that I knit at odd times. In person groups usually require a time commitment that I can't make and an element of socialization that I don't really enjoy, although I love the online communication because I can choose to read my email or not."⁶

In addition to time constraints, knitters that may have been previously isolated and have grown up knitting alone, with access to only those patterns and wools available locally, have now found themselves communicating in this global circle of knitters. A number of patterns and techniques that have been

posted by non-English speakers, are translated by members of the listserv, and posted back to the free pattern collection. Particular knitting techniques, patterns, wools or tools that are used in specific parts of the world are discussed in the virtual community of knitters. One knitter who lives in a very isolated area of the US wrote me, "The best ideas may come from Sydney, South America, or San Francisco, but I wouldn't have know about them without the Internet. The closest yarn shop is a 2-hour drive away, and it only has acrylic yarns and a few basic tools. I am a lace knitter, and there are traditional lace pins that I use to knit that I can only buy over the internet. The good thing about the internet is that I am still connected to others that knit, something that I have missed in the past."⁷

It certainly is not uncommon for people of similar interests to join together to talk about that interest, virtually or face-to-face. However, what is interesting about this group of predominately women is their strong connection to each other *while at the same time* talking about the pattern. The conversation may start out with technical questions about pattern construction, but it soon turns to other things, mimicking the long social tradition of women in handwork circles. And although many of the women I talked to do not belong to traditional, physical knitting circles, these women are truly knitting together, updating others on their progress and seeking advice, even though they are not always doing it face-to-face.

Creation of New Circles

For those knitters that do belong to "in the flesh" knitting circles, the pattern collection is being used as a way to bind those groups together. A large percentage of the pattern collection is made up of patterns used in what has been termed, charity knitting. Patterns for chemo caps, mittens, blankets, baby booties and winter hats are posted by organizations such as Project Linus, Operation Toasty Toes, or Hats for the Homeless. A number of knitters I spoke to indicated that either their knitting groups were formed around knitting patterns for one of these charities, or that their already existing group decided to knit one of the patterns for donation.

The New Apprenticeship System

"In previous generations, knitting was passed down from one generation to the next. It's impossible for many to acquire knitting skills that way today – many mothers of 20-somethings don't know how to knit beyond the basic knit one, purl one routine learned in Brownies."

Susan Lightstone, "The New Yoga"

Traditionally, hand-knitting was passed down from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. Traditional patterns, garment preparation, and concepts were communicated verbally. But, like many traditional crafts, knitting is no longer something mothers and daughters often do together. In the US, knitting is generally considered a hobby or pastime, not an essential component to the family's income or its historical understanding of itself. Consequently, people interested in learning the craft are increasingly turning to the Internet and, specifically, to the pattern collection to learn and get inspiration to knit. According to a recent survey conducted by the Craft Yarn Council of America, nearly 50% of knitters are "very likely" to seek instructions from the Internet (CYCA, 2001). One knitter told me, "self-learning was my only option. I didn't know anybody else who knitted or anybody who even had an interest to learn. I turned to the Internet because that is where I was spending most of my time."⁸

A number of women I spoke with taught themselves to knit via the interactive tools available in the pattern collection. Many of the patterns are designed to teach a new technique or enable people to hone skills in certain stitches. Other knitters, taught to knit at a young age but later giving up the craft, came back to it because of the availability of free patterns and instructional techniques. "I had learned to knit as a child and hadn't picked it up again until I was about 44 years old. Once I discovered the wealth of patterns that were out there, I went nuts knitting again. For me, it was the fact that these patterns were free. I was able to try new things, get advice if I got stuck, and learn more challenging and more interesting stitches, without a large investment in commercial patterns."⁹

But, despite this new medium for learning, this knitting instruction is still based on a tradition of apprenticeship and verbal sharing. Women, even those geographically removed from one another, are learning to knit by watching and talking to others. They are undertaking “virtual apprenticeships.” Patterns and instructions are posted and then often discussed either on the pattern site or in the listserv. Images of the patterns are displayed alongside stitch techniques and instructions. Some users told me that they take a pattern and use it at their guild meetings where every guild member knits the same pattern and then discusses improvements made, sometimes creating new patterns or instructions based on the original. The craftspeople are constantly recreating new, socially produced artifacts and re-circulating those artifacts into the living pattern collection. A contemporary knitter may no longer learn to knit at the lap of her mother, but she is learning (albeit virtually) at the lap of someone else’s mother.

Rediscovery of Traditional Patterns

“Objects are used to establish a link with the past which helps sustain identity.”

Alan Radley, “Artefacts, Memory and a Sense of the Past”

Knitted garments and patterns are often associated with national costumes. Items such as yoke-collared Greenland sweaters, Russian lace shawls, and Fair Isle guernseys are easily recognizable cultural artifacts, imbued with that culture’s symbols and history. In this sense, knitting connects the creator to the past. Knitting author, Nancy Bush writes, “Knitting for me is more than a hobby or a livelihood. It is a means of binding my life together with the lives of all the knitters, men and women, who have knit before me” (Bush, p. 6). By knitting a Norwegian pattern that has been knit in the same manner for centuries, a knitter has a way of connecting to her past.

