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Thought piece

How Knitting Got Its Groove Back

From hipsters to yummy mummies, knitting is now a highly credible hobby which reflects our growing preference for artisan authenticity in an age of digital duplicates. So what has driven this resurgence in popularity and newfound cool? Here we stitch together a short history of how knitting pulled itself out of a tangle and got its groove back; a good yarn, we hope you'll agree.

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When you think of knitting, what springs to mind? Silver-haired old ladies knitting piles of babywear, winter scarves and dubious Christmas jumpers? If so, it's time to think again. In less than ten years, knitting has gone from distinctly fusty to downright funky, now practised by A-listers from Scarlett Johansson to Sarah-Jessica-Parker, and even, we are told, Ryan Gosling.

Historians think that knitting grew out of another, similar, craft known as nalbinding (a process creating interlocking loops) in the eighth or ninth century CE, somewhere in the Middle East¹. The textiles created, such as cushion covers and gloves were ceremonial in purpose, and reserved for royalty. Since that time, knitting has run the gamut of trends. Ryan Gosling, it seems, was not the first male knitting pioneer. In 16th century France, it was considered a male-only occupation. Women knitted for the troops throughout two world wars, then the world of fashion got excited about colour and texture in the 1960s and 70s. The death knell came in the 1980s when mass-produced, high street fashion exploded the availability of cheaply knitted clothes and accessories. From then on, actual hand-knitting became the preserve of grannies the world over. So what happened? It can perhaps be summed up as a paradoxical mix of technology and anti-consumerism.

The emergence of the Internet provided a platform that revolutionised the retail world and, along with it, knitting. Social media snapped the world's synapses into action, connecting pockets of knitters via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. They wrote blogs, shared pictures, free patterns and designs ideas as well as tutoring a whole new audience of YouTubers on everything from basic knit and purl to the complexities of intarsia. Essentially a no-nonsense, accessible craft, knitting quickly went viral. It's as easy or as challenging as you can manage, as cheap or expensive as you can afford – depending on the yarn you choose. And even the yarn itself has got more exciting: colours and dyeing techniques have become more adventurous; the sourcing and blending of fibres have become more artisanal, more luxurious, more eco-friendly and more sustainable in the kickback against disposable 'fast fashion'.

The Western world's journey through the credit crunch and numerous economic wobbles over the last decade has naturally contributed to the rise of knitting's popularity. Not because it's more economical to knit clothes than to buy them, but because, once you've got your materials, knitting is a time-consuming hobby that becomes a cheaper alternative to going out. And, off the back of this comes the fact that, in an increasingly virtual world, people seemed to be getting more and more interested in things that are 'real', tangible, as reported in the Huffington Post:

"Growth seems to be highest among... twenty-somethings looking to express their creativity, reject cheap mass consumerism, and decompress in a way that doesn't depend on the technology they are immersed in all day"²

¹ <http://www.sca.org/ti/articles/2008/issue165/MedievalKnitting.pdf>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/04/20/knitting-cool_n_1440908.html

Knitting enables people to create, no matter what their ability levels are, so they can stand back and say “I made this”, making that simple sense of achievement a quick, and relatively easy, win. But it doesn’t stop there; the ascent of knitting goes on – from fulfilling economic necessity to an enjoyable hobby to the highest echelon: knitting as art. The phenomenon of yarn-bombing or graffiti knitting has hit every corner of the globe, from a single-decker bus being yarn-bombed in Mexico City to London taxi cabs being completely covered by New York-based crochet artist Olek³ (who is technically a crocheter, but hand-created, yarn-made fabric is still her medium). Never far away from what’s trending, as noted previously, celebs have been getting crafty too. Other notables who have been picking up the yarn and needles are Catherine Zeta-Jones, Julia Roberts and Laurence Fishburne⁴.

Fashion and textiles students have long been experimenting with their knitting needles, but the trend has now spread into the real world. People are knitting the unexpected and, like Olek, are taking to the streets to give full vent to their artistry, ‘painting’ in yarn by covering railings, bicycles, trees, phone boxes, bridges and statues in public spaces.

The map of knitting hotspots shows up a lot of countries with colder climates that have traditionally had a longer history with knitting. Scandinavian countries rank highly, as do countries which farm sheep and other fibre-producing animals such as alpaca, goats, camel and even yak. The growing trends for KALs and CALs (knit-a-longs and crochet-a-longs) mean that, through social media, such activities can take place on a global, rather than a local, scale. Dutch yarn brand Scheepjes, a company which can trace its roots back to the eighteenth century, has been sponsoring CALs for several years. Organised by a social group which is centred on crocheting, the Official CCC Social Group hosts the CAL via their Facebook page, to take place through the autumn so participants will finish the project just in time for Christmas. The pattern is free and is translated into at least 10 languages from German and Swedish to Afrikaans and Hebrew⁵, illustrating that the craft’s global popularity is wider than you might think.

But the rise of crafts like knitting and crochet isn’t just about an artisanal back-to-basics drive to give people something useful to do with their hands. Knitting, in particular, has its eye on the future. British companies are looking at different ways that knitting can sync with twenty-first century cultural, social, political and geographical requirements. Sustainability and responsible manufacturing are at the heart of this movement. London-based Unmade ‘prints’ clothes to order by using code to power knitting machines in a similar way to 3D printers⁶. Retail collective Wool and The Gang is championing knitting as “Made unique in the home, by human hands not robots”, which initially sounds like the company is eschewing technology. On closer inspection, though, the ethos is the same: it’s a drive to cut down on unethical waste, unwanted manufacturing surplus that is produced cheaply but which ultimately comes at a high cost to the planet.

³ <http://oleknyc.com/>

⁴ <http://firsttoknow.com/ryan-gosling-knitting-celebs/>

⁵ <http://www.scheepjes.com/en/cals/cals-sponsored-by-scheepjes/spirits-of-life-wrap-cal-2017/information/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/nov/01/cutting-edge-knitting-the-future-of-textiles>

Alpha is already on the knitting bandwagon. We create and translate content for a British knitting website that, over the course of the last year, we've enjoyed watching grow. Though their markets are centred on the UK, US and Germany at the moment, the possibility of expansion is never far away. And yes, here at Alpha, we knit too – after all, we've always been dedicated followers of fashion.

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