

MEDIEVAL KNITTING



In the Middle Ages, a “hot” new thread technology was sweeping Europe. This new technique made it easier than ever to produce colorful and luxurious textiles. It was eagerly borrowed by Europeans from the Islamic countries around the Mediterranean — along with a lot of other things from the same splendid cultural center, such as alchemy, blackwork embroidery, Greek literature, and the concept of zero. This hot new technology was knitting. It was easy to learn, and fast. Unlike weaving, it didn’t require cumbersome or expensive equipment. With a few pieces of wire and some colored thread, knitting could create anything from elaborate brocade-like designs to nicely fitted stockings to warm woolen caps.

History

Knitting was once thought to be one of those “timeless arts” that went back forever. But in fact, it seems to have been invented sometime late in the first millennium C.E., perhaps as early as the 8th C. The earliest pieces of surviving knitting — which are all from Islamic countries — are dated by their style of decoration to the 9th, 10th and 11th C. Even these earliest pieces are filled with intricate, multi-colored designs. Most of this material comes from graves and trash heaps in Egypt and other dry places, where textiles are more likely to be preserved.

The Islamic connection becomes even stronger when we note that the earliest knitted items in what’s now Western Europe are from Spain, where Islamic influence was strong. These early items include a pair of bishop’s ceremonial gloves (dated around 1245) and two cushion-covers. These are all very finely knitted in silk, and come from the royal tombs in the Monastery of Las Huelgas, near Burgos. One of the pillows bears a simple Islamic inscription (the repeated word “baraka,” which means “blessing”), and may well have been made by an Islamic-trained artisan. Another artisan signed his name, “Husain,” to an embroidered pillow made in a strikingly similar style from the same set of tombs.

The early knitting story was complicated for a long while by the confusion of knitting with another craft, nalbinding. Nalbinding has been around for much longer, and it can create textiles that look quite a lot like knitting. Nalbinding is a series of interlocking loops, made with a threaded needle and cut lengths of yarn or thread. The main structural difference between nalbinding and knitting is that in nalbinding, the *end* of the yarn is passed *through* every stitch. Knitting, on the other hand, is constructed from a continuous thread, and a *loop*, rather than an end, is pulled through each stitch. It can be difficult on occasion to tell which technique was used, although there are telltale signs if you know where to look. But archaeologists who are not textile historians may not even know that nalbinding exists. Many textiles made with nalbinding from Roman and even Egyptian times have been misidentified as “knitting” in archaeologists’ reports — or worse still, as “crochet,” which was only invented in the 19th C.

The prevailing theory on the origin of knitting is that it probably evolved out of nalbinding, when someone realized that by *not* pulling the end of the yarn through each loop, one continuous thread could be used for the entire piece. Like nalbinding, the theory goes, the earliest knitting was probably worked in the round to make cylindrical or tapered shapes, such as stockings or hats. In fact, many of the surviving pieces of early knitting

show a “jog” or mismatch in the pattern, proving they must have been knitted in the round, where this jog occurs at the end of every round. This means that knitting in the round is much older than knitting back and forth on two needles, which is the way most modern directions are written. We don’t see clear examples of back-and-forth knitting until close to 1600, when elaborately patterned knitted “jackets” of silk and gold thread come into fashion. Knitting back and forth is used to create flat pieces, which are later sewn together to make a finished item. This technique seems to have been derived from tailoring garments in woven fabrics.

Technique

Knitting requires a tool of some sort to pull a loop of yarn through a stitch, and it also requires some sort of device to hold, in proper sequence, all the loops made in a row of stitches. A straight piece of wire easily can perform both functions. So we most often see knitting done on those thin or fat pointed sticks we call knitting needles.

Knitting also can be done on a frame, usually made from one or more pieces of wood, bearing a row of small nails. Each nail holds a stitch, and a separate needlelike tool is used to pull a loop of thread through each stitch.

One form common in Europe is the “knitting spool,” a small hollow cylinder of wood with four to eight nails around the top. To create stitches, the thread is wrapped around each nail above the existing stitch, and a pointed tool is used to lift the old stitch up and over this thread and off the nail. This pulls the wrapped thread through to form a new stitch.

