





KNITTING SOCKS
FROM AROUND
THE WORLD



Kari Cornell, Editor

Photography by
Sue Flanders and Janine Kosel

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INTRODUCTION

By Nancy Bush

The first item of clothing identified as a sock was made from woven fabric, perhaps fulled, cut, and sewn together into a shape that would roughly fit a foot. Adjustments were made and eventually these items were shaped so that they fit as well as could be expected, considering that the woven material didn't have much stretch. To create some give in these stockings, the necessary shapes were cut along the grain of the woven fabric or on the bias (diagonally across the woven fabric). The seams, darts, and tucks used to shape the garment were soon hidden under decorative embellishments like embroidery, couching, and other fancy stitching.

The first socks made with yarn were not knitted, but looped, made in Egypt as early as the fourth century. The examples that exist today look like true knitting, with each stitch crossed or twisted. Upon close examination, it was discovered that these early socks were actually made with a looping technique that resembles knitting, except that the stitches won't unravel when cut.

A Dutch girl knits socks in this charming vintage postcard.

In Viking times (roughly 790 to 1066 AD) and later, even into the twentieth century in some parts of northern Europe, foot coverings resembling socks or stockings were also made using a looping technique known as needle looping or *nålbinding* in Swedish. Textiles made in this technique are warm and offer superior protection from northern winter weather.

Both of these similar techniques require short lengths of yarn and a wooden, bone, or metal needle with an eye, similar to a bodkin or darning needle. Stitches are made by looping the working yarn through previously made loops. The process is slow and the result is rather coarse.

True or classic knitting is believed to have its origins in the Middle East, likely in Islamic Egypt. It is possible that knitting was a progression from the looping technique mentioned above, and may very well have been done with hooked needles. One of the oldest known pieces of true knitting was found in what is now Cairo. This fragment was part of a collection belonging to a Swiss textile expert, Fritz Iklé, who dated the piece from the seventh to ninth centuries. It has sadly been lost, but was documented, along with an image, in *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book* (1938). The knitted piece was made of silk, in crossed stockinette stitch (where each stitch is twisted) at a gauge of about 36 stitches (15 cm) to an inch. As this was a fragment, it is impossible to know what the original item was.

Chronologically, the next knitting that can be dated to sometime between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries are blue and white knitted stockings, examples of which are in the collection of the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. These stockings, made of cotton in stockinette stitch, were knitted from the toe up. They and others like them, found in various museums, are thought to be the earliest known true knitted foot coverings. There also exist fragments of true knitting, with similar patterning, but it is unknown if they formed parts of stockings or other items, such as bags or perhaps hand coverings.

The craft of knitting is believed to have made its way into southern Europe by the thirteenth century. We have two knitted cushions as evidence of this, placed in Spanish tombs around 1275 AD. These pieces are some of the earliest examples of knitting known in Europe. The ornate two-color patterning and fine gauge (20 stitches to 1 inch) offer evidence that they were made by a highly skilled craftsman. The fine metal needles necessary for such intricate work was evidence of the skill of Spanish-Arab metalworkers.

True knitting was also used in other textiles of the same period; knitted relic purses were made to hold saint's relics, and there are knitted gloves, worn by abbots and bishops for religious ceremonies that date from the thirteenth century. The origin of these ancient textiles is unknown, so it is impossible to say with certainty that the craft of knitting was widespread throughout Europe. The fineness of the work could lead one to speculate that there were one or two highly skilled workshops operating at this early date, to supply knitted goods to specialized clients, such as the church.

KNITTING GAINS POPULARITY

It is only a short stretch of the imagination to realize that the wider population would adopt the same techniques used to knit these hand and foot coverings. The skill of knitting spread due to several factors: Knitting could be done with a few handmade tools. Yarn was readily available, and spindle spinning was a known skill. The techniques of knitting were not difficult to learn and, perhaps most importantly, knitted fabric could be made to fit special shapes, like feet and fingers. Stockings, gloves and hats needed to fit close to the body, required stretch in order to be put on, and offered protection from the elements. Because knitting was done with long lengths of spun fiber, it was quicker and easier than *nålbinding* or needle looping and required fewer tools and less space than weaving. If a mistake was made, knitting was easily pulled out, while *nålbinding* or needle looping is almost impossible (or at best very slow) to pull out. For all of these reasons, knitting must have been

considered the “wonder textile” of its day, and as such, became very popular, very quickly.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN SOCK

Mentions of fine knitted stockings in Europe first appear in records from the mid 1500s, in accounts of clothing belonging to royalty and the more well-to-do in England. Henry VIII owned “six pairs of black silk hose knit” while his daughter Mary I had twenty-seven pairs of cloth hose supplied to her. She likely had access to knit silk hose from Spain, as she married Phillip II of Spain in 1554. By this time Spain was a known source of finely knit silk stockings, due in part to their ability to make fine-gauge steel knitting needles. Other records indicate that knitted hose made in England were becoming more common. In 1560 Elizabeth I was given a pair of silk stockings, knitted in England. She was so pleased with them that she declared she would never wear cloth stockings again, and after 1577 she was supplied with only knitted silk stockings. Knitting became a common activity during Elizabeth’s reign (1558–1603).

