TRANSCRIPT

Overview of Traditional and Modern Colourwork Knitting

Colourwork knitting encompasses many different kinds of techniques and styles to incorporate multiple colours into the same row or round in order to create a visual pattern. These traditions have been rooted in regional knitting cultures for many generations, but you can see now with the proliferation of new knitwear designers and the interest in reinventing these traditional designs, that there's a modernization of the colourwork knitting aesthetic. You'll see these days that the colour choices for these colourwork projects is changing with new and fresh pallets, but also with the incorporation of things like hand-dyed yarns and all their variation and nuance. In some cases the colours used in today's colourwork projects are bold and vibrant and high contrast and often against sort of the traditional way things have been done in the past. As well, modern colourwork garments taken on newer, sleeker, more body-conscious silhouettes and shapes.

So before we dive into the idea of modernizing colourwork knitting, let's just get a big picture view of what colourwork knitting encompasses.

Knitting with colour might range from something as simple as alternating colours in different rows or rounds to create stripes.

Mosaic knitting is basically working different colours on each row or each round while also at the same time working slip stitches and that creates a pattern or a motif.

And then intarsia is working with large distinct blocks of different colours without carrying any yarn at the back of the work.

And finally stranded knitting refers to knitting multiple colours within the same row or round where the yarn colour that is not being knit is loosely held at the back of the work and produces a float or a long strand of unknit yarn at the back of your knitting. Within this category of colourwork there are a few different regional styles of stranded knitting, each with their own rules and distinctive features. So here are a few basic styles of stranded knitting.

The first is Fair Isle knitting. Fair Isle knitting comes from a tiny and remote island of Fair Isle which is part of the Shetland Islands north of Scotland. Traditionally in this style Fair Isle knitting is done in the round on long double-pointed needles using a padded knitting belt that's worn at the waist. Design-wise, Fair Isle patterns feature only two colours per round and only one colour is used for not more than five or six stitches at a time, meaning that the float in the back of the work is not longer than five or six stitches. Often the motifs that are found in Fair Isle knitting include things like crosses and lozenge-shaped hexagons, like elongated hexagons, and they produce an O-X-O pattern. Other smaller motifs like things like anchors or ram's horns, hearts, ferns, flowers, those are all included to represent the environment of Fair Isle. Today we sometimes use the term Fair Isle knitting as a blanket term to describe all different kinds of stranded knitting, but this is not really accurate. Different regions have developed different styles of stranded knitting, and Fair Isle knitting is specific to the Shetland Islands.

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Number two is Bohus. This is a gorgeous stranded colourwork style that originated in the 1930s in Sweden. It was developed during a time of depression in Sweden and a group of women from Bohuslan started an organization called Bohus Stickning to create clothing as a way of supporting their families. Bohus Stickning made these beautiful sweaters for over 30 years and then eventually production stopped in 1969 when the economy actually improved. The knitting patterns had also become so intricate and the wool was so delicate that many of the knitters found the work too difficult. One of the qualities of this beautiful Bohus knitting is that sometimes four or five colours could be used within the same row or round making it quite complex to knit. Some of the other features of Bohus knitting included incorporating fibres like angora or mohair like fuzzy, fuzzy yarns into the design of the yoke, as well as purl stitches. So there's always this gorgeous halo of texture, as well as the texture from the purl stitches. And at the same time the colourwork design was often used with gradients and ombre colour. So it just produced beautiful, beautiful work with all of these combinations of techniques.

Number three is Setesdal. This style of stranded knitting comes from the Setesdal area in southern Norway. These sweaters sometimes are called or the lice jacket, or which means Setesdal sweater. And all these sweaters feature this tiny little lice stitch pattern. These sweaters are usually black and white. And either the white or the black will be knit as the tiny little one stitch or three stitch pattern. And then the background will be the opposite colour.

Number four is Selbu. Selbu is another tiny little village in Norway. And in this area knitters developed beautiful eight-pointed star or rose designs using stranded knitting and also black and white yarn. These designs were often used on things like mittens called and have come to symbolize Norwegian knitting.

Number five is Lopapeysa. This style of stranded knitting is native to Iceland and uses wool from Icelandic sheep called Lopi. Lopapeysa basically means sweater made from Lopi. These sweaters usually feature a distinctive stranded yoke design.

Now you'll notice that all of these different styles of stranded knitting originate out of regional areas in cold northern climates. Knitting with a stranded technique effectively makes a thick fabric that's very warm and very insulating. The two strands of different colours alternating in, alternating which one comes to the face of the fabric means that air is being trapped in between the fabric and the floats, making for a very insulating fabric.

So many of the knitwear designs that are coming out today take their inspiration from one of these regional historical sources. Now when I look at a designer who's creating very contemporary, very modern knitwear designs that are inspired by stranded yoke sweaters, I wonder what makes them modern.

Design-wise, we can look at the motifs and the patterns themselves. There are these very traditional, symmetrical and small peerie patterns that are used in traditional Fair Isle. And then there are traditional and very recognizable snowflake or star motifs in Norwegian stranded patterns. For modern motifs you might consider looking at Andrea Rangel's book called AlterKnit which is full of fresh and contemporary motifs for stranded patterns. Also design-wise, the size and the scale of the patterns can push a design out of the traditional look and feel. So consider designs where scale of the motif has been enlarged. So like Caitlin Hunter from Boyland Knitworks, her Sunset Highway, it makes a very bold and dramatic look with a very large and almost exaggerated motifs there.

Looking beyond the stitch pattern itself and looking at the full garment, you'll notice that a lot of modern colourwork designs have considerably more shaping. It used to be that Fair Isle sweaters were fairly boxy with large amounts of wearable ease, many, many, many inches of wearable ease. And the aesthetic was very roomy and

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almost no shaping. I think in some ways they were meant to be worn front-to-back, back-to-front. It didn't really matter which way they faced. Nowadays with many of the newer colourwork designs they have much more body-conscious silhouette with shaping for the waist and much less ease and also bust shaping. And then a few of the recent sweaters that I knit also have short rows at the back to create a longer back waist measurement.

So what else do I notice about modern colourwork knitting projects? One of the big things is the desire to use contemporary yarns like hand-dyed knitting yarns as part of these sweaters and projects. Hand-dyed yarns obviously come in different styles from nearly solid to layered and glazed colours to speckled and splashy colours to hand-painted colours. More and more we're seeing hand-dyed yarns used in the place of more traditional yarn choices.

And finally along the same lines, many of the hand-tied yarns that are available these days are treated to be machine washable. So using Superwash yarns instead of the grippier more rustic and woolen yarns that are traditionally used for stranded colourwork also produces their own set of challenges.

So in the coming lessons we'll talk about each one of these points in more detail. But to get started, let's talk about how to actually knit stranded colourwork.

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