Each stitch knitted has a right and a wrong side: the right side showing a smooth series of loops, the wrong or “purl” side showing a raised “bump” of yarn for each stitch. Early knitting is all knit stitches, which, worked in the round form a smooth fabric (called “stockinette” in modern times). Sometime in the middle 1500s, someone figured out how to work stitches a little differently so that the “purls” appear on the right side of the fabric instead. Isolated or grouped purl stitches could then be worked to form raised decorative patterns on the right side of the fabric, one of the earliest examples being the silk stockings buried with Eleonora of Toledo (d. 1562).

Modern knitting has a large repertoire of decorative techniques, including color-patterned or “stranded” knitting, patterns of knits and purls as mentioned above, cables and twisted stitches, and openwork or “lace”, whose basic unit is an open eyelet, made by wrapping thread an extra time around the needle and then knitting two stitches together.

Of these techniques, color patterning is the only one used in early knitting, and it appears in some of the earliest surviving pieces. It may even be one of the reasons knitting became popular. It’s much easier to produce detailed, multicolored patterns in knitting than in nalbinding. In nalbinding, stripes are fairly easy, but more elaborate patterns are difficult because the stitches interlock both horizontally and vertically, which blurs the edges of color blocks. Color patterns are also easy to create in weaving, but weaving requires a heavy investment in looms, which are large, complex and expensive pieces of equipment. Knitting may have become popular, at least in part, because it provides a relatively easy, low-technology way to create elaborate colored patterns.

As mentioned above, knit and purl patterns appear in the second half of the 16th C., and around the same time we see the first use of eyelets (again, Eleonora of Toledo’s stockings being one of the early examples). However, fully-developed “lace” knitting and the other modern techniques don’t appear until the late 18th or 19th C.

Much of the early knitting we have is worked in much smaller stitches than we are used to in modern pieces. Stitch gauges of 10 to 15 stitches per inch were quite common, whereas modern knitters are accustomed to working in thicker yarn at 3 to 5 stitches per inch. Thick yarns, however, are found well before 1600 in the colder parts of Europe, where they are used to make woolen caps and other warm items.

It seems likely that the earliest knitting needles were metal wires, probably handmade. It’s difficult to know, because a simple, pointed wire could be used for many other purposes, so we can only be certain it’s a knitting

needle if it was found with actual knitting. A few knitting needles have been identified from the Middle Ages, and most of them are copper alloys (bronze). Larger needles for coarser work could of course be made from wood or bone, but both materials are too prone to snap to make good needles in the smaller sizes needed for fine knitting.

It seems likely that some early knitting needles had a small hook on one end to make pulling loops through previous stitches easier: such needles are still common in Turkey and Eastern Europe.

Materials

The early Islamic knitted pieces seem to fall into two more or less separate groups. One group is the many pieces knitted in fine, two-ply wool thread, usually in many bright colors. These pieces also use some cotton thread, but only for the color white. The other group is the pieces knitted entirely in cotton, in white and one or several shades of indigo-dyed blue. The two groups seem to belong to largely separate traditions, and share very few design motifs in common.

Common colors in the wool pieces include bright red, brick or madder red, pink, light yellow, amber or gold color, light green, turquoise and dark blues, and a very dark shade that may have originally been dark green or black. In the surviving pieces, thread that now appears beige, originally may have been light green, or one of the more fugitive “imitation” purples. There is very little black, and almost no “true” purple, perhaps because these were very expensive dyes.

The earliest products of European knitting also seem to fall into two groups: some very fine “luxury” knitting in multicolored silks, and other, coarser knitting in wool, which is often fulled or felted after knitting. The most common threads in both silk and wool are 2-ply, just as in the Islamic pieces. It’s impossible to say whether “luxury knitting” or the coarser sort came first.

Design and Products

Until the 1500s, knitting seems to have been used mostly for small items, including bags, hats of all kinds, long and short stockings, mittens and gloves. On the whole, knitted “body garments” seem to have been a late development, although there are a few examples, such as a child’s knitted vest now in the Museum of London. Knitted shirts or vests are mentioned in a list of knitted items in an English Parliamentary Act of 1552 limiting the times of year that wool could be sold.

