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Traveling Stitches: Origins of Fair Isle Knitting

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The tradition of Fair Isle knitting seems to have been emerged too well developed to have actually started in the islands north of Scotland. This paper suggests a source in the Baltic region of Eastern Europe.

Like much of the “history” of knitting, much published information on the history of Fair Isle-type knitting is folklore. The long-standing story is that a ship, *El Gran Grifon*, from the Spanish Armada, was wrecked on Fair Isle in 1588. The 17 households on the island took the sailors in. That much is true, and documented. The knitting story is that, in return, the Spaniards taught the islanders the brightly colored patterned knitting now known as Fair Isle. Not surprisingly, there appears to have been no multi-colored knitting tradition in Spain in the sixteenth century.

What is called Fair Isle knitting today, which combines a variety of colors with small geometric pattern motifs, dates no earlier than the mid-nineteenth century, even on Fair Isle itself. It certainly is not the “ancient” art it is often claimed to be, and it is not hundreds of years old. The Fair Isle “yoke” sweaters of the 1960s, popular in the United States, were a result of machine knitting and industrialization, and may have been influenced or suggested by the Bohus sweaters of the 1930s and 40s which also featured multicolored yokes.

Fair Isle and Shetland are both part of an archipelago that begins with Orkney, another group of about 70 Scottish islands (19 of which are inhabited) about 14 miles off the north coast of Scotland, towards the eastern edge. About 30 miles northeast of Orkney is the tiny island of Fair Isle (population 60). And another 30 miles or so north of that is Shetland, another group of about 100 islands, 15 of which are continuously inhabited. These northern islands are much more Norse than they are Scottish, in dialect and accent, in architecture and in history. One clarification: Fair Isle is distinct from the Faeroes, an island group owned by Denmark, almost due north of Scotland.

The geography helps to explain fairly easily where the lovely color patterning in island knitting originally came from. Although today these islands are remote and often considered to be backwaters, prior to the nineteenth century, Shetland and Orkney were flourishing ports with strong economies and direct links to the continent.

If we ignore our modern tendency to see things in terms of national borders, roads and flight patterns, Shetland and Orkney are in a direct line between the Baltic states and Scandinavia and the north Atlantic, where fishing colonies were long established.

Occasionally a small bag, an artifact found during an archaeological excavation of the 1950s, is cited as the earliest use of Fair Isle patterning. The body was probably buried between 1695 and 1700 in a remote area of Shetland. It’s quite possible the man wasn’t from Shetland or Fair Isle, although several of his accessories, including this little bag, were knit from island-type fleece. While the bag does contain both white and red

patterning on a natural grey background, it is not Fair Isle knitting, nor is it a predecessor. The objects from the dig, usually referred to as the Gunnister man, are in the collection of the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.

The earliest objects of “Fair Isle” knitting in the Shetland Museum are two caps that date to the 1860s. The National Museum of Scotland has similar early Fair Isle pieces dating to the 1850s. Both caps in the Shetland Museum; one for a man and one for a woman, are handspun and naturally dyed, and have been used. The man’s cap is knit in the same way as a Scandinavian “dubbelmossa”; that is to say, the lining is knit in one piece with the main cap, and so when the brim is folded up, there are four layers of material over the ears. The knitter was skilled enough to work the design where it was needed, for the turned-up brim, but knit the rest in plain white yarn, saving the dyed yarn for where it is visible. This type is known as a “haaf” cap in Shetland, which indicates an off-shore fisherman’s cap. Most Fair Isle and Shetland knitters will tell you this is the older style cap, which predates the tam o’shanter style. Similar style doubled caps are found throughout Europe, beginning in the late eighteenth century.

These early pieces are typical of what few pieces are left of Fair Isle knitting in the nineteenth century, and indicative of a style just beginning to develop. Other pieces in the Shetland museum from the 1870s, specifically two scarves or mufflers, make use of the same basic design motifs, worked in widely varying gauges and color combinations. Neither exhibit the subtle elegance of 1920s Fair Isle knitting that was widely exported to mainland Scotland and England.

One of the hardest questions to answer is where did the color patterning come from? Some of the patterns may have been disseminated from northern Europe, following the usual trade routes, and many knitters have tried to draw a link back to Scandinavia. Most knitters are familiar with the color patterning used in various Scandinavian knitting traditions – snowflakes, zigzags and checks, among many others. In Uppsala Cathedral in Sweden, there is a small handknit glove, worn as a favor by Svante Sture when he died in battle in 1565. It uses several bright colors, as well as metallic gold threads to simulate rings on the fingers, and in small repeats, on the hand of the glove. Although they are small color patterns, they do not have any other similarities to Fair Isle knitting.

