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Knitting as Scholarship

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On first consideration, scholarship and knitting may seem incompatible. However, the long-standing practice and unprecedented contemporary enthusiasm for knitting suggests the craft warrants further consideration as a subject for scholarly research. This paper investigates cultural and social aspects that have contributed to the limited acceptance of knitting as an academic topic, presents a brief review of scholarship to date that does focus on hand knitting, and argues for knitting as a largely untapped resource with unique potential for cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural study.

True hand knitting is not “age-old” or “ancient” as often described in popular media. It is generally accepted that knitting originated in the Middle East, spread to Southern Europe during the late Middle Ages and was carried to Northern Europe and the New World by trade and exploration. There is no evidence that native peoples of the Americas practiced true knitting. True hand knitting, as a process, refers to inter-looping yarns in rows using two or more needles. As a product, knitting refers to the textiles created by the process of knitting. Knitting is both process and product, a valuable concept when considering research potential.

Why has knitting been overlooked in scholarly research? In part, the answer lies within traditional meanings of scholarship, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as attainments of a scholar, especially the academic study of languages and literature. Another part of the answer points to the process and products of hand knitting itself, especially the associations with the mundane, poverty, Victorian frivolity, and kitsch.

Over time knitting has been seen as mundane, so ubiquitous and commonplace that it fades into the social, cultural, and historical background. Bishop Richard Rutt, author of the first substantial work on knitting history, expressed dismay over particular difficulty finding information about the history of knitting in America. Indeed information available for research about knitting often must be teased from widely scattered collections of extant knitted products, tools and yarn, pattern books, trade journals, and other publications. Patchy accumulations of such materials are held in personal, private, museum, and historical society collections. Commonly, hand knitting has been separated from provenance and at times the technique of knitting misidentified. Much information available for research may rely on serendipitous finds in such diverse sources as popular literature, advertisements, diaries, travel memoirs, presidential papers, academic or business archives, economic records of trade commodities, Red Cross instruction pamphlets, and interview data from knitters.

In addition, knitting as both process and product has been closely associated with utilitarian usage and with poverty, even enslavement. Hand knits, including knits that demonstrated considerable technical proficiency, have tended to be garments that were worn out, used up, raveled and recycled, or discarded after serving a purpose. For example, well into the twentieth century knitted garments in Norway (widely admired today for knitting expertise) ended in “rag piles” to shred for reprocessed wool. Associations with impoverishment further stems from knitting as the necessary work of those who could

not afford to purchase ready-made garments. Historically, the lowly task of knitting utilitarian garments like stockings and mittens fell to enslaved peoples. In addition, people living in poverty world-wide have turned to hand knits as one of the various textiles made and sold to sustain life. Therefore, the number of extant hand knits is relatively small and the distribution and availability for research frequently falls to happenstance.

Additional negative associations can be traced to Victorian-era “women’s work” intended primarily to demonstrate homemaking skills in polite society. During the nineteenth century, publications distributed a flourishing number of knitting and crochet patterns. Some followed traditional utilitarian knitting, but many others were considered frivolous products that served only to fill excessive leisure time. During American Colonial Revival movements, knitting was further associated with grandmothers in black dresses, spinning wheels, and woolly products of dubious aesthetic value. Much of this knitting was relegated to kitsch. Knitting has suffered from these unfortunate associations with the mundane and frivolous on one hand and with utilitarian usage and poverty on the other. Such negative associations, combined with scattered collections of extant hand knits and patchy documentation, appears to have discouraged knitting as a topic of serious study until the late twentieth century.

Reappraisal of women’s work since 1970 led to better understanding the history and society of women through textile studies. Knitting, however, lags behind quilting and weaving—which faced similar challenges—as a topic considered suitable for academic research. Fortunately, late twentieth-century scholars began to build on cross-cultural, foundational work about knitting carried out during the early- to mid-twentieth century by a small number of dedicated and original thinkers. Mary Thomas, Annichen Sibbern Bohn, Barbara G. Walker, and others sought to document traditional knitting designs and techniques across cultures and over time. New generations of late twentieth-century scholars and twenty-first century researchers recognized that knitting offered a previously untapped resource for a variety of disciplines.

A review of master and doctoral work reveals emerging scholars who have focused their academic studies on hand knitting, though smaller in number than those of quilting. The following representative list of findings is limited to works available in English.