Decorative motifs in knitting seem to come largely from whatever was currently in fashion in woven fabrics of the same period. Many of the Islamic designs are flower-like or geometric elements, like those in carpets or Asian brocades. In time periods where horizontal stripes or bands of motifs are common in woven materials, they also appear in knitting. Early European pieces tend to have more pictorial motifs, often of heraldic significance, such as lions, eagles, and castles.

Sometimes the technical limits of knitting do come into play and affect the range of possible designs: for instance, vertical stripes in knitting are much more difficult than horizontal stripes, and so are rarely seen. Isolated motifs of one color on a background of another color, with large intervals between them, are also harder to produce in knitting than more closely spaced motifs, although techniques to do these seem to have been invented at a fairly early date.

Getting started

If you're interested in more detail about the history of knitting, both before and after 1600, the book to get is Richard Rutt's *A History of Hand Knitting* (SEE BIBLIOGRAPHY). Rutt's book, first published in 1987, revolutionized our understanding of early knitting and its origins. Dr. Rutt is a good scholar who clearly explains and thoroughly documents his conclusions. His analysis of other techniques often confused with knitting, for instance, is a model of clarity. There is also a good deal of material in the book about knitting myths and pseudo-historical sources to avoid.

The book isn't perfect: the first section is organized by date, and later sections by geography, so information is sometimes scattered. If you can find the first (1987) edition for a reasonable price, it has a few color plates that the reprint doesn't. Rutt also commits a few errors, most of them minor. They seem to occur where he worked from published descriptions of surviving pieces, rather than examining them for himself.

For beginning knitting instructions, just about any "introduction to knitting" book is fine. Look for one with good, clear drawings of every step in the process. Drawings, because they reduce irrelevant detail, are often easier to follow than photos. There are also good instructions online.

There is no "wrong" way to knit. Knitters may work from left to right (usual) or right to left (rare), hold the loose yarn in their left or right hands or loop it around their necks, twist their stitches or not. There are many variations you can read about in detail in books like Rutt. While some techniques are easier to learn than others, they are all "correct" if they produce well-made knitted fabric.

Little of this matters in the long run, because it's impossible to tell from the finished piece which of these techniques were used.

I strongly encourage people who are just learning how to knit to begin with a simple pouch project on a short (16-inch) circular needle. While the circular needle is a modern invention, learning to knit in the round is both (I think) easier and more historically accurate than knitting back and forth. Two pouch projects are described in this article.

Bibliography

André, Paul, ed. *Tissus D'Égypte, Témoins Du Monde*. Institut Du Monde, 1993.

Buss, Katharina. *Big Book of Knitting*. New York: Sterling, 2001.

Learn How Book: Knitting, Crochet, Tatting, Embroidery. London: Coats & Clark, 2001.

Rutt, Richard. *A History of Hand Knitting*. Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 2003.

Zimmerman, Elizabeth. *Knitting Without Tears*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971

NOTES FOR BEGINNERS

We won't give directions for basic knitting here, since they are quite easy to find in knitting books or online. (See WEB RESOURCES for recommendations.)

If you use double-pointed needles rather than a circular needle, wooden or bamboo needles are easier than metal ones for beginners, because the stitches don't fall off the needles quite as easily.

Many beginning knitters knit far too tightly. If you can't easily slide your stitches along the fat parts of the needle, or if you have trouble getting the point of your needle into the stitches to make new ones, they are too tight. Try *not* to pull on the yarn to tighten the stitch after you've made it.

Stripes for starters

Project 1:

SIMPLE STRIPED BAG

This project takes about 1/2 skein of "worsted weight" knitting yarn (the normal weight for sweaters), and a 16-inch circular needle, size 5 or 6. Cast on 60 stitches. Join them into a round, being careful not to twist the row of stitches when you join it. Knit plain (knit every stitch — no need to purl) until you think it's long enough (8 inches is a good length) and bind off.

Stripes

If you want to try a small adventure and introduce some variety, take a few yards of yarn in a color you like, the same thickness as your basic yarn, and at some point just start knitting your new stitches with that yarn instead. When you get around to your starting point again (1, or 2, or more rounds later) drop the new color and pick up your old yarn, being careful not to pull too tight and pucker the knitting. Repeat stripes at whatever interludes you like.

