

Norway's wild, wintry climate greatly influences hand knitting style

Focus on...

# Norwegian knitting

*The Knitter* investigates the folklore behind Norway's quintessential knits, and discovers a thriving contemporary knitting culture



It sounds like the beginning of a Nordic fairytale. In the mid-19th century, a young Selbu farm girl named Marit Emstad looked down at her cold hands and decided to knit herself a pair of the warmest mittens imaginable, using two strands of yarn rather than one. The result was the creation of two-colour Selbu knitting, and the

advancement of an entire knitting culture

Annelin Andersen grew up in Lofoten, a Norwegian archipelago of islands. "Hand knitting is a part of Norwegian identity and has long traditions. There are many different patterns, all of which are rooted in different areas. The most famous is probably the pattern from Selbu – all Norwegian children have mittens from Selbu."

## Practical beauty

Originally, two-colour knitwear was black and white only, using the natural wool of Norwegian sheep breeds. The technique was as practical as it was attractive. Communities of farmers and fishermen enduring the long, dark Nordic winters needed clothes that ensured their warmth, while being comfortable enough to allow them to go about their tasks in freezing conditions.

"The advantage of two-colour knitwear is that you have twice as much yarn and therefore twice as much warmth – plus some beautiful patterning," says Laurann Gilbertson, the Textile

Curator at the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum.

Though traces of modern Norwegian knitting dates back as far as the 9th century, the most iconic designs and techniques only originated around 200 years ago.

"Most of what people recognise as traditional Norwegian patterns are the two-colour garments, which are actually a relatively recent addition to the Norwegian textile tradition," points out Sue Flanders, an American-Norwegian knitwear designer and the co-author of *Norwegian Handknits: Heirloom Designs* from Vesterheim Museum.

The museum exhibits masses of knitted items, most of them made in Norway and brought over to America with immigrants before 1920. The collection includes church mittens and embroidered gloves, two-colour hats sweaters and mittens, as well as examples of hand knitting done by the descendents of Norwegian immigrants living in the United States.

## Handspun heritage

Historically much of the handknitting was carried out using handspun wool, made by Nordic matriarchs who did everything from raising and shearing the sheep to carding and spinning it. As Norwegian sheep have to survive such harsh winters, their wool is particularly long and curly, making it ideal for creating very strong, light yarn that knits into gorgeously warm clothing. ▶

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Fishing communities thrived in coastal towns like Henningsvaer, in the north of Norway



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Laurann says: “Even though it was handspun, much of this yarn was very fine. Today Norwegian yarn is still the best because of the nature of the sheep’s wool. Some breeds have shiny outer hairs, giving the wool a sheen and strength that’s very appealing.”

For *Norwegian Handknits*, Sue and her co-author Janine Kosel developed modern knitting patterns inspired by antique knitwear in Vesterheim’s collection. Sue explains how she and Janine, carefully selected yarns that reflected the qualities of the traditional wools.

“We did use some yarns that are easier to find globally, rather than the traditional Norwegian yarns. My favourite yarn is the GammelSerie (Old Series) line by the Rauma Garn spinners. It’s an old style, hand-spun looking yarn that has some “tooth”, which refers to the body and crispness of the fibre. Some modern yarns are pretty soft, will not wear well and if they are too fuzzy, the pattern gets lost in the fibres.”

## Symbolic stitches

These patterns are as important a part of Norway’s knitting heritage as the need for sturdy clothing, evident in all kinds of knitwear from the sweaters worn by farmers to the elaborate mittens. Selbu brides traditionally give their guests – wedding favours that keep you warm! The patterns became a subtle means of communication, with different motifs holding different meanings. The Selbu star, or snowflake, is one of the most recognisable traditional motifs, widely seen on mittens, cardigans and jumpers.

Laurann Gilbertson says: “There is definitely some symbolism in the patterns. For example, eight-petal flowers (which we often call snowflakes or stars) were good luck symbols. The X and O pattern that was used on the shoulders of some sweaters were originally there to confuse

evil, for protection.”

During the Second World War, knitwear was used to demonstrate the country’s resistance, with people creating and wearing the red stocking cap of a mythological mischief-maker, the Nisse. When the Nazis caught on and forbade the wearing of the defiant hats, Norwegians took to knitting red bands into their jumpers and cardigans, showing that the undeterred resilience of their spirit.