Although many of these more popular knitting patterns have been available to knitters for years, there has been a reinvigorated interest in other, not so well known, traditional patterns and techniques. Many of the patterns in the collection are dedicated to “new” traditional knitting patterns and rediscovering traditional knitting techniques from around the world. One pattern designer has taken patterns from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collections found in the Widener Library at Harvard and the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The designer has adapted the pattern techniques for contemporary knitters¹⁰. Another designer has created a site dedicated to early Egyptian knitting techniques. Using a technique called *nÂbinding*, or the process of creating a textile in rounds or rows by looping short strands of yarn, a flexible, but dense fabric is created. The pattern on the site not only describes the technique used, but also the type of yarn, pattern and colors employed.¹¹

In a way, these patterns are putting some historical context back into the practice of contemporary knitting. Rediscovering knitting techniques and practices of the past and using those techniques, along with modern materials, creates new and interesting products that are imbued with a very different cultural meaning for the contemporary knitter, but borrow heavily from the past.

Patterns: Connecting to the Past – Shaping the Future

“Knitting is a perfect balancing of the traditional with the hip, an ideal combination of the creative and productive. Comfortable and comforting, social or solitary, it’s back.”

Susan Lightstone, “The New Yoga”

The craft of knitting has seen a resurgence. According to a survey conducted by the Craft Yarn Council of America, in the last four years there has been an 11% increase in the number of women that knit and a 57% increase in under-35 knitters (CYCA, 2001). There have been numerous theories to explain the increase. As one book title indicates, it is “hip to knit.” Stars from Julia Roberts to Russell Crowe knit. It has been dubbed the “new yoga”, with proponents touting its meditative capacity. Furthermore, knitting is a craft that connects the knitter with the product that they produce. In a society where people’s work is

often removed from the product of that work, knitting provides a real, tangible, even tactile creation that is immensely satisfying.

At the center of the craft is the pattern – constructed by multiple social systems – it is a form of cultural memory and the pattern collection is a preserver of those memories. Indeed, the end product of the pattern is different for contemporary knitters and the context of the pattern has changed over time (Radley, 1990). Knitting now has a different meaning and a different cultural importance. It is a hobby, a craft, a method of creative relaxation – the new yoga. Even so, certain features of the object have remained important. It continues to borrow heavily from its past, where ideas and concepts are communicated verbally and where people join together in social support groups and circles. It continues to be a conveyor of technique, of learning, of social history and of culture.

Not only is the pattern a holder of memories, it is an artifact on which new cultural memories are built. Now, a knitter can find a traditional cabled Aran pattern, adapt that pattern and create a new artifact, which is then posted on the pattern collection. Virtual knitting groups have formed around the collection, virtual apprenticeship systems are possible, and a passing on of historical patterns is possible in a way now that was more difficult for previous generations of knitters. It is this continued use of the patterns, borrowing from the past, appropriating historical techniques, assimilating into new technologies and cultural norms, gaining a different signification (from necessity to an idle pastime to meditative relaxation), and then contributing back again that has contributed to the growth and continued vibrancy of the craft. And, as we have seen, the free pattern collection is playing an important role in this process.

The Fair Isle Dog Sweater

In closing, I leave you with a personal anecdote. A knitting friend of mine (who I met and converse with virtually) has just completed designing and knitting a Fair Isle dog sweater. She is using predominately purple and yellow wool, accented with orange and green – colors from her (and presumably her dog's) favorite basketball team, the Lakers. When I asked her why she started knitting, she told me it was a fun stress release and a guilt-free way of doing "something productive, while I watch TV."¹²

A purple and yellow Fair Isle dog sweater knitted during the Simpsons? Not exactly what our foremothers were concerned about when knitting national costumes for cultural identity, warmth or family income. How is this a connection to knitters that have come before? When examined closely, we find out that she got the sweater design idea – based on an old cylindrical scarf – from one of the historical patterns in the collection. She decided on this particular Fair Isle patterning after a listserv conversation with a woman in Scotland, she bought her wool from a women's cooperative in Uruguay, and she learned how to knit Fair Isle (two-stranded knitting) from a tutorial on one of the pattern sites. And, she has discussed her pattern with other knitters and is deciding to post it to the collection.

We are not our grandmothers' knitters, but we certainly look like them. Traditional knitting patterns are being preserved and adapted, women who may have been isolated now are communicating in substantive ways and producing creative goods, and the craft is growing, changing and adapting to our times. We still rely and practice the craft in many of the same ways, using the same techniques, although for different reasons and with a different knitted end product. But the communities of practice, the emphasis on history, and the importance of learning from others is still as vital today as in years past. It is that reliance on past practices, its is that centrality of the pattern, the physical, virtual or oral social construction of the pattern, in all it symbolizes, that has enabled a new generation of knitters to create. The pattern collection reflects and contributes to those changes. Fair Isle dog sweaters? Why not. We are not our grandmothers' knitters, but their voices are in the room.

¹ The Free Knitting Pattern Net Ring can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/lefroglady/knitring.html>.

² From personal email correspondence with Chavie Fiszer.

³ Charts and symbols are often used for complicated stitch patterns like cables, or multi-colored knitting. Abbreviations like K2 (knit 2); PSSO (pass slipped stitch over); are used in most pattern instructions.

⁴ In conducting my research, I had email and instant messaging conversations with 27 knitters on the KnitList listserv. This quote is from one of those interviews.

⁵ For those dying to know, it means Pass Slipped Stitch Over, it is a technique used to create a right-leaning decrease.

⁶ Personal email correspondence.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ These historical knitting patterns can be found at <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~trombley/patterns.html>.

¹¹ The Medieval Muslim Knitting Pattern site can be found at <http://witch.drak.net/lilinah/EgyptKnitIntro.html>.

¹² Personal email correspondence.