Finishing

When finished, flatten the cylinder of knitting and overcast the two sides together at the bottom with a large needle and a strand of the same yarn (going once through each front and back stitch). Braid a carrying strap from leftover yarn (or any other yarn you like). Sew it neatly onto the top of the bag at two opposite points.

Cut or make two drawstrings — they work better if they are *not* wool. Shoelaces, smooth cotton string, and braided cotton embroidery thread work well. Thread both drawstrings in and out between the stitches in the third row from the top of the bag. Knot the two ends of each drawstring together. Pull one drawstring from each side to close the bag.

Decoration: Simple bags like this often show up in medieval paintings with three to five tassels along the bottom. These can be made out of leftover yarn.



Project II: COLOR PATTERNED POUCH

Working color patterns in knitting is not as hard as it looks. Here I have to tell you a “Verily, there I was...” story. Verily, there I was at Beltane Coronation in a sunny meadow, a few years ago. Two guests wearing coronets were sitting next to Their Majesties in the royal pavilion, and I noticed the woman of the pair was knitting, so after Court I went up, introduced myself, and showed her the color-patterned knitting I was working on.

The guests turned out to be Their Royal Highnesses of Caid. “Oooooooh!” said HRH when I showed her my work. She said they had decided their coming reign would have a Byzantine theme, and she had run across the story that one Empress of Byzantium had owned a *solid gold* drop spindle, and made a point of presenting other monarchs with gifts of her own spinning (talk about one-upmanship!). So she (HRH) had spun some nice blue yarn (though *her* spindle was plain wood!) and was knitting it into pouches to give away.

Eyeing my color knitting, she said, “*Would you teach me how to do that? We’re having a small event with classes in our local group in August...*” Being well-trained never to turn down royalty, of course I said yes! In preparation for the class, I started charting patterns from a book I’d just found, and that’s when I realized that the surviving pieces of Islamic knitting have lots of easy two-color patterns, perfect for people who are just starting to learn how to do color-patterned knitting.

At the class, I had four eager students, including the Queen. (Though after awhile, she disappeared and we had “No-na-me the Dancing Girl” instead, wearing MUCH more comfortable clothing!) By the end of a couple of hours, I had four successful people knitting patterns in color, and saying, “*Hey — this isn’t nearly as hard as I thought it would be!*”

The instructions

This project uses the same size yarn and needles as the striped pouch: in this case, about 40 yards of the color you use the most, and 10 to 20 yards each of three or more other colors. If you choose white or cream as one of your colors, it can either be wool, or worsted-weight cotton yarn such as “Sugar’n’Cream”.

The Three-Band Chart provided on p.8 is specifically designed for this project. Cast on 72 sts with your main color, and join to form a round. Knit about an inch plain with the main color, then follow the chart, starting at the bottom.

You can also choose different color patterns, either from the other charts in this article or from other sources. One good place to start is the HistoricKnit mailing list (see p.7), which has charts and examples in its Files section.

The key to successful color knitting is **not to pull the yarn too tight** when you are changing colors. The “floats” or strands of yarn you’re not using should lie a little loosely along the back of the knitting. If you need to, you can tighten up stitches that are too loose, but you can’t loosen them if they’re too tight.

After the last row of your chart, continue in your main color for another half inch or so. Knit one round of (K3, YO, K2tog) to make eyelets for the drawstrings. (These eyelets are a modern addition.)

Knit 2 more rounds plain and bind off. Darn in any loose ends of color on the inside of the pouch (if you haven’t done it as you go). Sew the bottom seam and finish the same way as the striped pouch.



ALL the color patterns in this article are charted directly from surviving pieces of medieval Islamic knitting.

Web Resources

For historic color charts, there are several in the group's FILES section at:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HistoricKnit/>

Please note that this is not a Society-only or exclusively pre-1600 list, but there is an immense amount of wisdom on medieval knitting in its archives.