## The famous lice

Probably the most famous Norwegian jumper design is the lusekofte, or lice jacket, named for the white speckles that scatter across a dark background. Despite the unpleasant connotations of the name, these sweaters enjoy worldwide popularity. Originating in the Setesdal valley in south Norway, they were developed for very practical reasons, with the addition of the flecks resulting in a thick, strong fabric well suited to the winter chill. In the 19th century these jumpers were knitted with this extra yarn included on every other round for optimum density, but most modern designs now include the lice only on every fourth round, as central heating and less time spent braving the elements make a softer, thinner fabric more appropriate.

The lusekofte was originally men’s underwear, worn beneath vests and jackets and tucked into high-waisted trousers. To save money and yarn, the section below the waist was knitted in plain wool only, keeping the decorative white flecks to the body where it could be seen.

Norway’s climate and terrain means that skiing is another vital part of the culture, which led in turn to a wealth of patterns being specifically designed for and worn by the national sporting heroes.

Sue grew up in the mid-western United States, where there is a strong history of

**“Traditional techniques include knitting in the round, with the cutting of steeks – two-colour patterns are still popular for warmth”**



① + ② + ④ These hat and backpack designs, by Sue Flanders, feature classic Fair Isle motifs, seen in her book *Norwegian Handknits: Heirloom Designs from Vesterheim Museum* ⑤ Designer Elsebeth Lavold is inspired by Norway's Viking heritage ③ This design, Solveog, is from Elsebeth's recent book, *The Third Viking Knits Collection*



Norwegian immigrants settling on the rich farmlands. "Since I am both a Nordic skier and knitter, there was a natural attraction to the traditional snowflake ski sweaters of Norway's national ski team. I made my first Norwegian sweater as a freshman in college and have not put down the needles since then."

There is even an official Olympic sweater supplier, Dale of Norway, which was formed in 1879 and has been producing Olympic sweaters since 1956.

Annelin says: "Back in the old days, Norwegians skiers could easily be spotted by their Selbu cardigans or similar woollen sweaters. For every Winter Olympics, a pattern is designed and given to the athletes. People often knit one for themselves and their families as well – I have no idea how many World Cup or Olympics-sweaters I've had."

## Steek and slash

Typically, Norwegian jumpers are knitted in the round. Armholes are knitted with a bridge of stitches called a steek, which is then cut open and the arms, also knitted in the round, are picked up and worked afterwards.

Another favoured technique for knitters is cabling. Intricately twisting and twining stitch patterns show continued popularity, particularly in coastal areas (not unlike our heritage of fisherman's ganseys across the UK).

To end up with an embroidery-like finish, yarns are firmly tensioned, and adornments are sewn on afterwards, with felting popular for creating embellishments such as bobbles and buttons, or for adding smoothly-textured bands at the cuffs and neckline. Other typical decorative features include metalwork, as pewter or silver clasps, for example.

Colourwork features predominantly at the shoulders and upper arms where they're best shown off, and boat necks are common, keeping throats warm while looking very elegant.

Traditional designs are simple to modernise by simplifying some techniques and streamlining others, with more modern takes on two-colour Fair Isle designs usually encompassing dyed wools, one light, one dark. With the incredible range and vibrancy of

colours now available, there are plenty of possibilities to tempt contemporary colourwork knitters.

## Modern moves

You'll see similarities between Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian knitting patterns and styles, as well as those from Fair Isle itself even. With the Norwegians particularly known for their bold, monochromatic and geometric designs, as well as patterns featuring people, animals and flowers. While these motifs are still hugely popular, knitted items vary enormously. Sue says: "Janine and I used some classic motifs on non-traditional items, like backpacks, to attract younger knitters to the old techniques."

Highly-regarded knitwear designer Elsebeth Lavold takes inspiration from Norwegian heritage in a very different way: "I have spent an awful lot of time studying Viking age artefacts in museums, archives and books. I've been translating the interlacing patterns seen on these hard materials such as metal, bone and stone – none textile. Items which feature old ornamentation can be used anew in knitted inspiration, by creating cable-textured garments."

Elsebeth has continued to advance these ideas into a project, including a travelling exhibition, *Knitting Along the Viking Trail*, and her first book of Viking Knits, *Viking Patterns for Knitting*. She has even developed a yarn line, demonstrating the diverse demand for Norway's knitwear. Look out for her patterns, which include wonderfully textural pieces, well worth the challenge.

## A living legacy

Ever since Marit Emstad created the first Selbu mittens in the 19th century, they've been among the most iconic Norwegian knitting designs, coveted to the extent that they now retail at around \$70 a pair under the trademark Original Selbu. In fact, today there are more than 300 registered Selbu designs. It just goes to show that Norway's knitting heritage continues to grow in vibrancy. ⑤