A less well-known tradition has many more similarities to the Fair Isle style, from the Baltic region of Eastern Europe. Latvian and Lithuanian knitting have their own small color patterning styles which are also well documented from the nineteenth century. Unlike Fair Isle knitting, however, there is concrete evidence of the color patterning from as early as the sixteenth century.

Figure 1 is a four-color pattern taken from a Latvian mitten. The mitten is an archaeological find, from a late sixteenth-century site in Riga. Another artifact from a nearby site also in Riga, a sock, shows a slightly different pattern, figure 2.

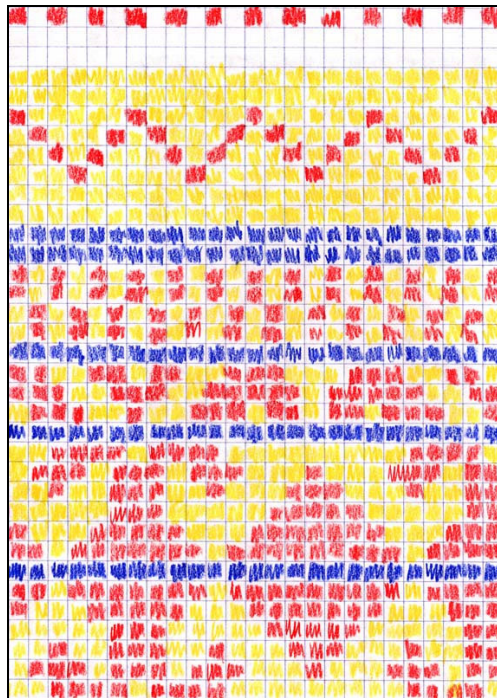


Fig. 1 (left). Four-color pattern from mitten found in sixteenth-century site in Riga, Latvia. (Zarina, page 5). Rendering and photo by Deborah Pulliam.

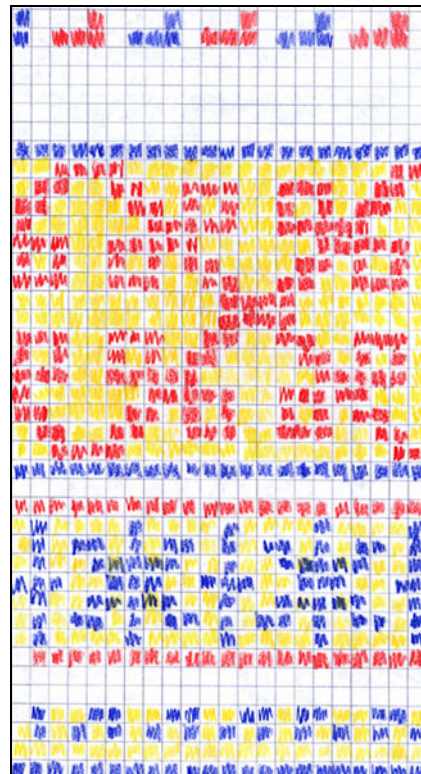


Fig. 2 (right). Four-color pattern from sock found in sixteenth-century site in Riga, Latvia. (Zarina, page 9). Rendering and photo by Deborah Pulliam.

Neither of these are Fair Isle type knitting, but they carry some of the hallmarks of the Fair Isle tradition: basically geometric shapes, small repeats, mirror imaging, and simple color changes. Never more than two colors only are carried in any one row, and there are few long floats, both important components of the Fair Isle style of knitting. Although both of these are from sixteenth century sites, they are surprisingly similar to nineteenth- and twentieth- century Latvian folk knitting.

In the 1960s, Karen Finch (founder of the Textile Conservation Center now housed at Winchester School of Art) did conservation work on an Italian burato panel at the Little Malvern Court in Worcestershire. The linen panel is 33 inches by 12.9 inches, with 210 different motifs worked in red running counted stitch. It is clearly a reference piece. The motifs are divided into two different groups, traditional and contemporary sixteenth century work. At least 150 of the 210 motifs are typically used in traditional northern European knitting patterns. Several of the patterns were used in the Sture glove. Finch considers the work to be professionally done and notes that the conventional or traditional end of the sampler tends to have the smaller, more repetitious patterns, while the larger motifs are at the contemporary end. She also matched many of the early patterns to those in a pattern book published in Venice, Italy in 1518. Perhaps ultimately the root of northern European color patterning is in Italy, although Italian knitting doesn't make use of it.

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