

Knit, Purl, Improvise



A traditional knitter teaches a young artist.

Shirley Hansen formed an unlikely friendship with Tim Schmidt when her knitting group visited the yarn shop where he worked.

BY DENISE LOGELAND

It was with some trepidation that three members of the Monday afternoon knitting group at Ingebretsen's invited their fellow knitters on a field trip. Ingebretsen's Scandinavian Gifts and Foods, in business since 1921 when it began as a butcher shop catering to Scandinavians in south Minneapolis, has hosted the knitters for about six years, says group member Joan Gilbertson. She works in the store's needlecraft department, a tidy room stocked with embroidery kits, craft books, textiles and imported yarns.

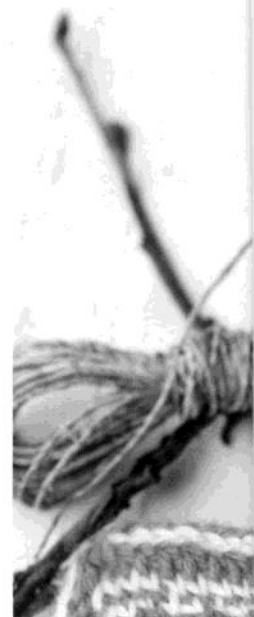
In an annex next door, where a lace-curtained storefront window floods the room with light, the

knitters gather around a table each week, projects in their laps, coffee and ginger snaps at the ready. Gilbertson says, "Our bent is pretty classic knitting," practical pieces in traditional styles.

Why the trepidation about the field trip? They planned to visit a new yarn store that's a little "out there," Gilbertson says. She wasn't sure how the group would like it.

Steven Berg, aka the "Glitter Knitter" opened his store last fall in a former fire station just a mile or two from Ingebretsen's. The exterior of his shop isn't so "out there," but inside, the transformation is complete: leopard-print chairs, a massive chandelier

continued on page 12



Child's Norwegian Mittens

Skill level: Intermediate

Materials needed:

Yarn: 3 50-gram skeins of Peer Gynt, Heilo or other sport weight yarn. 2 skeins main color (MC), 1 skein contrasting color (CC).

Needles: #4 US (3.5 mm), double-pointed set

Gauge: 6 stitches = 1 inch

Follow pattern from right to left for first mitten.

- 1 Cast on 36 stitches evenly distributed on the needles.
- 2 Knit 2, purl 2, following the pattern for the ribbing.
- 4 Knit the next row and increase to 42 stitches.
- 5 Knit the first 5 rows of the pattern. At the end of row 5, knit 3 stitches in the next stitch (CC, MC, CC).
- 6 Continue with 3 stitches for the thumb pattern.
- 7 Continue with increasing stitches every third row for the thumb as indicated on diagram, p. 12.
- 8 Transfer 7 thumb stitches on to a large safety pin.
- 9 Cast on 7 new stitches and continue with pattern. In the next row, increase a stitch on each side of the thumb so the pattern will come out right.
- 10 When mittens are long enough (see diagram, p. 12), begin the tapering.
- 11 Knit two stitches together where indicated on pattern (at beginning and ending of each side of the mitten).
- 12 When there are 3 stitches left on each side, break the yarn. Using a darning needle, thread the yarn through the stitches on the needle and pull tight. Thread the needle through the closure. Turn the mitten inside out and anchor the yarn by weaving in loose ends.

Thumb

- 1 Transfer the 7 stitches from safety pin onto one needle.
- 2 Pick up 11 more stitches divided on two needles.
- 3 Knit the pattern on the thumb and finish it off as on the main part of mitten.
- 4 Weave in all loose yarn with a darning needle or crochet hook.

To knit second mitten, read diagram (p. 12) left to right.

Pattern courtesy of
Mary Knutson and Ingebretsen's.
ingebretsens.com

hint
To make the
mitten slightly
larger overall, use a
size 5 knitting
needle.

continued from page 10

hung from a silver-painted ceiling, and candelabra atop shelves that are a jumble of luxurious yarns made from hand-dyed silk or the fur of the arctic musk ox.

Berg has hosted runway fashion shows of customers' knits. He's brought in wine, catered meals, spoken word artists, and even a klezmer band to entertain knitters who come in for a few hours of relaxation at his store.

