

“THE HISTORY OF KNITTING – A Brief Introduction”

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Did You Know?

- In 1769, the Virginia Merchants Association banned British goods, including silks and fabrics. In an attempt to establish independence at home, colonists created spinning and knitting groups to “clothe Americans by [their] own hands” and rebel from British control.
- The term “spinster” originates from around the same time period. During settlement, colonists were responsible for generating enough fleece to last 30 weeks of the year; due to all this work, families employed unmarried or otherwise unemployed members to do all the work.
- In 1915, war effort knitters invented a circular knitting machine to increase production of war effort socks; 27 892 pairs were knit for World War One.

- THE HISTORY OF KNITTING -

The origins of knitting are as complex as the histories of those who knit today; that being said, the earliest surviving garment dates to the 3rd century. Before then, knitting history traces knitting to Bible narratives as well as Assyria and Babylonia. Before knitting as we know it developed, sprangs – highly elastic weaving looms – and knitting warps were used. Straight needles developed in 1600 and before then, knitting was predominantly done in the round, or through methods similar if not identical to Tunisian Crochet.

Knitting guilds emerged in 1268 and developed into 1600 where knitting guild statutes ruled that in order to become a Master Knitter, one would have to knit a cap, a pair of gloves, a woollen waistcoat, and a flower-patterned carpet [image one] were to be created within thirteen weeks at a registered workshop. Guilds are a product of Spain and the Alsace region. Other than guildwork, knitting was done for convenience as well as to create liturgical garb and the 19th century saw knitting applied into the trousers of the toreadors.

Italy and France saw painters like Vitale degli Equi and Tommaso da Modena illustrate the Virgin Mary knitting [image two] in front of crowds or alone, in various poses and methods. Male Shepherds of the Landes [image three] during the 18th century would knit on stilts while ensuring the safety of their sheep and modern artist Françoise Dupré [image four] uses i-cords to create sculptures and canvassed art instalments.

Before the 19th century when it became widely practiced as a hobby, knitting was largely carried out to clothe families and royalty alike. This was no different for Indigenous tribes such as the Hopi, Navajo, Zuni, Cowichan, and Pueblo tribes who predominantly knit navy blue leggings or famous Fair Isle sweaters. In Newfoundland, a familiar method is Thrumming, which sees unspun roving or scrap yarn knit into the wrong side of the work to create a waterproof and warm barrier.

Knitting was and is a foundational part of a knitter’s identity and has survived through millennia. What remains unseen is the future of knitting: will a pair of handknit socks become museum items? Will everyone return to the craft like the days of yesteryear? Will it stagnate and remain the same? Regardless of the answer – and there are many – the above history is but a stitch in the tapestry of the History of Knitting.



LEFT: (1) Example of one of the knit (!!) tapestries expected of a would be Master Knitter. Note the Biblical symbolism, especially in the bottom center.



RIGHT: (2) Example of a painting of The Virgin Mary knitting in art. Why do you think this motif was common?



LEFT: (3) The Shepherds of the Landes on stilts whilst knitting in the field. This allowed them to keep watch and remain productive.



RIGHT: (2) Example of the work of Françoise Dupré who uses i-cord and non-Orthodox methods to make sculptures and other works of art.