The first worsted spun stockings were made in England around 1560. This was the beginning of England’s great worsted industry, the foundation of much of the British Empire’s wealth. These worsted stockings were finer than the coarser woolen spun stockings and could be compared to silk in comfort and delicacy. Both woolen and worsted stockings and socks were made by hand and worn by all classes of people. The making of these stockings also provided work for thousands of people, with buyers at home and abroad. Beginning in the 1600s, hand knitters competed with machine knitters to make enough stockings to keep up with the demand.

SOCK STYLES AROUND THE WORLD

Socks are one of the necessities of life for at least half of the world’s population. Those who live in warm climates might not think of socks as necessary, but those who live in colder climates surely do. They offer protection, warmth, and at the end of the day, decoration. Among everyday folk in northern lands, socks and stockings were utilitarian and also offered a way to add color, pattern, and excitement to what might have been an otherwise drab existence. We can only speculate on the stockings women wore, as they were almost always hidden under flowing skirts. Men’s stockings, on the other hand, were much more visible, especially in the sixteenth century, due to the fashion of the time. These stockings showed fantastic decoration, and were colored, embroidered, and decorated to an extreme.



Bosnian slipper socks, by Donna Druchunas

Small amounts of precious colored yarns could be used in decorating these smaller items of clothing, such as the Swedish Peerie socks or the Turkish socks. The surface could be covered in texture, such as the Gansy and Bavarian twisted-stitch socks, both decorated with ornate textured stitches. A lady could dress modestly, yet have a riot of color and ornate pattern hiding just above the ankle.

While everyone in northern climates needed socks and stockings, not all stockings were one and the same—the wearer’s social class was reflected in these humble garments. The stockings of kings and queens were made of colored silk, and embroidery of gold thread covered the areas that were once decorated on the sewn hose of earlier times. Merchants and farmers, sailors and servants alike saw the finery of the upper classes, and these ideas became the fads and fashions of the times. Decorating stockings was just part of it. The ornate “seams” weren’t really seams at all, but the memory of where seams used to be on cut and sewn hose. Fancy stitches down the ankle area of the sock, known as “clocks,” offered an abundant canvas for the creative and inspired knitter. Both the Finnish Sock and the Estonian Kihnu Sock patterns feature clocks. Knitters added textured stitches, colored yarns, or embroidery for decoration on the finished sock, and even incorporated special symbols into the design to protect the wearer or bring them luck.

The many folk cultures found in northern Europe developed a variety of interesting clothing styles and unique patterns to decorate themselves. To my mind, some of the most interesting techniques, patterns, and cuts of clothing were created and worn by those living in cottages rather than castles. The wealth of patterns and skill found in the knitting alone is rich and varied. Studying the socks and stockings of the folk knitters of the past is a mirror into their history. One gets glimpses of places that were isolated, such as central Sweden, in the province of Dalarna, where the technique of *tvåändstickning* (two-end knitting) was strong. This technique, which is used in the Midsommer Blommer Socks pattern, didn’t travel far from where it originated. One of the words in Swedish for this special technique translates to “doing it up like a sock,” reflecting one of the main items of clothing that was made using the technique.

Stockings played a great role in Scotland, as seen in the tradition of kilt hose. Early Scots were known as “red shanks” for their lack of leg coverings, wearing only a plaid woven blanket, which became the kilt of modern times. When they began to cover their legs, they used cut and sewn plaid fabric that eventually became the knitted argyle patterning we know today. The kilt hose take the idea of stockings to be worn with a kilt into a more decorative area, with twining of cables and ornate texture.

While some patterns didn’t travel far from where they were invented, others traveled the world, often with sailors as they fished for cod or delivered goods from port to port. It is likely that the X and O figures we think of as typical Fair Isle patterns were inspired by woven belts and knitted patterns from Baltic ports. Those designs probably made their way to the Shetland Islands on a fishing boat. Patterns were also introduced from one culture or tradition to another through marriage. Women often took family patterns and village ideas with them when they married into a family over the hill or across the sea—the Finnish socks are an example of this.

Many other ornate patterns found on knitted fabric are cross-cultural. A good example of this is the eight-pointed star, found on Turkish rugs and the Norwegian socks in this text. This pattern has traveled the world and, happily, suits knitting very well because it can be worked in a grid configuration. Other socks and stockings were made using the material at hand, one color of yarn, and simple stripes, or no pattern at all.