- Lillian Crowell Schell wrote her 1972 master’s thesis at the University of Alaska Anchorage on qiviut (under wool of musk ox), its historical usage, and the utilization in cottage industries in Alaska. Harpoon motifs were re-interpreted for knitting patterns.
- Donna Ghelerter wrote her master’s thesis, “Knitting in America during the First World War,” in 1989 at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York.
- Robin Orm Hansen completed her doctoral dissertation in 1990 at Boston University, “Knit one, Purl Two: Traditional Knitting in Hand and in Print in North America, Britain, and Scandinavia.”
- Linda G. Fryer wrote her thesis on the history of the Shetland hand knitting industry, 1790-1950, at the University of Glasgow in 1990. This work was published as the book, *Knitting by the Fireside and on the Hillside*. She explored the informal economy of Shetland women and traced the origin of Shetland lace to a lace bonnet imported to the islands in the early nineteenth century.
- Caroline Jean Blackman wrote her dissertation, “Some Aspects of Handknitting from 1908-1939, with Special Emphasis on the Work of Marjory Tillotson,” at the University

of London in 1997. Tillotson was chief designer for yarn manufacturers J. and J. Baldwin; the dissertation incorporates history of design and economic development related to knitting.

- Gail Ann Lambert wrote her dissertation, “The Taxonomy of Sweater Structures and Their Origins,” in 2002 at North Carolina State University. Her research explored a cross-cultural history of fashion interpreted through extant garments and written instructions.
- Catherine V. Kasdan knitted discarded shopping bags into garments for her 2007 master’s thesis at Kent State University, incorporating knitting to address waste in contemporary consumer culture.
- Tobi M. Voigt wrote her master’s thesis in 2006 titled “Unraveling Myths: Knitting and the Impact of Feminism during the 1960s and 1970s” at the Cooperstown Program History and Museum Studies. Most of the women in her study saw no correlation between feminism and knitting, although she found that knitting publications reinvented knitting as empowering for women, and motivations to knit were highly diverse.
- Kristina M. Medford wrote “I Knit, Therefore I Am” for her dissertation in philosophy in 2006; she explored personal, creative, critical, and passionate aspects of research with emphasis on gender identity.

This abbreviated list of knitting-related master and doctoral work reveals the breadth of approaches available for scholarly research using knitting as an umbrella topic. Emerging scholars become museum professionals, tenured professors, and independent researchers who bring their focus on knitting into mature scholarship in classrooms, peer-reviewed journals and books, and exhibitions across many disciplines. Knitting-related publications and events now appear within disciplines seemingly unrelated to textile and design studies. For example, the fall 2008 “American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy” featured essays on knitting written by philosophy professors at universities across the nation. Professors at the 2006 Joint Mathematical Meetings in New Orleans included a knitting circle that addressed the “quantum leap” in communication re-making mathematical surfaces from fabric. *The Journal of Design History* (Vol. 19, Oxford University Press) published a study of knitting and sewing as coping strategies for stress during wartime.

Similar exhibitions, symposia, and collections provide more opportunities for scholars of knitting to share and distribute their work. The exhibition “Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting” at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York attracted attention with attempts to challenge the stereotypical mindset toward needlework, including knitting. In England, three innovative “In the Loop” symposia have attracted scholars and artisans who presented research exclusively about hand knitting. Establishment of The Knitting Library at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, has made available extant handknits and publications from the collections of knitting historians Monte Stanley, Jane Waller, and the Bishop of Rutt.

If negative associations in the past discouraged knitting as scholarship, what changes will drive knitting toward a stronger position in academic research? One factor must be the online digital world that has brought knitters and knitting resources together beyond imagination. Knitting enthusiasts eager to learn more from such online sources as the Ravelry and Victoria and Albert Museum Knitting sites—plus knitting bloggers too numerous to mention—provide validation for the academic study of knitting. Additionally, improved organization and availability of knitting resources contributes to time- and cost-

effective research about knitting. Museum, library, archival, and private collections strive to make digitized images available for extant knits, books, photographs, patterns, and expertise to serve as foundations for the study of knitting as scholarship. Broader definitions of topics suitable for scholarship defy traditional boundaries. Academic interest continues to shift toward cultural and social phenomena, including interpretations using textiles and textile artisans, designers, and materials. Reaching beyond the stereotype, knitting offers a resource well suited to the contemporary academic emphasis on cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural studies.

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