For beginners who want to teach themselves to knit, I recommend the Bernat site:

<http://www.bernat.com/learntoknit.php?PHPSESSID>

or Knit World (which has bigger diagrams). I always start people off with what Knit World calls a "two-needle" method of casting on.

http://www.knitting.co.nz/site/page_affix/toaffix_learntoknit2/

http://www.knitting.co.nz/site/page_affix/toaffix_learntoknit5/

Knittinghelp.com has some nice free videos

<http://www.knittinghelp.com/knitting/videos//cast-on/knitting-on-english.mpg>

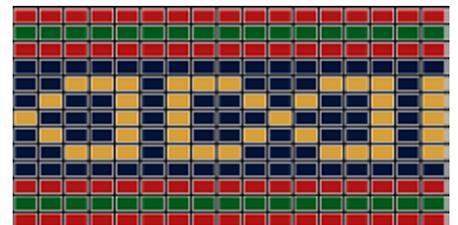
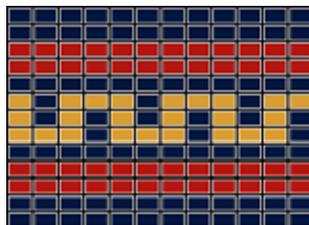
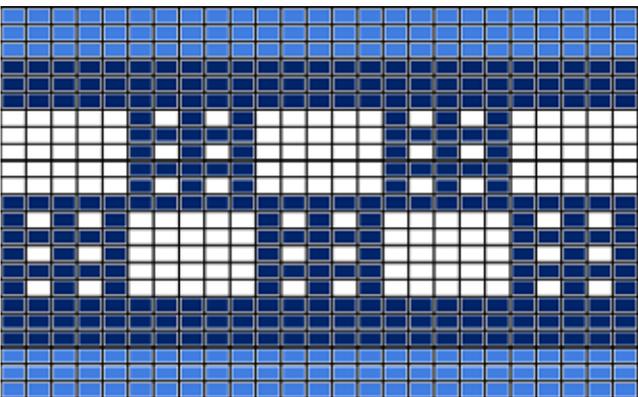
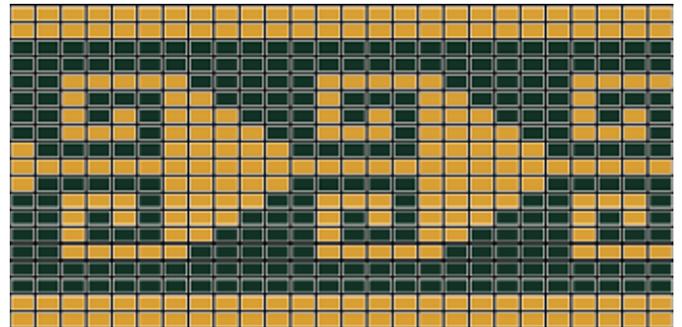