True knitting wasn’t known in South America until the Spanish Conquest brought the skill to the indigenous people. With plenty of raw materials at hand, including alpaca and llama, they adapted knitting into their culture. Our Peruvian Socks are inspired by patterns from the region.

Construction of socks and stockings also varied from place to place. Most socks from northern Europe were made from the top down, while socks from the Balkans and further east, were typically made from the toe up. Examples of this type of construction can be seen in the Bosnian and Albanian Sock patterns.

In the Far East, knitted stockings were unknown until Europeans brought the skill of knitting with them. In Japan, socks made of cut and sewn cotton fabric with a separation for toes were worn with traditional sandals. The text offers a modern, knitted example of these traditional Japanese *tabi* socks.

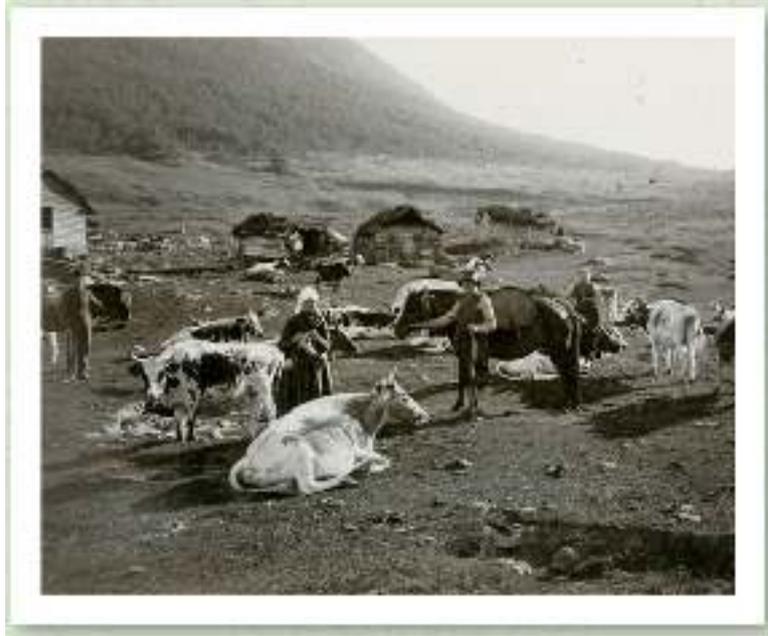
In modern times, knitters continue to find inspiration in traditional techniques. Sock knitters are no longer knitting day and night to earn enough to pay the rent or to feed the family, nor are they reduced to using one type of yarn, spun at home in one or two colors. They have every choice imaginable, from spun by hand to mill-spun and imported from the other side of the world.

This collection of socks, inspired by traditions, places, and people from around the world, is a cross-section of the many possibilities there can be for knitting a sock. There is interesting “architecture,” structure, and construction; varied, bold, and charming decoration; and glimpses into traditions that shaped the ideas behind the designs and patterns. We hope you enjoy this trip around the world in knitted socks!



Our collection of Favorite Socks from Around the World.

SOCKS OF SCANDINAVIA



Midsommar Blommor Socks 14

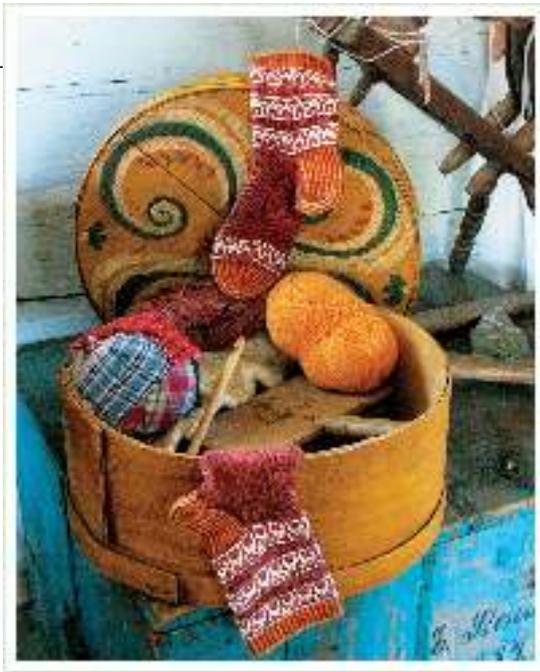
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MIDSOMMAR BLOMMOR

SOCKS

DESIGN BY W. J. JOHNSON OF SAGA HILL DESIGNS



This sock employs a knitting technique from my Swedish heritage. *Tvåändstickning* (two-ended knitting) is a double-knitting technique that creates a dense knitted fabric. It's ideal for garments that receive heavy wear, such as mittens and socks/slippers. For the two-color "cuff" pattern, I chose a traditional design from the Hälsingland province of Sweden, where my father's family resides, slightly modifying it to create a continuous design around the cuff.