"I'm about inspiration," Berg says, "and letting people—as classic as they may be, as traditional as they may be—come and experience a little bit of the magic, because you'll go home enthused about those traditional, classic projects that you are working on as well." It's a creative spirit that enables knitters, he believes. "If you have that true passion for this, you don't need to follow all the predesigned rules."

As it turned out, there was no cause for the Ingebretsen's knitters to worry: The group was in their element among the spools of rabbit-fur trim. After all, Norwegian knitting has always combined the practical with the flamboyant,

Knit Your Own!

Create your own Norwegian-style knitwear with Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program. The self-guided program is for all ages and abilities, and is appropriate for groups or individual knitters. To get your copy of the knitting unit, contact your lodge cultural director or call Sons of Norway Headquarters at 800-945-8851.

and mixed tradition with improvised self-expression. In fact, Shirley Hansen, 82, a pillar of the Ingebretsen's group and a prolific knitter of Norwegian sweaters, found a kindred spirit at Berg's shop that day.

Berg introduced Hansen to one of his staff members, who had graduated from her alma mater, St. Olaf College. And that's how Hansen, St. Olaf class of '49, started knitting with Tim Schmidt, class of '09.

"You're Unlimited"

Hansen joined this tradition of adaptation and improvisation on her first trip to Norway. It was 1965 and she was accompanying her husband, a Lutheran pastor who was going to Norway to

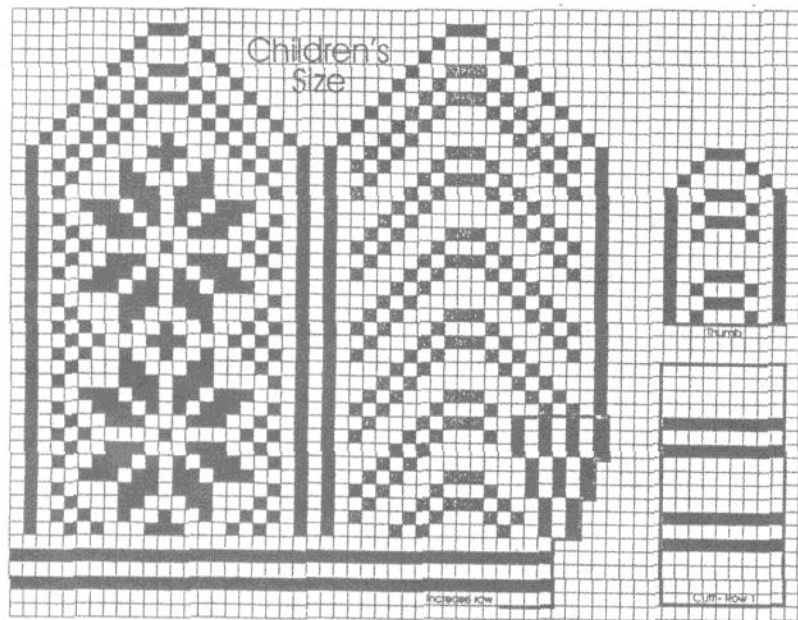
study the treatment of alcoholism there. Hansen had learned to knit from her grandmother as a young girl, and had swapped handknits for rosemaling with her girlfriends. In the years after school, she was eager to try her hand at her first Norwegian sweater, but there weren't any classes around in those days, she says. So in Norway, "I just hid out in the yarn shops, watching [the knitters] and asking them questions, and I kind of picked it up." What she learned were techniques, but also some underlying principles.

"You know people think Norwegian sweaters are difficult? They're not difficult *at all*," Hansen says. It's a matter of counting stitches, but because it looks complex, "you get a *lot* of credit for what you do."

She saw, too, that often Norwegian knitters weren't really following a written pattern, they were just mixing motifs as it pleased them: "All of the patterns are graphed, but you can move parts around or skip them if you don't like them or whatever." Alternately, she says, you can make up any kind of pattern you like: "Just draw it and put the graph paper over it. You're unlimited."

Tradition, Refreshed

Tim Schmidt was already a fearless improviser—and an experienced knitter, though after a lifetime of growing up in the Norwegian-roots community of Northfield, Minn. and four years at a college that was founded by Norwegians, he still found himself without a Norwegian sweater. A studio art major,



Use this mitten pattern or plot the basic shape on graph paper and create your own.



hint

Make this pattern with a variety of yarns for very different results. This shawl was knit with **Misti Alpaca sock yarn** (2 skeins) run together with **Rowen Kidsilk Haze** (3 skeins).