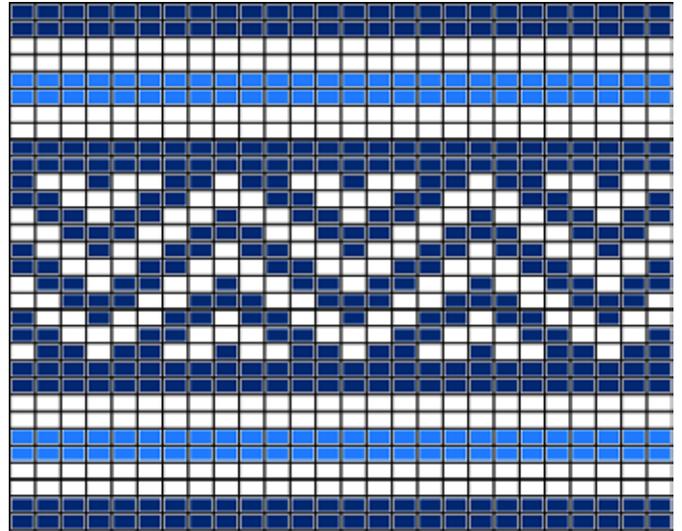
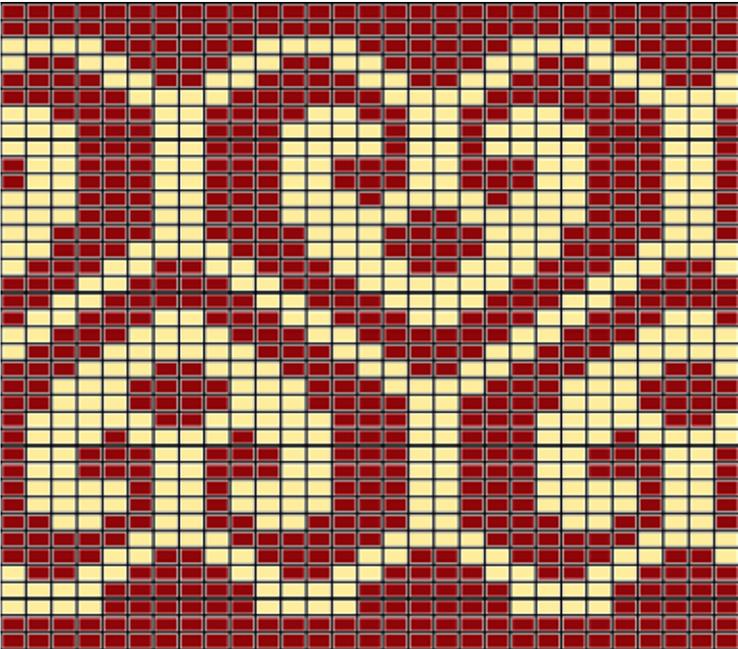
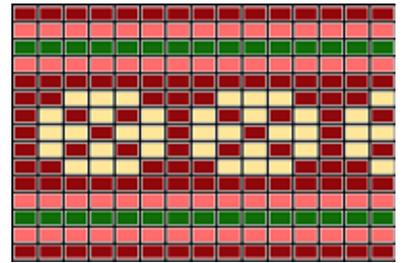
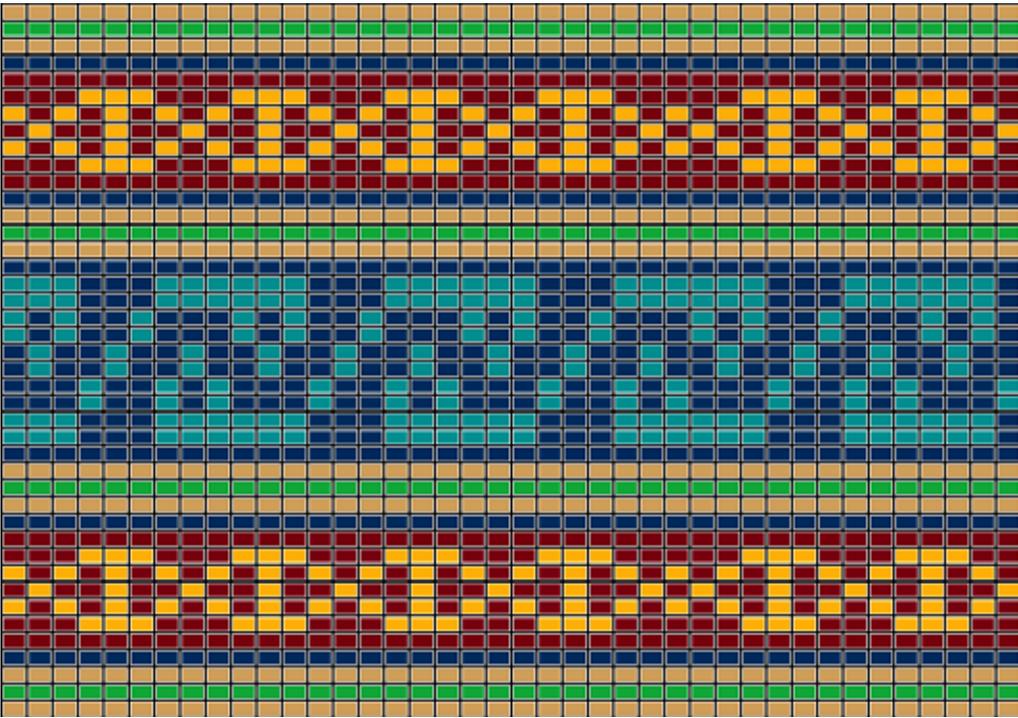
http://www.knittinghelp.com/knitting/basic_techniques/knit.php

Some of their pages give you a choice between "Continental" knitting (loose yarn held in your left hand) or "English" (in your right hand). Knittinghelp also has pages for increasing, decreasing, purl stitch, binding off. They show circular knitting under "advanced techniques," but don't let this intimidate you!

http://www.knittinghelp.com/knitting/advanced_techniques/

KNITTING PROJECTS

“Three Band” Chart for
color patterned pouch



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