Icelandic wool

Photo courtesy of Icelandair.

Marcy Lovitch

Imagine a country where knitting is celebrated and sheep are prized as a natural resource. Not surprisingly, you need to look north—to Iceland, where for centuries sheep were the basis of survival, providing not only food for sustenance, but wool for warm clothing to guard against the harsh, biting cold. Today in Iceland, you'll still find an impressive variety of woolen items made by a number of natives who continue to consider knitting a way of life.

For generations, knitting in Iceland was an honored tradition and family activity. "In the old days, it wasn't uncommon for the women to spin the yarn while their husbands did the actual knitting," says Bryndis Eiríksdóttir, lifelong knitter and manager of the woolen goods shop run by the Handknitting Association of Iceland. Icelandic children learned to knit from their mothers and grandmothers at a very young age, and in Iceland's elementary schools knitting is still a regular part of the curriculum.

Although wool continues to be a major industry on this rugged northern island, for most of Iceland's younger generation, knitting is no longer a central part of daily life. Today, older women and stay-at-home moms account for the majority of knitters. Recently, however, Eiríksdóttir has noticed a growing interest among younger women who are discovering that knitting can be a pleasurable pastime, and not just a means of income. She reports that fashionable patterns and a colorful array of dyed yarns are making knitting popular again.

The Reykjavík-based Handknitting Association of Iceland (www.handknit.is/en) helps to play a major role in the country's present knitting and wool industry. Founded in 1977, the association, which began with a membership of about a thousand, now numbers about 200 active participants. The goal of the organization, says 25-year member Eiríksdóttir, is to provide Icelandic artisans with knitting support and marketing opportunities for their finished products. In order to join, knitters are required to present their work to Eiríksdóttir or one of her staff to ensure that it meets the association's criteria for quality workmanship. Garments must be well made and neatly finished to be accepted. Knitwear by obvious beginners or with mistakes is turned down. Members also pay an initial membership fee, plus annual dues.

In return, members benefit from the opportunity to display and sell their handknitted items in one of the two association-run shops. The knitter's identification number is written on the inside label of the garment, so the customer can, if desired, contact the creator to reorder. "One of the association's goals is to create a relationship between the buyers—usually tourists from other countries—and the garment's knitter," says Eiríksdóttir. Most of the sweaters in the two shops are based on the round-yoked Icelandic lopi design, but the shops carry lace shawls and other traditional styles, ponchos, and knitted accessories as well.

Handknitting Association of Iceland/photos by Lilja Gunnarsdóttir.

The association also functions as a resource for knitters, helping them come up with new ideas for next season's garments or, when needed, with knitting techniques.

According to the association, native knitters spend the majority of the winter crafting their handknitted products to accommodate the demands of summer visitors. During the main tourist season, wool and handknitted goods are a significant source of Iceland's revenue, bringing in more than one million dollars in 2002.

The Look of Lopi

Most knitters associate Icelandic apparel with the conventional lopi sweater, with its decorative, patterned yoke. Characterized by stylized snowflakes, mountains (think Charlie Brown's sweater), or chains in different formations around the yoke, the lopi sweater remains a favorite with natives and foreigners alike.

Many people assume that the classic lopi sweater has been around for hundreds of years. The truth, however, is that the familiar style so identified with Iceland originated in the early 1950s. Though no particular person claims to have invented the first lopi sweater, the roots of its round yoke and patterning may

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Icelandic wool

Icelandic sheep are the hardy descendants of the breed brought to the island by Norse Vikings in the late ninth century. Geographical isolation and harsh conditions that prevent other kinds of sheep from thriving have allowed Iceland's sheep to retain the traits of their primitive ancestors.

Icelandic sheep are well adapted to their rugged sub-Arctic home. Their fleece is two-layered, with a long outer coat (the "tog") to shed rain, and a soft undercoat (the "thel") to insulate against cold winds. Over the centuries, Icelanders have made good use of the complementary qualities of the different portions of the fleece. Traditionally, the longer, coarser tog fibers have been spun into thread for sewing and even plied into rope. Finer tog, often from lambs, has been used to make a laceweight yarn resembling mohair, while the soft thel has been favored for undergarments and baby things. Other Icelandic knitwear has been made from a yarn combining tog and thel, and was often felted for warmth and durability.

Lopi yarn, which we associate with Iceland, was originally produced in the country's nineteenth-century woolen mills as roving, the combed and drawn-out strand of fleece that is spun into a yarn suitable for knitting and weaving. In the 1920s , an innovative spinner/knitter discovered that the mix of fiber lengths from the thel and tog portions of the fleece made the untwisted lopi sturdy enough to knit with, yet soft enough to yield a comfortable garment.

lie in traditional sweaters from southern Sweden and the colorful beaded collars of Greenland's national costume.

The word "lopi" literally translates as "unspun fibers." Before the twentieth century, typical Icelandic knitwear was thick and sturdy, made of firmly spun yarn. But in 1923, when an article in a handicrafts periodical described the merits of knitting directly from lopi (unspun wool), a new trend was born. Since then, the barely spun yarn has been as much identified with Iceland as the patterned round-yoke sweater.

Icelandic knitters love the rich natural colors—shades of black, brown, beige, taupe, gray, and white—that come from the country's unique breed of sheep. Although lopi in natural shades continues to be the best seller, the yarn has been available in a wide range of colors since 1960 when Álafoss (now Ístex—www.istex.is), the country's only wool processor, began dyeing the wool.

In Iceland, you can buy lopi in a variety of weights: létt (light), Álafoss lopi (a heavy worsted), and bulky. Nonlopi yarns are also available, like Hosuband, spun with nylon for socks, and pure-spun wool Lodband, a laceweight yarn for shawls, gloves, and doilies.

Marcy Lovitch is a Brooklyn-based freelance writer who has recently returned to knitting after a seventeen-year hiatus.

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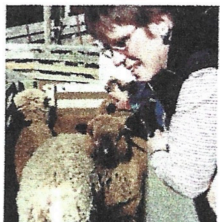

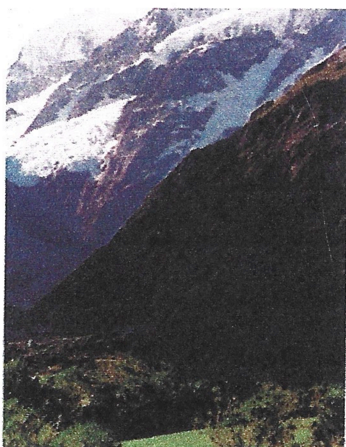

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