The heel of the sock is a traditional Swedish "peasant" heel and not form-fitting like contemporary turned heels. This type of heel allows the sock to be easily repaired in the heel or toe, should it develop a hole.

The sock sample is knit in colors that are commonly found in traditional Swedish socks: a natural white and red. I chose to use a "Falun" red (a red found in the Falun iron mines in Dalarna, Sweden, and a traditional Swedish house color). I hand-dyed the yarn from my Saga Hill Minnesota Series Dyes™.

The merino/silk blend is also a wonderful fiber combination for a bed sock because it is warm, wicks moisture, and is incredibly soft. The loose fit makes it especially comfortable. 🧶





Sizes

Sizes include extra ease and are not meant to be form-fitted. The sock is designed to fit more like a slipper.

Woman's small [US sizes 3–5] (medium [US sizes 6–9], large* [US sizes 9–12]). Instructions are given for smallest size, with larger sizes in parentheses. When only 1 number is given, it applies to all sizes.

*Note: *Will also fit Man's shoe size 10-1/2–14.*

Finished Measurements

Circumference: 7-1/4 (9-1/4, 10-3/4)" [18.5 (23.5, 27.5)cm]

Length: As desired by knitter

Materials

- ◆ Saga Hill Designs *Handpainted Silk/Wool Blend* (fingering weight; 70% merino wool/30% silk): 450 (500, 550) yds [411 (457, 503)m] Natural (MC); 50 yds [46m] Falun Red (CC) *Kits or yarn for this sock are available at www.SagaHill.com*
- ◆ Size 2 [2.75mm] double-pointed needles (set of 5) or size needed to obtain gauge
- ◆ *Optional:* Size 0 or 1 [2 or 2.25mm] double-pointed needles (if necessary to obtain gauge in stranded St st)
- ◆ Tapestry needle

Gauge

40 sts and 40 rnds = 4" [10cm] in twined-knitting and 2-color stranded St st.

Adjust needle size as necessary to obtain correct gauge.

PATTERN NOTES

- ◆ These socks are made from the top down; they feature a peasant heel.
- ◆ Twine-knitted fabric does not cling to the leg as single-strand knitted fabric does; a braided tie is threaded through the top of the sock to help to keep the sock in place—this is a traditional feature of twined socks.
- ◆ All sections of the sock, with the exception of the colorwork, are worked using twined knitting techniques. For ease in reading the pattern, instructions are written as standard “knit” or “purl” or variations (such as decreases or increases), but are worked with two strands of yarn that alternate and twist around each other (see Sidebar).
- ◆ The color pattern is worked in standard stranded stockinette stitch and is not twined. You may need to use smaller needles for the colorwork section so that the gauge will match the twined-knitting gauge. Strand the yarn not in use loosely on the wrong side to maintain the fabric’s elasticity; do not carry yarn not in use more than 5 stitches—weave it in as necessary.
- ◆ The sample socks show two options of twined patterning that form a border on either side of the color pattern: Border Version 1 has one twine-purled round; Border Version 2 has two rounds of alternating crook stitch (a patterning technique used in twined knitting); this pattern is usually called “Chain Path.” Since Chain Path requires an odd number of stitches, the stitch count will be decreased by 1 stitch on the preceding round and increased by 1 stitch on the following round.

SPECIAL ABBREVIATIONS

N1, N2, N3, N4: Needle 1, needle 2, needle 3, needle 4. After heel is positioned, N1 and N2 hold sole sts and N3 and N4 hold instep sts.

STITCH PATTERN

Chain Path (twined over an odd number of sts)

Rnd 1: *K1, p1 (carrying strand on RS in front of knit st); rep from * around, ending k1.

Rnd 2: *P1 (carrying strand on RS in front of knit st), k1; rep from * around, ending p1.

COLOR PATTERN

See Chart on [page 19](#).

TWINED KNITTING TECHNIQUE

Twined knitting is worked with two ends of a ball of yarn, so it's necessary to work from a center-pull ball. Hold both strands of the working yarn (one from the ball center and one from the outside of the ball) in your working hand (left or right depending on your knitting style) and separate the strands with your index finger. Knit the first stitch with one of the strands. To knit the next stitch, pick up the other strand and wrap it clockwise over the first strand and knit the stitch. Then pick up the first strand again and wrap that clockwise around the strand just used for the second stitch and knit with that. Keep knitting by alternating strands in this manner. If you are knitting correctly, the back side of your work will have an even "twining" of stitches that run in the same horizontal direction.

Purled twined stitches are worked in the same manner by wrapping them clockwise around each other, but the yarns are held to the front of the work, as with a normal purl stitch.

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