

Old Yarns

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Examples of Roisin's knitting of scarves and jumpers are displayed with knitting patterns and a memoir of how Roisin was taught knitting by her grandmother and now teaches her own daughter. Nina Clough helped curate the display.

"My grandmother taught me to knit when I was a child and I made many stripy coats and dresses for my dolls from old bits of wool she saved from her knitting throughout the year. I can't remember when I moved from making doll's clothes to full sized garments but by the time I went to university I was 'a knitter'. This was in the 1970's when knitting was very fashionable and people such as Sasha Kagan and Patricia Roberts were becoming well known. Vogue started to publish wonderful hardback books of patterns – before this patterns were usually found in women's weekly magazines or bought in little wool shops which were found everywhere in towns like Portsmouth or Aberystwyth where I went to university.

Somewhere in the 1980's I stopped knitting, I'm not sure why but it was probably a combination of not having time and not having a lot of money (shop bought jumpers were much cheaper than hand knits). I seemed to have stopped very suddenly because there were three 'bags of shame' under my bed with an unfinished jumper in each. These moved with me over the years and every New Year's Day I wondered aloud if this was the year when I'd finally complete them. 2008 has been that year! The first garment to be finished was a red mohair cardigan, it was tricky because I couldn't even remember what size I was knitting. As I started and bits of mohair fluff were getting up my nose and making me sneeze the old fascination came back, that almost hypnotic state that knitting induces and the 'just one more row before I go to bed' feeling. I gave the cardigan to my mother and she wears it so much (because it's warm) that she wouldn't give it to me for this display. Garment number two was a grey 1940's style jumper which is displayed here with the pattern (from one of those women's magazines I mentioned earlier). I think this is the best 'made up' jumper I've ever done ('making up' is the process of blocking, pressing and sewing together). The third and most ambitious jumper is still in the process of completion. It's a cotton jumper from a Sasha Kagan book and hopefully will be ready for next summer. I've also included a new jumper and scarf from a modern pattern book.

I'm really pleased to see that knitting is having a revival; wool shops are re-appearing and I've found books with both very new ideas as well as re-workings of old patterns for modern yarns. Both Patricia Roberts and Sasha Kagan are now represented in the V&A. The V&A website has a lovely collection of stories of learning to knit. I'm really thankful that my grandmother took the time to pass on her love of knitting to me. One of my daughters has asked me to show her how to knit and has started a stripy scarf – so the story goes on."

Roisin Gwyer
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