Mermaid Shawl

Skill level:
Advanced beginner

Materials needed:

Yarn: 2 50-gram skeins of Tilli Tomas, Voile de la Mer 70% Silk, 30% Seaweed, 290 yards

Needles: #9 US (5.5 mm)

Finished size: approximately 24" x 105"

Gauge: 18 stitches = 4 inches

Directions:

- 1 Cast on 60 stitches.
- 2 Knit 6 rows.
- 3 Knit 2, *yarn over, knit 2 together*, repeat between *s to last 2 stitches, knit 2.
- 4 Knit 2, purl center stitches, knit last 2 stitches. Repeat steps 3 and 4 to desired length.
- 5 Knit 6 rows.
- 6 Bind off.
- 7 Weave in loose ends and block.

Pattern courtesy of StevenBe and the Yarn Garage. stevenbe.com

he'd known how to knit since his mother taught him when he was a boy. For his senior art project, he created a sort of meditation on environmental degradation, making abstract sheep whose fleece he knit out of used plastic bags and other materials, such as old

yarn and wood scraps. Hansen said she could help him toward his goal of making a traditional Norwegian sweater.

"That first day when I walked into Ingebretsen's and she said, 'Well, how do you want to start?' I said, 'I don't know, I guess get patterns and any yarn

we need,'" Schmidt recalls. "She said 'Patterns?—we make them up as we go. That's how the Norwegians do it.'

"That's when I knew we were going to hit it off," Schmidt adds. He had avoided traditional knitting in the past because he liked feeling his way through a project

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and didn't want to be tethered to a pattern. Now, with Hansen's help measuring and estimating gauge, he made up his own using Norwegian motifs.

Where Hansen uses graph paper, though, Schmidt prefers using a software application to do his graphing. Another turn toward technology comes from Schmidt's recent involvement in knitting as public art or "graffiti knitting"—pieces knit around tree trunks or lightposts and left for others to enjoy or amend as they see fit. "I want to develop an application for the iPhone, where your artworks or your graffiti knits can be posted there, and then have a digital map," he says, "so you could do a graffiti-knitting tour."

What Hansen is teaching him is less high tech, but one cardigan body and

two in-progress sleeves later, he says her guidance is refining his work: Keep your gauge loose so the color changes don't cause your work to bunch up. And that hem? You can knit it in place instead of sewing it. Hansen taught him to purl a round where the hem would fold.

"It was nice to learn how to make the garment do what you want it to do," says Schmidt.

From Hansen's improvisations, he learned that even tradition isn't so tradition-bound: "It's very refreshing," Schmidt says, "hearing from an 82-year-old traditional knitter that she's doing it the same way I'm doing it."

Former *Viking* editor Denise Logeland has been waiting for September and the first cool days of knitting weather.

Knitters Connect: with the tradition and online

Arnhild Hillesland is a knitwear designer, distributor for Rauma Yarn, and native of Norway. She leads knitters' tours to her homeland, with the next one scheduled for June 2012. Sign up for information under "tours" at arnhild.com, or call her at 515-451-0584. Hillesland also leads an annual knitters' retreat (Feb. 25-27, 2011) in Ames, Iowa, where her business, Arnhild's Knitting Studio, is based.

Annemor Sundbø has written several books on Norwegian knitwear design, and her best may be *Invisible Threads in Knitting*. There are patterns to knit, and also a rich history of how a knitting culture took hold in Norway, how designs reflect folk beliefs, and what knitting has meant in Norway's economy and society over the years. Available from schoolhousepress.com and others.

Ravelry.com is a social networking site for knitters, who use it to share patterns, swap yarns from their stashes, and post photos and stories of their finished projects. Anyone can join the special-interest groups on the site (there are several for Norwegian and Scandinavian knitting) and take part in online discussions to glean knitting tips and news.

There's a whole Ravelry group organized around Terri Shea's book, *Selbuvtotter: Biography of a Knitting Tradition* (available at selbuvtotter.com). Shea traces the evolution of a single Norwegian design into a knitting industry and includes 30 patterns to try.

One of the first online knitting magazines, **knitty.com** is still one of the best. Four issues a year and a library provide patterns and articles to print and use at no cost.
 —D. L.

